



Fear of Falling

When I was in my teens, I went to a party at the Edificio Panamericano, a new residential building that overlooks the Buceo Yacht Club in Montevideo. We were in a lovely apartment on the eighth floor. I was standing by the window, looking at the masts bobbing up and down in the marina across the road. I lowered my eyes and saw a narrow ledge running across the front of the building, all the way to the corner about ten feet to my left. I pictured myself out there, inching my way along the ledge and then around the corner to a window on the side wall, where I would re-enter the room to the admiring applause of my peers.

That night, in a dream, I climbed out onto the ledge. A couple of boys asked what I was doing, but I ignored them. Facing right, with my chest and belly pressed against the glass, arms outstretched and hands gripping whatever they could find, I began to edge my way along, the applause still ringing in my ears. The ledge was less than a foot wide but felt solid. As I reached the corner of the building, I curled my fingers around the masonry and held on tight. I leaned forward to peer around the corner and realized I hadn't counted on the wind. A stiff blast hit my face, ruffling my hair and making me feel I was being pushed back, off the ledge. I suddenly thought about the drop below me, eight floors to the ground. My mouth dried up and my heart started pounding in my chest. Very carefully, I swivelled my head around, slowly moved back along the ledge, and climbed in through the window I had just exited. My insides had turned to ice, and I was shaking uncontrollably. One of the boys said I was as white as a sheet. I managed a weak smile and slunk away.

There was no applause.

I had felt that kind of fear before. The kind that strips away all your supports, all your distractions, and makes you concentrate all your attention on the mess you're in. You are utterly alone and know that if you don't save yourself, nobody will. We're always alone when we're face to face with our mortality.

As a kid, I loved to jump on and off buses while they were moving. Old city buses, with an open platform at the back and a couple of steps for passengers to climb up and down. Newspaper boys, *canillitas*, did it all the time, carrying a huge bundle of newspapers under one arm. In awe of them, I started making timid jumps and gradually built up my skill and confidence and became more and more daring. One day I waited longer than I ever had before; the bus was already moving quite fast when I leaped off the bottom step. I knew from experience to literally hit the ground running, but my momentum was greater than I expected and was propelling me forward at a terrifying speed. I ran faster than I'd ever run before, knowing that if I didn't keep up, I was dead.

A few years later I was visiting my friend, Alicia, in San José, Costa Rica. We had some delicious daiquiris at a thatched roof, open-air bar and then she drove us to the top of the Irazú volcano, which looked like the surface of the moon. This was the mid-1960s and there was very little there to prevent idiots from walking right down to the rim. I did just that and was soon standing where, if I leaned out just a little, I could see the furnace raging and roaring far below: red and yellow flames shooting up out of a molten soup. Some pebbles suddenly shifted under my feet and rolled over the edge. My heart leaped into my throat, and I stumbled back and hurried up the slope to safety, wondering when I was going to learn.