

# Close to the Sky

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This is a story about two people who, officially anyway, died on the same day, in more or less the same geographic area.

It should go without saying that in itself this wouldn't be so unusual. People die every day, and sometimes more than just two at a time. The circumstances, though. The details. That's what weaves what might have been seen as a pair of unrelated tragedies into a most unusual event. But from a distance...say, the distance from the cockpit of a helicopter flying over Interstate 65 in downtown Louisville to a rooftop below, nothing seemed to be amiss, at least at first glance. It was a typical Thursday morning drive. A little extra buildup on the eastbound side of the Watterson, that was all. Not even anything for the pilot to report to his waiting audience.

It was funny, then, how as that helicopter droned toward him Dan Meyer ended up stepping unnoticed out onto the roof of that tall building just below on that cold winter morning, a faint smile on his face and a Haydn string quartet in his mind as he stepped toward the parapet.

Now, the concept of "funny" all depends on the perspective. *Funny*. Dan Meyer thought of his present situation as funny, but humor had nothing to do with it. It was funny, yes, but as in, odd or unexpected, though honestly, neither was strictly true in this case. More on this anon. To the disconcerted woman standing behind him, *funny* was something more akin to unfortunate, perhaps tragic. The woman's name was Candy Marcum, and she had first met Dan Meyer a few days' previous when he had suddenly appeared in her office. And again, a word of multiple meanings: *appeared*. It could mean that he had walked in through her office door unannounced or without an appointment, but of course, it did not. No, Dan Meyer had *appeared* before Candy Marcum's astonished eyes, out of thin air, as it's said. Materialized might be a better word. At 5:15 AM.

This had the expected effect on Candy, who was, fortuitously, seated at her desk at the time, catching up on some work in her office on the 27<sup>th</sup> floor of the Norton Building, where she spent her work day handling medical insurance claims. It wasn't usually an exciting job, more often than not frustrating really, poring over stacks of claim forms she knew were probably going to be rejected and as such, was a complete waste of time. Still, the pay was decent, she had her own office with a splendid view of the city, something a lot of her peers wished they had, and better health insurance than most of the folks whose claims she processed. Which was a fortunate thing, considering some of the claims that passed through her hands daily.

Oh, there were interesting times, rare enough but spectacular. On one memorable occasion a disturbed client had casually walked past security and found his way up to Candy's office, a most uncomfortable situation indeed, especially when he began asking some even more uncomfortable questions, such as, who exactly had denied his wife the potentially life-saving treatment for her cervical cancer, and why. Of course, she only processed the form. The denials were done in the office of the chief claims adjustor, and she'd told him so. He'd then gone into that office and proceeded to

spill his guts. Literally. Cut himself across the belly with dramatic irony. Also with a scalpel. Astonishing! To others in the office it was a deliciously gruesome story that would be gleefully told for the rest of their lives. But Candy Marcum was not so strong of stomach, and besides, as the office's OSHA liaison she'd had to help clean up the awful mess left behind. She'd had to take a week off to recuperate from that. Never mind the fact that Dr. Cross, the adjustor, hadn't even been in his office. It just happened that he was in Cancun that week. Funny how things like that work out. *Funny*, again, this time as in fortunate. Again, perspective is everything.

So, when Dan Meyer just...oh, let's say, *wafted* into view, now that was "funny" as in unusual. Visually, his appearance was almost like a flame coming to life in a gentle breeze: a vague form, wavering just a bit before gaining solidity.

Candy, being seated, had the expected reaction to such an event: an almost cinematically perfect spit-take, dropping her coffee cup onto her desk, where it made a soggy mess of the papers strewn there. Great. More work to do. Or at least, that's what she thought later, when her composure returned.

Her first words upon seeing him were not *words* so much as *sounds*. Then she invoked the name of her Savior, then she finally gasped, "Who the *hell* are you, and where the hell did you come from?"

And at that, Dan Meyer grinned hugely, quite pleased with himself. "So, you can, like, see me?"

"Yes! I can, *like*, see you. Don't be stupid. You're right there in front of me."

Another wide-eyed smile, perhaps a bit calmer this time, and this perhaps in an effort to calm *her*. "My name is Dan, Dan Meyer," he explained, "and I'm in the middle of an out-of-body...experiment."

She goggled up at him, astonished. "Oh, sure you are. Well, you can just experiment yourself right back into that body, Mister...Mister Dan Meyer. I didn't come in here early this morning to get my pants scared off by some fresh guy talking hippie talk."

Now he laughed, and here it first occurred to Candy Marcum that his was a very pleasant laugh. "I'm about as far away from a hippie as you can get. I voted Bush in 2000." He grimaced. "If only I knew then what we all know now. Anyway, I'm just an ordinary guy."

"Apart from the whole out-of-body thing, of course." She amazed herself with the calm in her voice. But he seemed okay, and besides, he was sort of cute too, after all.

"Naturally." He looked around. "I am *here*, then? You see me, you're talking to me. But I'm not really here." He walked over to her desk, picked up a form she'd been perusing, a form now drenched in coffee. "You see me lifting this."

She snatched it from him. "Here, that's *confidential*," she said, trying for 'authoritative' but still landing somewhere around 'mystified'.

"And wet," he noted. "Can I help you clean up?"

"That...that would be fine. There's paper towels in the restroom, just down the hall."

So he left, and while she had no expectation of his ever returning, he did anyway to her surprise and delight, bearing a stack of neatly folded paper towels. She hadn't budged in the meanwhile. "That's either the cleanest crapper I've ever been in, or my

sense of smell isn't transferring," he said, matter-of-factly. "Beats the one at the plant all to pieces."

"This *is* a health insurance office," she pointed out. "I would imagine our...crappers, as you call them, are at least sanitary."

"Is that what this is? I wondered." He laid half of the towels on the desk and looked around. "I work in a factory myself. Run a band saw. It's not much, but it's a living. Only, somebody's put boogers all over the walls in the men's room. Classy."

She gagged. "Yeah. Classy."

"It's somebody who smokes. They all have nicotine stains. Me, I quit about a year ago." He nodded approvingly as he looked around her office. "This is nice. I wish I had this kind of view."

"It seems you do, today at least," she commented as she patted up the pools of coffee. "Doesn't that seem strange to you?"

"It should, I guess," he agreed, looking out the window and down onto the interstate below. "That's where I am right now, you know." He pointed down to the roadway where it crossed the Ohio River over the Kennedy Memorial bridge. "Probably getting ready to turn off onto 64 right about now. New Albany, that's where our plant is. We'll be there in about ten minutes."

"Who's 'we'?" Candy asked.

Dan Meyer looked back at her. "Oh, that'd be Joe and I. He's my roommate. Kinda. He owns a trailer house in Okalona. We share the lot rent and utilities. I've had apartments with bigger closets than my bedroom there, but I reckon it beats sleeping under a picnic table. And I've had to do that before." He looked thoughtful. "I suppose when we get there I'll disappear. And probably you won't remember me. Like waking up from a dream. That's how it's been so far anyway. Just so you know."

"So far?"

"Well, this isn't the first time I've been here."

This was news to Candy Marcum. "Mister Meyer, no offense, but I've been here for fifteen years and this is the first time I've set eyes on you." *And too bad for that*, she almost added, but didn't.

It probably ought to be noted at this point that poor Candy's life had been rather mundane up till the moment which Dan Meyer materialized in front of her. She grew up working class in Jeffersontown, a suburb of Louisville, had an unremarkable childhood and an equally unobtrusive adult life. Oh, she'd done what she could to spice it up, especially in the past few years: she bought a motorcycle, went hiking, joined a book discussion group, spent time at the park, and even took up running in an effort to meet people. She told friends it was only for friendship, not necessarily for relationships and what might come thereafter, but if that did, why, that was okay too. She'd long ago resigned herself to spinsterhood, but she wasn't committed to it.

Spinster. There's a word you don't hear much anymore. Kind of out-of-date, old fashioned. But that was Candy Marcum for you. Trapped in the seventies. About the only good thing she had going for her socially was that she really, really liked disco music, and it seemed to be back in vogue again. Mostly among gay men, but that was okay too. It was entertainment. This, though...

"I've been coming here the past several days," Dan Meyer told her. "Since I figured out I could do it. We talked about it at the group meeting last week, and I just figured I'd try it this week." He looked back outside. "Funny. I figured I'd have woken up by now. I must really be out of it."

"You're confusing me," Candy said. "And I sure could use a replacement for that cup of coffee. Would you mind if we took this discussion to the Break Room?"

"Not sure how long I'll be able to stick around. But I'm willing to try." He got up and Candy did likewise—a little weak in the knees, admittedly, but steady enough—and she led him down the hall a few doors to the company break room, which was still deserted at this hour. "Pretty posh," he remarked. "Our break room at the plant has plywood walls. Not even painted. And some folding tables and chairs. No windows, except in the door, and I figure that's there so the shift leaders can peek in and see who's goldbricking." He drew two cups of coffee. "I take mine straight. You?"

"Lots of cream and sugar, just like candy. Which is my name, by the way."

He nodded as he worked. "I knew that."

Well, of course he did. If he really *had* been coming over the course of the week, he'd have had ample opportunity to learn her name. And more, especially if he had been...invisible, if you will. With a private office, she never hesitated to use it as a changing room for her daily post-work run in the park. When exactly had he been there, and what exactly had he seen, she wondered? Or perhaps the thought was something more earthy. One could certainly forgive her had that been the case. So, it was only natural that her next query might've been exactly that. But it wasn't. Such was her comfort level, and given the circumstances, that was at least understandable.

Anyway when Dan Meyer came back to the table bearing two brimming cups, he sat across from her and told a tale that was, at least, incredible.

"See, I thought I was bored," he said to her. "So bored I didn't feel like living. My therapist called it depression." He shrugged. "Not that I put much stock in what she said. But it was her who suggested I go back to school. I can't exactly afford to go back to school, but I heard the city offers adult education classes."

"They do," Candy noted. "I've seen the brochures at the library."

"That's where I saw 'em. Anyway, I picked one up, looked through it, and I found one that sounded like I would enjoy it. Parapsychology. More important, it was *free*. I figured, what the hell, if nothing else, it was something to occupy some time. Our class met at Southern High School, twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays over eight weeks. It was great. It was never the same thing twice. We started with ghosts and poltergeists, which took a couple of nights, then we branched off into UFOlogy, ESP, telekinesis, spiritualism—which I thought was really odd, considering how Catholic this city is—and we finished a few weeks ago with meditation. Neat stuff. We had a great group, so tight that when the class ended, we all decided to keep meeting informally. Only once a week, but it beat not at all, and it was cheaper than going back to therapy. I gave that up anyway. The woman who was my therapist..." He laughed cynically. "The best thing I can say about her is that she was gorgeous. Mia, that's her name. I'd *do* her, but I'd never be her patient again."

There was a pause, almost as if Dan was waiting for Candy to ask the inevitable question, which she obliged by finally breaking the silence with, "Why?"

"She wanted to commit me." He grinned. "I'm mad, you know. Or at least that's what *she* thought when I told her what I was doing. People can't really do this sort of thing, she told me. But, here I am, so what does she know? And when she suggested sticking me back in the nuthatch, I thought pretty much the same thing and told her where to get off. Haven't been back since."

"Ummm...*back* in the nuthatch?"

"Spent a couple of weeks there a year ago for trying to kill myself." He shrugged. "Don't ask me, we probably don't have that kind of time. Anyway, I learned a lot at those group meetings, more than Mia ever taught me. And one of the things I learned was that supposedly you really *can* project yourself from one place to another...if you can focus, focus completely, shut everything else out."

"So you decided to try it," Candy concluded, "and here you are."

"It wasn't that simple. I tried to do it at the house a bunch of times, but somehow I never made it work. Tried everything that made sense. I got somewhere quiet, thought of somewhere I wanted to go. And I fell asleep. Went to the woods, figured communing with Nature would help. I got chased out by hornets. Last place I ever figured it would work would be in a car, but that's where it happened first. Funny, I seem to relax more in the car than I do at home in bed."

"Not driving, hopefully."

"Not driving. Joe drives. It's his car. I have a motorcycle."

"Really!" Candy squealed. "So do I! Maybe we can go riding..." Then she remembered she was speaking to a disembodied spirit—or whatever Dan Meyer was—and she toned down the enthusiasm.

"Anyway, we come through downtown pretty much every weekday morning about this time. I'll stare out the window, sometimes we'll listen to the news or whatever. We don't really talk a lot, Joe and I. Probably why we get along so well. Anyway, I took to looking at what was happening in the windows of the office buildings downtown, what I could see, and what I *imagined* I could see. I'd look up, see which offices had lights, if there was anybody visible, that sort of thing. After a few days I pretty much had it figured out where I could look to find someone." He smiled at her. "That was you. And you were always alone. So I figured, well, let's see if I can come up and get a closer look at you. And this last Tuesday, I did it."

"But I couldn't see you."

"No. I knew something was wrong, that I wasn't completely *there*. It didn't feel..." He searched for a word. "I guess it didn't feel natural. Or as natural as something like this *can* feel, anyway. I mean, what is astral projection supposed to feel like?"

"Well, what *does* it feel like?" Candy asked.

"Well today it felt like I deflated in the car...like all the air went out of me. Then, when I got here, it was like I kinda popped back into place." He laid a hand on hers, and she surprised herself by not flinching, not even a little. "Look, I'm sorry if I scared you. I wasn't sure where I was going to end up. The first couple of times I got here, I tried to get a good look around so I'd know I wasn't going to arrive in a closet or something. It worked out well enough, I guess."

"I guess."

"And here I am. So, what shall we do?"

She looked up at him. "Do? What do you mean?"

"Really, Candy. Here I am. What will we do? It seems I'm unoccupied, and I bet you're not officially on the clock yet either. Go somewhere, do something, maybe? I don't know. I haven't had breakfast yet. You guys have a cafeteria here? I'll buy." He checked his pockets and grinned. "I guess my money's good when I'm projecting. I hope so, anyway."

She thought about it for a moment, and came to the conclusion that nothing ill could come of having a cute guy buy her breakfast, whether he was real or not. He certainly looked and sounded human enough. And this would be a fine test, anyway. If she got all the way to the café with him, why, then he was real enough, and what was happening was enough to constitute a date. Which might, perhaps, lead to more. She stood. "All right," she said, "but if you're not with me by the time we hit the elevator, I'm just going to think of you as a hallucination or something."

"Fair enough." He took her hand and shook it. She had to admit he *felt* real too. A nice firm grip, and warm too. Her father had always relied on a firm handshake to determine whether her potential suitors were trustworthy; Dan Meyer would almost certainly pass muster. Of course, with a name like Meyer he was liable to be Jewish, and Dad might not approve of *that*. Still, she wasn't exactly looking at him as husband on the hoof just yet. You just don't do that with a guy that materializes in your office. At 5:15 AM, even.

They did, in fact get to the elevator. They even passed a couple of people in the hall along the way, one of which happened to be Candy's best friend, who asked about Dan later and provided Candy with some much-appreciated confirmation that she hadn't been hallucinating after all. Good thing that it hadn't been Dr. Cross that had seen them; that might've been awkward. As it was, Candy was still left wondering how to explain things, especially when the elevator doors opened on two, she turned to lead Dan out, and found him missing. *Dematerialized*, she supposed. With a sigh and a shrug, she went into the cafeteria, picked out a grapefruit half and a bowl of Rice Krispies and spent the remainder of the pre-work period contemplating the basic unfairness of the Universe, and wondering if she'd ever see Dan Meyer again.

Which she did, of course, the very next morning. And it was just as surprising, though she at least managed to avoid splattering her work. "Hi," she greeted him as soon as she'd composed herself. "I was hoping you'd come back."

He smiled at her. "And I was hoping you'd feel that way." He looked down at her desk, where she already had breakfast laid out for both of them. Not fancy, just biscuits and jam and coffee, but more than he would've had anyway, and he told her so. "We never get much chance, Joe and me," he said. "Money either. We do okay, mind you, but it's not what it could be."

"I'm glad I could help." She took a bite of a biscuit liberally smeared with strawberry jam. "So tell me, what it was it like to go back?"

"Rough," he admitted, sipping his coffee and giving her a thumbs-up. "Ah, nice and strong. Thanks. It was like when you have one of those dreams where you're falling. Know what I mean?"

"Sure. And you wake up when you hit."

He shuddered and looked most uncomfortable. "That's what it's like. Joe about crapped his drawers. He thought I was having a coronary or something. Maybe I was, I don't know. And maybe I will again this time. But I had to come back." The fearful look

changed into something more serene. "Mostly, I was worried you'd be scared and you wouldn't be here."

She shrugged. "Where else would I be? If I don't do the work, nobody will."

He nodded but smiled knowingly. "Maybe. But you sure do look nice today, Candy." And she had in fact gone to special pains to make herself look attractive that morning, almost like the last time she'd gone on a date. Which was quite some time ago, honestly, and maybe that was why she had so anticipated his...visit, or whatever it might be called.

She blushed, and they shyly continued eating their breakfasts, until eventually he said, rather abruptly, "Whoops."

"Whoops?"

"Whoops." He looked disconcerted for a moment, then downright scared. "I think I'm about to..."

And he did. Disappear.

It was abrupt enough that Candy worried from that moment until next she saw him again, which wasn't till the next morning when he arrived, looking just a little paler and peaked than he had previous. Still, she greeted him happily, not so rattled as before, and *this* time she had a somewhat more sumptuous spread, a proper breakfast: juice, eggs, bacon and sausage, biscuits (homemade this time, not canned) and coffee. And she was wearing her best dress, what she tended to call her "trolling" outfit, the same one she'd worn bar-hopping with her younger sister Kim. She hadn't gotten so much as a nibble during those trips, and it had been downright depressing. Now though, now there was *someone*, someone actually going out of their way to meet her, albeit in a most unusual way. And by God, he kept coming back. She still wasn't entirely sure why or what—if any—feelings he had for her, but she did know she'd already fallen for Dan Meyer, and fallen hard. He was witty, intelligent, polite, and yes, he was cute. And of course there was that whole mystery thing he had going...the ability to appear and disappear...yes, there was a peculiar attraction in that.

Still, there were some puzzles, and concerning ones at that. She knew more or less where he lived, Okalona, a southern suburb of the city, but she'd been unable to pin down exactly where. He was a little too evasive on that point for her liking. And he wasn't in the phone book either. Not that she hadn't looked; she'd spent an entire evening calling every variation of Meyer she could find: D Meyer, Daniel Meyer, Danny Meyer, J D Meyer (who knew, maybe he went by his middle name, people do, after all) and various permutations of initials. To make things worse, she wasn't even sure she was spelling Meyer right. Or maybe "Dan" was just a nickname and his real first name was something unusual like Ignatz or Aloysius.

But what was truly dismaying to her was that he hadn't bothered to ask any searching questions about *her* identity. Which led her to question whether or not her mystery man really cared that much about her after all.

So on this occasion, when he arrived, she decided she would do what he had not so far: she would make sure he knew what he needed to know, which was to say, how he could locate her *without* need for any paranormal travels. And perhaps then she would really find out if he cared as much for her as she did for him.

Then, 5:15 came, and he did not arrive.

5:30. 5:40. That stack of claim forms in her Inbox wasn't getting any smaller either...in fact, other peoples' problems seemed rather far away and unimportant just now.

She stood, paced, looked anxiously out the window. What was wrong? Because surely something *had* to be wrong. He had been as faithful as...well, as faithful as an astral traveler could be. Or whatever he was. Sure, it had only been a couple of days, but 5:15 was 5:15...

Abruptly there was a faint but audible "pop" from behind her, and she whirled just in time to see him swirl into view.

And he did not look good. In fact, he looked quite weak. Maybe...

"Sick," he mumbled, trembling. "Sorry, Candy. I'm sick. Flu or something. I stayed home from work today, then I remembered, if I didn't come, maybe you'd forget me or be mad or something..."

Candy Marcum was wholly overcome with emotion. That is a very dramatic statement, yet it's also very true. Even "overwrought" wouldn't have properly described her. It was especially so when she walked to him and got a closer look...because he really did look bad.

"Oh...oh dear," she said, not sure whether what she was about to do was right or not. Or what "right" even meant in this sort of situation. But, instinct being what it is, she felt inclined to put her arms around him, so she did, and to her immense relief—and delight—he rested his head on her shoulder and sighed a happy if rumbly sigh.

"It's chilly out there," he muttered. "I don't really have winter riding clothes, I just stay inside most of the time, or I borrow Joe's car if I need to go out. But I had to be here. Set the alarm, tried to do it from home..." He coughed, a rough, choked cough. "Figured it'd be easier 'cause I'd been here before. It wasn't. Had to..." Now he shivered, and violently. "I actually had to come downtown, somewhere I could see your window..."

She held him tighter, and she also held her tongue, as she desperately wanted to say something like, *well, here's an idea, why didn't you just come up?* But maybe there were things at play here she didn't fully comprehend. And then again, maybe he wasn't thinking properly. He was sick, after all. Or, maybe she was in love with a guy who was a couple of sandwiches shy of a picnic. There was that possibility too.

But none of that mattered to Candy, not right now. She had a cold man in her arms and she was determined to warm him up. And judging by the steady progression of his trembling, she was doing a pretty lame job of it. "There," she said, and again, "There. It's okay, Dan. You'll be fine. Just...just stop shaking so. You'll heat up, just give it a minute. It's nice and warm in here."

He looked at her and smiled. "I bet it is. Only, I'm out there."

"No. No you're not." Candy was firm about it. And why shouldn't she be? He was here, right here with her. How could he be cold? She *loved* him, after all. And she told him so. "You can't be cold, Dan Meyer, because you're here, I'm holding you, and I love you. There's nothing paranormal about that."

She felt the smile forming on his face, pressed against her shoulder, then her neck. And now *she* was shivering.

"You love me? Really?" At least his breath was warm, she felt it on her neck now.

"Really."

Another long sigh. "You know, I figured something good was going to come out of that class. Knew it. Joe thought it was a waste of time. But I knew. I knew."

And now, he put *his* arms around *her*. And that was good. Very good.

But at the same time, also she knew it was wrong.

"Look," she said carefully, "you're sitting outside right now, aren't you? Somewhere you can see my window?"

He didn't answer.

"You're sick, Dan. You need to be in somewhere where it's warm."

"Are you telling me you want me to leave?"

There was a moment's hesitation, then she said, "Yes." Firmly. "Go home. Come back when you can do it without hurting yourself."

And he did, and Candy Marcum spent the next several days wondering if she had just driven off the first man to whom she'd proclaimed her love. Five days, in fact, days spent thinking and despairing. Days even her sister knew it was probably best to keep her distance, that Candy was not in any sort of mood for comfort or condolence. Company, yes, but little else. She would come out of it on her own eventually. And of course she did, but it wasn't till Dan Meyer made his return, and that wasn't till the following Thursday morning. At 5:15.

Candy hadn't grown tired of waiting for him, but by this time she'd almost grown accustomed to *not* seeing Dan appear that when he did appear, it came as something of a surprise. Thus the look on her face when she saw him materialized was already disconcerted, and it was even more so when his being swam into focus.

Dan Meyer did not look good. Fact was, he looked positively awful. Not cold, not like the last time, but certainly more cadaverous, thinner and more pale, appreciably so especially considering she'd only seen him three times over the course of less than a week. She stared at him with something akin to shock, so much so that he asked her, "What's wrong? Do I look that bad?"

"Yes, Dan, you do," she replied, getting to her feet and walking over to him. "You look like you're really, really sick. And skinny. Are you eating at all?"

"Mostly what you've been feeding me," he admitted. "But I haven't had a lot of time for it otherwise. I've been working on perfecting this astral projection business, and I think..."

Candy very nearly shrieked. "Do you mean to tell me you haven't eaten anything in the past five days?"

Dan looked at her, surprised. "You mean it's been *that* long? Wow. I guess that explains why I feel so rotten right now." He looked down at her—and it only occurred to her just now how tall he was—and he smiled. "Well, I guess we're finally going to have a leisurely breakfast together now, aren't we?"

"Are we?" she asked him, her voice an unsteady mixture of doubt and hope.

"Yes," Dan replied firmly. "Yes, we are. Today, we are."

So Dan and Candy walked the same route they did that first day, down the hall and to the elevator. This time, when they got on the car, she took his hand, and she didn't let go of it, even after the doors had opened and they'd stepped out onto the second floor and walked into the cafeteria, which was rather quiet this early on a Thursday morning. But it was open, and everything smelled wonderful, and there was even music playing, something appropriately swirly and romantic. "Oh," she said as the

music rose to a dramatic pitch, "I know that. It's..." She thought for a moment. "Oh, I know it. It's that guy who was in the Raspberries. What's his name?" She snapped her fingers. "Damn it, I know it, it's right on the tip on my tongue. Eric somebody."

"Rachmaninov?" Dan said.

"No, no, nothing foreign. He's from Cleveland. Eric..."

"No, it's Rachmaninov. Sergei Rachmaninov. It's his second symphony. It's Eric Carmen you're thinking of, and yes, he did crib a bit from this piece."

She looked up at him, again noting the difference in their relative heights. "I never knew that."

He smiled at her. "Most people don't. I just happen to like Rachmaninov. I think Carmen wrote some nice lyrics for it though."

"Never gonna fall in love again," Candy said, following him as he carried their tray to a table. "Yes, I thought that too, Dan. What about you?" Then she stopped. "No, wait a minute. First..." She took a pen and paper from her purse. "What's your address and phone number? Just in case you get pulled out of here early."

"Good thinking." He gave her his address at a trailer park on the south side of town. "And yours?"

"Never you mind," she said. "You just be ready when I come get you tonight. No excuses. Showered, shaved, and ready for the night of your life."

This seemed to amuse Dan Meyer, but anyone who happened to be looking could tell by the look on Candy's face that she was deadly serious: this date would be Birthday, Valentine's, and Christmas all rolled up into one, with a little Thanksgiving thrown in for good measure. She certainly looked ready enough to give thanks.

So, they ate and they talked, and they had a delightful time...so delightful, in fact, that when Dan looked up at the clock and discovered that it was nearly seven, he gasped in amazement. "Well, won't you look at that!" he said excitedly. "I've been here over an hour, Candy! Do you know what that means?"

"That you're madly in love with me, and you'll want to go look at rings with me tonight?" she replied playfully. "Make sure it's got a ruby in it. I adore rubies, and red is my favorite color."

He took her hands across the table. "And I guess if I asked you to marry me right now, you'd say yes, then?"

Now *she* looked surprised. "I...I think I'm supposed to say something about this being so sudden," she stammered. "Dan, I don't..."

He grinned at her. "I won't hold you to that. But Candy, what it really means is that I've got this astral thing whipped. I can come and go as I please now." He looked out the window facing west. "Right about now I'll have clocked in, and I'm at my saw. Putting the first stack up, I'd say."

"I hope that's not dangerous."

Dan Meyer seemed to mull this over. "Well," he finally said, "I reckon I always figured my job didn't require a whole lot of brainpower. This ought to prove it, hmmm?"

And they talked some more. They talked about their pasts (his, fairly lurid, hers, as previously noted, mostly mundane) their present (rather the same case as the past, actually), and what they expected for their futures. It should come as no surprise to anyone reading this that their latter tales tended to parallel each other, and by the time they finished, they'd as much as concluded that they might as well go and look for those

rings tonight after all, because it seemed clear that Fate had brought them together, and you sure can't fight that sort of thing, can you?

By now the clock had moved its slow hand all the way around nearly a full circuit, and it was almost time for Candy to begin her work day proper. "Would you escort me to my office, Dan?" Candy said, standing and offering him her arm.

"Delighted," he replied, and they disposed of their breakfast tray and walked to the elevator together, and to the rest of the world, they appeared to be a couple now, a couple perfectly happy with one another and looking forward to, perhaps, a lifetime together.

The elevator door opened, discharged its passengers, and they climbed on, and Dan almost pressed the button labeled 27. Almost. Instead, he looked over at Candy and asked, "Do you think we'd be able to get out on the roof?"

"On the roof?" She was questioning, but at this particular instant she would entertain most any suggestion he might make. "I suppose we probably can. Why?"

"I have a thing for high places. Besides, I've always wanted to see what the city looks like from above."

"And 27 floors up isn't enough?"

He shook his head and pressed the 40. "No way! It has to be the top, and not just any top, but the *very* top." He tapped his foot anxiously. "It might be a little chilly though. Maybe we ought to stop and get a coat for you."

And, in an absurdly romantic move, something she would have never done in her old life—meaning everything she had known prior to meeting Dan Meyer, of course—Candy leaned against him and said, "Not so long as I have you to keep me warm."

Absurd? At least! God, but it was so sublimely corny, had she not been the one to actually utter those words, had she been a bystander *hearing* them instead, she probably would've burst out laughing hysterically. Instead, it was marvelous. Enough to bring tears to the most cynical man, which Dan Meyer definitely was not. He put his arms around her, pulled her to him, and for the first time, kissed her.

They were still engaged in the most serious of lip-locks when the doors opened onto the 40<sup>th</sup> floor and depositing them, breathless, in a deserted hallway with a door marked "Roof Access" just a few feet away. They disengaged long enough for her stroke his face lovingly—noting the impression her glasses had made on his cheeks—and then she took him by the hand and led them up two flights to a door that opened onto a graveled surface with the most amazingly unobstructed vista of their chosen home.

"Oh," Candy Marcum gasped, and not just from the view. It was that, and the passion, the suddenness, and her mounting happiness. It was all just a bit too much to take in, so much, so soon, so...odd. But, so wonderful. "Oh Dan. *Look* at it."

He already was. "It's unbelievable," he cried. "I've never been so..." He wheeled around, his arms outstretched joyfully. "So close to the sky! It's beautiful!"

She pointed up and to the southeast. "Look! A helicopter!" She started waving wildly. "Look, Dan! We're going to be on TV!"

Yes, there was a chopper up there, approaching slowly. Most of the local news stations had a morning drive copter. Probably it was one of them.

About a quarter of a mile away and about half that above them, Gregory Farzo did his best to keep his cameras aimed at the key junctions, fly the

machine—and mind you, a helicopter is an amazingly complex thing to keep in the air—and stay out of the way of the traffic from Louisville International, which had always been way too close for his liking. Oh, and he was also subject to the inane chatter of his overly enthusiastic rider, a local car dealer who used the traffic reports to pitch his business. More than once Greg Farzo had been sorely tempted to shove the guy out the door, but that might've hurt somebody below.

He didn't see Candy Marcum waving. Not yet, anyway. But he was heading straight toward her.

Back on the roof of the Norton Building, Candy was so lost in waving at the helicopter that she didn't notice Dan walking away from her...away from her and toward the edge of the building. By the time she saw, he was halfway there...and she was mystified. "Dan! Dan! Where are you going?"

He was saying something. She could only just hear it, but he was saying *something*...and it wasn't anything coherent, just one sound, over and over. "Oh. Oh. Oh."

"Dan?" she cried, running to him as he continued to advance, slowly now, his eyes fixed at a point to the west, just slightly above the horizon. "Dan, what's wrong?"

His unusual actions reminded her of his troubled past. And he'd said he had a thing for high places...but surely, not *now*, not after...

But he was close now, maybe a step, maybe two away. "Dan!" she screamed. "Dan! Stay away from the edge!"

He looked back at her, and the look on his face...it was not what she expected, not a look of despair, not the darkness of one bent on suicide. Instead, it was more of a look of wonder, of fervor for...what?

He paused, stared at her, his eyes wide, his mouth faintly smiling. Traces of tears, tears of joy, speckled his cheeks. "Don't you see it?" he said breathlessly. "Don't you see it? It's beautiful!"

"Dan?" Candy held out her hand. "Dan? Come away, Dan, come away with me..."

He turned back to the parapet, stepped up, arms out for balance, one in front, one behind. It rather looked like he was rock-hopping across a creek.

And then Candy Marcum thought, *I don't know what he sees...but I want to be wherever he is. Or wherever he's going. I will not live without him, one way or the other.*

She reached out, grabbed his trailing hand.

He looked back, his face awash with love.

Greg Farzo had seen them now. It was the woman waving that had caught his attention. Somebody on a roof downtown, especially a woman...it was too cold for sightseeing, surely...instinctively he banked toward them, nose down, his view unobstructed now. If nothing else, it would make for an interesting shot for the morning crew, someone...no, two people it seemed, out enjoying the view...

Wait. Wait. The man, for one was a man, he was walking toward the edge of the building, with the woman following him. And she was calling to him, Farzo couldn't hear, of course, but he could see, and that was enough to tell him that he was seeing a tragedy in the making. Dynamite footage, yes, but was this something people really wanted to see? Was it something *he* wanted to see?

Still, he was committed. And if he got close enough, maybe somehow he could...  
He gasped. "Oh no. No." The man had stepped up to the edge, put a foot onto the parapet. "No, no, no...don't..."

It got worse. Way worse. The woman took the man's hand. And just when Greg Farzo thought that she was going to pull him back, instead, *she stepped up with him...*

And then, together they *stepped*

Dan Meyer's hand closed around hers.

In that instant, Candy Marcum looked, *saw*, saw what he had, saw what lay before them. Her eyes widened, filled with tears, tears of joy.

Together, they *stepped*

Hours later, in his office at the station, Greg Farzo paced back and forth, still trying to compose himself, and trying just as hard, and about as successfully, to reconcile what he'd filmed versus what he'd seen.

*What he'd filmed:* a woman, stepping off the Norton Building and plummeting to her death.

*What he'd seen:* a man and a woman, stepping off the Norton Building...and vanishing.

He'd seen it. And rationally, he knew what had to have happened. People don't just vanish. People *do* step off buildings, to die. Happens every day.

The woman had killed herself. Simple.

Or not. *Not* what Greg Farzo had seen. Two people, not one. *Two*. Hand in hand, the expressions on their faces unmistakable. They weren't depressed, they weren't suicidal.

The film he'd shot would never be seen.

Candy Marcum's death barely rated a paragraph in the newspaper that day.

Across the river in New Albany, the removal of Dan Meyer's body from the passenger seat of a car in the parking lot of Midwest Fabrications was noted only by his co-workers and his roommate.

Together, they stepped...*up*.