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Segue 9: Fall 10

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Falling Up

It was one of their grabs at the Musharaff Corner Store that changed everything for Jimbo.

The day was like any other—except it wasn't, not quite; the day never really seemed to start it was so overcast—and they were walking the estate; himself, Si and Si's two brothers. Jimbo never remembered the names of the brothers, and their names never passed between them; it was as if they had no names. They looked identical, too, with shaved heads and Helly Hansen puffer jackets in shades of green, so they might as well have been called nothing. Jimbo did silently refer to them as Helly 1 and Helly 2. Helly 1 had a huge zit on his forehead, in the middle of his eyes, which Si said made him look like a Hindu. That was the distinguishing feature that Jimbo went by.

Si was on top form. He wanted to clear the till. Cause a diversion for the proprietor Mr. Musharaff, and then just swipe the contents of it. Normally, they would slip a few bottles of J D into their pockets; this time, Si was strongly in favour of hitting a jackpot.

"Mr. Musharaff is blind in one eye," he said, as if the fact was commonplace.

"How d'we do it?" Helly 1 asked, sucking a cigarette.

"Easy. We get Jimbo to fake falling over. He does it in the middle of the store and old Musharaff shuffles to help him—I'm in the till."

Helly 2 nodded. "Yeah, that's nice."

Helly 1 flicked his cigarette into the air. "How do you get in the till, then?"

Si flashed a smile. It was the kind of smile Jimbo was getting used to.

"We're tooled up."

Out of his jacket, Si pulled a rusted crowbar. He showed them, concealing the hooked end in the fold of his jacket.

"Nice," Helly 2 conceded.

Helly 1 put another cigarette into his mouth. He nodded and without warning gave Helly 2 a shove to the shoulders, causing his brother to lose balance and fall against a short wall. Everybody laughed, except Helly 2, who tried to act casual by sitting on the wall.

"What was that for?" he demanded, making to push at Helly 1 in return, but holding back.

Si laughed. "What was that for?" he mimicked, crossing his long arms over his chest. "What was that for?" he said in a posh accent, directing it at Helly 2.

Helly 1 lit his cigarette in a quick movement like he was rubbing his face with his cupped palms. He exhaled the smoke.

"I just felt like it."

They made their way to Musharaff Corner Store by the usual route. Si led as normal, his bowed legs pronounced in skinny jeans. Jimbo felt nervous. Si was walking in that aggravated way like he was angry with the paving stones. He was hunched, one hand holding the crowbar through his jacket.
Jimbo didn't like the look of the crowbar.

At the corner of Dunfield Street, they paused, or rather Si paused and they all did the same. Si looked up and down the street and lifted his leg up onto a bollard. He slotted a finger into his boot.

Helly 2 frowned, hiding his Hindu spot.

“What are you doing?”

Si looked around at Helly 2, but didn’t see him. He just kept fishing into his boot with a real purpose, pushing his finger around as if to release some pressure from his foot. “Fuck's sake,” he whispered, finally pulling his boot off.

Out of the boot, he took a cellophane wrap. He unfolded the wrinkled plastic until the contents were revealed. Some of it spilled onto his fingertips, and he quickly dabbed the powder onto his gums.

Hellys 1 and 2 whistled and pushed each other in the arms, and crowded Si until he had to cradle the wrap out of harm’s way.

“Fuck’s sake,” he whispered again—louder this time, but controlled.

Once more, nerves attacked Jimbo. He didn’t crowd Si, just watched him intently, unable to keep his eyes off the powder. Each speck seemed to glitter, even in the dull light.

For that year after finishing school, Jimbo had stayed at his mum’s house, sleeping in a cold attic, trying to sustain himself with his own kettle and toaster and collection of cheap chocolate to avoid going downstairs.

Staying with his mum wasn’t a choice; it was a necessity. His dad had landed a job on an oil rig and wasn’t going to pay rent for a place he wasn’t sleeping in. Even if Jimbo was sleeping in it, he wasn’t going to keep up those rent payments. He’d said, It’s only natural to be with your mother, while throwing his clothes into a frayed, old Adidas backpack a day before he was supposed to leave, not really making eye contact with Jimbo at all.

Either way, Jimbo didn’t spend much time at his mother’s house. He was fishing mostly, or taking long walks up the canal to look for new spots. Through summer and autumn, it was all he did. Even in the winter, when he couldn’t feel his toes and his eyes leaked tears without warning, he’d be out there casting off with the other loners who dotted the canal-side. It had been a hobby at school, but now it was more than that: he needed to fish; fishing was a way of getting out, a way of escaping his mum’s new boyfriend, Steve, who had a beaten-up BMW and was not much older than himself.

It was a relaxation. He could sit for hours—rod in stand—staring at the brown, oily water until the sun was gone. Sometimes, a heron would glide by; without a sound, it would settle itself on the upturned shopping trolley in the middle of the canal, as motionless as Jimbo was, making little adjustments to its neck and head to watch for prey.

Jimbo would marvel at its poise. Stick-thin legs, arrow neck—how did it remain so balanced and graceful? Jimbo, conversely, needed all the centre of gravity he could get: he was
sitting on a green crate, underneath which was a wide-load pallet he’d hauled from the canal bank—even then, he found himself keeling to the side. But the heron remained as steady as if it were floating. It would dip its long beak into the murky water in one easy, flowing movement and rise out again, untroubled. Stability was its number one advantage.

Apart from fishing, he signed on every Wednesday. This was no fun as the Job Centre was the worst place for his trips and falls. Stepping onto the zigzag carpet at the entrance filled him with fear because he knew zigzags would fuck around, dropping and rising at a whim. He knew he looked strange, his steps staggered to counteract the shifting patterns on the carpet. But he had to get his money; without that fifty quid a week, he would be reliant on his mum; if he was reliant on his mum, he was reliant on Steve.

One time, after negotiating the zigzags successfully, the whole ground disappeared. People had crowded around to help, of course, but people always crowded around and he hated it; the puzzled looks of those who had seen, really seen, would imprint onto his mind. It was worse than the hysterics of Si and his brothers—at least with the hysterics there was a soundtrack, something to lose yourself in. Not so with the staring.

After that particular trip for his Giro, he had changed his route home. Instead of cashing it at the central post office and getting the 26, he jumped on the number 30, which headed to Samuels Park. There, he withdrew his money from a local post office and made his way to the Victorian bandstand—notes balled up in his fist—where he knew a few people; knew was not exactly the word, but he could name them.

The wind was strong at the bandstand. He shielded his lighter, flicking the wheel a few times until a flame appeared. He lit a cigarette and held on tightly to the railing. Si and Hellys 1 and 2 were listening to Grime on Helly 1’s mobile phone not far away, but Jimbo wasn’t about to approach them. They had been two years ahead at school, so his hands were tied. Si, especially, wasn’t someone you approached. You waited.

Si was the guy that everybody knew on the estate.
Eventually, he came up to Jimbo.
“St. Michael’s?”
Jimbo nodded.
“Yeah, I thought so,” he said, looking Jimbo up and down. “You got a cig, then?”
Jimbo delved quickly into his inside pocket and passed one to Si.
Si lit the cigarette and blew smoke into the air above. Up close, Si was smaller, more compact than Jimbo had remembered—he had seemed so tall at school, towering over the teachers, head and shoulders on his peers. But here in the dark—his neck zipped up in his coat, a closely-shaven head—Jimbo was level pegging.

Jimbo lit another cigarette.
“You look like someone…” Si looked straight into and through Jimbo.
“From St. Michaels…”
Si shook his head. “No. From the television, what’s his name? You know who I mean…”
Jimbo shrugged. “Like an actor or something?”
“Yeah…” His eyes were wide open, searching. “No, not an actor. Ah, what is it? Hey bro! Bro! Come here, a second.”
Helly 1 glanced over from a wooded area, just north of the bandstand. From what Jimbo could tell, he was counting out money. There were a couple of kids with him. He tried to ignore Si.

“Bro! Bro!” Si kept calling, unfazed. “Get over here!”
“Who’s this?” Si said, pointing to Jimbo when he arrived.
“I don’t fucking know,” Helly 1 said, glancing from Jimbo to Si. “I was just in the middle…”
“Look at him,” Si interrupted. “Just look at him, a minute.”
Si gave up after a while. It felt good to be recognized, though.

Mr. Musharaff studied the four of them as they filed down the narrow main aisle of the corner shop. He had half-moon spectacles perched at the end of his long nose; the spectacles were attached to a strap of leather, which meant he could let them hang at his chest.
Helly 1 and Helly 2 went forward to the till, while Si and Jimbo hung back in the aisle. As planned, Si and Jimbo searched for something on the shelves; the blood was thumping in Jimbo’s ears, but he concentrated hard on the dusty tins of spam and corned beef, moving across to the baked beans, the spaghetti and sausages, the breakfast tins, and finally the Pot Noodles.
Through the thumping in his ears, he heard Helly 2 ask for Marlborough Lights. Helly 1, in turn, ordered his usual Superkings.

“Jimbo.”

Though Jimbo knew it was time, he couldn’t get a message to his legs. He had a Chicken and Mushroom Pot Noodle in his hand. It felt good to hold on to, like an anchor. He felt sure he was about to fall.
Si came in close to him and pulled the Pot Noodle out of his hand; he was restricted in the way he moved, one arm still pressing onto the crowbar under his jacket. He managed to jab an elbow into Jimbo’s ribs.

“Now,” he whispered, his lip curled to a snarl. “Now.”
Jimbo could feel the cocaine dripping down his throat, numbing his tongue and his teeth. His legs felt like nothing. But in feeling like nothing, he knew they would hold.

Si was the deciding factor.
It wasn’t at all certain Jimbo would become friends with them, especially taking into account Hellys 1 and 2, who were suspicious. But with Si on his side, and with Si’s insistence on him ‘sticking around for a bit’, the clique formed.
He started falling down regularly after that. One night, he lurched forward onto the grassy embankment leading to the bandstand; another, he took the stairs of the bandstand on his knees, rolling off into the gravel and skinning his left cheek. Helly 1 thought it was all an act. He was so
convinced of this, at first, he’d refused to laugh, and had pulled Jimbo from the ground, squared up to his face and said, ‘Do that again’. Close up, the Hindu spot was blazing on his forehead and there was the stink of the Superkings, and a grin in his eyes; a grin that flickered off and on.

Si, on the other hand, embraced Jimbo’s clumsiness. To him, the falling was what Jimbo did best—his calling card, his special power.

Si was always inquisitive about that.

“You must be like an epileptic or something,” Si had stated, the night Jimbo had fallen over on the grass.

Jimbo had shrugged, brushing the wet off his jacket. He could feel that old anger boiling up inside him again.

“I don’t think it has a name,” he lied, knowing the name very well—Ataxia. “What I have, it’s just…”

“It’s just your fault?”

Jimbo shrugged again, accepting a spliff from Si. “Yeah.” He pulled the smoke deep into his lungs. “My mum took me to a clinic…but they didn't know.”

Didn’t know.

His mother had known all along. It had skipped her, and it was now Jimbo's problem—it was coded. He had not been too young to understand what his mother was doing, or not doing about it. They never went back to the clinic.

Si pinched the spliff out of Jimbo’s fingers. “Yeah, well. Fucking typical, isn’t it? Do you know what NHS stands for?”

Jimbo didn’t.

“It stands for No Health Stupid.” He laughed and punched Jimbo in the arm. “But serious, you have a problem.” He touched his head with the hand holding the spliff; the smile was gone. “It’s here. Not in your legs. Do you know what I’m saying?” He kept on pressing a finger into his temple, the smoke trailing around his head. "Do you understand?"

Jimbo nodded.

“You’re right,” he continued, looking off into the distance. “You’re fucking right. We’re all fucked up here.”

He laughed so hard that the end of the spliff showered hot rocks onto his jeans. He kept laughing as he brushed off the burning hash.

“We’re so fucked up!” he shouted into the beams of the bandstand.

Turning to Jimbo, a light was in his eyes that Jimbo could hardly forget about. His eyes were translucent; Jimbo could see the workings behind them, the wires and arteries wound around each other and sending signals.
Jimbo didn’t move. He glanced up the aisle to Mr. Musharaff. Mr. Musharaff was staring at them both, his pencil poised over the notebook on the counter. By now, the cocaine was working its way into Jimbo's arms and legs and fists and knees and elbows. It was making him strong, super strong.

Si was in close.

“You go up there, Jimbo,” he said. “You…go…up…there.”

As he approached the counter, Jimbo concentrated on Mr. Musharaff’s thinning hair. It was no more than a wisp on top, and combed over. Hellys 1 and 2 were walking away towards the magazine rack, unwrapping their packets of cigarettes in unison. They flashed Jimbo a smile.

Jimbo could go no further. He turned back to Si.

“Go on,” Si mouthed, as loud as if he had shouted.

At this point, Mr. Musharaff had taken his glasses off and they were resting at his chest. “What are you boys doing?” he demanded. “If you want to buy something, buy something. If not, you leave now.”

Jimbo could see that one milky eye.

“Do you understand English?” Mr. Musharaff was lifting up the counter. “I suggest you leave now!”

Jimbo had his fists balled up. He was supposed to fall down. Now that he had everything in place: his legs in place, his arms, his fingers—all strong, all how it could've been in his life—he was supposed let that all go.

“Do you understand, though?” he spat out, without even thinking the words. All of his muscles felt coiled tight, ready to spring at any moment. “We're not leaving…do you understand that?”

He didn't see Mr. Musharaff anymore; he saw Steve, his mother's new boyfriend. He saw the ripped blue jeans. He saw the stupid white t-shirt with the faded angel's wings spread out across the chest. He saw the two little nicks shaved right into the eyebrow.

“I asked you a fucking question!”

One of the things he hated the most about Steve was his F reg BMW parked badly outside their house. It would be half on and half off the curb. There'd be the muffled bass of his music and that shrill sound of him shouting into his mobile phone. Jimbo would hate that moment. He would hate the door slamming and that pause before his mother's excited welcome.

“Fuck it!” Jimbo could feel the anger twist and snap as he said the words, he could feel the twist and snap, but also the calm and ease that contained it. With the cocaine, he could stand his ground. Literally, stand. Not have to hold onto anything.

He stared into the Mr. Musharaff's bad eye. The eye stared in return. Behind the film of his blindness, there seemed to be an understanding in what Jimbo could do. In the eye, he saw Si approaching, the gait in the way he walked, the crowbar coming out.
It happened: Si cracked open the cash till, using the crook of his elbow for leverage; Helly 1 emptied the cigarette stand into a bin liner, taken from the shelves; Helly 2 gently slipped bottles of whisky and vodka into his backpack.

In all of this, Jimbo felt slow. He could sense that maybe one or two of his knuckles were broken; he could sense, also, a pinch of guilt somewhere, layered away. But he was comfortable in his body. His body was a vehicle now—controllable. Behind every inch of his skin, Jimbo could feel light.

Stepping over Mr. Musharaff, Jimbo glided out of the corner store with Si and the Hellys following behind him. The pavement was like air under his feet, and the cloud cover was no longer so grey and lifeless. It was blue in colour now; a dark shade that made it almost electric.

As they made their way to the bandstand, Hellys 1 and 2 were jogging and pushing each other. Every so often, Helly 1 peeled open his backpack to show off the bottles he’d snatched, the liquids sloshing around.

“Anyone thirsty?” he beamed.

Each street corner they turned, each road crossed, each hill and slope, brought Jimbo down from the cocaine. It stepped down. There was nothing sudden about it. By the time they reached the bandstand, Jimbo was no longer feeling anything.

Si was counting out the money.

“…sixty, eighty, eighty-five…”

Helly 1 dived a hand into Si’s pocket. “Is that it?” he said.

“Yes, that’s fucking it! Where do you think we were robbing?”

Jimbo’s attention was drawn away to Helly 2, who was quietly rolling a spliff at the other end of the bandstand. He had his knees up to his chest and a paper in each hand. He seemed to be having trouble sticking the papers together.

“Jimbo?” Si was sipping from the Jack Daniels’ bottle. “Come over here, a sec.”

Jimbo sat down next to Si. Already, he could feel his muscles switching off and on, the tiny impulses, the twitches that he knew too well.

“This is your cut, mate,” he said, handing two crumpled twenties and a ten to Jimbo.

Jimbo felt the notes between his fingers. “This is too much,” he said.

Helly 1 perked up. “Yeah, too fucking right!” He barged onto the bench, pushing Jimbo over a little. “I’m thinking…what am I thinking, Jimbo?” He both glared and smiled at Jimbo. “I’m thinking twenty each, aren’t I, Jimbo? Twenty each, Si, you fucking maths genius.”

Jimbo looked to Si. He was swigging from the bottle now, a blankness to his face like he was younger. A kid of ten or twelve, not eighteen.
Putting the bottle down deliberately so that it balanced on two bench slats, Si turned to Helly 1. His eyes were bloodshot, and he had regained his years—but not all of them. “You know what, bro? You know what?” he began.

Helly 1 stared at him in confusion.

Si stood up. “I didn't see you do what was needed. I didn't see you facing up to Musharaff.” With a sudden jerk of his foot, he kicked the bottle of Jack Daniels off the bench. “I'm thinking fifty goes to Jimbo. I'm thinking, bro…”

From across the bandstand, Helly 2 shouted, “Yeah, bro, you know what I mean, it was all Jimbo.” He was slurring his words badly and trying to get up from the ground, hands slipping on the railing. “Fuck. It was all Jimbo. He didn't even fall. He was supposed to fall, right?”

When night came, Jimbo thought about the heron. He hadn't been back to the canal for weeks and he wondered if the heron was still there, or if it had migrated. He wondered if the bird could be there, even if he wasn't. He was connected to the heron; the heron was what he was not—it was logical.

Instead of taking the cash, he took the cocaine, wrapped in Si’s boot. Si was apologetic. There wasn't enough, it wasn't a fair swap, he’d said. Jimbo could see that he was reluctant to part with it—and he couldn't blame him. It was like gold. It was the best thing Jimbo had tasted—the sourness was still there on his tongue. But he persisted, and Si eventually gave it to him.

Leaving them to their whisky and vodka, Jimbo made his way to the canal.

At the canal, his crate and pallet were in the correct place. He took his seat and watched the black water ooze by. There were all sorts of things in the water: petrol bottles, plastic bags, bubble wrap and a kid's bike. But no shopping trolley.

Jimbo half-expected the heron to fly across. A few pigeons swooped down near him, pecking around for food. He watched their heads jerk back and forth as he dipped his finger into the white powder. At some point, he would snort the cocaine, he told himself. At some point…but not yet. He was comfortable with just eating it. He enjoyed the sharpness. He knew that within ten, fifteen minutes it would rise up inside him, flooding every part of him, easing his muscles and slipping that light under his skin.

He would wait for that.
Author Notes

Jonathan Cardew lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with his wife and two daughters. He has had stories published in Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine and two editions of Sheffield Hallam University’s Best of... series. A collection of stories, Heal Yourself And Move, is forthcoming, if not coming soon.

About the Work

In his essay “A Story-teller’s Notebook,” Raymond Carver has this to say about penning a short story, “Get in, get out. Don’t linger. Go on.” This is, for me, the best piece of advice on short fiction writing; it is everything you need to know. A former mentor of mine, E.A. Markham, would say the same thing with different words—“Arrive late, leave early”. In Markham’s case, though, I expect he was referring to his own time management skills.

Whichever way, I hold to this principle as much as I can when I write.

“Falling Up” begins a couple of hours before the end, loops back and points to a wide open future. So far so good. I get in: “The day was like any other...and they were walking the estate.” I get out: “He would wait for that.” I don’t think I linger too much. Not everything is written down. I know much more about character, place and plot than I will let slip. And that’s where the editing plays its role—the rewriting, resizing, copying, cutting, pasting, and then cutting again of what doesn’t need to be written. This was all very much in evidence in the drafting of this story.

It began with the character: Jimbo.
And his problem: falling down.
And the gang: Si, Helly 1, Helly 2.
It suddenly had a title (a borrowed title, from the electronic music artist Theo Parrish).
It was something I was investing my time and energy in.
It had a future.
It had possibility.
But it didn’t happen for me. After a few pages, I put it away.

When I looked at it again a few months later, I was a little happier with the story. The main thing that stood out for me was the heron. It resonated, and meant that I could carry on. Without the line, “Stability was its number one advantage,” I don’t think it would have been worth my while. Of course, there were other things going for the story—the narrative was simple, the characters had their reasons for being, and the prose was clear in the most part - but there had to be a hook that went beyond plot and character. I’m not sure if hook is the right word in this instance, and I don’t think it matters. Because I finished the story. The heron was an image I had carried in my mind—and it was an image rooted in reality, as was the canal where Jimbo does his fishing, a stretch of the Sheffield canal between Shalesmoor and Attercliffe—and I carried it to the end, even if the heron is nowhere to be seen in that final section.
This is the point: *I did finish the story.* Whatever gets you to finish a story, to finish it with purpose, to finish it strong—whether it is a heron or a bag of pretzels or a three-cornered table—is the important thing.

**Jonathan Cardew on the Web**

[wordpress.jonathancardew.com](http://wordpress.jonathancardew.com)