

It doesn't take long to fall from outside the viewing gallery on Tower Bridge to the Thames below. With a little school physics, a calculator and a google-sourced knowledge of the height (9.2 metres per second squared and 65 metres to save you the trouble), you can calculate that it takes about 3 seconds, give or take, and that you would be travelling at around 128 kph when you hit the water.

I can also tell you from experience that whatever the maths tells you, it doesn't take very long, but it seems like a lifetime. And it hurts when you hit the Thames. Well, it hurts for the first second or so. After that it all goes dark. Again, a little research will tell you that water is hard and unyielding. Compressing liquids, which is what your body is trying to do to the Thames, is not impossible, but it takes a lot of pressure to achieve a small amount of compression in a liquid, unlike a gas. It's something to do with the molecules being more dispersed in gases. But you don't really need to know that and neither did I. It just crossed my mind and I thought I'd share it.

Consequently, if you fall from a height onto water, you may sink through it, but the impact is a bit like hitting concrete. So, there is something like a 90% chance of death following such an experience. And if the fall doesn't get you, then the shock, the cold water and the drowning will.

However, physics aside, there is something about the context created by extreme experiences which enhances the senses. Soldiers talk of the magic in the air the morning before a battle. Rock climbers will tell you how they feel alive when they are on the rock. Someone once said of driving race cars that the racing is life, everything else is just waiting. I am sure you can think of other, perhaps less "aggressive", examples, but there is no doubt that being in the moment changes the quality of the air, sharpens your eyesight and enhances your hearing. In short, extreme experiences can, in the right circumstances, make you feel more alive than you have ever felt before.

Falling from Tower Bridge is something like that. Although I was not in control of the consequences, the feeling was extraordinary. Just as I was committed to the trajectory, I looked out. London had never seemed so beautiful as a city. The air had never been so clear and to quote the Who "I could see for miles." As I continued my journey downwards, my breathing was slow and steady, not panicked in any way. Each breath seemed deeper

and richer than the one before. My pulse seemed to have slowed and time, and I know it's a cliché, seemed to stand still

You're curious now, I know. Well, it's a real story and, yes, I am a storyteller. I always have been. Not by profession, but it was something I was known for. So, I rehearsed the story in the way that I always do. It's an essential part of the skill. If it looks as though you are trying when you are telling a story, then you haven't rehearsed enough. So, I always start rehearsing the story as soon as it happens. And I know this particular story is a doozy. It's a story people will love to hear. It's a story for dinner parties, although I feel it deserves a wider audience. It's the kind of story that will amuse and shock people and they will never be sure whether I am telling the truth or not. There will be two questions that will come up, and if they don't I will bring them up.

"What you are all asking yourselves is 'Why did you do it?' and 'How did you survive?'"

Needless to say the answers to both questions are intertwined.

The answer to the first question is really a familiar story in this day and age. I'll tell it quickly for reasons that will become obvious later. I was in my mid 40s with a reasonably successful career as a middle level manager in a large company. House in the suburbs, lovely wife, reasonable social life. Good work life balance. Then the company was bought by a large international conglomerate. All very positive. Rumours of expansion. Rumours of promotions. Rumours of international postings. All the usual, usual, usual. Then six months or so in, the rumours changed. The alternative usual started. Re-organisation. Streamlining. Efficiency measures. And I was not part of the strategic plan. No great worry at first. I had marketable skills. We were financially comfortable. A cushion in the bank. Then the jobs didn't come. We started to economise. Discussed the wife going out to work. Then she left. I still don't know exactly why. I know there was someone else and I know our situation didn't help, but there was little explanation.

"I'm leaving you."

"Why?"

"I think you know."

I didn't really, but that was pretty much it. Almost instantaneous. She had obviously been preparing for it for quite a while. Clothes removed from the wardrobe gradually and, more importantly bank accounts drained. And suddenly I was not just out of work, but also on my own and broke. I needed an income. I said earlier that I was a story teller. Up to then it was mostly a social thing, but I do like to think that I am good at telling jokes, anecdotes, recounting family stories and so on. Often to the annoyance of my wife.

"I think they've heard that one before."

But she was no longer part of my life. I made up my mind. Children's story teller. I was good, able to string the kids along, engage them for half an hour or so, which was all the parents wanted. Thirty minutes of Chardonnay peace in the kitchen. Work came in, and I was building a reputation through word of mouth. Positive rumours you might say. I was beginning to regain a little self respect, and the income would work as long as the benefits office didn't find out. Then the accusation came.

The child had been a little annoying in the way middle class children can be. A bit precocious and precious. I had stood a little abruptly and a glass of squash had spilled. The mother was out of the room, but returned quickly when she heard the scream. Chardonnay had been working its magic on the mother, so it all went over the top. I had to leave in a hurry. As I left, I could hear the accusations escalating behind me, as the child sought to remain the centre of attention.

More rumours. Negative this time. Other parents started 'remembering' things. There was nothing behind it, of course. But rumours build on rumours. My wife had left me. Why? I had lost my job. How? Well, they made up their own stories and they probably bore no relation to whatever truth there was. I never heard them directly, so I was powerless to contradict them. Then the police were involved and they were not pleasant. Legally compliant, but not out to make me feel comfortable. Then somehow the press got hold of it and the perfect storm started gathering just off the coast of my sanity. And finally broke.

It was the end of the road. A tunnel with no light at the end.

We had been on top of Tower Bridge as part of a corporate function, back when I had a job. I knew there was a door to the outside. Locked, secured, but these things are there to be overcome. I did the calculations. Well, you already know that. You've seen them. Maybe even checked them to see If I am telling the truth.

I think I've already mentioned that I was a good storyteller. The thing about story tellers is that they set up a sense of anticipation for the listener to maintain attention, suspense. Questions to be answered. I think I have answered the first question I posed earlier. The why.

As to the second question: the answer is that after 65 metres, 9.2 metres per second squared and then the Thames, it all went dark.