

11. If I really fell....am I now a ghost?

It was a spartan, but functional 70s kitchen, tiled, floor and walls. White box appliances and cupboards lining the space around a dining table and chairs. The boy, perhaps six or seven years old, dragged a chair to the window at the end of the kitchen, allowing him to climb up and undo the latch of the cantilever window, swing it out and forward. Looking through the glass he could see the clouds in the distance, low cover with intermittent sunlight breaking through, and a tall block of apartments mirroring his own. He climbed up on the windowsill.

Holding the surrounding frame, he eased first his right leg, then his left, adjusting his position as he sat on the lower window partition, the large window section in front of him like a car windshield. In between there was nothing but air, and a view of the car park twelve stories down, with few vehicles at this time of the day. There he sat, holding the frame, sitting, and kicking his legs back and forth, feeling the breeze at this height in the sky. Unglazed view to his left and right.

He could see even further now, out towards Battersea power station, defunct, but with its four chimneys still proudly thrusting up from each corner, defiant against dereliction and age. The river Thames in between, and even birds roughly parallel to his eyeline, singular, in pairs or flocks. He took great delight of this vision around and in front of him to far distance, a feeling of being alive, vital and exciting. And looking down that 12 stories trajectory to tarmac, concrete, and cars. The sensation of gravity sucking at his shoes becoming noticeable, uncomfortable. He looked back up and through the glass.

He was on his own, not just in the apartment, but up here, a small boy balancing on metal and glass, dangling his legs, the wind ruffling his short, brown hair. Almost like someone who cared, giving him comfort, stroking his head, back and forth. He felt the rhythm, and unconsciously emulated it, rocking his body to and fro, his legs slightly straighter, as if on a swing, one so high and free, out of reach to any other kid, but him. He smiled to himself, as he ever did, he never smiled to his parents and seldom to children and adults he knew or not. Looking down, the car park, so far down, and yet he wondered how long he would fly, and how hard would he land, if he should just rock forward while releasing his hands?

It was difficult to work out how much time had elapsed, his mother could be back soon, as she was often the one to return first. Still rocking, he looked around the sky and distant landmarks, but his eyes were drawn down, as if a silent siren distracting him, attracting him, making him focus on the ground. He would be in so much trouble, so much punishment would come, he could climb back, but then perhaps quicker to fall? Imagine, no more of this sad, unhappy life, or perhaps an escape to some land where he knew not. Rocking, to and fro, his legs up, his hands holding the frame, as if rope or chains, his makeshift swing in the sky, forward to freedom, or back to some kind of hell.

Even in his young mind, he was vexed by this indecision, forward or back, troubling his happiness and excitement like a rain cloud over the building, darkening him and his window. He didn't think they would care, either way, and perhaps he would not either, whether something quick and nasty twelve stories down, or long and protracted twelve stories up. The siren was down there, beguiling, enticing, like the stories he would learn of, should he stay and grow, larger than he was now, but having accumulated even more pain. He could not quite recall how, but there he stood, on that tiled floor, window closed, chair pushed back.

And as I remember it now, decades later, I cannot help but wonder, did I really fall, and if so, am I a spirit, a ghost child? How can I tell, how to know, for surely this life is what cannot have been real?

