

The Man on the 99th Floor

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

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All day Forbis had been trying to reach the 100th floor. Crouched at the foot of the short stairway behind the elevator shaft, he stared up impotently at the swinging metal door on to the roof, searching for some means of dragging himself up to it. There were eleven narrow steps, and then the empty roof deck, the high grilles of the suicide barrier and the open sky. Every three minutes an airliner went over, throwing a fleeting shadow down the steps, its jets momentarily drowning the panic which jammed his mind, and each time he made another attempt to reach the doorway.

Eleven steps. He had counted them a thousand times, in the hours since he first entered the building at ten o'clock that morning and rode the elevator up to the 95th floor. He had walked the next floor—the floors were fakes, offices windowless and unserviced, tacked on merely to give the building the cachet of a full century—then waited quietly at the bottom of the final stairway, listening to

the elevator cables wind and drone, hoping to calm himself. As usual, however, his pulse started to race, within two or three minutes was up to one hundred and twenty. When he stood up and reached for the hand-rail something clogged his nerve centres, caissons settled on to the bed of his brain, rooting him to the floor like a lead colossus.

Fingering the rubber cleats on the bottom step, Forbis glanced at his wristwatch. 4.20 p.m. If he wasn't careful someone would climb the stairs up to the roof and find him there—already there were half a dozen buildings around the city where he was persona non grata, elevator boys warned to call the house detectives if they saw him. And there were not all that many buildings with a hundred floors. That was part of his obsession. There had to be one hundred exactly.

Why? Leaning back against the wall, Forbis managed to ask himself the question. What role was he playing out, searching the city for hundredstorey skyscrapers, then performing this obsessive ritual which invariably ended in the same way, the final peak always unscaled? Perhaps it was some sort of abstract duel between himself and the architects of these monstrous piles (dimly he remembered working in a menial job below the city streets—perhaps he was rebelling and reasserting himself, the prototype of urban ant-man trying to overtopple the totem towers of Megalopolis?)

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Aligning itself on the glideway, an airliner began its final approach over the city, its six huge jets blaring. As the noise hammered across him, Forbis pulled himself to his feet and lowered his head, passively letting the sounds drive down into his mind and loosen his blocked feedbacks. Lifting his right foot, he lowered it on to the first step, clasped the rail and pulled himself up two steps.

His left leg swung freely. Relief surged through him. At last he was going to reach the door! He took another step, raised his foot to the fourth, only seven from the top, then realized that his left hand was locked to the hand-rail below. He tugged at it angrily, but the fingers were clamped together like steel bands, the thumbnail biting painfully into his index tip.

He was still trying to unclasp the hand when the aircraft had gone.

Half an hour later, as the daylight began to fade, he sat down on the bottom step, with his free right hand pulled off one of his shoes and dropped it through the railing into the elevator shaft.

Vansittart put the hypodermic away in his valise, watching Forbis thoughtfully.

„You're lucky you didn't kill anyone,“ he said. „The elevator cabin was thirty storeys down, your shoe went through the roof like a bomb.“

Forbis shrugged vaguely, letting himself relax on the couch. The Psychology Department was almost silent, the last of the lights going out in the corridor as the staff left the medical school on their way home. „I'm sorry, but there was no other way of attracting attention. I was fastened to the stair-rail like a dying limpet. How did you calm the manager down?“

Vansittart sat on the edge of his desk, turning away the lamp.

„It wasn't easy. Luckily Professor Bauer was still in his office and he cleared me over the phone. A week from now, though, he retires. Next time I may not be able

to bluff my way through. I think we'll have to take a more direct line. The police won't be so patient with you."

"I know. I'm afraid of that. But if I can't go on trying my brain will fuse. Didn't you get any clues at all?"

Vansittart murmured noncommittally. In fact the events had followed exactly the same pattern as on the three previous occasions. Again the attempt to reach the open roof had failed, and again there was no explanation for Forbis's compulsive drive. Vansittart had first seen him only a month earlier, wandering about blankly on the observation roof of the new administration building at the medical school. How he had gained access to the roof Vansittart had never discovered. Luckily one of the janitors had telephoned him that a man was behaving suspiciously on the roof, and Vansittart had reached him just before the suicide attempt.

At least, that was what it appeared to be. Vansittart examined the little man's placid grey features, his small shoulders and thin hands. There was something anonymous about him. He was minimal urban man, as near a nonentity as possible, without friends or family, a vague background of forgotten jobs and rooming houses. The sort of lonely, helpless man who might easily, in an unthinking act of despair, try to throw himself off a roof.

Yet there was something that puzzled Vansittart. Strictly, as a member of the university teaching staff, he should not have prescribed any treatment for Forbis and instead should have handed him over promptly to the police surgeon at the nearest station. But a curious nagging suspicion about Forbis had prevented him from doing so. Later, when he began to analyse Forbis, he found that his personality, or what there was of it, seemed remarkably well integrated, and that he had a realistic, pragmatic approach towards life which was completely unlike the overcompensated self-pity of most would-be suicides.

Nevertheless, he was driven by an insane compulsion, this apparently motiveless impulse to the 100th floor. Despite all Vansittart's probings and tranquillizers Forbis had twice set off for the down-town sector of the city, picked a skyscraper and trapped himself in his eyrie on the 99th floor, on both occasions finally being rescued by Vansittart.

Deciding to play a hunch, Vansittart asked: "Forbis, have you ever experimented with hypnosis?"

Forbis shifted himself drowsily, then shook his head. "Not as far as I can remember. Are you hinting that someone has given me a post-hypnotic suggestion, trying to make me throw myself off a roof?"

That was quick of you, Vansittart thought. "Why do you say that?" he asked.

"I don't know. But who would try? And what would be the point?" He peered up at Vansittart. "Do you think someone did?"

Vansittart nodded. "Oh yes. There's no doubt about it." He sat forward, swinging the lamp around for emphasis. "Listen, Forbis, some time ago, I can't be sure how long, three months, perhaps six, someone planted a really powerful post-hypnotic command in your mind. The first part of it—*Go up to the 100th floor*—I've been able to uncover, but the rest is still buried. It's that half of the command which worries me. One doesn't need a morbid imagination to guess what it probably is."

Forbis moistened his lips, shielding his eyes from the glare of the lamp. He felt too sluggish to be alarmed by what Vansittart had just said. Despite the doctor's frank admission of failure, and his deliberate but rather nervous manner, he trusted Vansittart, and was confident he would find a solution. „It sounds insane,“ he commented. „But who would want to kill me? Can't you cancel the whole thing out, erase the command?“

„I've tried to, but without any success. I've been getting nowhere. It's still as strong as ever—stronger, in fact, almost as if it were being reinforced. Where have you been during the last week? Who have you seen?“

Forbis shrugged, sitting up on one elbow. „No one. As far as I can remember, I've only been on the 99th floor.“ He searched the air dismally, then gave up. „You know, I can't remember a single thing, just vague outlines of cafs and bus depots, it's strange.“

„A pity. I'd try to keep an eye on you, but I can't spare the time. Bauer's retirement hadn't been expected for another year, there's a tremendous amount of reorganization to be done.“ He drummed his fingers irritably on the desk. „I noticed you've still got some cash with you. Have you had a job?“

„I think so—in the subway, perhaps. Or did I just take a train...?“ Forbis frowned with the effort of recollection. „I'm sorry, Doctor. Anyway, I've always heard that post-hypnotic suggestions couldn't compel you to do anything that clashed with your basic personality.“

„What is the basic personality, though? A skilful analyst can manipulate the psyche to suit the suggestion, magnify a small streak of self-destruction until it cleaves the entire personality like an axe splitting a log.“

Forbis pondered this gloomily for a few moments, then brightened slightly. „Well, I seem to have the suggestion beaten. Whatever happens, I can't actually reach the roof, so I must have enough strength to fight it.“

Vansittart shook his head. „As a matter of fact, you haven't. It's not you who's keeping yourself off the roof, it's me.“

„What do you mean?“

„I implanted another hypnotic suggestion, holding you on the 99th floor. When I uncovered the first suggestion I tried to erase it, found I wasn't even scratching the surface, so just as a precaution I inserted a second of my own. „Get off at the 99th floor.“ How long it will hold you there I don't know, but already it's fading. Today it took you over seven hours to call me. Next time you may get up enough steam to hit the roof. That's why I think we should take a new line, really get to the bottom of this obsession, or rather“—he smiled ruefully—„to the top.“

Forbis sat up slowly, massaging his face. „What do you suggest?“

„We'll let you reach the roof. I'll erase my secondary command and we'll see what happens when you step out on to the top deck. Don't worry, I'll be with you if anything goes wrong. It may seem pretty thin consolation, but frankly, Forbis, it would be so easy to kill you and get away with it that I can't understand anyone bothering to go to all this trouble. Obviously there's some deeper motive, something connected, perhaps, with the 100th floor.“ Vansittart paused, watching Forbis carefully, then asked in a casual voice: „Tell me, have you ever heard of anyone called Fowler?“

He said nothing when Forbis shook his head, but privately noted the reflex pause of unconscious recognition.

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„All right?“ Vansittart asked as they reached the bottom of the final stairway.

„Fine,“ Forbis said quietly, catching his breath. He looked up at the rectangular opening above them, wondering how he would feel when he finally reached the roof-top. They had sneaked into the building by one of the service entrances at the rear, and then taken a freight elevator to the 80th floor.

„Let’s go, then,“ Vansittart walked on ahead, beckoning Forbis after him. Together they climbed up to the final doorway, and stepped out into the bright sunlight.

„Doctor...!“ Forbis exclaimed happily. He felt fresh and exhilarated, his mind clear and unburdened at last. He gazed around the small flat roof, a thousand ideas tumbling past each other in his mind like the crystal fragments of a mountain stream. Somewhere below, however, a deeper current tugged at him.

Go up to the 100th floor and...

Around him lay the roof-tops of the city, and half a mile away, hidden by the haze, was the spire of the building he had tried to scale the previous day. He strolled about the roof, letting the cool air clear the sweat from his face. There were no suicide grilles around the balcony, but their absence caused him no anxiety.

Vansittart was watching him carefully, black valise in one hand. He nodded encouragingly, then gestured Forbis toward the balcony, eager to rest the valise on the ledge.

„Feel anything?“

„Nothing.“ Forbis laughed, a brittle chuckle. „It must have been one of those impractical jokes—*Now let’s see you get down*. Can I look into the street?“

„Of course,“ Vansittart agreed, bracing himself to seize Forbis if the little man attempted to jump. Beyond the balcony was a thousand-foot drop into a busy shopping thoroughfare.

Forbis clasped the near edge of the balcony in his palms and peered down at the lunch crowds below. Cars edged and shunted like coloured fleas, and people milled about aimlessly on the pavements. Nothing of any interest seemed to be happening.

Beside him, Vansittart frowned and glanced at his watch, wondering whether something had misfired. „It’s 12.30,“ he said. „We’ll give up—“ He broke off as footsteps creaked on the stairway below. He swung around and watched the doorway, gesturing to Forbis to keep quiet.

As he turned his back the small man suddenly reached up and cut him sharply across the neck with the edge of his right hand, stunning him momentarily. When Vansittart staggered back he expertly chopped him on both sides of the throat, then sat him down and kicked him senseless with his knees.

Working swiftly, he ignored the broad shadow which reached across the roof to him from the doorway. He carefully fastened Vansittart’s three jacket buttons, and then levered him up by the lapels on to his shoulder.

Backing against the balcony, he slid him on to the ledge, straightening his legs one after the other. Vansittart stirred helplessly, head lolling from side to side.

And... and...

Behind Forbis the shadow drew nearer, reaching up the side of the balcony, a broad neckless head between heavy shoulders.

Cutting off his pumping breath, Forbis reached out with both hands and pushed.

Ten seconds later, as horns sounded up dimly from the street below, he turned around.

„Good boy, Forbis.“

The big man's voice was flat but relaxed. Ten feet from Forbis, he watched him amiably. His face was plump and sallow, a callous mouth half-hidden by a brush moustache. He wore a bulky black overcoat, and one hand rested confidently in a deep pocket.

„Fowler!“ Involuntarily, Forbis tried to move forward, for a moment attempting to reassemble his perspectives, but his feet had locked into the white surface of the roof.

Three hundred feet above, an airliner roared over. In a lucid interval provided by the noise, Forbis recognized Fowler, Vansittart's rival for the psychology professorship, remembered the long sessions of hypnosis after Fowler had picked him up in a bar three months earlier, offering to cure his chronic depression before it slid into alcoholism.

With a grasp, he remembered too the rest of the buried command.

So Vansittart had been the real target, not himself! Go up to the 100th floor and... His first attempt at Vansittart had been a month earlier, when Fowler had left him on the roof and then pretended to be the janitor, but Vansittart had brought two others with him. The mysterious hidden command had been the bait to lure Vansittart to the roof again. Cunningly, Fowler had known that sooner or later Vansittart would yield to the temptation.

„And...“ he said aloud.

Looking for Vansittart, in the absurd hope that he might have survived the thousand-foot fall, he started for the balcony, then tried to hold himself back as the current caught him.

„And—?“ Fowler repeated pleasantly. His eyes, two festering points of light, made Forbis sway. „There's still some more to come, isn't there, Forbis? You're beginning to remember it now.“

Mind draining, Forbis turned to the balcony, dry mouth sucking at the air.

„And—?“ Fowler snapped, his voice harder.

... And... and...

Numbly, Forbis jumped up on to the balcony, and poised on the narrow ledge like a diver, the streets swaying before his eyes. Below, the horns were silent again and the traffic had resumed its flow, a knot of vehicles drawn up in the centre of a small crowd by the edge of the pavement. For a few moments he managed to resist, and then the current caught him, toppling him like a drifting spar.

Fowler stepped quietly through the doorway. Ten seconds later, the horns sounded again.

