

# SHORT STORY NIGHT



INTERVIEW WITH  
AUTHOR JOHN JODZIO!  
(THIS AMERICAN LIFE,  
MCSWEENEY'S, AND ONE STORY)

# The Narrows & The Falling Baby

JOHN JODZIO

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# The Narrows | The Sun magazine

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John Jodzio

My sister Nell and I were standing on the banks of the Duvallis River, waiting for a man to float down it. Our aunt Leona had called a few minutes earlier and told us he would be there soon, that he'd jumped off the Bluffton Bridge, a suicide attempt gone bad or good, depending on if you were him or us. Leona had said the man still looked alive, that he'd popped out of the froth of the falls and his coat had caught on a piece of driftwood.

No matter what Leona said, Nell and I knew not to get too excited. Over the last few years Leona had seen many men jump off the bridge, but she still hadn't gotten any better at knowing which ones were alive and which ones were dead. She was eighty-three and had a milky cataract in her left eye that made everything she saw sort of a crapshoot.

"He's got dark hair," Leona had told us. "Like you like."

Leona lived in a senior center that overlooked the falls in Bluffton. We lived two miles south, in a place called the Narrows, where limestone bluffs pinched the Duvallis and made its water cascade and eddy. I watched as Nell waded into the river, impatient as always, spinning her man hook in her palms. I stood on shore in my life vest and hip waders, holding my own hook in a way that suggested confidence and poise. I'd always been the prettier sister; everyone said so.

"Here he comes!" Nell shouted.

It was the beginning of October and unusually warm. I moved out beside Nell. She hooked the man under his arm, and I hooked his calf. We lugged him to shore in our practiced way, stepping in tandem, legs spread wide to fight the current.

Leona was right: the man was still breathing. His face, though, was in horrible shape. His nose was badly broken, and one of his ears was just hanging there, flopping around.

"This counts as your turn," Nell snapped after we rolled him onto the shore. "Don't say it doesn't."

Nell had gotten the last floater, a man with almond-colored eyes. For about five minutes it had looked like he might live, but then he'd started to cough up ropy blood and the sparkle in his eyes had faded. He wouldn't come back to life no matter how hard Nell slapped his cheeks.

"Is this heaven?" the new man wheezed.

The sun was coming through the cottonwoods, a fall light dappling the ground. Soon the warm weather would end and suicide season would be over. Soon the river would freeze and the men would stop coming. Nell and I would sit across the kitchen table from each other playing cribbage, withdrawn and loveless.

“Nope,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Not even close,” Nell told him.

The man nodded solemnly at us and shut his eyes. His breath became creaky, then stopped altogether.

“Shit,” Nell said. “I’m way too tired to call the coroner.”

“Same,” I said.

“Plan B?” Nell asked.

“Yep,” I told her.

We were middle-aged, our fingers stiff with arthritis, our faces puffed from menopause. Lately our hips and knees balked under the weight of the dead. We usually called the coroner, but tonight we didn’t want to deal with the questions and the police tape, so Nell and I draped the man’s body over a log and pushed him back into the river. We watched him bump his way through the rapids and head south. Someone in Masonville could deal with the body.

I normally slept late, especially on weekends, but the next morning Nell nudged me before the sun was up.

“River’s almost clogged,” she said. “Better get busy.”

“Again?” I said.

The Narrows was beautiful but treacherous. Near our house the river thinned to thirty feet, and granite slabs jutted out of the water at odd angles. These outcroppings constantly snagged tree limbs and truck tires. Whenever something big got caught, the debris snowballed quick, sticks and leaves and river garbage snarling around it. Soon a dam would form, and the water would buckle and churn as it rose. It was amazing how fast the Duvallis could breach its banks and slither across the field to lick at the steps of our back porch.

Nell had cleared a clog by herself two weeks ago when I wasn’t home, so it was my turn now. I slid on my waders and grabbed the chain saw from the toolshed. This was the price we paid for the occasional man in our beds, the price of being near the rushing water and getting to see eagles snatch steelhead out of the river while we ate our oatmeal. Enjoying this beauty meant beating this beauty back — unclogging, trimming, uprooting. It was

exhausting work and lately I dreamt of moving to a place with no upkeep and no obligations: a condo with an ocean view and a handsome doorman. Unfortunately Nell wanted none of that.

“We’re too young to live like old people,” she said.

“But we’re too old to pretend we’re anything else,” I told her.

For the next hour I yanked and clawed at the tangle of wet wood and leaves. Nell sat on the shore in her brunch dress, doing a crossword puzzle. We had plans to go to Leona’s later that morning.

“How much longer?” she yelled to me.

I pulled away a snarled limb and found the culprit: an old refrigerator door wedged between two rocks. An upstreamer had probably chucked it into the river to save a trip to the dump or to see if it would float. I wedged my man hook under the door, pried it loose, lugged it to shore, and tossed it onto the pile of appliance and car parts that had come before it. I wiped some algae from my cheek and shook some reeds from my hair.

“I’ll be ready in half an hour,” I told Nell.

Most Sundays we drove into town and had brunch in the dry heat of Leona’s apartment, drinking all her vodka and eating all the caramels from her candy dish.

“So many men this year,” she said as she set out a tray of finger sandwiches. “Way more than the last few.”

“Probably our biggest year out of the last three or four,” Nell said.

“Let’s hope it continues,” Leona said, raising her lowball in a toast.

In the beginning Leona thought the river was a horrible way to meet men. She thought Nell and I should meet them through normal channels, at church or a coffee shop, and not immediately after they’d tried to end their lives. Over the years, though, she’d accepted that my sister and I weren’t attracted to churchgoing, coffee-shop sorts, that we liked men who’d reached the ends of their ropes, guys who’d been gut-punched by life enough times to know they would be gut-punched several more.

Leona was a widow. She’d lost Uncle Harmon to a stroke, and afterward she’d turned into an insomniac. Instead of watching television or reading while she was up at night, she watched the bridge and studied the drunks who spilled out of the riverfront bars to stumble home or square off into fights.

A pair of Leona's bridge-watching binoculars sat on her coffee table, and I put them up to my eyes. The bridge was a wonderful structure, built in the 1930s by the WPA. A city-council member had recently proposed installing a fence to make it harder for jumpers, but the mayor had quashed that idea. He didn't think it was a prudent use of taxpayers' money.

While we ate, we heard yelling below.

"Christ," Nell said, pointing out the window. "Look."

In the street, men filed past holding signs and chanting. There'd been small protests all summer: loggers pissed about unsafe working conditions, miners demanding a living wage. This was the largest protest we'd seen so far — a couple of hundred bearded men holding placards and shouting. We watched them march past the grocery store and the post office and then sit down on the cobblestone street in front of the courthouse, hemming in our car. It would take at least an hour for the cops to restore order.

"I'll mix us another drink," I said.

That drink turned into another, and another, and by the time the cops had cleared the streets, we were drunk and it was around dinnertime, so we ate that meal with Leona, too.

Two days later Leona called again. October had traditionally been high season for jumpers. The fishery and the logging camp laid off their summer workers, and the mornings turned windy and crisp. It was hard not to think of failure and the amount of energy it took to fight it. It was hard not to think about how quickly winter would arrive and how low and dark the sky would be for the next six months.

"Another one," Leona said. "Looks like he made it past the rapids with his body intact."

No matter how many times our hopes were dashed, Nell and I remained optimistic. Living in the Narrows did that to a person. The dead floated by too often for you not to stay grounded. You couldn't forget how easy it was to give in to the troubles and travails of life.

I hung up the phone and yelled to Nell. We pulled our man hooks from the umbrella stand on the front porch and ran to the river. Soon we saw the man, straddling a felled log. As he got closer, he waved and shouted, "Ahoy!"

This man was good-looking and very much alive. He was younger than us, with curly hair and a neatly trimmed beard that didn't look like he'd grown it to cover a weak chin.

"I tried to kill myself," he yelled out, "but I didn't die! Everything looks so bright and beautiful right now, you know?"

We knew, we knew. We'd dried these men off, fed them. We'd mended their bodies, if they were still mendable. We'd fished so many different kinds of men out of the Duvallis over the years, but this man in front of us was our favorite kind: relatively unhurt, a good amount of wisdom in his face, a grateful surge of adrenaline coursing through his blood. These men were always generous in bed, chatty, happy not to have lost their ability to touch. They were tender and patient with our aging bodies, ignoring our liver spots and the veins that had burst from their original housing. These men were unconcerned about the winter weight we packed on each year, but never lost.

As the man waded to shore, Nell undid a button on her blouse.

"My turn," she said.

Nell was on a hot streak. It happened sometimes: a couple of men in a row ended up in her bed and none in mine. But she'd gotten the last four men who'd lived, and it had been months since I'd had one. Lately it was hard not to wonder how much time I had left. I wondered if my bad luck was just that — luck — or if it was a new and shittier normal.

The man's name was Alex. Nell found a pair of our dead father's khakis and a flannel shirt for him to change into. Our father had been a small man, and Alex was a big man, with thick legs and large forearms. When he came out of the bathroom, he tugged at the pants. This was exactly how Nell wanted him: stuck in uncomfortable clothes he would soon want to shed.

"Surviving the falls is an incredible feat," she said, handing him a glass of wine. "You're a miracle."

"Thank you for the hospitality," he said, toasting us. "I won't let my second chance go to waste."

Nell and I both preferred to flirt without the other around. Usually, if it was her turn, I gave her the privacy to say all the stupid and obvious things men need to hear to bolster their egos. Tonight, though, I hunkered down at the kitchen table.

"Why'd you jump?" I asked Alex.

We usually didn't ask this. We usually kept the conversation upbeat, unfettered by whatever darkness clouded the men's past. We wanted the men to think that since they'd kissed death and lived, their futures would be uncomplicated and full of fun, that everyone they encountered from now on would lavish them with attention, food, and love. Sometimes these men were witty and polite for a couple of hours, but then the adrenaline wore off and they returned to being loud and boorish. Some were sweet and kind for a bit, but then they turned dour and silent and rifled through our medicine cabinets looking for painkillers. Sometimes,

immediately after sex, these men realized you couldn't fuck away despair and they curled up in a ball and sobbed. One man I'd slept with asked me to drive him back to the bridge so he could jump again.

In answer to my question, Alex said, "My wife died, and things kind of spiraled out of control."

I was about to ask his wife's name, ask what she'd looked like, make him remember her. It was selfish of me, a ploy to make his head and heart hurt again, to use his grief to end Nell's streak. Unfortunately Nell realized what I was doing and grabbed Alex's hand.

"I want to show you something upstairs," she said.

It was rare, but occasionally the men weren't interested in sex. Some told us they weren't attracted to us, or that, although they absolutely appreciated our generosity, they were too distraught to touch another person. I hoped Alex would reject Nell, but he did not. I soon heard giggling, and then Nell's bed began to creak and she let out a throaty moan, and then a louder and higher-pitched squeal. I went into the bathroom and stuffed wet toilet paper in my ears and wrapped a wool scarf around my head, neither of which drowned out their happiness.

When I went to bed, Nell's door was cracked. I peeked in and saw Alex's thigh stretched over her torso. Honestly I was surprised he was still here. Nell was notorious for shooing men out as soon as she was finished with them. I never did that. My goodbyes were leisurely and often included an omelet.

"Come in here," Nell whispered.

I stood over Alex and watched his hairy chest rise and fall, breath escaping his full and kissable lips.

"I told him he could stay until noon," she said. "You've done that before."

I had done that before, but that didn't make her doing it any easier for me now. I was jealous that Nell would have more time with Alex, even though I understood her wanting him to linger. When the river doesn't kill a man who wants to die and that man ends up in your bed, you take full advantage. You savor his body. You lick things slower and hold things a little longer or tighter, especially when you aren't sure if you're ever going to lick or hold anything like that again.

"It's been so long for me," I said.

"Your bad luck isn't my problem," Nell replied.

I reached out and ran my hand over Alex's chest hair. I couldn't help it. I wanted to drag him to my room, but Nell slapped my hand away.

“Control yourself,” she snapped, and I went back to my lonely, manless room and lay there in the dark, listening to the sad coyotes howl from the hills above our house.

The next day, instead of leaving at noon, Alex went back upstairs with Nell, and they had sex again. I went for a walk. I climbed the bluffs near the Narrows and watched smoke from the paper mill in Masonville curl into the clouds. Masonville was covered in a smoky haze much of the time, and whenever the wind turned north, it left everything we hung on our clothesline smelling burnt.

As I walked back, Nell’s car sped past on the road. Alex was driving, and Nell was in the passenger seat. At first I thought they were going to the bus station or back to Bluffton, but when I got to the house, I saw a note on the kitchen table.

“Back in a few days,” it said. “XOXO, Nell.”

I spent the next couple of days doing Sudoku puzzles, eating leftover chili, and sabotaging Nell’s knitting projects. I’ll admit it was actually kind of nice to be in the house alone. Nell and I hadn’t had any time apart in a long while.

On the third day Leona called me, out of breath.

“There was another protest,” she said. “Biggest one yet. A bunch of the miners and loggers bound themselves together and jumped off the bridge.”

I looked outside. From my bedroom window I could see the tea-colored water of the Duvallis.

“There’s gotta be a dozen of them,” Leona said. “Looked like three or four were still alive.”

There’d been talk of freezing temperatures coming next week, maybe snow. Quite possibly these would be the last men of the year. I grabbed my man hook and raced down to the river, hoping Leona was right and there would be multiple survivors. Maybe I’d get to line up two or three on shore and choose the one I preferred.

I saw this knot of men from a long way off, as they floated past that oak felled by lightning the previous summer. From where I stood it looked like a couple of them had their eyes open and were waving their limbs.

As they got closer, though, I could tell something was wrong. Some of their arms and legs stuck out at strange angles. Also their skin looked waxy. When they were about twenty-five feet away, I realized these men weren’t actually men; they were mannequins, lifeless and dumb, thrown off the bridge in effigy.

“Fuck!” I yelled, hearing the word echo against the granite and return to where I stood. I slammed my man hook into the mannequins as they passed, breaking a foot off of one.



Of course, this wasn't the end of my disappointment. As you might imagine, this mass of fake men was not easily swallowed by the Narrows. It spit them backward once, twice. The third time, they got wedged between two slabs of granite and stuck fast. I could almost see the water buckle toward me, rise. I wanted to walk away, but I knew that if I left the mannequins there, the river would arrive at our house in short order.

The swirling current pitched me forward as I made my way toward the clog. I raised my man hook and brought it down on these fake men over and over, snapping off their legs, splitting their arms at their elbows, cleaving their heads open. Undamming the river was a two-person job, but, like most two-person jobs, it could become a one-person job if the one person was filled with enough rage.

When I got back inside, I was dripping wet, my clothes and hair full of mannequin shards. I stripped and lay down in bed.

I woke to find Nell standing over me, worried.

"Why are you sleeping naked?" she asked. "And why do you have all that crap in your hair? Are you OK?"

I didn't have a chance to answer before our phone rang. It was Leona. There was another jumper making his way toward us, possibly alive.

"I can go alone if you aren't up to it," Nell said.

Though my bones ached and my head was foggy with sleep, I pulled on my clothes. I couldn't fucking help myself. I was someone who knew the odds but still hoped that, if I stuck around long enough, the sheer act of trudging onward would bring reward. I was someone who knew it was crazy to think a river would bring me what I wanted, but I got up and grabbed my man hook anyway. Because I was here. Because someday I would not be. Because it was my turn.

# The Falling Baby by John Jodzio

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 [okaydonkeymag.com/2020/09/18/the-falling-baby-by-john-jodzio/](https://okaydonkeymag.com/2020/09/18/the-falling-baby-by-john-jodzio/)

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I caught a falling baby once. He hadn't fallen out of a high-rise apartment window or anything fancy like that. It happened at a birthday party where some people knew me from the horse track and some people knew me from selling them horse drugs. There was a trampoline. Someone set a baby down on the trampoline. Soon the baby flew through the air.

I caught the baby like a football before he landed on a concrete patio. No one gasped and only one person clapped. This was the 1990s and sometimes babies flew off trampolines and sometimes their parents took horse drugs that made them want to dig hundreds of holes in their yard or not move from their couch for a week.

The baby had dark hair and brown eyes. He wore a onesie with a green turtle on it. He was not crying, but he was certainly breathing heavily. Hey little one, I said, cradling him in my arms, maybe this will only be a tiny blip in an otherwise unscarred life? Hey little buddy, I said, maybe this will only make you terrified of trampolines and not scared of the entire goddamn world?

I walked around the party, asked everyone if this was their baby. Fifteen minutes went by and no one said he's mine. Fifteen minutes went by and I couldn't help but imagine a future where the two of us moved into a house near a river with a backyard that would occasionally flood, a place where I would not sell horse drugs or regular drugs or at least would only sell them to supplement his college fund.

"Why is my drug dealer holding my baby?" a woman yelled out.

This woman had feathered blonde hair and light blue eyes. I did not remember selling her drugs because I sold a lot of people drugs and usually tried to not to look anyone in the eye unless they made me.

"How do I know he's yours?" I asked.

"How do you know he's not?" she said.

I turned the baby toward the mother. I wanted to see if there was any sort of joy or connection between the two of them when they looked at each other. Instead of recognition or happiness, the baby yawned.

"I saved his life," I said.

"I gave him life," she told me.

She held her arms out and stepped toward me. Instead of handing the baby to her, I tucked him under my arm and sprinted toward my car.

I did not get far. Two men tackled me and the mother pulled the baby from my arms. Some people at the party wanted to call the cops, but most of the people there did not want to lose their connection for their horse drugs. In the end, I was kicked in the ribs a couple of times and told to leave.

I sat inside my idling car as the party went on. The mother was holding the baby now, watchful, bouncing him up and down on her knee. He seemed fine? Soon the two of them went inside and I watched people jump up and down on the trampoline for a couple of minutes and then I drove back to my apartment that was not by the river and would never flood.