

ANTHONY HOWCROFT

This is Not How it Ends

They gathered a few feet from the edge and shuffled forwards. Alan leaned out for a better view, intensely aware of the jostling group behind him. Beyond a crumbling lip of limestone, the world was made of turquoise and light. A seagull swerved into view and the sudden movement and revealed depth made Alan recoil. They were all going to dive into the water twenty metres below, and Alan was going first. The instructor clapped his hands.

“OK people, gather round. Let’s not freak out before we’ve started.”

The instructor was a muscular powerhouse towering above the teenagers. His Mexican assistant was closer to Alan’s size but with a torso from the cover of a health magazine. The instructor continued. “You all know the routine. Nobody would be here if they didn’t have the technique.”

A ripple of laughter came from a mumbled comment at the back but Alan missed the joke. His mouth was dry.

“Sanchez will demonstrate one last time. That means he’ll be in the water as you dive. When you surface, remember to swim to Sanchez and not bob around waiting for a human missile to land on you.”

Alan tried to stay focused. He suddenly couldn’t remember how he’d got here. The whole summer seemed a blur of practice sessions in the pool. There had been dancing, laughter and Monica; with brunette hair tied back her face was a perfectly shaped frame for those horizon-blue eyes. She glanced at him now. They didn’t talk

much. He found the words hard and never seemed to get it right.

"Alan, come here so you can see this," the instructor said. "Remember, number one. The step-up." Sanchez demonstrated by walking forward to the red marker.

"Two, spread your wings," the instructor said and Sanchez pushed his shoulders back, flexed his neck and then deliberately moved his arms like a bird about to take flight.

"Three, the arrow," Sanchez raised his arms above his head to make a steeple.

"Go."

Springing from his heels, Sanchez vanished faster than Icarus. The cluster of teenagers held their breath, until one girl on the edge pointed.

"There!" she shouted.

The crowd cheered and Sanchez waved in an exaggerated fashion before swimming towards the overhang and disappearing from view.

"It's not rocket science, ladies and gentlemen." The instructor slapped Alan heartily on the shoulder. "Alan, show us what you can do."

Alan had planned to wink at Monica but it was taking all his effort just to walk. The instructor spoke softly so that only Alan could hear. "Follow the steps. It'll be swell," he said. This last word sounded false in the instructor's mouth. It was one of *their* words. He hated it when they tried to sound hip.

"One," the instructor barked.

Alan took three paces to the marker and placed his feet precisely on the line. He swallowed mouthfuls of salt air as commands two and three followed rapidly. Alan's arms were raised above his head but weighed down like lead, and he felt precariously unbalanced. There was no sound but the wet slap of the ocean's giant hands.

"Go!"

Conditioning caused him to leap. All he could see was a palette of turquoise and azure. For a moment, he felt suspended in the air, lighter than a feather, followed by a rush of adrenalin, then a white explosion. Disorientated, he kicked towards the light, groping with his hands until he burst through the ocean's skin. The sun reflected off the water, blinding him with fragments of gold. Sanchez was at

his side.

"Well done," he said and Alan waved wildly to an audience he couldn't see.

"Let's go." Sanchez swam and Alan followed until they reached a boulder protruding from the sea like a giant turtle's back. Sanchez offered a hand and pulled him from the water.

"It was good, no?" Sanchez asked.

"Swell."

On the cliff, Monica watched the others take their place in line, then leap off like obedient lemmings. She was relieved Alan had made it safely. Monica felt queasy. It wasn't the idea of the dive itself but fear of making a mistake. She didn't want to let anyone down. Monica lacked confidence with physical tasks but they'd been through the routine so many times that she was expected to have it memorised.

"You're next, Monica." The instructor held her hand, squeezing it gently before she stepped into position.

"One."

She walked to the line.

"Two."

Monica held her arms out to the side, like Christ on a Crucifix.

"Three."

She formed the steeple.

"Go."

Confused, she stepped forward instead of jumping and slipped over the edge. Smashing, tumbling, her arms flailing, she called out in terror as she thrashed. She felt a sharp pain tear her left arm as she spun into the darkening aquamarine.

Below, the turtle boulder was squeezed tight with teenagers. Alan had been shivering as he watched the last few divers, waiting patiently for Monica. They heard her scream. The waterproof walkie-talkie of Sanchez buzzed with static.

"EMT," it said as a body pirouetted into the water with a plume of spray.

"The green toggle," Sanchez shouted. "Pull your green toggle."

Ken went pop like a balloon, then Ray and two others standing beside him. Like bubblewrap, the teenagers vanished with a loud

snap as they yanked the green toggles attached to their trunks.

"You too, Alan."

He clasped it between his knuckles and pulled sharply, as on the cord of a lawnmower. There was an unpleasant sensation like a paper bag bursting in his head. He lay still for a moment, feeling his heart race. He breathed deeply before slowly opening his eyes.

A hospital ward. Blinding light from the windows. A thin blue sheet covering him. His bed made from pipes. Alan let his hand explore the tubes raised either side of him like a cot. Opposite were two beds containing old men. Alan noticed a girl sitting in a chair to his right, looking intently at him.

"Grandad?" the girl said.

"Hello," Alan replied, clearing his throat.

"It's me. Rachel," she said.

"Hello Rachel. I must have been dreaming."

"No you were in VEEP," Rachel said. "Do you remember what that stands for?"

"No, I don't."

"It's a place they take you to recover," she said.

"Am I ill?" Alan asked.

"You had a stroke. Remember? Two months ago."

"No," Alan said. "I don't remember."

"Your neighbour found you. He called an ambulance and the police. They had to break down your door," Rachel told him.

"So where am I?"

Rachel smiled and Alan suspected he must have asked that many times before. "You're in Victoria Hospital in Blackpool."

"Am I getting better?" Alan asked.

"You're making good progress physically."

It seemed a slippery answer but Alan didn't want to ask the follow-on question, and Rachel showed no inclination to say any more.

"How old am I?" Alan asked.

"You're eighty-five."

"I thought I was seventeen."

"Well, you were once," she smiled, gently.

"That's *really* old," Alan said with feeling. "There was an accident,

for Monica," he added.

"Grandma?" asked Rachel. "Wait here. I'll be back in a minute."

"I'm not going anywhere," Alan said, but Rachel had already gone.

Alan studied his swollen hands. There were bruises on his wrists and forearms and the skin was textured with hundreds of tiny, permanent wrinkles. Only a minute ago he'd been a teenager plummeting into the sea, and now he was an old man with a twenty-something grandchild. His head throbbed trying to piece the puzzle together. He closed his eyes to think.

Alan woke uneasily. He was on a minibus that rattled and shook. It was dark outside, although a pink tinge through the windscreen suggested it was sunrise. Sanchez was driving and the instructor was alongside him. Alan looked at his hands. They were slim with tanned skin stretched tight over agile fingers. He wiggled his fingers and turned his hands over to admire their perfection. Monica was next to him. There was something puzzling about her being there, some incident half-remembered.

He looked up to find the instructor standing over him, stooped to avoid the low roof. He was studying Alan, thinking with his eyes. Alan opened his mouth to ask a question but wasn't sure what to say.

"Monica's fine, Alan. She hurt her arm last week but she's alright now."

"OK," Alan said and felt better. Today, he would ask her on a date.

The sun was yawning into a washed out sky when they arrived. Monica stirred as they lurched to a full stop.

"We're here," Alan told her.

"Where?" she said dreamily.

"Here." Alan wasn't entirely sure of the answer.

The instructor had them gather in a circle.

"Today's activity is rock climbing," he said. "We're going to have a picnic up there." The instructor pointed to a rock wall and slowly raised his hand until they were staring at the sky, where the rock was brushing against a cloud.

"Jump off a cliff one day, climb it the next," Alan whispered to Monica. "I wish they'd make their bloody minds up."

Sanchez showed them the complex sequence of loops they

needed to make the rope knot. Monica did hers without too much trouble but Alan found it hard even with his nimble fingers. Monica did it for him.

Sanchez went first, free climbing. A minute later the first rope uncoiled down the cliff, dangling like a brightly coloured snake.

"It's not a race," the instructor said. "Take your time and always keep three points anchored. We'll get into dynamic moves another day."

Alan leaned back in his harness and watched Monica swiftly climb the rock face. She was confident and made it look easier than walking up stairs. It wasn't a race, but Alan saw that Monica was first to the top. Now it was his turn.

After a few minutes climbing he began to tire and realised he was stuck. Where the holds had seemed large and plentiful, now they were small and awkward. He felt for another hold with his left foot. His right toes remained precariously perched on a narrow ledge and his fingers ached as they squeezed together to grip the small holds sustaining him. His groping foot could find nothing. He brought it back to the last ledge where it had held purchase. Alan's left leg began to jerk up and down uncontrollably. Fear punched into his stomach. He told himself the rope would hold. He'd watched Monica tie the knot, but wasn't the left loop meant to go through the right, and hadn't she done it vice versa? As easily as a spider on a thread, Sanchez slid into place next to him.

"OK Alan, there's a foothold just here." He tapped the rock with his toe to indicate the spot. "Then move your other foot here," he tapped another spot with his hand this time. "Only a few feet left."

Having Sanchez next to him was the impetus he needed and suddenly there was Monica reaching out to pull him over the top. She hugged him tight with relief and love, Alan thought; definitely love.

Sanchez herded them towards the woven picnic rugs and Alan felt good. Everybody was exhilarated and they sang together, an impromptu concert with tunes that everyone knows.

"Monica," Alan said and she turned her eyes on him. "Would you like, I mean perhaps one evening..."

"Yes," she said and he wasn't sure if it was a question or a

confirmation but it gave him the confidence to finish his sentence.

"...we could see the city lights? They're beautiful from the Giant's Kitchen."

"I'd love to," she said.

The instructor announced a surprise.

"We're going home via a shortcut." He held up a backpack with various straps hanging off it. "This is a rapid deployment parachute. You're going to enjoy this!"

Alan and Monica stood hand in hand about twenty foot from the cliff edge. Alan's heart was thumping and Monica's hand gripped his like a vice. The instructor made them both repeat the instructions and then gave a thumbs up. They ran forwards and hurled themselves off the edge. It was spectacular. This was the life he had always hoped for. Who could ask for more?

"Pull," Alan shouted.

He tore at the green ripcord and saw Monica do the same thing. They were jolted apart and he felt a pop as the parachute opened.

"Dad, can you hear me?"

Alan opened his eyes. His hand grabbed the tube-side of his bed and ran along the smooth aluminium. He looked to his side and sitting in the chair was a middle-aged woman with Monica-coloured eyes.

"Was I asleep?" Alan said.

"You've just woken up. It's Stephanie."

"Where am I, Stephanie?"

"Victoria Hospital. You had a stroke."

"But I'm getting better."

"That's good," Stephanie said.

A rotund male nurse came in to the room. Alan noticed his name badge said Sanchez. He checked Alan's drip and made a note on his clipboard. Stephanie asked Sanchez a question that Alan missed.

"It is safe," Sanchez replied in a thick accent.

"Look at the bruises on his arm," Stephanie said.

Alan lifted his arm to inspect the purple patterns for himself.

"Alan forgets he is attached to a drip. He goes walkabout and it detaches. We must find a new insertion. You remember the drip, uh

Alan?" Sanchez said.

"My Mum's arms are worse," Stephanie said.

Sanchez answered. "Yes, she wave her arms after a bad VEEP, and collide her bed. Skin is very thin. It bruises like, a plum? VEEP is safe, though."

Stephanie seemed agitated to Alan. The conversation was making little sense to him because they talked so fast.

"Are there statistics, evidence of the results?" Stephanie said and Sanchez nodded, used to dealing with such requests.

"VEEP is proven to accelerate physical and mental recuperation for ischemia strokes in both primary degenerative and vascular dementia. I give you URL?"

"That would be helpful," Stephanie said, partially appeased.

Sanchez was not finished. "We use VEEP to enhance the quality of life, for pleasure to people with limited mobility or memory functions."

"I'm not sure I see how," Stephanie said.

"It provides dignity and a graceful..." Sanchez paused to search for the right words, "celebration of life."

"Is that really God's way?" Stephanie asked.

"I can't answer for him, but it is our way."

Rachel entered the room, hesitantly.

"Hi, Grandad. How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad," Alan said. "Bed fourteen," he pointed to the old man opposite.

"Yes, and you're in bed seventeen."

Alan counted round the beds like the numbers on a clock, "And your Grandma is in bed..." he let the sentence hang.

"Thirty-two," Rachel said.

"That's right," Alan nodded as though he'd known all along.

Sanchez came and mixed some powder into Alan's orange juice to thicken it and gave him a spoon. Alan kept repeating the number thirty-two. Eventually his eyes fell shut. When he opened them next it was dark. He pulled himself upright and slid his feet into the worn slippers by his bedside. He collected a bag from the bedside cabinet and clutched it tightly. Then he walked unsteadily towards the corridor. There was a ping as his drip pulled out of his arm.

At each bay, he studied the numerals. Eventually he found bed thirty-two. Monica was still awake. Alan put a finger to his lips.

"Put these on," he said and handed her the bag.

"19 Rigby Lane, Bolton," Monica said.

"Give me five minutes," Alan said and shuffled away.

"Don't be late!" Monica shout-whispered, and then laughed until she coughed.

Back at his bed Alan took a second pair of goggles and slipped them on.

His Norton rumbled as it burbled past the terraced houses at a walking pace. Monica was already standing outside her house. She wore a floral green dress and her hair was tied back with a bow.

"You look fabulous! Hop on." Alan shouted above the growling engine. Monica straddled the motorbike and held his waist one hand on either side, rather than all the way around the middle.

"Let's go," she said.

He kept the engine low until they'd navigated out of town. Once they reached the hills he opened the throttle wide and the Norton roared into the evening. He flipped the bike left then right to cope with the switchbacks, and as they climbed higher Alan felt like an eagle rising into the sky on a thermal, gazing at the glittering world spread below.

There was a bench at the top and they sat cuddled together, Alan's arm around her shoulders as they looked at the twinkling lights.

"Did we do this before?" Alan asked.

"No, you only had a scooter."

"That's right," he said. "We should have done it."

"We were always too busy, with work, then the kids. There was never enough time for us."

"There are moments when everything comes back into focus. The scooter, the holidays, all of it seems real again," Alan said, and Monica leaned into him. "I think it's time we planned one last journey," he said.

"Yes," Monica murmured, "I was thinking that. Let me pick you up in my Triumph Stag. We didn't have one of those either, but I always wanted a yellow one."

Alan opened his eyes to the dazzling sunlight streaming through the window.

“Morning Grandad,” a female voice. Alan turned to find a young woman sitting by his bed. She was familiar, and he thought long and hard before he said her name.

“Rachel.”

“Do you need a drink?” she said, and Alan nodded.

Rachel found the staff nurse in the kitchen where he was pouring out a protein yoghurt. She checked his name tag.

“Is it Stephen or Steve?” she asked.

“Steve.” He smiled and would have shook her hand but was still busy pouring.

“We’re hoping Alan will eat more soon. His swallow reflex is improving,” Steve said. “Do you know about his nightly trips?”

Rachel shook her head.

“Alan’s been sneaking off with your grandmother. Motorbike trips into the hills, rowing across midnight lakes and picnics in spring meadows. They’ve had quite a month.”

“Is that allowed?” Rachel asked.

“We encourage the patients to explore and go outside the formal training program. That’s why VEEP was designed as an open-world environment.”

“He seems to believe VEEP is real. I mean it’s just a computer game, right?”

Steve nodded. “The difference is that we use CRF-23, which helps people suspend belief. It’s based on the chemical your brain releases at night, which is why weird stuff can happen in your dreams and seem real. We use it to make VEEP feel genuine. It’s not uncommon for patients to find it more rewarding than reality. They have more mobility, and we design it from their past, so it feels like home.”

“That’s reassuring. Thanks,” Rachel said.

“You really care, don’t you?” Steve commented. “Not everybody does.”

Most of the time, her Grandad slept. Rachel found it hard to talk to him, with such a one-sided conversation. She wasn’t sure if she

should talk about her new flat, or the challenge of finding a decent single man in Molesey, or reminisce about favourite family subjects. Her Grandad's right hand moved up and down the tubes at the side of his bed, occasionally taking a tight grip of the tube and twisting back and forth rhythmically, even when he had his eyes shut. As the visitor hour shrank, she kissed him goodnight and moved on to the next bay.

"Hi, Grandma!"

"Rachel, come here and give me a hug."

"You seem very perky, Grandma."

"Hot date tonight!" she declared and Rachel had a sinking feeling.

"Alan's picking me up on his Norton."

"What's a Norton?"

"A big, black motorbike. Brm Brm Brm!" Her Grandma twisted her wrist, just as she had seen her Grandad doing a moment before.

"I'd better leave you to get ready," Rachel hugged her Grandma as the visitor bell rang a final warning.

"Give him a kiss from me," Rachel said.

It was a thunderous sky and the rain was threatening to break at any moment. Staff- nurse Steve had accepted an invitation to the double funeral, even though members of the clinical team rarely attended such events. He was hoping to find Rachel, and talk to her privately now that she no longer had a reason to come to the hospital. Steve managed to find Rachel alone in the garden, away from the attention of the other mourners.

"It's not uncommon for a husband and wife to die soon after each other. I think they would have approved," he said softly.

"Perhaps they're still together," Rachel said.

"I hope so," he said.

"What's it like? Inside VEEP?" she asked.

"It's like any computer environment," he replied. "Of course, it's different for the clinical staff because we don't take the drug. We need to keep a medical perspective."

"I'd like to have seen them together," Rachel mused.

"They were very much in love. I can tell you that."

They stood in silence for a few moments, and the nurse cleared

his throat. "Listen," he said. "A group of us are going cliff-diving on Sunday. It's the one they used as the model for the VEEP course. It makes you realise what it must be like, the fear and the ecstasy. It's the closest you can get to VEEP, without taking the drugs. Would you like to come?"

Rachel hesitated.

"We could grab a bite to eat afterwards?" he said.

The sea was turquoise. The staff nurse seemed more relaxed to Rachel, away from the hospital, more comfortable somehow, in her presence. They were doing pencil jumps. "We'll do it side by side," Steve said.

"One!" laughed Sanchez, relishing his turn in the instructor role.

Rachel and Steve walked to the cliff's edge.

"Now separate a bit. You don't want to be too close."

They both took a pace to the side.

"Two."

Rachel watched Steve raise his hands and copied.

"Three."

Rachel steepled her hands.

"Go!"

Steve disappeared over the cliff. Rachel froze.

"Go!" Sanchez shouted again.

Rachel pushed off into the air, terrified. She remembered to go stiff like a plank of wood as she'd been told, but rigid would be a better description. She closed her eyes as she hurtled towards the waves, and felt the shock as she pierced the sea. Bursting through the surface she gasped and swivelled around to find Steve. He lifted her bodily out of the water and dropped her back again, shrieking. The water was golden, scattering the light into dazzling pieces.

They swam to a rock shaped like a turtle's back and clambered out. The other divers gave her a round of applause and she did a mock curtsy.

"That was amazing!" Rachel said.

"Would you do it again?"

She laughed. "Maybe, but not today!"

Sanchez was on the cliff top, shouting. Steve cupped his hand to

one ear, indicating that Sanchez should shout louder.

“EMT on ward!”

Steve turned to Rachel. “We need to get back,” he said.

“I thought you were off duty?” Rachel asked.

Sanchez’s voice carried over the crashing waves, “Pull your green toggle,” she heard him say. One by one the others on the rock vanished, until there was just Rachel and Steve left.

“You didn’t realise, did you?” he said. “You were back at our first date.”

“I’d forgotten.”

“We’ve had a wonderful life together, Rachel. This is not how it ends.”

He reached over and placed the green toggle from his suit in her hand. She slowly pulled out the cord of her toggle and offered it to him.

Two pops fired together like the corks of champagne bottles, echoing against the cliff. The waves lolled against the empty rocks.