

His life in ruins, Doug prepares to jump... until dove pays visit

The Derby Telegraph is inviting readers to submit short stories for publication. Here is **Jumping to Conclusions** by Philip Neale

"Well, thank you Mr Atherton, I think that's all we need for now. We appreciate you coming along again, and we'll be in touch in the next few days."

Doug Atherton shook hands with his two interviewers, forced a smile and left the office. He'd got to the last three for the position of divisional accountant and now had to wait for the inevitable polite but firm rejection letter. Six months before, life had seemed so good; now it lay in ruins.

"If you don't spend more time around here with me and the kids instead of at that electronics firm, you're gonna come home one day and find that there's no family here!"

His wife, Tracy, had been forthright in her warning, and it was something that she had been saying on and off quite a while now. He'd been at Simeca Electronics as their chief financial officer for just over ten years, and in that time they'd married, had two children and moved upmarket on the property ladder. They'd even taken advantage of a new type of mortgage to afford their six-bedroom house with double garage. Sub Prime the broker had called it, and with his financial background and a rising property market, Doug had seen nothing wrong at the time. When the bubble burst his mortgage lender threatened to foreclose.

"Swines!" He cursed out loud. OK, he'd missed three payments, but they'd been in like lightning. Tracy had hit the roof.

Standing in the elevator in the fifth-floor lobby he mused over the interview he'd just been through. His finger hovered over the ground floor button as the doors closed, but he changed his mind. Punching the top floor one instead he decided to head for the roof. After all, what was there left? Tracy had left him, he was out of work at 49 years of age and the guys across the lobby were probably already writing his "No thanks" letter.

The air was cool up here at the top of the building. Cooler than the hot, steamy

streets, and he would spend the last moments of his life in contemplation of what might have been. He pulled the pack of Marlboro's from his pocket and smiled grimly. The last cigarette in the pack. The last cigarette that he would ever smoke, and it would be here, on the roof of the headquarters of the company which was confirming his consignment to the business scrapheap - ironic really.

Yes, Tracy was gone. Taking the kids and the car, she'd headed off for her parents' home in Phoenix. He loved them all, always had, and the ten years at Simeca had been the backbone of their financial stability. Trouble was he had spent far too much time there, patching up an old IT system because they were too mean to re-kit, staying late into the night catching up on work for the CEO, and generally coming home too tired and too late to minister to the needs of those who should have been precious to him.

Then, out of the blue, he was finished. Had it been only six months ago that Bradshaw had called him into the office?

"Hey, Doug, c'mon in. Take a seat, got something I need to talk to you about. Oh, close the door behind ya, yeah?"

"Close the door" - that should have set the alarm bells ringing. Bradshaw never closed his door. His face then set into a block of stone as he sat down the other side of his oak office desk.

"See, we've been going through a tough spell" He suppressed an embarrassed laugh. "S'pose you know that already though. Well, this is kinda rough on me too, but I'm afraid that we're gonna have to let you go."

He took another pull on the Marlboro - halfway down now, and not long to go before the act that he had come up here to carry out. He stepped to the edge of the roof and looked down. Twenty-four floors and he could probably wave to his interrogators as he flew past the window, maybe he would see them sealing his envelope.

"All right Mr Atherton, I think we can both see how well qualified you are, but what prompted the departure from Simeca? From what I see they're well placed to move up the market ladder."

The question had stumped him briefly and he stuttered through his response. Rising costs, poor budgeting, window dressing, off balance sheet financing and a curious



Jobless Doug Atherton, contemplating what might have been, prepares to jump to his death.

letter from the SEC had all been matters which the CEO had refused to discuss with him.

"So, you just let it go?"

"No, I pushed matters as far as I felt I could without compromising either my position or that of the company but Mr Bradshaw just wouldn't talk. In the end I think he fired me just to get me out of the way."

"You didn't fight your corner then?"

"I fought. I redrafted the whole budget, reforecast the cash flows for all divisions and produced a strategic plan that would have seen us out of the woods inside twelve months."

"Six months before, life had seemed so good; now it lay in ruins."

PHILIP NEALE

"So...what then? You just backed off?"

The questioning went on like this for another 15 minutes and the effect on Doug had been draining. When he left the office it was with an immense feeling of relief. He now knew what it was that he needed to do.

The view from the top of the building was quite spectacular; all the way across the Chicago skyline to Lake Michigan in the distance, and a clear blue sky to frame the entire picture. He'd certainly chosen a beautiful day to make the jump. A sudden fluttering caught his attention and he shielded his eyes against the glare as a white dove descended on to the rooftop and settled ten feet away from him. It cocked its head on one side, maybe curious of his intentions in a domain not of his own.

"Hey buddy, how much better off are you?" The question ordinarily would have been incongruous but now seemed quite apt in the circumstances. The dove stopped, almost as if it understood, and turned to face him.

Like an Exocet missile, the hawk descended at breakneck speed, plucked the dove from the roof and was gone in an instant, leaving only a shower of feathers as evidence of its predatory act. The incident stunned Doug Atherton and he stood open-mouthed, the Marlboro hanging from his bottom lip by its fingernails.

His words to the dove now came back in stark contrast to the changed circumstances. He was still alive, the dove almost certainly dinner for a growing brood. Casting the smouldering stogie to the ground, he crushed it beneath his heel and headed back towards the roof door. Moments later he was out on the sidewalk and breathing a life that he believed to be ending. Back inside a conversation was taking place which would seal his destiny.

"So, we got three to choose from. You think Doug Atherton fits the bill? You gave him a pretty tough time with that last round of questions."

Martin Kelley was VP Finance for the group and had taken pretty much a back seat in the proceedings of all three interviews. Doug was his favoured candidate, but the reply was not what he expected.

"No, I don't. Michaelson is much better suited to the role."

"Pity, I kinda liked the guy, and he handled you and your grilling well."

"That's why I did it to him. With what I have in mind, he'll need all the backbone he can muster. Shelbourne re-

tires next year and we're gonna need a replacement with enough punch to keep that western division on track."

"You're giving him the entire western seaboard?"

"Damn straight. With the package I got in mind he'd be crazy to turn us down. What's his cell number?"

Doug had turned left, deep in thought as he walked along the street. The raucous sound from his pocket shook him from his musings. The number displayed stopped him in his tracks.

By the end of the call he was too stunned to continue but was brought back to reality by the screaming of a woman on the other side of the street. He had not travelled half the block when the body hit the sidewalk. He'd never heard the sound of a jumper hitting the ground before, and the "splat" was a sickening reminder of what had awaited him only a short time before.

Suddenly there was concentrated action from all quarters. Some running away, some running towards the prone and now bloody figure of a middle aged man. Doug wondered at the guy's fate. A sudden icy chill enveloped him as he realised that the jumper had landed at the spot where he would have been had the call to his cell not interrupted him.

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