



RIVERHEAD BOOKS

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MARTIN

Can 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. I'm not a bloody idiot. I can explain it because it wasn't inexplicable: It was a logical decision, the product of proper thought. It wasn't even very serious thought, either. I don't mean it was whimsical—I just mean that it wasn't terribly complicated, or agonized. Put it this way: Say you were, I don't know, an assistant bank manager in Guildford. And you'd been thinking of emigrating, and then you were offered the job of managing a bank in Sydney. Well, even though it's a pretty straightforward decision, you'd still have to think for a bit, wouldn't you? You'd 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.

It’s no contest, is it? The golf club! Give me a break. Obviously your aged parents give you pause for thought, but that’s all it is—a pause, and a brief one, too. You’d be on the phone to the travel agent’s within ten minutes.

Well, that was me. There simply weren’t enough regrets, and lots and lots of reasons to jump. The only things on my “cons” list were the kids, but I couldn’t imagine Cindy letting me see them again anyway. I haven’t got any aged parents, and I don’t play golf. Suicide was my Sydney. And I say that with no offense to the good people of Sydney intended.

A MAUREEN

L I told him I was going to a New Year’s Eve party. I told him in
O October. I don’t know whether people send out invitations to
N New Year’s Eve parties in October or not. Probably not. (How
G would I know? I haven’t been to one since 1984. June and
Brian across the road had one, just before they moved. And
W even then I only nipped in for an hour or so, after he’d gone to
A sleep.) But I couldn’t wait any longer. I’d been thinking about
Y it since May or June, and I was itching to tell him. Stupid,
really. He doesn’t understand, I’m sure he doesn’t. 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, doesn't it?

The moment I told him, I wanted to go straight to confession. Well, I'd lied, hadn't I? I'd lied to my own son. Oh, it was only a tiny, silly lie: I'd told him months in advance that I was going to a party, a party I'd made up. I'd made it up properly, too. I told him whose party it was, and why I'd been invited, and why I wanted to go, and who else would be there. (It was Bridgid's party, Bridgid from the church. And I'd 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 Bridgid's 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 wasn't 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 isn't anyone else, really. Maybe someone at the church, or someone in a shop. It's almost comical, when you think about it. If you spend day and night looking after a sick child, there's very little room for sin, and I hadn't done anything worth confessing for donkey's years. And I went from that, to sinning so terribly that I couldn't 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 you're told that you'll 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 it's 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 don't say, You will be consumed by hellfire for all eternity. That would be a bit strong.) It didn't 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 I'd picked up. Every Sunday I pretended as though I'd learned something new, because Sundays were when I saw Bridgid. "Bridgid says there'll be dancing." "Bridgid's worried that not everyone likes wine and beer, so she'll be providing spirits." "Bridgid doesn't know how many people will have eaten already." If Matty had been able to understand anything, he'd 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 Year's Eve, but I never asked. If she was planning to have a party, she might've felt that she had to invite me.

I'm ashamed, thinking back. Not about the lies—I'm used to lying now. No, I'm 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 Year's 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 I'd wear, how much I'd drink, what time I'd leave. Whether I'd come home in a taxi. That sort of thing. In the end it was as if I'd actually been. Even in my imagination, though, I couldn't 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 you'd still have wanted to jump off the roof by five past twelve. And I wasn't the happiest person in London anyway. Obviously.

I only went because someone at college told me Chas would be there, but he wasn't. I tried his mobile for the one zillionth time, but it wasn't on. When we first split up, he called me a stalker, but that's like an emotive word, "stalker," isn't it? I don't think you can call it stalking when it's 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 don't, 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, isn't it?

Well, I never went near any shops. And anyway I didn't 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 you're owed five or six hundred quid, minimum, and the person who owes it to you is avoiding you, then you're bound to knock on his door late at night, when you know he's going to be in. People get serious about that sort of money. They call in debt collectors, and break people's legs, but I never went that far. I showed some restraint.

So even though I could see straightaway that he wasn't 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 Year's Eve, apart from some shit party in some shit squat where you don't 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 I'm not sure why or how. And so people and parties disappear.

I pissed Jen off, I'm sure of that. She disappeared, like everyone else.

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MARTIN

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I'd 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

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you read the story about the poor bastard: His wife was sleeping with his best friend, he'd lost his job, his daughter had been killed in a road accident some months before . . . Hello, Mr. Coroner? Anyone at home? I'm sorry, but there's no disturbed mental balance here, my friend. I'd say he got it just right. Bad thing upon bad thing upon bad thing until you can't take any more, and then it's off to the nearest multistory car park in the family hatchback with a length of rubber tubing. Surely that's fair enough? Surely the coroner's 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, I've never seen a coroner's 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 I'm not saying that being engaged to Miss Sweden, playing for Manchester United, and winning Oscars inoculates you against depression—I'm sure it doesn't. I'm just saying that these things help. Look at the statistics. You're more likely to top yourself if you've just gone through a divorce. Or if you're anorexic. Or if you're unemployed. Or if you're a prostitute. Or if you've fought in a war, or if you've been raped, or if you've 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 he'd 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 hadn't slept with a fifteen-year-old. I hadn't been to prison. I hadn't 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 don't tell me that the balance of my mind was disturbed, because it really didn't 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.

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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. I'm not beefy enough to push a grown man off a ledge. And I wouldn't have tried anyway. It wouldn't 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.

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JESS

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Before I got to the squat, I never had any intention of going onto the roof. Honestly. I'd forgotten about the whole Toppers' House thing until I started speaking to this guy. I think he fan-

ced me, which isn't 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 he'd 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 hadn't 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, You're 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, I'm 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, I've been put on suicide watch, to look out for people who've only come here because they want to go upstairs. And I was like, What happens upstairs? And he laughed, and went, You're joking, aren't you? This is

Toppers' House, man. This is where people kill themselves. And I would never have thought of it if he hadn't said that.

Everything suddenly made sense. Because even though I'd been about to go home, I couldn't imagine what I'd do when I got there, and I couldn't imagine waking up in the morning. I wanted Chas, and he didn't 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 didn't 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 I'd hit the street in no time. I'd beat the world record for falling off a tower block.

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MARTIN

If she hadn't tried to kill me, I'd be dead, no question. But we've all got a preservation instinct, haven't we? Even if we're 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. I'd been taking nips out of the old hip flask for a while, and I'd had a skinful before I came out, as well. (I know, I know, I shouldn't have driven. But I wasn't going to take the fucking stepladder on the bus.) So, yes, I probably did let rip with a bit of vocabulary. If I'd known it was Maureen, if I'd known what Maureen was like, then I would have toned it down a bit, probably, but I didn't; I think I might even have used the "c" word, for which I've apologized. But you'd have to admit it was a unique situation.

I stood up and turned round carefully, because I didn't 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 don't know you. But I've 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 wasn't expecting it. It all seemed a bit beside the point, that side of life.

"From the television."

"Oh, for Christ's sake. I was about to kill myself, but never mind, there's always time for an autograph. Have you got a pen? Or a bit of paper? And before you ask, she's 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."

That's what everything comes down to: ladders. Well, not ladders literally; the Middle East peace process doesn't 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. I've 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); I've 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 it's the catches on the garden sheds and the London Zoo cards that give you the footholds; without them you wouldn't know where to start. Not if you're hosting *Rise and Shine with Penny and Martin* you don't anyway. Maureen and I couldn't talk about why we were so unhappy that we wanted our brains to spill out onto the concrete like a McDonald's milk shake, so we talked about the ladder instead.

"Be my guest."

A "I'll wait until . . . Well, I'll wait."

"So you're just going to stand there and watch?"

L "No. Of course not. You'll be wanting to do it on your own,
O I'd imagine."

N "You'd imagine right."

G "I'll go over there." She gestured to the other side of the roof.

"I'll give you a shout on the way down."

I laughed, but she didn't.

W "Come on. That wasn't a bad gag. In the circumstances."

A "I suppose I'm not in the mood, Mr. Sharp."

Y

I don't 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 couldn't concentrate. The moment had gone. You're probably thinking, How much concentration does a man need to throw himself off the top of a high building? Well, you'd be surprised. Before Maureen arrived I'd 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 couldn't 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 hadn't changed my mind, and I still knew that I'd have to do it sometime. It's just that I knew I wasn't 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—and, 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. You've got twenty minutes. Then I want my spot back."

"How are you going to get back over this side?"

I hadn't thought of that. The stepladder really only worked one way: There wasn't enough room on my side of the railings to open it out.

"You'll have to hold it."

"What do you mean?"

"You hand it over the top to me. I'll put it flush against the railings. You hold it steady from that side."

"I'd never be able to keep it in place. You're 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 didn't want to die a long and painful death from some disease or other.

"So you'll have to put up with me being here."

I wasn't 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 there—beyond the humiliation and shame you'd expect to feel if you were sitting on a ledge, on your own, on New Year's Eve.

"Why can't you shuffle round to the other side of the roof?"

"Why can't you? It's my ladder."

"You're not much of a gentleman."

"No, I'm fucking not. That's one of the reasons I'm up here, in fact. Don't 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."

"That's 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 that's all you can dredge up?"

"Yes."

"So why do you think I want to kill myself?"

"I've no idea."

"You're pissing me around."

"Would you mind watching your language? I find it offensive."

"I'm sorry."

But I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe I'd found someone who didn't 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 didn't want to spend them talking about my pas-

sion 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 didn't 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.

A JESS

L I shouldn't have made the noise. That was my mistake. I
O mean, that was my mistake if the idea was to kill myself.
N I could have just walked, quickly and quietly and calmly, to
G the place where Martin had cut through the wire, climbed the
W ladder, and then jumped. But I didn't. I yelled something like
A “Out of the way, losers!” and made this Red Indian war-whoop
Y 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