

## In Lieu of a Better Plan

*Elizabeth Downs*

In lieu of a better plan, one otherwise pleasant evening at the asylum, as the sun descends and both the faculty and my colleagues here flock to the cafeteria preoccupied by their desire for Jello squares, I—a known murderess and recently declared Vice President of Ward G—escape through a partially opened, third-story window. A fork is duct-taped to my inner thigh and the pockets of my housecoat are packed to the hilt with birdseed.

It's not as simple as it sounds.

For starters, I'm terrified of heights, and a short but daunting balancing act across a two-by-four to a neighboring rooftop is required. Also, being the damaged twenty-nine-year-old girl that I am, my already diseased mind only further muddled with medications, I am easily distracted, and by the time I even reach the window, after dragging my two-by-four behind me like a Christ through the hallways of the asylum, I have forgotten all about the birdseed in my pockets, and as I hoist myself through the window, a large portion of the seeds scatter to the checkered floor.

Spilling the birdseed is not a part of the plan and I am detected before my escape even begins. Barney, an orderly on staff here, a hunky Cherokee who whittles a toothpick with his teeth at all times, peeks his head around a corner at the far end of the hallway. People—even my beloved Barney, I have come to conclude—are all mad the vast majority of the time. Present company excluded, of course. And when noticing me crouched in the window, he runs to my aid like a man possessed, pointy toothpick carelessly still gripped in his mouth.

In case you are wondering, the mentally ill, as a rule, are easily rattled. I am no exception. When confronted by the result of my incompetence, my poor execution of the simple act of climbing out of a window, I burst into tears.

Time is of the essence, I remind myself. Barney's white shoes squeak briskly across the linoleum, and I pull myself together, regaining my composure as best as one can when one is teary-eyed and straddling a window of an insane asylum with a two-by-four cradled in her arms like a wooden baby.

I quickly secure the three-foot beam, positioning one end on the window ledge, the other on the ledge of the rooftop. Three floors is a long way to fall, even for a crazy person. Concrete and asphalt are less than forgiving, I realize. I stand, however, a bare foot on the ledge, the other on the two-by-four, and my legs go to rubber beneath me. Then, ignoring my better judgment, I cross.

Before me, on the neighboring rooftop, pigeons cluck. They taunt me. “CooCoo,” they remind me, in case the ludicrousness of my escape has escaped me.

“Madame Vice President,” Barney yells. “What the fuck are you doing? You’re going to kill yourself?”

Suicide, you’ll be glad to learn, is also not part of the plan. What sort of lunatic would want to murder him/herself in a world this wondrous? The night air around me is delightful, a warm bath. Heat radiates in the concrete jungle. I begin to cross the beam, heel to toe. The two-by-four bows ever so slightly beneath me. I thank the heavens for my slenderness, my unnaturally high metabolism, and the anxiety that, for the past several years, has prevented me from eating regular meals.

You should know that I have a history with windows. History is important, as my history teachers used to say. If one forgets one’s history, one is likely to relive it. Think Hitler. Think Nam. Think windows. For me, windows are my bane. They are, in fact, my downfall, no pun intended. Shortly before my incarceration began, several years back now, I threw a jar of pickles out an open window, and it fell and smashed upon the skull of a young and beautiful blonde girl who was standing innocently with her mother on the sidewalk in front of my apartment, balloon in hand, whistling.

I was famished at the time, in dire need of a peanut butter and pickle sandwich—a delicacy for the insane—and the lid of my spanking new jar of pickles had been staunchly sealed during the packaging process. Irrationally so. Why would a manufacturer distribute jars of pickles that couldn’t be opened?

So, frustrated, without forethought, I chucked the jar out the window, and then regretted the decision almost immediately.

Down went the jar, and the girl’s whistling ceased. Somewhere a woman shrieked. The balloon lifted to the skies.

In my defense, I did contact the authorities immediately. “I just threw a jar of pickles out a window,” I said to the bored woman on the other end of the line, and as I reported my information to her—my full name and address, a vague and partially inaccurate description of myself—I imagined the woman languidly filing her nails, could almost hear the long scrape of metal against her pinky nail. Then, everything went black. Later that day, I awoke to find myself strapped to a cot in the local ER, not far from a man who had purposely burst his own eardrum with a letter opener.

Since then, while residing here at my new address, I have been on my best behavior, attempting in all ways to behave like Queen Victoria, who, I am fairly certain, never chucked anything out a window in all her long life.

So here I am, I think, as I cross the two-by-four, arms splayed to the sides in lieu of a balancing bar. Again, with the windows. This time climbing out of them.

It is a short and mostly graceful hike across the beam; thankfully, the buildings here are practically built on top of one another. My arrival on the neighboring rooftop, however—if truth be told—is somewhat unfitting of the Queen, as it involves tripping gracelessly on the ledge of the building and spouting a fair number of obscenities as I topple to the concrete and skin my knee. The plague of pigeons on that side—my tormentors, my nemeses—frightened by my entrance onto the scene, flutter away, lifting inelegantly into the stunning evening sky on what can only be described as a kamikaze mission, the way their stubby wings scarcely sustain their hefts.

I wobble to my feet and rub my knee with the palm of my hand.

The two-by-four, in the process, has toppled to the ground, and I am again haunted by the recollection of my previous crime, the futility of that act, the memory of the pickle jar spiraling through the air, glinting with sunlight like an oiled football, the woman's shriek below, the lonely balloon then lifting to the skies.

I look to the street. Thankfully, on this occasion my victim is a mere Buick sedan.

I stand and gather myself, dusting off my housecoat as best I can, pleased—in fact, proud—by what, as a newly elected Vice President, I have achieved: I have escaped an asylum and I have senselessly murdered not one innocent bystander in the process. But my pride is quickly doused when I realize that either as a result of the medication or my leaky brain itself I have completely forgotten my purpose. I cannot, for the life of me, recall what it was that I intended to do once I escaped to the other rooftop.

I deliberate. I situate myself on the ledge and swing my bare feet from the building's side, trying to think. The street below is awash with headlights and honking.

I am also hungry. After locating a tattered ketchup packet amongst what little birdseed remains in my pocket, I tear open the packet with my teeth and suck it dry.

I postulate. Concerning the plan, I can only assume that it must have somehow involved the pigeons, which over the past several months I've come to hate—all their shitting and cooing. They typically reside on this rooftop—hence the birdseed in my pocket. But who can say for certain?

Let me explain, in case you are like me and the obvious escapes you. Among other things, I have poor decision-making skills. Chemical. This is how the doctors explain my illness. Or not. They shrug. A disconnect, they say, as if the

matter has been resolved, thoroughly explained. They scribble prescriptions on tiny squares of paper.

The sky this evening is a sublime thing to behold. I rub my smarting knee, delighting in the setting sun, but the bleeding persists.

Several nurses wave, like old friends, from the windows. I do not wave back. I am not where I am supposed to be. I am scheduled to be sitting calmly in the cafeteria right now, allowing my dinner to digest, awaiting the arrival of my Jello squares. Instead, I am sitting on the ledge of a rooftop with my bloody knee in my hand, wondering what has brought me here in the first place.

I look to the street below. The two-by-four still sits atop the parked sedan. I have lost my way.

I retrace my steps. I was inside the asylum; now I am outside the asylum. The results are inconclusive, a disconnect. To jog my memory, I imagine various connections: a plug in an electrical outlet, a jet refueling midair, the ducks I once witnessed mating outside the public library. But still, the fog persists. The minutes pass slowly, like flagged cars in a funeral procession, and the plan—of which not long ago I was certain—eludes me. I rack my pea of a brain, but the fork taped to my inner thigh is veiled in mystery. The birdseed in my pockets is an enigma.

My incompetence is astounding. I am reminded of Barney's words: "Madame Vice President—what the fuck are you doing?"

About my Vice Presidency...I should elaborate. I can only deduce that my colleagues were desperate for some sort of organizational principle, a clear-cut leader. And allow me to reassure you about the process; I have been told that my election to office was nothing less than democratic. I was informed of my new post one night, several months prior, as I lay awake in bed, watching the clock as my life ticked away, folding my hair into two long braids, making myself into a Pocahontas, with the hope that Barney would then fall in love with me and take me away to his teepee where we would make love under bearskins day in and day out, like the ducks—but slowly and with less biting.

One of my colleagues, who still remains anonymous, had scribbled the news on the backside of a bingo card and then slipped it under my door. By the time I returned from my fantasy and crossed the room to open the door, my informant was gone.

My confirmation? That night at dinner in the cafeteria, pork chop in hand, I received a standing ovation. Imagine my surprise. I hadn't even realized I was in the running.

Now, a small group of pedestrians, my subjects, have gathered below. Pointing. Cupping their mouths with their hands. I wave, as if from a homecoming float.

I close my eyes and imagine my brain as a receptor, as a bowl that holds things, a car battery in the process of being jump-started, but to no avail.

The nurses on the third floor, as time passes, seem to become more and more panicked by the thought of me let loose upon the world. Think of all the staunchly sealed jars of pickles out there, all the opportunities for murder. They wave frantically. Dramatically. It's as if they are performing a play.

One of them will be fired for this, for leaving the window unlocked and ajar in the first place. I, on the other hand, will not be punished. After all, I am a crazy person. This is what crazy people do. They devise schemes, crawl out open windows when people are not looking, and then immediately forget why. I will be reprimanded, of course, for dismantling my bed for the purpose of procuring a two-by-four, and most likely administered more medication that will, once and for all, turn my brain into cottage cheese. But that will be the end of it.

I locate yet another ketchup packet in with the birdseed and drain it in a similar fashion, while continuing to swing my feet side to side like an impatient child.

My poor Barney now flounders like a sad fish in the window. How will we make love from this distance, he must be wondering.

A siren blares beyond.

The evening sky is the most glorious accident one could hope to witness, a beautiful wreck of orange and blue, and I am somewhat appeased by the thought that something so disorderly can be, at the same time, this exquisite.

But the nurses gathered at the third floor windows, awaiting my catastrophe, are blind to the sun's terrible beauty. Instead, they are intent to focus on me. My escape is much easier to stomach than the ever-morphing skies, than the sublime terror of this fragile, temporary world of ours, and the sad truth that it could conceivably all end in a moment's notice. After all, I am easily contained: 5'2" and 105 pounds, a small brunette, a tiny blot of insanity in what they consider a largely rational world.

Poor Barney. If he could only see what I see, but sadly, like the others, he is blind to the wonder of all this, too much trusting in the permanence of things. And I fear this difference will distance us forever.

He again waves. He whittles his toothpick.

The sirens blare.

My outing this evening will be a short one, which, it turns out, is for the best, as I am famished, now desperate for Jello squares, and utterly without intention. Once back inside, I will scribble my resignation from the office of Vice President of Ward G, most likely on a tablecloth or whatnot. But for now I'll wait patiently for the authorities to arrive with their lights flaring, their horns honking, their good intentions blazing, hopeful that they will come equipped with a better plan. Or at least a trampoline. Or a ladder so long it could reach the heavens. ☸