

Mr. Hardy

Peter W. Andersen

Mr. Hardy was near the top of the stairs when it happened. He must have been careless or overly confident because he didn't see it coming. He didn't see it at all. But it came all right.

From out of the blue, a blow to the side of the head lifted him clear off his feet and threw him backwards. He didn't even land until he was eight or nine steps down, and he came down hard on his left side. The pain was so great that Mr. Hardy knew he'd broken his arm. But without time to think he continued falling quickly and uncontrollably down the stairs. He plowed face-first onto a step, feet flying over the top of his head, and landed hard, flat on his back. This knocked the wind out of him but he kept going – limp, sliding, as if the stairs had been greased, the hard wooden corners of the steps pounding rhythmically into his back as he snaked his way down. The back of his head hit every step, which hurt like hell and made Mr. Hardy dizzy.

He began to slow down at one point, and was almost able to stop himself, when he reached a landing and the stairs made a turn to the left. He had gotten halfway to his feet on the landing when a massive headrush toppled him again. Since he was almost standing by now, he didn't continue down the stairs but actually tipped over the edge of the landing and out into thin air. He made a beautiful full flip in the air and everything that had been in his pockets – keys, change, his wallet, a roll of breath mints, a piece of paper with something embarrassingly personal written on it – all flew away from him. His wallet opened like a parachute, exploding its contents through the air. Mr. Hardy landed 15 feet below, where the stairs continued, and picked up where he left off. As he landed he caught his shirt collar on the rail of the stairs which instantly snapped three buttons, but managed to remain caught so that as his legs and feet slid limply down the stairs, his cheek was pinned against the rail, burning the skin as gravity pulled him down. There was another landing below and another turn to the left. This time when the rail veered sharply left the shirt finally gave way and tore one sleeve completely off, wrenching Mr. Hardy's neck in the process. He didn't have time to think about it, though, because as he was released from the rail he slammed into the opposite wall with his torso, head, and right shoulder, and made a loud thud. Mr. Hardy had finally come to a stop.

He knelt on both knees, bruised, bleeding, missing a shirt sleeve.

But although it could have stopped here, there must have been something deep inside Mr. Hardy that was ever so slightly out of balance, because although he looked like he was perfectly still, he swayed slightly, swooned, tried to right himself, and then slowly pitched forward until he hit the stairs full on and continued headfirst like a bare-armed bearskin rug, unseen forces relentlessly pulling his overweight form chin-first down the stairs which seemed to never end.

At this point an odd thing happened. Some people actually passed him going the other direction. They knew Mr. Hardy. They were his friends. But they were deep in conversation at the time and whether they could have or should have done anything to help him was irrelevant. They didn't.

He continued past them, and at this point actually managed to tuck himself into a ball. Although this protected his body, it also allowed his speed to increase until Mr. Hardy was going so fast as to be unrecognizable. Now other people on the stairs began to notice him, and they ran out of the way as he approached. Like the first group they were good people, but nobody thought of helping Mr. Hardy until it was too late and he was gone. At the moment you saw him, Mr. Hardy was much too interesting to be helped.

Even the longest staircase in the world eventually reaches the bottom, and this one was no different. By the time Mr. Hardy approached the final landing he had picked up so much speed that he did quite a spectacular thing. Rolling in a ball and by this time only hitting every fifth or sixth step, he bounced once neatly on the center of the landing and then flew over the edge of the rail and sailed like a human cannonball into the open atrium below, which, to Mr. Hardy's great misfortune, was covered by an enormous glass ceiling. The ceiling shattered into a million pieces as Mr. Hardy came crashing through. People screamed as glass and Mr. Hardy rained down on them, and they ran to protect themselves. A fire alarm went off and sprinklers came on. Mr. Hardy landed with an enormous splash in a beautiful, three-tiered fountain and floated there, ignored in the ensuing panic by everyone, except for a massive verdigris cherub with a frozen smile who poured water from a bottomless urn onto Mr. Hardy's head.

Amid the noise and confusion the crowd of people scrambled to escape the lobby, spilling out into the street. Within seconds, sirens were heard outside and the turmoil had spread

to the entire block. The driver of an oncoming fuel truck, going a little too fast and not expecting any of this, attempted to swerve in front of the building in order to avoid the crowd, but his truck was full of aviation fuel and weighed precisely 43 tons. As the semi-conscious form of Mr. Hardy sank to the bottom of the fountain amid coins tossed in for luck, the gigantic, silver fuel truck lost control and careened through the lobby where it ran straight into a central support pillar. The ceiling and walls of the magnificent atrium began to shake and collapse. The explosion of the truck, seconds later, could be heard in the next county, but what really made the event memorable was the fact that there was an underground crew a half block away at that very moment, repairing a broken gas main...

For a week, visitors from nine states could park their cars in the nearby mountains and look down over the still burning landscape that had once been a city.