

# ***THE DESCENT OF FAN***



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## Falling Down

Julia Daly

The day of Ann Green's funeral was traumatic for a number of reasons. Attending the funeral in its own right was difficult enough for anyone, but for Doug it also carried extra loading from his own wife's funeral in 2001, another Anne. We set off from Scotland bright and early allowing extra time on top of the sat-nav's estimate. Unfortunately, after initially speeding along well, we hit the M6 car park and that was the end of our plan to make it to the funeral. It took Doug a little while to accept this but fortunately he did so before we transformed into a fiery ball of twisted metal and splintered glass blocking the carriageway. Luckily Fran was able to text us the postcode of the reception, and we headed there direct.

I had offered to drive originally, but Doug felt he would be better off with something to do. However, by the time we got back to Sheffield, the stress of the day's events had transformed my lover into a zombie (without the insatiable need for brains, fortunately). I led him upstairs, gave him a massage, tucked him into bed snug and warm, and went in search of Indian takeaway for tea.

On my return I called up the stairs, suggesting that we could have tea in bed if Doug was too tired to come down, but he insisted that he was fine and would be down directly. I had not anticipated just *how* directly.

Have you witnessed Laurel and Hardy's "The Music Box"? Or perhaps Inspector Clouseau in the Pink Panther cartoons falling repeatedly down flights of stairs? The noise is extended, tremendous and much hilarity ensues.

I was stunned into immobility as the sound commenced. Though it doubtless lasted but seconds, it seemed eternal, as if each thump of a limb against a step shattered into a thousand echoing realities in which a thousand more Dougs fell down a thousand more flights of stairs, multiplying to infinity... and beyond. Abruptly, the sound ceased as his body explosively jack-knifed into my field of vision, legs into the front room, upper body into the kitchen. He lay very still. Oh God! Was he conscious? Was he still breathing?

I teleported to the doorway and then hovered, helplessly wringing my hands and squeaking "Areyoualright? Areyoualright?" in tones decipherable only by bats. There was a breathless pause, and then Doug said:

"Maybe" (he paused, doubtless for effect) "we should find somewhere other than the stairs to store your books."

He went on to wave the (uncrumpled) hand still clutching his (undamaged) mobile phone pointing out his vast experience of falling down stairs which had enabled him to accept it, relax and ensure he had the wherewithal to phone for an ambulance if necessary. After some thought and careful testing he managed to get to his feet and declare himself bruised but not broken.

We retired to the sofa with our curry. Later he asked if, when I was giving him a massage, I had applied oil to the soles of his feet. I was stricken with guilt and apologised for trying to kill him. He frowned and said that he hoped if I had really been trying, I would have been a bit more effective.

## Why We Have A Cat

Fran Dowd

Back in The Day, there was a house on Valley Road in Sheffield that was always owned by fans. It was little terraced 2-up 2-down, with a bathroom sticking out the back and a nice bit of garden. In the time I speak of, Gentle Reader, it was owned by David Cooper, who had smartened it up considerably since it was owned by Steve Lawson. But there were certain things that couldn't be changed - the stairs were steep, running up between the front and back rooms, with no landing at the top and far too much landing ending in a brick wall at the bottom.

The question to ask, therefore, is not how, or why, but whom. And what happened afterwards.

Linda-Claire Toal arrived in Sheffield one night, bedraggled and forlorn, with the help of a roadside rescue truck. She was going to stay in Valley Road for a day or so, before she and David went off on a holiday. After a long lie in to recover from her arduous trek from Scotland, she went downstairs, planning to go out later for lunch with a friend. The cat was on the top step, and she had a chocolate bar in one hand. After shattering one leg against the brick wall at the bottom of the stairs, she was still able to phone for an ambulance. In shock, she also managed to crawl back upstairs to get the key David had left for her, and back downstairs to let the ambulance crew in.

So when David came home later, he thought she had left some rather large dirty footprints on the carpet, before going out for the day. The friend gave up waiting and went home (no mobile phones Back in The Day, mind). L-C could remember the name of the charity I worked for, but directory enquires claimed never to have heard of us, and she didn't know where anyone else was.

Finally, in the evening, word spread, and everyone poured into the hospital. She'd be there for a while, they said, operations and pins and rehab and stuff. And they didn't want her to leave Sheffield when she came out, especially if it meant moving back to somewhere in Scotland with Stairs. She needed life on the flat, a bathroom on the same floor as her bedroom, and someone to keep an eye on things, probably for about six weeks as autumn faded slowly into Christmas.

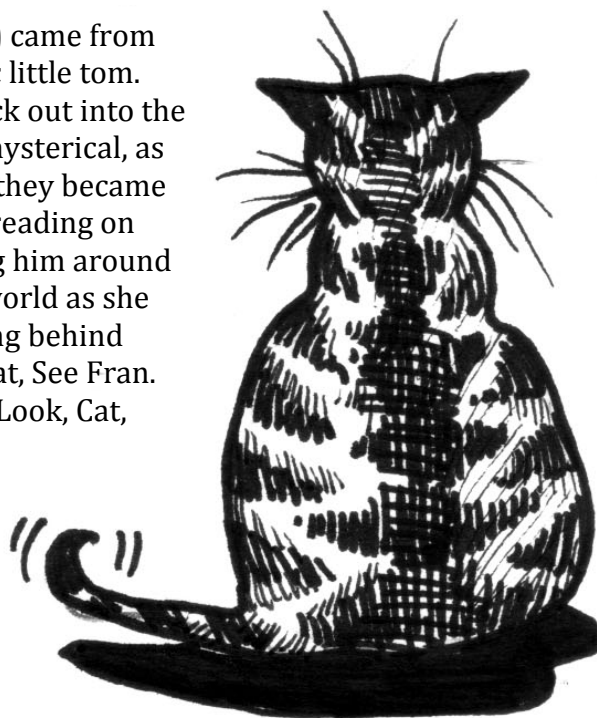
We'd been in our house about a year, by then. It's rather large. Back in The Day, there was still a full bathroom downstairs, next to the kitchen. And the dining room wasn't furnished, it would be a matter of moments to turn it into a bedsit. John's nephew was living in the attic, doing his first year at uni, so even though we were out in the day at work there would be someone around.

I hadn't realised that L-C hadn't ever lived in shared accommodation before, although I knew that Nephew hadn't lived away from home - there were rows over the telly, the temperature, access to the kitchen, noise, and occasional allegations of sexual harrassment. I discovered that balancing meals for a permanently starving youth, a middle-aged woman on a fat-free diet, a diabetic and a bored invalid was, um, interesting. We had the spaniels, and they kept everyone company and cuddled a lot. They weren't really any good, though, at controlling the mice. The house is (literally) on the edge of a large park. We quite enjoy the wildlife - bats, owls, voles, shrews, even the rats are sleek and pretty. The mice had decided that park life was not for them, they would quite like a warm comfy des res with plenty of dried dog food available, thanks vair much, and lovely old crumbly plaster to scurry in. Plus the park was getting a bit over-populated, what with the local conservation volunteers trapping their house mice alive and releasing them Into The Wild. We didn't really notice them, but they drove L-C nuts. They ran around in the dining room walls all night, and she was convinced

they were going to erupt in their thousands and pour over her bed, nibbling as they went. Or she would get out of bed and step on a pulsating horde of evil.

So we went and got a cat. EnDy (Not the Dog) came from the local pet-store, black and white, a generic little tom. The mice took one sniff and bugged off, back out into the park or possibly next door. L-C was initially hysterical, as it was A Cat That Had Done This To Her. But they became close companions. In fact, in order to avoid treading on him or tripping up again, she took to carrying him around tucked up against her chest. Explaining the world as she went. It's a bit disconcerting to hear muttering behind you, and turn round as someone says "See, Cat, See Fran. See Fran Make the Corned Beef Sandwiches. Look, Cat, Look."

All are Long Gone. We are now in the Elder Days of EnDy's replacement, Flynn the Mighty Hunter. He has not tripped anyone up on the stairs, that we know about. The ghost of one of the spaniels got John, once, but that's a different story for another time.



## **Well, I'll Go To The Foot Of Our Stairs**

Sue Mason

I hadn't taken stairs much into consideration until I started house hunting. House hunting was a new experience to me; I'd lived in the same house, a rather shabby terrace, which my parents rented before me, all my life. I wasn't sure what sort of property I was looking for, but it had to be two things, a. big enough for all my crap and b. cheap. Having a very limited budget limited my choices, being an artist, starving in the garret is most overrated, trust me on this. I de-crapped a lot of stuff, mostly Mum's stuff, some sold by auction, some to the junk shop, some on EBay but most to the tip. My mother was a packrat in a previous existence. Clutter is a part of every fans life, we do clutter, books, hobbies but Mum takes it to the extremes. She was a dressmaker and, I kid you not, there were off cuts from everything she'd made since the 1960's, just in case the skirt, dress, whatever, needed a patch or a repair. Not that she'd ever patched or repaired anything; she'd make something new, obviously, being a dressmaker. And then there were bags of unsown fabric, all the sewing kit, the contents of several elderly female relative's houses and 40 years of just stuff. The charity shops and tip all knew me by name. Mum, of course, has moved to Derbyshire and is now filling Bill the Boyfriend's house with crap. Poor man.

House hunting. I started looking close to where I worked, which meant Wythenshawe on my budget. One of the largest housing estates in Europe. I'd worked there, on and off for years, doing craft classes with the elderly of Wythenshawe and youth work with the kids. It has a

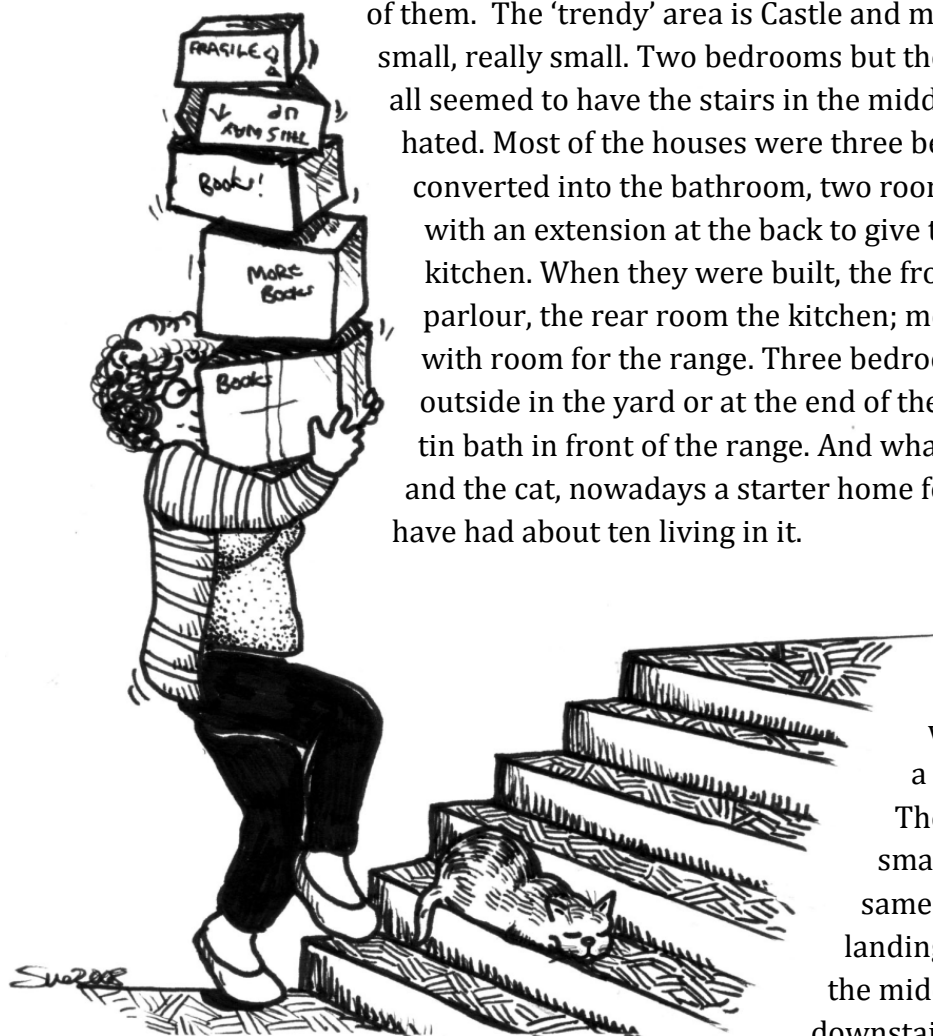
bad reputation, but most of the denizens are fine, it's just that small percentage who aren't. I decided against Wythenshawe when I drove past the road sign with the bullet holes in it.

I cast the net further afield.

Using work as a base point, Stockport was six miles away, Northwich thirteen. Through the vagaries of the South Manchester road network, it took as long to get to Stockport as Northwich so I chose living in the Cheshire countryside over the town.

In Wythenshawe, I had been looking at post war three bedroom semi-detached. Bit of garden front and rear. But the internal layout wasn't quite right for me; too many small rooms. And gardening? I have the black thumb; any plant in my garden is on death row. So in Northwich I was looking at terraces.

I like terrace housing. For one woman (and her cat) they are ideal, small enough to keep clean and heat easily, big enough to give me a spare room as an art studio, so no living room covered in art crap anymore. Northwich, working class salt mining and industry town is full of them. The 'trendy' area is Castle and most of the terraces there were small, really small. Two bedrooms but the second one was a single and all seemed to have the stairs in the middle of the lounge. Something I hated. Most of the houses were three bedrooms upstairs, one usually converted into the bathroom, two rooms downstairs, sometimes with an extension at the back to give two reception rooms and kitchen. When they were built, the front room would have been the parlour, the rear room the kitchen; most retain the chimney breast with room for the range. Three bedrooms; the loo would have been outside in the yard or at the end of the street, no bathroom, just a tin bath in front of the range. And what is a nice little house for me and the cat, nowadays a starter home for singles or a couple, would have had about ten living in it.



I hadn't realised the stairs were an issue until I saw them. The Altrincham house we rented for forty years had a large hall, the stairs off that. The Northwich houses were smaller, the rooms about the same size but without the hall and landing. And the stairs ran through the middle, between the two downstairs rooms. Some were closed in; rather claustrophobic. Some houses

had the two reception rooms knocked through into one, with the stairs floating in the middle which I couldn't stand, I wouldn't feel safe going up them without a banister, let alone coming back down, graceful creature that I am, I could see me going arse over tip down them. Some had a tiny square landing with the three upstairs rooms coming off three sides

and the stairs on the fourth. This felt most precarious, I could see me stumbling out of the bedroom in the night and taking a dive down the stairs. I knew logically that I'd soon get used to the layout and that wouldn't happen, but still, it all felt a bit dangerous.

One of the houses I saw, and I saw many, many houses, was on a lovely quiet street, a cul de sac opposite a park. Nice area, nice house but the décor knocked it out of the running. I know you should never discount a property simply due to decoration, but Artex is the exception to that rule. And this house had Artex everywhere. The through lounge walls were about three inches deep in the stuff, with a mock Spanish arch and the odd terracotta brick sticking out of them. It would have been like living in a Mediterranean restaurant and the stuff is hell to get off walls, gathers dust and it's sharp as anyone who's ever fallen against an Artexed wall will attest.

On the other hand, I fell for Boundary Street as soon as I walked through the door. At sometime, the Seventies, I would assume, someone had, sadly, removed the old sash windows, replacing them with double glazed and changing the orientation, from portrait to landscape. They had built an extension for the kitchen, knocked through the two reception rooms, taken the plaster off the big old rear room chimney breast to reveal the brick beneath and they had moved the stairs.

As you walked through the front door, there was a tiny hall, barely six foot square and the stairs directly in front of you. They'd put in under stair and over stair storage and generally made a pretty good job of it.

I liked the little hall. I still had Spookie at that time, he was twenty, mostly deaf, short sighted, somewhat incontinent and I needed somewhere for a litter tray which wasn't in the kitchen. And a hall, no matter how little, did the trick.

I liked the house in general, the front was east facing and caught the morning sun, the rear west facing for the afternoon and being knocked through, you got good light all day. I loved the exposed brick of the old kitchen fireplace, though it was quite clear that it was never designed to see the light of day; the quality of the bricks, chipped, cracked and uneven were never designed to be seen. No garden, just a back yard where a few hardy survivors try to thwart my attempts to dispatch them. I liked the storage, there was even a dinky walk in wardrobe in the bedroom; never have enough wardrobes, I have three. And three chests of drawers. And two blanket chests. And the over stairs storage. And the loft. I may have too many clothes.

But it's small and perfectly formed and the stairs are in the right place.

## **Trip Report**

Ang Rosin

Hello. My name is Angela and I fall down stairs. A lot.

Okay, I exaggerate. I've fallen down stairs perhaps four times in my adult life (not counting stumbles, slides or mis-stepping slightly) so I guess about once every four years. That's less times than I've exercised my democratic rights but more times than I've had major dental work: to my mind quite significant. For people who haven't fallen down stairs there are three things you need to know:

1. It's very difficult to do so and retain some dignity.
2. It hurts. Quite a lot.
3. Your mind enters "stair space".

Let's deal with these in reverse order:

### **Stair Space**

Is a state where time has slowed sufficiently for you to experience the fall in minute detail. It begins a couple of seconds before you actually fall and your thoughts run like this:

"Oh dear, I am about to fall over"

"I am falling over"

"Ow" "Ow" "Ow"

"I've fell"

"Ow".

There may be more or less ow's, and more or less detail, depending on the length of the fall. I've fallen on the street, I've fallen off a wall, I've fallen on to a wall (don't ask) but I don't remember those incidents in as much clarity or detail as when I've fallen down the stairs.

### **Pain**

Let's face it, I'm not going to get more than one toe into a size zero, so with the help of gravity I land \*heavily\*. I'm rather surprised that I haven't done myself more damage, knowing a lot of people who have merely misplaced a foot on the pavement and had six months of surgical work and rehabilitation. The only time I thought I'd actually broken something was when I tripped in work. The fall went something like this:

"Ooooo. I'm going to miss my footing"

"I've missed my footing and I'm going to fall down the stairs"

"I'm going to fall on my face, maybe I should twist a..."

"Ow. I appear to have landed with all my force on my right shoulder"

"Ow. This hurts. I think I should lie here and go 'ow' until someone appears".

Of course, someone did eventually appear and I was transported to The Royal with a friend where I was able to watch people with broken fingers try and find other people to roll a cigarette with them, and pensioners unable to work out the complicated exit system bang onto doors like beige houseflies. Luckily I was only bruised so was given some kick-ass painkillers and thrown back out to float around work.

## **Losing Face**

Once one has accepted that you are the sort of person who falls down stairs and that falling down stairs hurts, the final stage is to accept that it's going to be embarrassing. You can grin and bear it, as they say, or you can try and make the best of the situation and impress witnesses with your quiet composure and dignity. Failing that, you can amaze them with your gymnastic ability. This I managed to do when a student.

My first year at university I lived in a basement at a Hall of Residence. No en suite bathrooms and wireless access for us. We had meals prepared for us we then ate in a dining hall, shared bathrooms and I even shared a bedroom. The hall had two basements; the one on the other side had the TV room and the laundry, while we had a fire escape and a bathroom that should have been condemned. We also had a set of stairs covered in linoleum with fierce metal treads.

This particular day we'd been at lectures and because our hall was on campus a couple of our friends had come back to our room for coffee. Somehow, I don't remember how, a water fight developed but because the bathroom downstairs was a death trap one of the guys had gone upstairs to dry him off. I lay in wait with a cup of water outside ready to give him another soaking...

... He was prepared for that and pushed out of the door brandishing a towel, I stepped back right at the top of the stairs. To my amazement I then executed two perfect backward somersaults before landing on my bottom at the foot of the stairs. My friend was looking at me in stunned surprise from the door of our room, the guy with the towel in complete shock at the top. Both looked amazed when I stood up and started laughing hysterically, particularly as they'd notice, but I hadn't, that a broken fragment of the cup was embedded in my palm. To this day I swear it was only my ample rear padding that saved me from serious injury.

It only took a couple of weeks for the bruising to go down.



## **It's Okay, I Know What I'm Doing...**

Douglas Spencer

I know what I'm doing; I've fallen down stairs before. Often enough, in fact, to have become rather an expert in proper technique: I can achieve the maximum of noise and comic effect, coupled with the minimum of lasting damage. The reason why you're reading this little collection is because in mid-August I fell down the stairs once more, and in response to my bold claims of competence a number of people volunteered stories of their own.

The human body is, at one and the same time, astonishingly robust and frighteningly fragile. It can sustain considerable damage and yet repair itself as good as, and in some specific cases stronger than, new; in other circumstances the tiniest impact can be disabling or even fatal. The great trick, when it comes to falling down the stairs, is to ensure that all your injuries are exclusively of the former type.

Ang, above, describes Stair Space: "*a state where time has slowed sufficiently for you to experience the fall in minute detail*". The key is to take advantage of this state, not only to experience the fall, but to plan your orientation, trajectory, and inevitable sudden deceleration.

### **Head Last**

The first task is to ensure that your descent is anything but head-first. Head injuries are, without exception, a bad idea. Landing on your head means you'll sustain damage from the initial impact, but there's every chance that your swiftly-following body will twist or crush your neck and give you spinal injuries too – and they're just as much a bad idea. Your whole attention, in the handful of milliseconds before you lose your final piece of traction on floor or walls at the start of the fall, is to orient your body so that your head will be the last thing to arrive at the bottom of the stairs.

### **Face Up**

Leaving aside the head (see above), spine and kidneys (see below), all the really fragile structures are on the front of the body. Abdominal wounds are bad. Broken ribs, while painful, aren't particularly hazardous... unless one of them punctures a lung, or you break so many that the mechanics of breathing fails. There's lots more scope for fatal injury at the front of the neck than at the back, and a world of pain waiting for you if you break one of the many bony structures in your face, and that's always supposing that you don't drive the bridge of your nose upwards into your brain, or pop one of your eyes, or get something wedged somewhere where it's going to obstruct your breathing. So if at all possible, make sure that you're face upwards when you embark on your little concession to the force of gravity. Apart from anything else, it means you'll be better placed to scout out your landing zone and plan accordingly.

### **Arse Down**

The most padded part of your body, the part where bones are furthest from the surface and where impact is least likely to damage some vital structure, is the part where you should aim to direct your principal impact. It's your ideal choice of crumple zone, enabling the body to decelerate smoothly while its kinetic energy is safely dissipated around the passenger compartment. If you position it correctly it'll ensure that your lower back isn't subjected to

front-line combat, thereby protecting the only fragile rearward-facing structures from any more than minimum damage. It's important, therefore, to ensure that when you finally land, you land on your arse.

### **Limbs In**

The final injury zones we haven't covered are the arms and legs. It's worth bearing in mind that tears to tendons and muscles take a long time to heal, and leave the victim with a permanent weakness, whereas simple broken bones heal relatively swiftly and are often stronger, once healed, at the site of the former break than beforehand. However, fractures become complicated very easily – you don't, for example, want your fractured femur to sever your femoral artery, because that's routinely fatal – and so even those beneficial fractures are worth avoiding. Accordingly, try to keep your arms and legs under control so they don't end up twisting underneath you and wrenching a joint, or hitting random bits of house and leaving you with an untidy break that damages some of the surrounding structures. And don't attempt to slow yourself down using your arms and legs: once you've got some speed up they're not equal to the task and you're better just keeping them out of the way and enjoying the ride.

### **Audit**

Once you've come to a complete stop, probably at the foot of the stairs, take a moment or two to audit your injuries and surroundings before you attempt to move. Some injuries which are quite manageable upon first acquisition become much more severe if you move in an unfortunate way. In particular it's well worth going out of your way to stay still if you've damaged your head or spine, because you really don't want to aggravate any damage to your central nervous system. Try not to move any limbs with broken bones, because you really don't want those broken ends taking out any major blood vessels or nerve trunks. And, crucially, make sure that you won't disturb any household debris that might be arranged around you, having followed you down the stairs, because the last thing you need having negotiated the fall successfully is to suddenly find yourself buried under a pile of books, dislodged furniture, or injured housemates.

### **Dissemble**

Time, they say, is a great healer. However, since by the time you complete your audit you'll already have been approached by various able-bodied people from other parts of the building, your access to time will be severely curtailed. It's vital, therefore, to convince any observers that you're completely at ease with having fallen down the stairs lest they form the (entirely unwarranted) opinion that you're just a clumsy clot who shouldn't be let out on his own. I can't help you here, since any technique you employ will have to be carefully crafted to suit the audience and their pre-existing opinion of you. I often find it helpful to muse aloud about likely reasons for the fall, carefully avoiding any implication that I might be to blame: You can read, in Julia's account (above), about exactly how effective my latest attempt turned out.

All these techniques, assiduously employed on each of the dozen or so occasions I've fallen down the stairs, have helped keep me clear of any disabling or disfiguring injury. All my existing disabilities were either inherited, or acquired in activities where stairs were not involved. Expertise gathered during rapid descents of many different staircases, and distilled for you here, can help you fall down the stairs just as safely as I. And, expert that I am, I must offer you one final paragraph:

### **Prevention**

Ah. Oh. I never quite got the hang of that.