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A Long Way Down

Nick Hornby



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurNarrated in turns by a dowdy, middle-aged woman, a half-crazed adolescent, a disgraced breakfast TV presenter and an American rock star cum pizza delivery boy, A Long Way Down is the story of the Toppers House Four, aka Maureen, Jess, Martin and JJ. A low-rent crowd with absolutely nothing in common - save where they end up that New Year's Eve night. And what they do next, of course. Funny, sad, and wonderfully humane, Nick Hornby's new novel asks some of the big questions: about life and death, strangers and friendship, love and pain, and whether a slice of pizza can really see you through a long, dark night of the soul.Extrait The cure for unhappiness is happiness, I dont care what anyone says. ELIZABETH MCCRACKEN, Niagara Falls All Over Again PART ONEMARTINCan 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. Im not a bloody idiot. I can explain it because it wasnt inexplicable: It was a logical decision, the product of proper thought. It wasnt even very serious thought, either. I dont mean it was whimsicalI just mean that it wasnt terribly complicated, or agonized. Put it this way: Say you were, I dont know, an assistant bank manager in Guildford. And youd been thinking of emigrating, and then you were offered the job of managing a bank in Sydney. Well, even though its a pretty straightforward decision, youd still have to think for a bit, wouldnt you? Youd 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. Its no contest, is it? The golf club! Give me a break. Obviously your aged parents give you pause for thought, but thats all it isa pause, and a brief one, too. Youd be on the phone to the travel agents within ten minutes. Well, that was me. There simply werent enough regrets, and lots and lots of reasons to jump. The only things on my cons list were the kids, but I couldnt imagine Cindy letting me see them again anyway. I havent got any aged parents, and I dont play golf. Suicide was my Sydney. And I say that with no offense to the good people of Sydney intended.

MAUREEN I told him I was going to a New Years Eve party. I told him in October. I dont know whether people send out invitations to New Years Eve parties in October or not. Probably not. (How would I know? I havent 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 hed gone to sleep.) But I couldnt wait any longer. Id been thinking about it since May or June, and I was itching to tell him. Stupid, really. He doesnt understand, Im sure he doesnt. 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, doesnt it? The moment I told him, I wanted to go straight to confession. Well, Id lied, hadnt I? Id lied to my own son. Oh, it was only a tiny, silly lie: Id told him months in advance that I was going to a party, a party Id made up. Id made it up properly, too. I told him whose party it was, and why Id been invited, and why I wanted to go, and who else would be there. (It was Bridgids party, Bridgid from the church. And Id 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 Bridgids 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 wasnt 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 isnt anyone else, really. Maybe someone at the church, or someone in a shop. Its almost comical, when you think about it. If you spend day and night looking after a sick child, theres very little room for sin, and I hadnt done anything worth confessing for donkeys years. And I went from that, to sinning so terribly that I couldnt 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 youre told that youll be going to this marvelous 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 its 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 dont say, You will be consumed by hellfire for all eternity. That would be a bit strong.) It didnt stop me from going to the church. But I only kept going because people would think there was something wrong if I stopped. As we got closer and closer to the date, I kept passing on little tidbits of information that I told him Id picked up. Every Sunday I pretended as though Id learned something new, because Sundays were when I saw Bridgid. Bridgid says therell be dancing. Bridgids worried that not everyone likes wine and beer, so shell be providing spirits. Bridgid doesnt know how many people will have eaten already. If Matty had been able to understand anything, hed have decided that this Bridgid woman was a lunatic, worrying like that about a little get-together. I blushed every time I saw her at the church. And of course I wanted to know what she actually was doing on New Years Eve, but I never asked. If she was planning to have a party, she mightve felt that she had to invite me. Im ashamed, thinking back. Not about the liesIm used to lying now. No, Im ashamed of how pathetic it all was. One Sunday I found myself telling Matty about where Bridgid was going to buy the ham for the sandwiches. But it was on my mind, New Years Eve, of course it was, and it was a way of talking about it, without actually saying anything. And I suppose I came to believe in the party a little bit myself, in the way that you come to believe the story in a book. Every now and again I imagined what Id wear, how much Id drink, what time Id leave. Whether Id

come home in a taxi. That sort of thing. In the end it was as if Id actually been. Even in my imagination, though, I couldnt see myself talking to anyone at the party. I was always quite happy to leave it. JESS I was at a party downstairs in the squat. It was a shit party, full of all these ancient crusties sitting on the floor drinking cider and smoking huge spliffs and listening to weirdo space-out reggae. At midnight, one of them clapped sarcastically, and a couple of others laughed, and that was it Happy New Year to you, too. You could have turned up to that party as the happiest person in London, and youd still have wanted to jump off the roof by five past twelve. And I wasnt the happiest person in London anyway. Obviously. I only went because someone at college told me Chas would be there, but he wasnt. I tried his mobile for the one zillionth time, but it wasnt on. When we first split up, he called me a stalker, but thats like an emotive word, stalker, isnt it? I dont think you can call it stalking when its just phone calls and letters and e-mails and knocking on the door. And I only turned up at his work twice. Three times, if you count his Christmas party, which I dont, because he said he was going to take me to that anyway. Stalking is when you follow them to the shops and on holiday and all that, isnt it? Well, I never went near any shops. And anyway I didnt think it was stalking when someone owed you an explanation. Being owed an explanation is like being owed money, and not just a fiver, either. Five or six hundred quid, minimum, more like. If youre owed five or six hundred quid, minimum, and the person who owes it to you is avoiding you, then youre bound to knock on his door late at night, when you know hes going to be in. People get serious about that sort of money. They call in debt collectors, and break peoples legs, but I never went that far. I showed some restraint. So even though I could see straightaway that he wasnt at this party, I stayed for a while. Where else was I going to go? I was feeling sorry for myself. How can you be eighteen and not have anywhere to go on New Years Eve, apart from some shit party in some shit squat where you dont know anybody? Well, I managed it. I seem to manage it every year. I make friends easily enough, but then I piss them off, I know that much, even if Im not sure why or how. And so people and parties disappear. I pissed Jen off, Im sure of that. She disappeared, like everyone else. MARTIN Id spent the previous couple of months looking up suicide inquests on the Internet, just out of curiosity. And nearly every single time, the coroner says the same thing: He took his own life while the balance of his mind was disturbed. And then you read the story about the poor bastard: His wife was sleeping with his best friend, hed lost his job, his daughter had been killed in a road accident some months before... Hello, Mr. Coroner? Anyone at home? Im sorry, but theres no disturbed mental balance here, my friend. Id say he got it just right. Bad thing upon bad thing upon bad thing until you cant take any more, and then its off to the nearest multistory car park in the family hatchback with a length of rubber tubing. Surely thats fair enough? Surely the coroners report should read, He took his own life after sober and careful contemplation of the fucking shambles it had become. Not once did I read a newspaper report that convinced me that the deceased was off the old trolley. You know: The Manchester United forward, who was engaged to the current Miss Sweden, had recently achieved a unique Double: He is the only man ever to have won the FA Cup and an Oscar for Best Actor in the same year. The rights to his first novel had just been bought for an undisclosed sum by Steven Spielberg. He was found hanging from a beam in his stables by a member of his staff. Now, Ive never seen a coroners report like that, but if there were cases in which happy, successful, talented people took their own lives, one could safely come to the conclusion that the old balance was indeed wonky. And Im not saying that being engaged to Miss Sweden, playing for Manchester United, and winning Oscars inoculates you against depression Im sure it doesnt. Im just saying that these things help. Look at the statistics. Youre more likely to top yourself if youve just gone through a divorce. Or if youre anorexic. Or if youre unemployed. Or if youre a prostitute. Or if youve fought in a war, or if youve been raped, or if youve lost somebody... There are lots and lots of factors that push people over the edge; none of these factors are likely to make you feel anything but fucking miserable. Two years ago Martin Sharp would not have found himself sitting on a tiny concrete ledge in the middle of the night, looking a hundred feet down at a concrete walkway and wondering whether hed hear the noise that his bones made when they shattered into tiny pieces. But two years ago Martin Sharp was a different person. I still had my job. I still had a wife. I hadnt slept with a fifteen-year-old. I hadnt been to prison. I hadnt had to talk to my young daughters about a front-page tabloid newspaper article, an article headlined with the word SLEAZEBAG! and illustrated with a picture of me lying on the pavement outside a well-known London nightspot. (What would the headline have been if I had gone over? SLEAZY DOES IT! perhaps. Or maybe SHARP END!) There was, it is fair to say, less reason for ledge-sitting before all that happened. So dont tell me that the balance of my mind was disturbed, because it really didnt feel that way. (What does it mean, anyway, that stuff about the balance of the mind? Is it strictly scientific? Does the mind really wobble up and

down in the head like some sort of fish scale, according to how loopy you are?) Wanting to kill myself was an appropriate and reasonable response to a whole series of unfortunate events that had rendered life unlivable. Oh, yes, I know the shrinks would say that they could have helped, but that's half the trouble with this bloody country, isn't it? No one's willing to face their responsibilities. It's always someone else's fault. Boo hoo hoo. Well, I happen to be one of those rare individuals who believe that what went on with Mummy and Daddy had nothing to do with me screwing a fifteen-year-old. I happen to believe that I would have slept with her regardless of whether I'd been breast-fed or not, and it was time to face up to what I'd done. And what I'd done is, I'd pissed my life away. Literally. Well, OK, not literally literally. I hadn't, you know, turned my life into urine and stored it in my bladder and so on and so forth. But I felt as if I'd pissed my life away in the same way that you can piss money away. I'd had a life, full of kids and wives and jobs and all the usual stuff, and I'd somehow managed to mislay it. No, you see, that's not right. I knew where my life was, just as you know where money goes when you piss it away. I hadn't mislaid it at all. I'd spent it. I'd spent my kids and my job and my wife on teenaged girls and nightclubs: These things all come at a price, and I'd happily paid it, and suddenly my life wasn't there anymore. What would I be leaving behind? On New Year's Eve, it felt as though I'd be saying goodbye to a dim form of consciousness and a semi-functioning digestive system—all the indications of a life, certainly, but none of the content. I didn't even feel sad, particularly. I just felt very stupid, and very angry. I'm not sitting here now because I suddenly saw sense. The reason I'm sitting here now is because that night turned into as much of a mess as everything else. I couldn't even jump off a fucking tower block without fucking it up. MAUREEN On New Year's Eve the nursing home sent their ambulance round for him. You had to pay extra for that, but I didn't mind. How could I? In the end, Matty was going to cost them a lot more than they were costing me. I was only paying for a night, and they were going to pay for the rest of his life. I thought about hiding some of Matty's stuff, in case they thought it was odd, but no one had to know it was his. I could have had loads of kids, as far as they knew, so I left it there. They came around six, and these two young fellas wheeled him out. I couldn't cry when he went, because then the young fellas would guess something was wrong; as far as they knew, I was coming to fetch him at eleven the next morning. I just kissed him on the top of his head and told him to be good at the home, and I held it all in until I'd seen them leave. Then I wept and wept, for about an hour. He'd ruined my life, but he was still my son, and I was never going to see him again, and I couldn't even say goodbye properly. I watched the television for a while, and I did have one or two glasses of sherry, because I knew it would be cold out. I waited at the bus stop for ten minutes, but then I decided to walk. Knowing that you want to die makes you less scared. I wouldn't have dreamed of walking all that way late at night, especially when the streets are full of drunks, but what did it matter now? Although then, of course, I found myself worrying about being attacked but not murdered—left for dead without actually dying. Because then I'd be taken to hospital, and they'd find out who I was, and they'd find out about Matty, and all those months of planning would have been a complete waste of time, and I'd come out of hospital owing the home thousands of pounds, and where was I going to find that? But no one attacked me. A couple of people wished me a happy New Year, but that was about all. There isn't so much to be afraid of, out there. I can remember thinking it was funny to find that out, on the last night of my life; I'd spent the rest of it being afraid of everything. I'd never been to Toppers House before. I'd just been past it on the bus once or twice. I didn't even know for sure that you could get onto the roof anymore, but the door was open, and I just walked up the stairs until I couldn't walk any farther. I don't know why it didn't occur to me that you couldn't just jump off whenever you felt like it, but the moment I saw it I realized that they wouldn't let you do that. They'd put this wire up, way up high, and there were curved railings with spikes on the top... Well, that's when I began to panic. I'm not tall, and I'm not very strong, and I'm not as young as I was. I couldn't see how I was going to get over the top of it all, and it had to be that night, because of Matty being in the home and everything. And I started to go through all the other options, but none of them were any good. I didn't want to do it in my own front room, where someone I knew would find me. I wanted to be found by a stranger. And I didn't want to jump in front of a train, because I'd seen a program on the television about the poor drivers and how suicides upset them. And I didn't have a car, so I couldn't drive off to a quiet spot and breathe in the exhaust fumes... And then I saw Martin, right over on the other side of the roof. I hid in the shadows and watched him. I could see he'd done things properly: He'd brought a little stepladder and some wire cutters, and he'd managed to climb over the top like that. And he was just sitting on the ledge, dangling his feet, looking down, taking nips out of a little hip flask, smoking, and thinking, while I waited. And he smoked and he smoked and I waited and waited until in the end I couldn't wait anymore. I know it was his stepladder, but I needed it. It wasn't going

to be much use to him. I never tried to push him. Im not beefy enough to push a grown man off a ledge. And I wouldnt have tried anyway. It wouldnt have been right; it was up to him whether he jumped or not. I just went up to him and put my hand through the wire and tapped him on the shoulder. I only wanted to ask him if he was going to be long. JESS Before I got to the squat, I never had any intention of going onto the roof. Honestly. Id forgotten about the whole Toppers House thing until I started speaking to this guy. I think he fancied me, which isnt really saying much, seeing as I was about the only female under thirty who could still stand up. He gave me a fag, and he told me his name was Bong, and when I asked him why he was called Bong he said it was because he always smoked his weed out of a bong. And I went, Does that mean everyone else here is called Spliff? But he was just like, No, that bloke over there is called Mental Mike. And that one over there is called Puddle. And that one over there is Nicky Turd. And so on, until hed been through everyone in the room he knew. But the ten minutes I spent talking to Bong made history. Well, not history like 55 BC or 1939. Not historical history, unless one of us goes on to invent a time machine or stops Britain from being invaded by Al Qaeda or something. But who knows what would have happened to us if Bong hadnt fancied me? Because before he started chatting me up I was just about to go home, and Maureen and Martin would be dead now, probably, and... Well, everything would have been different. When Bong had finished going through his list, he looked at me and he went, Youre not thinking of going up on the roof, are you? And I thought, Not with you, stoner-brain. And he went, Because I can see the pain and desperation in your eyes. I was well pissed by that time, so looking back on it, Im pretty sure that what he could see in my eyes were seven Bacardi Breezers and two cans of Special Brew. I just went, Oh, really? And he went, Yeah, see, Ive been put on suicide watch, to look out for people whove only come here because they want to go upstairs. And I was like, What happens upstairs? And he laughed, and went, Youre joking, arent you? This is Toppers House, man. This is where people kill themselves. And I would never have thought of it if he hadnt said that. Everything suddenly made sense. Because even though Id been about to go home, I couldnt imagine what Id do when I got there, and I couldnt imagine waking up in the morning. I wanted Chas, and he didnt want me, and I suddenly realized that easily the best thing to do was make my life as short as I possibly could. I almost laughed, it was so neat: I wanted to make my life short, and I was at a party in Toppers House, and the coincidence was too much. It was like a message from God. OK, it was disappointing that all God had to say to me was, like, Jump off a roof, but I didnt blame him. What else was he supposed to tell me? I could feel the weight of everything then the weight of loneliness, of everything that had gone wrong. I felt heroic, going up those last few flights to the top of the building, dragging that weight along with me. Jumping felt like the only way to get rid of it, the only way to make it work for me instead of against me; I felt so heavy that I knew Id hit the street in no time. Id beat the world record for falling off a tower block. MARTIN If she hadnt tried to kill me, Id be dead, no question. But weve all got a preservation instinct, havent we? Even if were trying to kill ourselves when it kicks in. All I know is that I felt this thump on my back, and I turned round and grabbed the railings behind me, and I started yelling. I was drunk by then. Id been taking nips out of the old hip flask for a while, and Id had a skinful before I came out, as well. (I know, I know, I shouldnt have driven. But I wasnt going to take the fucking stepladder on the bus.) So, yes, I probably did let rip with a bit of vocabulary. If Id known it was Maureen, if Id known what Maureen was like, then I would have toned it down a bit, probably, but I didnt; I think I might even have used the c word, for which Ive apologized. But youd have to admit it was a unique situation. I stood up and turned round carefully, because I didnt want to fall off until I chose to, and I started yelling at her, and she just stared. I know you, she said. How? I was being slow. People come up to me in restaurants and shops and theaters and garages and urinals all over Britain and say, I know you, and they invariably mean precisely the opposite; they mean, I dont know you. But Ive seen you on the telly. And they want an autograph, or a chat about what Penny Chambers is really like, in real life. But that night, I just wasnt expecting it. It all seemed a bit beside the point, that side of life. From the television. Oh, for Christs sake. I was about to kill myself, but never mind, theres always time for an autograph. Have you got a pen? Or a bit of paper? And before you ask, shes a right bitch who will snort anything and fuck anybody. What are you doing up here anyway? I was... I was going to jump, too. I wanted to borrow your ladder. Thats what everything comes down to: ladders. Well, not ladders literally; the Middle East peace process doesnt come down to ladders, and nor do the money markets. But one thing I know from interviewing people on the show is that you can reduce the most enormous topics down to the tiniest parts, as if life were an Airfix model. Ive heard a religious leader attribute his faith to a faulty catch on a garden shed (he got locked in for a night when he was a kid, and God guided him through the darkness); Ive heard a hostage describe how he survived because one of his captors

was fascinated by the London Zoo family discount card he kept in his wallet. You want to talk about big things, but its the catches on the garden sheds and the London Zoo cards that give you the footholds; without them you wouldnt know where to start. Not if youre hosting Rise and Shine with Penny and Martin you dont anyway. Maureen and I couldnt talk about why we were so unhappy that we wanted our brains to spill out onto the concrete like a McDonalds milk shake, so we talked about the ladder instead. Be my guest. Ill wait until... Well, Ill wait. So youre just going to stand there and watch? No. Of course not. Youll be wanting to do it on your own, Id imagine. Youd imagine right. Ill go over there. She gestured to the other side of the roof. Ill give you a shout on the way down. I laughed, but she didnt. Come on. That wasnt a bad gag. In the circumstances. I suppose Im not in the mood, Mr. Sharp. I dont think she was trying to be funny, but what she said made me laugh even more. Maureen went to the other side of the roof and sat down with her back against the far wall. I turned around and lowered myself back onto the ledge. But I couldnt concentrate. The moment had gone. Youre probably thinking, How much concentration does a man need to throw himself off the top of a high building? Well, youd be surprised. Before Maureen arrived Id been in the zone; I was in a place where it would have been easy to push myself off. I was entirely focused on all the reasons I was up there in the first place; I understood with a horrible clarity the impossibility of attempting to resume life down on the ground. But the conversation with her had distracted me, pulled me back out into the world, into the cold and the wind and the noise of the thumping bass seven floors below. I couldnt get the mood back; it was as if one of the kids had woken up just as Cindy and I were starting to make love. I hadnt changed my mind, and I still knew that Id have to do it sometime. Its just that I knew I wasnt going to be able to do it in the next five minutes. I shouted at Maureen. Oi! Do you want to swap places? See how you get on? And I laughed again. I was, I felt, on a comedy roll, drunk enough, I suppose, deranged enough to feel that just about anything I said would be hilarious. Maureen came out of the shadows and approached the breach in the wire fence cautiously. I want to be on my own, too, she said. You will be. Youve got twenty minutes. Then I want my spot back. How are you going to get back over this side? I hadnt thought of that. The stepladder really only worked one way: There wasnt enough room on my side of the railings to open it out. Youll have to hold it. What do you mean? You hand it over the top to me. Ill put it flush against the railings. You hold it steady from that side. Id never be able to keep it in place. Youre too heavy. And she was too light. She was small, but she carried no weight at all. I wondered whether she wanted to kill herself because she didnt want to die a long and painful death from some disease or other. So youll have to put up with me being here. I wasnt sure that I wanted to climb over to the other side anyway. The railings marked out a boundary now: You could get to the stairs from the roof, and to the street from the stairs, and from the street you could get to Cindy, and the kids, and Danielle, and her dad, and everything else that had blown me up here as if I were a crisp packet in a gale. The ledge felt safe. There was no humiliation and shame therebeyond the humiliation and shame youd expect to feel if you were sitting on a ledge, on your own, on New Years Eve. Why cant you shuffle round to the other side of the roof? Why cant you? Its my ladder. Youre not much of a gentleman. No, Im fucking not. Thats one of the reasons Im up here, in fact. Dont you read the papers? I look at the local one sometimes. So what do you know about me? You used to be on the TV. Thats it? I think so. She thought for a moment. Were you married to someone in ABBA? No. Or another singer? No. Oh. And you like mushrooms, I know that. Mushrooms? You said. I remember. There was one of those chef fellas in the studio, and he gave you something to taste, and you said, Mmmm, I love mushrooms. I could eat them all day. Was that you? It might have been. But thats all you can dredge up? Yes. So why do you think I want to kill myself? Ive no idea. Youre pissing me around. Would you mind watching your language? I find it offensive. Im sorry. But I couldnt believe it. I couldnt believe Id found someone who didnt know. Before I went to prison, I used to wake up in the morning and the tabloid scum were waiting outside the front door. I had crisis meetings with agents and managers and TV executives. It seemed impossible that there was anyone in Britain uninterested in what I had done, mostly because I lived in a world where it was the only thing that seemed to matter. Maybe Maureen lived on the roof, I thought. It would be easy to lose touch up there. What about your belt? She nodded at my waist. As far as Maureen was concerned, these were her last few moments on earth. She didnt want to spend them talking about my passion for mushrooms (a passion which, I fear, may have been manufactured for the camera anyway). She wanted to get on with things. What about it? Take your belt off and put it round the ladder. Buckle it your side of the railings. I saw what she meant, and saw that it would work, and for the next couple of minutes we worked in a companionable silence; she passed the ladder over the fence, and I took my belt off, passed it round both ladder and railings, pulled it tight, buckled it up, and gave it a shake to check it would hold. I

really didnt want to die falling backward. I climbed back over; we unbuckled the belt and placed the ladder in its original position. And I was just about to let Maureen jump in peace when this fucking lunatic came roaring at us. JESS I shouldnt have made the noise. That was my mistake. I mean, that was my mistake if the idea was to kill myself. I could have just walked, quickly and quietly and calmly, to the place where Martin had cut through the wire, climbed the ladder, and then jumped. But I didnt. I yelled something like Out of the way, losers! and made this Red Indian war-whoop noise, as if it were all a game which it was at that point, to me anyway and Martin rugby-tackled me before I got halfway there. And then he sort of kneeled on me and ground my face into that sort of gritty fake tarmac stuff they put on the tops of buildings. Then I really did want to be dead. I didnt know it was Martin. I never saw anything, really, until he was rubbing my nose in the grit, and then I just saw grit. But I knew what the two of them were doing up there the moment I got to the roof. You didnt have to be, like, a genius to work that out. So when he was sitting on me I went,

So how come you two are allowed to kill yourselves and Im not? And he goes, Youre too young. Weve fucked our lives up. You havent yet. And I said, How do you know that? And he goes, No ones fucked their lives up at your age. And I was like, What if Ive murdered ten people? Including my parents and, I dont know, my baby twins? And he went, Well, have you? And I said, Yeah, I have. (Even though I hadnt. I just wanted to see what hed say.) And he went, Well, if youre up here, youve got away with it, havent you? Id get on a plane to Brazil if I were you. And I said, What if I want to pay for what Ive done with my life? And he said, Shut up. MARTIN My first thought, after Id brought Jess crashing to the ground, was that I didnt want Maureen sneaking off on her own. It was nothing to do with trying to save her life; it would simply have pissed me off if shed taken advantage of my distraction and jumped. Oh, none of it makes much sense;

two minutes before, Id been practically ushering her over. But I didnt see why Jess should be my responsibility and not hers, and I didnt see why she should be the one to use the ladder when Id carted it all the way up there. So my motives were essentially selfish; nothing new there, as Cindy would tell you. After Jess and I had had our idiotic conversation about how shed killed lots of people, I shouted at Maureen to come and help me. She looked frightened, and then dawdled her way over to us. Get a bloody move on. What do you want me to do? Sit on her. Maureen sat on Jesss arse, and I knelt on her arms. Just let me go, you old bastard pervert. Youre getting a thrill out of this, arent you? Well, obviously that stung a bit, given recent events. I thought for a moment Jess might have known who I was, but even Im not that paranoid. If you were rugby-tackled in the middle of the night just as you were about to hurl yourself off the top of a tower block, you probably wouldnt be thinking about breakfast television presenters. (This would come as a shock to breakfast television presenters, of course, most of whom firmly believe that people think about nothing else but, breakfast, lunch, and dinner.) I was mature enough to rise above Jesss taunts, even though I felt like breaking her arms. If we let go, are you going to behave? Yes. So Maureen stood up, and with wearying predictability Jess scrambled for the ladder, and I had to bring her crashing down again. Now what? said Maureen, as if I were a veteran of countless similar situations and would therefore know the ropes. I dont bloody know. Why it didnt occur to any of us that a well-known suicide spot would be like Piccadilly Circus on New Years Eve I have no idea, but at that point in the proceedings I had accepted the reality of our situation: We were in the process of turning a solemn and private moment into a farce with a cast of thousands. And at that precise moment of acceptance, we three became four. There was a polite cough, and when we turned round to look, we saw a tall, good-looking, long-haired man, maybe ten years younger than me, holding a crash helmet under one arm and one of those big insulated bags in the other. Any of you guys order a pizza? he said. MAUREEN Id never met an American before, I dont think. I wasnt at all sure he was one, either, until the others said something. You dont expect Americans to be delivering pizzas, do you? Well, I dont, but perhaps Im just out of touch. I dont order pizzas very often, but every time I have, theyve been delivered by someone who doesnt speak English. Americans dont deliver things, do they? Or serve you in shops, or take your money on the bus. I suppose they must do in America, but they dont here. Indians and West Indians, lots of Australians in the hospital where they see Matty, but no Americans. So we probably thought he was a bit mad at first. That was the only explanation for him. He looked a bit mad, with that hair. And he thought that wed ordered pizzas while we were standing on the roof of Toppers House.

How would we have ordered pizzas? Jess asked him. We were still sitting on her, so her voice sounded funny. On a cell, he said. Whats a cell? Jess asked. OK, a mobile, whatever. Fair play to him, we could have done that. Are you American? Jess asked him. Yeah. What are you doing delivering pizzas? What are you guys doing sitting on her head? Theyre sitting on my head because this isnt a free country, Jess said. You cant do what you want to. What did you wanna do? She didnt say anything. She was going to jump, Martin

said. So were you! He ignored her. You were all gonna jump? the pizza man asked us. We didnt say anything. The f? he said. The f? said Jess. The fwhat? Its an American abbreviation, said Martin. The f? means What the f? In America, theyre so busy that they dont have time to say the what. Would you watch your language, please? I said to them. We werent all brought up in a pigsty. The pizza man just sat down on the roof and shook his head. I thought he was feeling sorry for us, but later he told us it wasnt that at all. OK, he said after a while. Let her go. We didnt move. Hey, you. You fing listening to me? Am I gonna have to come over and make you listen? He stood up and walked toward us. I think shes OK now, Maureen, Martin said, as if he was deciding to stand up of his own accord, and not because the American man might punch him. He stood up, and I stood up, and Jess stood up and brushed herself down and swore a lot. Then she stared at Martin. Youre that bloke, she said. The breakfast TV bloke. The one who slept with the fifteen-year-old. Martin Sharp. F! Martin Sharp was sitting on my head. You old pervert. Well, of course I didnt have a clue about any fifteen-year-old. I dont look at that sort of newspaper unless Im in the hairdressers, or someones left one on the bus. You kidding me? said the pizza man. The guy who went to prison? I read about him. Martin made a groaning noise. Does everyone in America know, too? he said. Sure, the pizza man said. I read about it in the New York Times. Oh, God, said Martin, but you could tell he was pleased. I was just kidding, said the pizza man. You used to host a morning talk show here. No one in the U.S. has ever heard of you. Get real. Give us some pizza, then, said Jess. What flavors have you got? I dont know, said the pizza man. Let me have a look, then, said Jess. No, I mean... Theyre not my pizzas, you know? Oh, dont be such a pussy, said Jess. (Really. Thats what she said. I dont know why.) She leaned over, grabbed his bag, and took out the pizza boxes. Then she opened the boxes and started poking the pizzas. This ones pepperoni. I dont know what that is, though. Vegetables. Vegetarian, said the pizza man. Whatever, said Jess. Who wants what? I asked for vegetarian. The pepperoni sounded like something that wouldnt agree with me. JJ I told a couple people about that night, and the weird thing is that they get the suicide part, but they dont get the pizza part. Most people get suicide, I guess; most people, even if its hidden deep down inside somewhere, can remember a time in their lives when they thought about whether they really wanted to wake up the next day. Wanting to die seems like it might be a part of being alive. So anyway, I tell people the story of that New Years Eve, and none of them are like, Whaaaaat? You were gonna kill yourself? Its more, you know, Oh, OK, your band was fucked up, you were at the end of the line with your music, which was all you wanted to do your whole life, plus you broke up with your girlfriend, who was the only reason you were in this fuckin country in the first place... Sure, I can see why you were up there. But then like the very next second, they want to know what a guy like me was doing delivering fucking pizzas. OK, you dont know me, so youll have to take my word for it that Im not stupid. I read the fuck out of every book I can get my hands on. I like Faulkner and Dickens and Vonnegut and Brendan Behan and Dylan Thomas. Earlier that week Christmas Day, to be precise Id finished Revolutionary Road by Richard Yates, which is a totally awesome novel. I was actually going to jump with a copy, not only because it would have been kinda cool, and wouldve added a little mystique to my death, but because it might have been a good way of getting more people to read it. But the way things worked out, I didnt have any preparation time, and I left it at home. I have to say, though, that I wouldnt recommend finishing it on Christmas Day, in, like, a cold-water bedsit, in a city where you dont really know anybody. It probably didnt help my general sense of well-being, if you know what I mean, because the ending is a real downer. Anyway, the point is, people jump to the conclusion that anyone driving around North London on a shitty little moped on New Years Eve for minimum wage is clearly a loser, and almost certainly one stagione short of the full quattro. Well, OK, we are losers by definition, because delivering pizzas is a job for losers. But were not all dumb assholes. In fact, even with the Faulkner and Dickens, I was probably the dumbest out of all the guys at work, or at least the worst educated. We got African doctors, Albanian lawyers, Iraqi chemists... I was the only one who didnt have a college degree. (I dont understand how there isnt more pizza-related violence in our society. Just imagine: Youre, like, the top whatever in Zimbabwe, brain surgeon or whatever, and then you have to come to England because the fascist regime wants to nail your ass to a tree, and you end up being patronized at three in the morning by some stoned teenaged motherfucker with the munchies... I mean, shouldnt you be legally entitled to break his fucking jaw?) Anyway. Theres more than one way to be a loser. Theres sure more than one way of losing. So I could say that I was delivering pizzas because England sucks and, more specifically, English girls suck, and I couldnt work legit because Im not an English guy. Or an Italian guy, or a Spanish guy, or even like a fucking Finnish guy or whatever. So I was doing the only work I could find; Ivan, the Lithuanian proprietor of Casa Luigi on Holloway Road, didnt care that I was from Chicago, not Helsinki.

And another way of explaining it is to say that shit happens, and theres no space too small, too dark and airless and fucking hopeless, for people to crawl into. The trouble with my generation is that we all think were fucking geniuses. Making something isnt good enough for us, and neither is selling something, or teaching something, or even just doing something; we have to be something. Its our inalienable right, as citizens of the twenty-first century. If Christina Aguilera or Britney or some American Idol jerk can be something, then why cant I? Wheres mine, huh? OK, so my band, we put on the best live shows you could ever see in a bar, and we made two albums, which a lot of critics and not many real people liked. But having talent is never enough to make us happy, is it? I mean, it should be, because a talent is a gift, and you should thank God for it, but I didnt. It just pissed me off because I wasnt being paid for it, and it didnt get me on the cover of Rolling Stone. Oscar Wilde once said, Ones real life is so often the life that one does not lead. Well, fucking right on, Oscar. My real life was full of headlining shows at Wembley and Madison Square Garden and platinum records, and Grammys, and that wasnt the life I was leading, which is maybe why it felt like I could throw it away. The life I was leading didnt let me be, I dont know... be who I thought I was. It didnt even let me stand up properly. It felt like Id been walking down a tunnel that was getting narrower and narrower, and darker and darker, and had started shipping water, and I was all hunched up, and there was a wall of rock in front of me and the only tools I had were my fingernails. And maybe everyone feels that way, but thats no reason to stick with it. Anyway, that New Years Eve, Id gotten sick of it, finally. My fingernails were all worn away, and the tips of my fingers were shredded up. I couldnt dig anymore. With the band gone, the only room I had left for self-expression was in checking out of my unreal life: I was going to fly off that fucking roof like Superman. Except, of course, it didnt work out like that. Some dead people, people who were too sensitive to live: Sylvia Plath, van Gogh, Virginia Woolf, Jackson Pollock, Primo Levi, Kurt Cobain, of course. Some alive people: George W. Bush, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Osama bin Laden. Put a cross next to the people you might want to have a drink with, and then see whether theyre on the dead side or the alive side. And, yeah, you could point out that I have stacked the deck, that there are a couple people missing from my alive list who might fuck up my argument, a few poets and musicians and so on. And you could also point out that Stalin and Hitler werent so great, and theyre no longer with us. But indulge me anyway: You know what Im talking about. Sensitive people find it harder to stick around. So it was real shocking to discover that Maureen, Jess, and Martin Sharp were about to take the Vincent van Gogh route out of this world. (And yeah, thank you, I know Vincent didnt jump off the top of a North London apartment building.) A middle-aged woman who looked like someones cleaning lady, a shrieking adolescent lunatic, and a talk-show host with an orange face... It didnt add up. Suicide wasnt invented for people like this. It was invented for people like Virginia Woolf and Nick Drake. And me. Suicide was supposed to be cool. New Years Eve was a night for sentimental losers. It was my own stupid fault. Of course thered be a low-rent crowd up there. I should have picked a classier datelike March 28, when Virginia Woolf took her walk into the river, or Nick Drakes November 25. If anybody had been on the roof on either of those nights, the chances are they would have been like-minded souls, rather than hopeless fuck-ups who had somehow persuaded themselves that the end of a calendar year is in any way significant. It was just that when I got the order to deliver the pizzas to the squat in Toppers House, the opportunity seemed too good to turn down. My plan was to wander to the top, take a look around to get my bearings, go back down to deliver the pizzas, and then Do It. And suddenly there I was with three potential suicides munching the pizzas I was supposed to deliver and staring at me. They were apparently expecting some kind of Gettysburg Address about why their damaged and pointless lives were worth living. It was ironic, really, seeing as I didnt give a fuck whether they jumped or not. I didnt know them from Adam, and none of them looked like they were going to add much to the sum total of human achievement. So, I said. Great. Pizza. A small, good thing on a night like this. Raymond Carver, as you probably know, but it was wasted on these guys. Now what? said Jess. We eat our pizza. Then? Just give it half an hour, OK? Then well see where were at. I dont know where that came from. Why half an hour? And what was supposed to happen then? Everyone needs a little time-out. Looks to me like things were getting undignified up here. Thirty minutes? Is that agreed? One by one they shrugged and then nodded, and we went back to chewing our pizza in silence. This was the first time I had tried one of Ivans. It was inedible, maybe even poisonous. Im not fucking sitting here for half an hour looking at your fucking miserable faces, said Jess. Thats what youve just this minute agreed to do, Martin reminded her. So what? Whats the point of agreeing to do something and then not doing it? No point. Jess was apparently untroubled by the concession. Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative, I said. Wilde again. I couldnt resist. Jess glared at me. Hes being nice to you, said Martin. From Publishers WeeklyMore than just

a reading of Hornby's fourth novel, this audiobook is nearly an audio play with three excellent actors playing four characters. A famous pervert, an old maid, a crazy chick and a has-been rocker walk into a bar... well, they eventually do walk into a pub or two, but this disparate group of strangers first meet on a tower rooftop. Each of the quartet has independently decided to jump on New Year's Eve. Now, bonded by circumstance, they can't get rid of each other. Vance does a superb job rendering the glib tones of Martin, the TV anchor fallen from grace (he did jail time for having sex with a 15-year-old). His pompous but self-loathing delivery is dead on. Brick, with more than 150 audiobooks under his belt, perfectly nails the earnest voice and cockiness of J.J., the washed-up American rocker. And Kate Reading is outstanding playing both female characters. As Maureen, the older woman with no social life, she exudes quiet, naive dignity, but she really shines as Jess, the young wacko whose rudeness and rebellion are conveyed with a brash comical snap.

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