

Heavenly Reason

Nicole Hansell

“That’s not the best idea, you know.”

Thomas Whelan jumped.

Well, not literally.

If he’d literally jumped, as he’d been considering doing a moment ago, he would have found himself momentarily weightless, falling through a good hundred feet of cold, unfeeling air to the icy water below. But as it was, Thomas did not jump.

Not that way at least. Not yet.

He would.

In a moment, he would. But first he wanted to know what kind of a person would sneak up behind a man who was standing outside the guard rail of a bridge at 2am on a chilly February night.

As it turns out, the sort of person who would was the sort of person who would also have a large overcoat reaching to his knees, an old maroon sweatshirt underneath (Tom knew it was old because one faded cuff was poking out from the sleeve of the coat and looking frayed at the edges, like an old dog lying on the porch with unkempt fur with a couldn’t care less attitude), and a pair of jeans (the cuffs of which joined that of the sleeve its tattered we don’t care either glory) over a pair of bare feet.

Of course, a cursory survey of a man’s clothing says nothing about the person wearing those clothes, but it’s good, Tom thought, to have some image in mind of the person in question before making any sort of judgment on his behavior.

That said, the man was a jerk.

The jerk grinned widely, leaning his elbows on the railing that Tom’s elbows were hooked backwards over. Not the same place, mind you. If the jerk had leaned into Tom’s back, Tom would again be falling right now, weightless, flying, suit jacket fluttering in the breeze as he fell. No, the jerk leaned down next to Tom, his broad shoulders sloping back into a position that must’ve been fairly uncomfortable for a man of his height leaning down so stiffly. The reason for the stiff posture turned out to be a cat lounging like a poorly groomed scarf across the man’s neck, orange and tattered like the dog sleeve, missing one eye and looking like the cat equivalent of a hobo.

The cat blinked at him, stretched its paws out toward him briefly, allowing them to quiver with the satisfying extension of muscle before settling back in for a nap. Tom turned his attention back to the jerk’s grin. He wondered briefly if that comfortable, toothy grin would remain in place if he were to let go right now. The grin faltered. Maybe not.

“You okay, there, bud?” The man’s voice was a lion’s soft rumble. It was the kind of voice one would associate more with someone muscular and gruff; someone who’d fought with his bare hands and could intimidate you with only a few words.

Like Liam Neeson, Tom thought.

Twinkling, hazel eyes met his curiously, and Tom instinctively looked elsewhere, preferring to watch the cat readjust its weight, settling with a sigh against the back of the man’s neck and the fringe of disheveled brown hair. And that hair. It was ridiculous. It looked like the unholy offspring of bed head and hat hair—wild, windblown, and completely unnoticed by its owner whose insufferable grin was back in place, fringed by a brown beard. The beard was white right down the middle from the edge of his smile to the tips of his moustache which blended with the beard as if it didn’t know it was called something else.

Ridiculous. The incongruity of the man’s youthful face and the white streaked beard and crow’s feet crinkling the corners of his eyes was confusing. Was he old or young? It was just unreasonable



not to choose one or the other. Tom himself was old, he thought. In mind, if not in body. He was old, worn out, and sick of life.

That was why, at the age of thirty-three, with newly shined shoes, his best grey work suit, the garish orange tie his mother had got him, and his briefcase waiting for him at the bottom of the river, Tom Whelan was going to jump.

“Still not the best idea, if you ask me.”

“Just shut up,” Tom said.

“Why?” the man asked.

“Because I’ve made up my mind already,” Tom replied.

“Have you?” the man asked.

“Yes,” Tom said, trying to sound irritable enough to make the man leave.

“Oh,” the man nodded agreeably, “Okay.”

A moment of silence passed as the man looked out over the river, and Tom watched the man. The man glanced over at him. Tom looked away quickly, fixing his eyes on his shoes and the dark water swirling below. He couldn’t see it swirling... couldn’t even see his shoes too well except for where the yellow-gold of the streetlamp caught the shiny surface. He’d had them shined just that morning. The hotel did it for free and he’d left his shoes out to have it done without thinking. At least whatever hobo found his body tomorrow would get a nice pair of shoes out of the deal.

Man... that was dark. Tom looked out over the water, just able to see the silhouetted tree branches waving against a backdrop of near black-blue. It was dark. Outside and inside. He tried to picture the water, little eddies making ripples in the surface as the currents pulled this way and that. Like life, pulling helpless people into its endless dance, ripping at you from all sides until you just have nothing left to give it. The water and life were both, dark and depressing, and Tom was going to jump into this water, escaping that life.

The man made a sound. A sort of thinking sound that implied a long drawn out, “Maaaaybe...” and would inevitably be accompanied by a “but.”

“Aren’t we all?” the man said with a wink, moustache and beard meeting as he let out a huffing chuckle through his nose. That painted stache and beard annoyed Tom. It was like a young man, old enough to have a beard, but young enough to want to keep it, had smeared cream on it, or dribbled cream down it, Tom supposed. He imagined the man with an oversize glass of water, gulping it down so eagerly that when he set it back down, the tip of his nose and all the hair beneath it was stained wet and white. Wet and white like the snow that had fallen just a few days ago when Tom’s life had gone to hell. It wasn’t snowing now. That would be magical and maybe even beautiful against the backdrop of starry skies and softly swaying treetops on either side of the river. No, all day it had been grey and lifeless like Tom wished he was. The snow from the night before had become slush, not enough to make snowmen with or play in but too much for comfortable walking. A miserable day to finish off a miserable week.

“You wanna hear about a miserable week? I could tell you stor—Whoa there, Tommy!”

Tom felt the man’s hand grasp his sleeve before he realized he’d been slipping. He was so startled, so stunned, it took the dip of vertigo to draw him back to reality as his foot left the edge of the bridge only to be reunited with it as the stranger pulled him back.

“H-How’d you know what I was—”

“Because you told me, Tom.”

Oh... had he been talking out loud? The man was frowning at him in a concerned sort of way, so Tom guessed he probably had.

The cat yawned as Tom caught the railing with both hands, secure but not quite giving up on his plans for the night. He was going to jump, and it was going to be exhilarating, freeing. It was going to be what he wanted, and he wouldn’t have to worry anymore. He let out a visible breath,



watching the steam of it curl in the cold air.

“Do you worry a lot, Tom?”

“Huh?”

“I said, do you worry a lot about stuff? You know, like money, bills, work, your family, stuff like that. You look like a guy who worries.”

The man’s hand released Tom’s jacket and folded back with its twin as the man resumed his leaning position. Did Tom worry? Hell, Tom was *worry*. Most people (at least, most of the people he’d heard of) committed suicide because of some major event in their lives, something like the death of their soul mate or the utter ruin of their career... but Tom? He had just worried himself to the edge of reason, to the edge of this bridge. And it sounded so stupid when he thought about it. Who kills themselves over a little worry? Everyone worries! But did everyone worry like *this*? Tom didn’t know why, but he just knew he’d worried all his life. No one knew what it was like to worry that much. He’d been told it came from both sides of his family. His grandmother on his mom’s side had been chronically plagued by anxiety, but in her time they just called it “being a silly woman” and left it at that. His grandfather on his dad’s side had self-medicated through alcohol and nicotine. His parents had been less than understanding, his dad had followed in his own father’s alcoholic, stumbling footsteps, and Tom had never really been that close to his mother.

So, did Tom worry?

Yes, Tom worried.

Tom worried about everything from what he was going to wear that day to when and how he was going to die. He worried that coworkers could tell he’d worn that shirt twice in a row, that they could tell he was confused by Jim’s slideshow or the financial report from Sasha’s team. He worried that he wouldn’t have enough money to pay rent, to buy clothing, to buy food, to pay insurance bills and electric bills and the money he needed to keep a roof over his mother’s head and a breathing tube down his father’s throat. Every time he took the subway, he worried he’d be mugged, raped, killed. He was a thirty-three-year-old man who was afraid of being kidnapped, afraid of developing a terminal illness, afraid of being asked a question he didn’t know the answer to in front of people he hardly knew. Tom worried that he would never meet someone, that he *would* meet someone, that he’d never be a father, that he *would* be a father. Anything under the sun, the sun included, could potentially worry Tom and he was *sick* of it.

It was like a disease, a condition he couldn’t control. He was tired of people telling him to calm down, to relax, and to not worry about it. Wouldn’t he be *doing* that if he knew how? The sheer arrogant stupidity of the advice to “not worry about it” rankled him like nothing else. Gee, thanks William, I’ll just do that why don’t I? By the way, I’m really relaxed and calm about how the nursing home has upped mom’s rent, which, by the way, I pay more than fifty percent of. He’d tried explaining all this to his brother. Tried to tell him that it felt like the feeling you get when your foot slips off the top step. That quick little blast of adrenaline... times a hundred. He tried telling Will that it felt like your heart was screaming, the sound and the terror echoing through every vein.

Will had laughed and told him to stop being dramatic.

But he *wasn’t*. It *felt* like that. It felt sharp and piercing. It made him hot and cold at the same time. It made him feel sick and dizzy, made his heart rate pick up, and his breathing increase. It made him want to run and to hide. It gave him gas and headaches and exhausted him so very thoroughly that he fell into bed every night wishing he’d never wake up.

So...

“Yeah.” Tom said, and the man nodded.

“I get that.”

Great. The hobo jerk with the hobo cat and bare feet on the rain-pooled, slush-strewn sidewalk



understood Tom on a level his family and friends never had. That figured.

“No you don’t,” Tom grumbled, turning around again to face the river. There was a moment of silence as Tom wondered if he wanted to jump just because it would be the one way he could control that feeling, that adrenaline. He edged one foot out, holding it over the black darkness below. He wondered if his shoe would fall first, although it was tied tightly with a precise knot to prevent just that. But still, he could see it, feel it almost, slipping from his heel, hanging on his toes briefly like a man at the edge of a cliff. The wind would sweep in, chill his foot and he’d curl his toes against it, dropping the shoe’s grip and leaving it to tumble, end over end, into the water below. Would he hear the splash? Would anyone hear his over the faint rumble of water and the occasional wet rush of a car passing by? It had started to rain, drizzling weakly, more misting than anything, and again, Tom wondered what the water looked like, if it was beautiful or terrible in the rain, soft and calm or voracious and swollen.

“Feels like tippin’ your chair back too far. ‘Cept it doesn’t stop.”

Tom turned to look at the man who looked back at him, taking a small book from his pocket and tilting it in his hands so Tom could see the cover. It said *Holy Bible* across the front in gold letters, illuminated by the street lamp’s impersonal yellowed light.

“You can sweat blood if you worry too hard, says so in here.”

“Yeah?” Tom asked, not sure what else to say.

“Yeah,” said the man, with a slight smile. Then he spoke softly, as if saying the words too loud would make them too real. “Hurts, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah...” Tom said, feeling his throat constrict with emotion. He fought off the feeling, fixing his eyes again on his shoes, both safely tucked on the ledge beneath him. He glanced over at the stranger’s bare feet and watched for a moment as a bit of drizzling rain water fell from the edge of his coat onto the bare skin. “Aren’t your feet cold?” The man glanced down like he’d only just realized his shoes had gone missing.

“Oh. No. Rocky keeps me warm.” He hooked a thumb back to indicate the cat who gave no indication of having heard its name spoken.

“Rocky?”

“Yup. ‘Cause he’s been through a lot, like a friend of mine.”

“Oh.” Tom began to worry. Was this guy some Bible-thumping loony? What would he do if he found out Tom had hardly set foot in a church since he’d moved out of his mother’s home? Would he be angry? Would he—well, what could he do? Kill him?

The apprehension that had been sneaking up his chest to his throat faded and Tom paused a moment, relishing that feeling and thinking it figured the only thing he’d found that worked that well to relieve his suffering was jumping off a bridge.

“And what’s your name?” Tom asked, for once not stumbling over his words or having his hands shake when he tried to get to know someone. Tom didn’t have many friends. Tom didn’t have *any* friends except Larry, his neighbor in the fifth grade who only really counted as a friend because they were still linked up over social media. They never spoke except in the form of those chain mail type posts people shared. Tom hated those. He didn’t believe in them... but after spending a sleepless night worrying that he’d have ten years bad luck if he didn’t share a picture, he just did what they said and moved on. He hated that. So Tom asked about the guy’s name and felt good about himself for managing it and bad about himself for feeling good about such a stupid, mundane accomplishment.

The man gave him a sidelong glance, a playfully suspicious look, jaw shifting as if he were considering the question.

“How ‘bout this,” he said finally, “I tell you my name... and you come back over that rail?”

Tom hesitated. The man was a good several inches taller than him, looked like he’d win if this



turned into a fight, but Tom was quick, and he could always make a mad leap for the edge if the man turned out to be a cop trying to talk him down. But then... he doubted cops wore cat scarves, carried Bibles, and went around barefoot. He nodded.

The man nodded back.

“Okay. I’m Emmanuel Iams. You can call me Manny.” He held out his hand to shake Tom’s and all but dragged him back onto the sidewalk on the other side of the rail when Tom accepted the warm, rough handshake.

“I-Iams? Like the dog food?” Tom asked, rather stupidly, he thought afterwards, but something in him felt like it had shaken loose and all the shaking was going to his legs, rattling unsteady tremors into his voice. Manny laughed.

“Like the cat food,” he said, catching Tom’s arm as he stumbled, seating him on the waist-high concrete barrier separating sidewalk from road and leaning back against it himself. The water soaked into Tom’s suit pants, but he didn’t care. It didn’t really matter anyway seeing as all of him would be wet in just a little while. He meant to say something more intelligent, to say something like, “I’ll talk to you for a bit, but then I’m going over.” But Manny beat him to it.

“You’re not gonna jump, Tom.”

Tom frowned, the stubborn Irish streak from his mother’s side kicking in.

“Am too,” he mumbled, feeling foolish even as he said it.

“Are not.” The man quirked a lopsided grin at him. “Do you really think I came all this way to watch you do that?” Tom managed a bitter laugh.

“Why the hell not? There’s nothing else good on TV.”

Manny’s smile faded, but Tom continued before he could cut him off, feeling frustration and exhaustion fueling his words into a near shout.

“Why shouldn’t you come see me jump, huh? Why shouldn’t the whole world come by and watch? It’s not like they’re losing anything! I can’t even get through *one day* without embarrassing myself or disappointing somebody or just sitting there and screaming inside because it freaking *hurts* to worry! It freaking *hurts* to be afraid of *everything* and to *know* how stupid that is! Why do you even care? I’ll give you a tip, go down the river a little ways, and you can have my shoes when I catch up with you, how’s that?” Tom scoffed at Manny’s grim expression. “What is my life worth to you anyway?”

A strange look passed through those hazel eyes and before Tom could snap another bitter drained question, Manny’s work-worn fist had caught his collar and tie and jerked him so close to the man’s face that Tom could see the tiny band of scars dotting the man’s brow and hear the unspoken emotion heavy in his low voice.

“I didn’t go through hell to see you jump, Tommy. I didn’t watch good men die right next to me so you could throw your life away, ‘cause if you wanna do that, there are plenty of better causes than jus’ a clear head.” Tom tried not to fidget; the rough, work-worn fist still clutching his collar. He took in a calming breath that didn’t really ever work and tried to keep his tone level despite the knuckles brushing his throat.

“What else am I supposed to do?” he asked, startled by the utter exhaustion in his own voice. Manny stared at him in speechless shock before a soft smile spread across his whiskered face. He shifted then, exchanging the near-chokehold for a supportive hand on Tom’s shoulder.

“Live.”

“Easier said than done,” Tom scoffed.

“Yeah,” agreed Manny, “But I know a lot of good men that had the choice made for ‘em. A lot of ‘em wished it’d gone the other way.”

Silence stretched between them, Tom looking down at the rain glinting in the light of the streetlamp, Manny staring out over the river at the horizon and the distant lights of the city. The



cat, Rocky, twitched in his sleep and Manny glanced back at him with a soft smile. The streetlamp flickered and failed, dropping them both into darkness. Still neither of them spoke. A car swept by, bringing with it a current of damp air that brushed Tom's cheek and ruffled Manny's hair. The companionable silence Tom had never experienced before was broken by the man's gruff voice.

"Would you look at that..." His tone was reverent as he gazed up at the sky, a blissful half-smile on his face as his eyes traced the constellations the streetlamp's tacky urban glow had hidden. Tom looked too, finding the familiar shapes of Orion, the North Star, the Dippers all standing over them with a tremulous light, like diamonds, sewn with care to the silky folds of sky. The dark rush of the water below was nothing compared to the expanse of twinkling pinpricks of light, painted across the skies with a light so pure and clear that it seemed to smile down on the earth. A soft breeze brushed through the swaying trees, leaves rustling like feathers and taking flight across the water, visible only by their darkness against the pale starlight. The moon slipped out from behind a cloud, unfurling her gown of silvery light across the earth. The moonlight caught in the puddles of water, the glint of it a pale shadow of the stars overhead.

"This is what helps me," Manny's voice rumbled softly beside him, somehow grounding him without detracting from the beauty around them. "No matter what I remember 'bout those days an' what we went through over there, no matter how many lives were lost or troubles gained... there are still more stars in the sky than there are reasons to die."

Tom felt the man look over at him and met his gaze, watching as the moonlight rested a motherly beam on his head, catching in his silver beard and sparking in his eyes.

"An' I might be a dirty vagrant who can't keep his nose out've another man's business, but personally, I think even one star like that," he pointed at the sky, indicating the tiny holes in the sky's gossamer fabric, "Little pinpricks of heaven shinin' through, like the sun sneaking out to dance in the rain... I think just one of them is worth living for."

The man sighed, patting Tom on the shoulder and straightening. The movement woke Rocky who voiced his displeasure with a rattling meow. Manny shushed him softly, taking him in his arms and stroking the cat's disheveled fur.

"Jus' promise me you'll think about that, Tommy. Alright?"

Tom nodded and the man gave him one last fond smile before turning and making his way down the sidewalk, bare feet fracturing the starry mirrors in each puddle he crossed. Tom watched, just watched in calm silence as the man's steps became a dance, twirling slowly and swaying in the starlight... like the sun sneaking out to dance in the rain.

