

David Sakmyster
126 Beacon Hills Dr. S.
Penfield, NY 14526
sakman70@hotmail.com

About 2,600 words

Ladders

By David Sakmyster

When the body slammed into the pavement right in front of Charles Lang, splattering bone and muscle and exploding in a grisly mess that even cracked the concrete street, his first thought wasn't that he'd just narrowly escaped being killed; instead he was struck by a Newtonian apple-dropping-Eureka moment: a flash of insight as to how he might prevent these increasingly commonplace falls - prevent them, and also get rich in the process.

The problem, after all, began with the ladders.

#

But 'ladders' was a misnomer. Rarely Lang would find such conventional structures: garden-variety ladders that opened at an angle and were built for safety. They could only take a climber so far. More often, the ladders were simply haphazard collections of things set atop other things, assemblages constructed on the city's rooftops for just one purpose: to realize a height greater than that allowed by building codes.

They climbed these ladders in order to see something of the sky, to peek at the mythical horizon or just glimpse the unremembered heavens; to see something of real clouds, wispy and dreamlike, and to stare at the burning sun until they wept with joy and forgot all about their lives below.

And that's why they needed someone like Charles Lang. Someone down on his luck, someone desperate - someone with a little vision and drive. Someone also, who wasn't afraid of heights. Apart from that, he was nothing special. Simply in the right place at the right time.

It had happened to Newton, and now it was happening to Lang.

#

He invented the position and became the first - and so far only - Retriever. Changing times call for changing professions, and entrepreneurs with a little foresight can blaze new trails. It's a dangerous job, but the money's good - fantastic in fact,

and it's saved him from sleeping in urine-soaked alleys and freezing all night in the worst food lines. Relatives and loved ones will always pay top dollar for someone who will risk their neck to bring back poor mom or grandpa, or little Timmy. But for Lang, it isn't all about the cold hard cash. There are other perks.

In retrieving these poor saps who have ascended so high that they've gotten themselves stuck like the proverbial cat up a tree, he's not only performing a service. He's also escaping the city for the better part of every day, breathing in the sweet air of the translucent sky far, far above the grimy streets, the exhaust fumes and the reek of sewage, trash, rot and decay.

It is his one guilty vice. It's intense, erotic even, when the wind is just right, and the air so fragrant, and the ladders shudder just so. He enjoys every second of it, despite the risks, despite the reception when he gets up there - just like the firemen of old, suffering the scratching and clawing of the unwilling and ungrateful.

Like Ben Fullmer.

Ben's an example of a disturbing new trend: climbers who latch themselves to the top rungs. Twine, rope, handcuffs - anything that can bind. Secured, as if they know he's coming for them. Defiant bastards. They're content to just hang there

with all the others, individual thorns in the city's brittle crown. These climbers, wet in the driving rain, embrace their ladders, and it's as if they're caught in an infinite moment of rapture. Nothing can shake them loose or even make them blink. Nothing, of course, except for Lang coming to retrieve them.

While he's up there cutting Ben Fullmer loose, trying to avoid the man's kicking feet and snapping teeth, Lang finds himself drawn to the stark vision of all that mortality amidst the infinite space above: a sea of wobbling, half-dead men, women and children as far as the eye can see. Climbing, grasping, holding on with bruised and swollen fingers.

Some of them, he knows, will need his services soon. Their relatives will call and plead, "So-and-so went up our ladder two days ago and hasn't come down. I'd go up, but I'm afraid, and he's too heavy..." On and on it went. He usually tuned out their bullshit excuses - and readied his own.

Because sometimes he came back without his targets. If they were already dead - just hanging there with mouths open in a crooked smile, their eyes wide and glazed, staring up, always up despite the angle of their drooping necks - then sometimes he'd just cut them down and let them fall where they may.

Obviously it wouldn't hurt them any, and as long as no one was in their path it was the safest way to get them down.

Safest for him, that was: easier than lugging dead weight and trying to keep his balance at the same time.

Occupational hazard, it might be pointed out, but still - he created this position, so he could make the rules. If they're dead, he drops them. Simple as that.

Then, like Ben, there are others - not quite dead, but Lang wishes he could just cut them loose and give them a shove all the same. They seem to have a death-wish anyway. Why not grant it?

But he doesn't yield to such unprofessional temptations. He cuts this man loose - no easy task as Lang has to balance his legs between the rungs and use bolt cutters to snap off Ben's handcuffs, then grab the man and somehow pull him down without the both of them slipping to their deaths. At the bottom, Ben's still struggling, trying to break free and race back to the ladder.

But Ben's brothers are on the roof. They hold him back while Lang 'cleans up.' He breaks down the ladder using a hammer. He just whacks the base connectors a few times and the whole thing comes down. These people were by no means professional architects.

Of course, another ladder will probably take its place by next week. Repeat clients were a large part of Lang's income.

Afterwards, he has one of Ben's brothers sign the invoice, pay the bill and close out the tab, and then he's off to the next assignment.

As luck would have it, he doesn't have far to go: only two buildings over. The electric company called this one in. More often than family or neighbors, most of Lang's referrals came from desperate bill collectors. A newly-married couple ascended together three weeks ago and haven't been seen since.

Lang shakes his head, but this too is not a first.

#

As the elevator takes him to the next rooftop, and as static crackles over speakers that once played soothing music, he thinks about this situation, this phenomenon that's so widespread, yet so disregarded.

People prefer to ignore what goes on over their heads. But sometimes he'll catch whispered speculations on the street. Some argue that the climbers' efforts would be better served if they were to go sideways - that in time, if they continued in one direction, they should reach an eventual border and beyond the city's edge should be what their collective history calls Open Space. Green fields. Lush valleys, jungles even. Perhaps a sandy beach upon a nameless ocean's shore. Waves and waves of unbroken blue stretching as far as their eyes could see, meeting somewhere and melding with a violet-turquoise sky.

But all such explorative attempts have failed. Valiant pioneers instead lose themselves and years of their lives in the twisting maze of shadow-infested alleys. They are turned around again and again and discover the same familiar haunts, the same scolding neon signs, torn-up streets and rubble-strewn sidewalks. Endless detours lead to dead-ends. Again and again they come upon ragged street vendors, congested avenues filled with dark suits, black umbrellas and blank faces that move from one shelter to the next, dodging rain, each other and the occasional falling body. Dented, rusted cabs inch forward in time-frozen gridlock.

And so, after such painful failures, they have no other choice. They go Up.

Lang wonders if this predilection might be due to some remnant in our genetic makeup, as if there were truth to the old myths that we were stardust, seeded in Earth's primordial youth. We took root as single-celled life-forms struggling to ascend out of the radioactive sludge, to perceive something beyond our limited biospheres, just as our sea-dwelling ancestors struggled and evolved and finally broke free of the sea and filled their lungs and tasted the airy world above.

Nothing has changed. Single-minded organisms, vaguely unsatisfied with their lot, unwilling merely to exist, to live and trudge back and forth to work, to ascend and descend their

hive-like homes and workstations, to numbly go about their days. Still hoping to evolve, they poke their heads out from the miasma of their predicament.

Only now, it's gotten so much harder to do that. The city holds them back. Holds them tight.

#

Lang has no family. No friends. He used to have a girlfriend. Sally. Dark complexion. One eye green, the other blue; hair as black as oil simmering on hot pavement. Always had a distant, dreamy look on her face, and more often than not he'd catch her furtively glancing up, as if she could possibly glimpse something lurking in the narrow gaps between the steel and brick towers.

She missed a date one Saturday. Never returned his calls. He assumed she had broken it off, maybe moved in with someone else. Another week went by, and finally he went to her apartment where the landlord, concerned about the rent, was only too happy to let him in. When Lang couldn't find her, he went to the roof and saw the ladder, a crude, barely-sustainable concoction of rotting wood, bent nails and scrap metal.

Sally was his first retrieval.

She was also the first corpse he ever brought down. She hadn't meant to latch herself to the top. Instead, the edge of her scarf had somehow caught on a protruding nail, and Lang

found her hanging by her neck, arms and legs swaying in the wind, oily-black hair whipping and lashing at her face; those bi-colored eyes open toward the sky and her lips rigid in a smile, celebrating her victory over the spinning, jealous ground below.

Now, as he strides across the gravel-strewn rooftop, dodging bent satellite dishes and clogged vents, making his way toward the lone ladder, he hopes this isn't one of those days where there's a double-dose of death waiting for him up there. At the base of the surprisingly solid-looking structure, he peers up and barely makes out the two tiny forms at the ladder's dizzying apex.

Here we go again, he thinks, slinging his pack over his shoulder and starting up the ladder.

#

As he climbs, he has a lot of time to think.

Lately, the job seems too daunting. So many ladders. More and more each day. He's beginning to find multiple climbers on each one now. Two, three, four. Not enough raw materials to build more ladders. Not enough rooftops for everyone.

His mailbox is jammed with orders; his answering machine routinely runs out of space for new messages. He can't respond to everyone. He thinks about getting a partner or a secretary, but doesn't trust anyone in this city enough to share such

responsibility. And anyway, thus far no one else has volunteered. His wait list is getting longer, and he knows that for most of these clients, it will be too late by the time he gets there. Bringing down a decomposing corpse - or dropping one at the feet of their relatives - doesn't encourage them to pay their bill.

Then, sometimes there are accidents before he can even get there. Too much weight at the top, pitching the entire thing off balance. People walking on the street hundreds of feet below are often struck dead without warning.

He sees it more and more. The rains never fully wash such gore away. They're falling faster than he can retrieve them. Sometimes he'll save one or two on a given ladder, only to lose the third.

Sometimes they see him coming, and before he can get there - they jump.

Sometimes, he has to admit, he just wants to push them.

A few more rungs and he can see Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Kowalski latched together with a bungee cord.

Once again, he's too late.

But this time, something stops him from immediately cutting them down and letting them fall.

More and more at these moments, he finds himself longing for that sense of freedom he sees in their vacant eyes. More

and more he fights the urge to push them away and secure himself in their place. He could bring wood and nails and hardware. Build this ladder higher, sturdier.

Perch himself and then defend this spot from all the jilted sky-lovers who are bound to follow. He needs to get farther from the city, beyond its ever-extending reach. He has to stay above the others - all his neighbors with the same idea.

Maybe someday, just maybe, he'll try it out. See what all the fuss is about.

He looks at this couple's strange smiles - all teeth - and then bids them goodbye, releasing them into the whipping, hungry winds. And then he's left holding the cords and staring at the top rung and all that infinite space beyond. A gleaming rim of gold bravely protrudes over the city's swaying periphery, and a patch of mesmerizing blue peeks between the jumbled barrier of ladders in his way. Just a glimpse of all this, and he's still thinking about maybe.

Maybe...

Maybe that someday is today.

#

Later.

Minutes? Days? Weeks? - his arms numb and his face nearly frozen, he discovers an unexpected irony.

These ladders? They're really not providing any escape. When you think about it, they're made of the same stuff as the buildings - wood and brick and steel.

No one can really, truly get away. Some might attempt to stray, might even risk a modest glance at something Other, but in the end, there's no true escape.

Even as Lang stares, the sky narrows and the vision fades amidst the sounds of hammer-blows, drills and the clamoring of construction. He hangs his head. He knows this is why we fail. It's why we fall. It's why, in the end, our lives ebb away with the realization that the higher we climb, the more we extend the city's reach.

We're still building the city. Making it bigger, taller, higher. We'll never see the horizon. Never see the ocean, or the sun, or the stars. All we'll see are the other ladders ascending right along with us - this ghastly multitude, this infinite collection, each trying to outclimb the other.

There's just too much going on between the roof and the sky.

Still, it's better up than down. Any step up, away from the earth and toward the heavens, is still an improvement - even if it's only illusory. Lang continues to dream about staying on the ladder. Remaining on this top rung until some other bright-eyed city-dweller steals his idea and comes up to retrieve him.

With a smile on his face and a spring in his step, some nameless Joe might show up any minute and drag him down, expecting a reward.

But right now, Lang's the only one doing the job. He's got a monopoly, and surely that's a good thing, something to look forward to; something to live for.

Responsibility.

So he trudges down, and once back on the rooftop, he steps over the broken bodies, the mashed corpses - still locked in an embrace.

And he fishes out his cluttered notebook and checks his list of clients. He finds the address for his next job, and with a last, wistful glance up the ladder, he gets back to work.