

MARTIN

Can I explain why I wanted to jump off the top of a tower-block? Of course I can explain why I wanted to jump off the top of a tower-block. I'm not a bloody idiot. I can explain it because it wasn't inexplicable: it was a logical decision, the product of proper thought. It wasn't even a very serious thought, either. I don't mean it was whimsical – I just meant that it wasn't terribly complicated, or agonized. Put it this way: say you were, I don't know, an assistant bank manager, in Guildford. And you'd been thinking of emigrating, and then you were offered the job of managing a bank in Sydney. Well, even though it's a pretty straightforward decision, you'd still have to think for a bit, wouldn't you? You'd at least have to work out whether you could bear to move, whether you could leave your friends and colleagues behind, whether you could uproot your wife and kids. You might sit down with a bit of paper and draw up a list of pros and cons. You know:

CONS – aged parents, friends, golf club.

PROS – more money, better quality of life (house with pool, barbecue, etc.), sea, sunshine, no left-wing councils banning 'Baa-Baa Black Sheep', no EEC directives banning British sausages, etc.

It's no contest, is it? The golf club! Give me a break. Obviously your aged parents give you pause for thought, but that's all it is – a pause, and a brief one, too. You'd be on the phone to the travel agents within ten minutes.

Well, that was me. There simply weren't enough regrets, and lots and lots of reasons to jump. The only things in my 'cons' list were the kids, but I couldn't imagine Cindy letting me see them again anyway. I haven't got any aged parents, and I don't play golf. Suicide was my Sydney. And I say that with no offence to the good people of Sydney intended.

MAUREEN

I told him I was going to a New Year's Eve party. I told him in October. I don't know whether people send out invitations to New Year's Eve parties in October or not. Probably not. (How would I know? I haven't been to one since 1984. June and Brian across the road had one, just before they moved. And even then I only nipped in for an hour or so, after he'd gone to sleep.) But I couldn't wait any longer. I'd been thinking about it since May or June, and I was itching to tell him. Stupid, really. He doesn't understand, I'm sure he doesn't. They tell me to keep talking to him, but you can see that nothing goes in. And what a thing to be itching about anyway! It just goes to show what I had to look forward to, doesn't it?

The moment I told him, I wanted to go straight to confession. Well, I'd lied, hadn't I? I'd lied to my own son. Oh, it was only a tiny, silly lie: I'd told him months in advance that I was going to a party, a party I'd made up. I'd made it up properly, too. I told him whose party it was, and why I'd been invited, and why I wanted to go, and who else would be there. (It was Bridgid's party, Bridgid from the church. And I'd been invited because her sister was coming over from Cork, and her sister had asked after me in a couple of letters. And I wanted to go because Bridgid's sister had taken her mother-in-law to Lourdes, and I wanted to find out all about it, with a view to taking Matty one day.) But confession wasn't possible, because I knew I would have to repeat the sin, the lie, over and over as the year came to an end. Not only to Matty, but to the people at the nursing home, and... Well, there isn't anyone else, really. Maybe someone at the church, or someone in a shop. It's almost comical, when you think about it. If you spend day and night looking after a sick child, there's very little room for sin, and I hadn't done anything worth confessing for donkey's years. And I went from that, to sinning so terribly that I couldn't even talk to the priest, because I was going to go on sinning and sinning until the day I died, when I would commit the biggest sin of all. (And why is it the biggest sin of all? All your life you're told that you'll be going to this marvellous place when you pass on. And the one thing you can do to get you there a bit quicker is something that stops you getting there at all. Oh, I can see that it's a kind of queue-jumping. But if someone jumps the queue at the Post Office, people tut. Or sometimes they say, 'Excuse me, I was here first.' They don't say, 'You will be consumed by hellfire for all eternity.' That would be a bit strong.) It didn't stop me from going to the church. But I only kept going because people would think there was something wrong if I stopped.

Nick Hornby, *The Long Way Down* (2005)