

The Case of the Plywood Skyscraper

(Intro music plays. FRANK, a hard-boiled detective-engineer, enters smoking a cigarette. She addresses the audience. Year 1973.)

FRANK *(narrating)*

It was a windy fall evening back in '73 as I crossed the Mass Ave bridge from MIT to Boston. I wondered what about this case stirred me to turn away from my experiments that night. Was it the cold Boston air? The desperation I heard over the phone? Boredom from staring at news about the recession? Or maybe... just maybe... it was the sound of shattering glass,

(echoing shattering glass sound)

echoing across the Charles. The newly built John Hancock Tower, owned by Hancock Insurance, was losing its glass window one-by-one. One-by-one, crashing down to the street, nearly killing any passersby too slow to move. No one knew why. They needed an engineer. They needed me, doctor of aerospace sciences, Frank H. Durgin.

MARIANNE

Thanks for coming right away, Frank. We just had to board up another window!

FRANK

I heard.

MARIANNE

We need to find out who's responsible for this!

FRANK *(narrating)*

That's Marianne Harrison. CEO of Hancock Insurance and now proud owner of one giant plywood atrocity, marring the Boston skyline.

MARIANNE

You're the only one I trust to help me with this case, Frank!

FRANK

Thanks, Marianne. Our time together in the war meant a lot to me too.

COBB

Enough sentimentality! Let's get this case wrapped up!

FRANK *(narrating)*

That's Henry Cobb, the architect that designed this behemoth. She has a lot to lose if we don't figure out who's at fault for the falling foils.

MARIANNE

This building was suppose to ensure our superiority as the best insurance company in Boston! Instead, it's costing us a fortune! Whoever's at fault for this will be hearing from our lawyers! We are Hancock Insurance, after all! It's our job to hold people accountable for these sorts of incidents!

COBB

What I don't understand is how we haven't seen any signs of damage. No fractures, no cracking, just...

(MARIANNE makes the whistling sound effect and visual with her hands of a window falling and crashing.)

FRANK

It certainly is a puzzle. But no puzzle is too big for engineer Frank H. Durgin.

COBB

I hope so! I need to move on to my next project.

(FRANK finishes her cigarette and scans for disposal.)

MARIANNE

Ugh! The trash can's full again.

(A MYSTERIOUS STAFFER, who looks extremely suspicious, enters to change the trash. To MYSTERIOUS STAFFER:)

Why didn't you get to this last night? What are we paying you for??

MYSTERIOUS STAFFER

(changing the trash can)

Sorry...

(exits when done)

MARIANNE

So, Frank, where do you want to start?

(FRANK contemplates, lighting up another cigarette.)

FRANK

If you don't mind, I'd like to take down a few measurements in my notebook while I'm here.

(She takes out her notebook.)

MARIANNE

Of course. Henry, could you please show Dr. Durgin everything she wishes to see?

COBB

Of course, President.

FRANK

I'd like to start at the last casualty. Could you bring me to the frame of the window that just fell?

COBB

Of course, doctor. Right this way.

(They walk a short distance out of the CEO office and get to another office. This one has a missing window. FRANK inspects the opening with a pair of calipers and writes down the different measurements in her notebook.)

FRANK *(narrating)*

That crystal glass had shined its last shine last night. I looked out through what was now a vacant hole and took a deep breath of that Boston air. What could this all mean? The buildings across the Charles looked like they were swaying in the distance, waving tauntingly at me with the answer only they knew. But maybe I'd had just one too many cigarettes.

(to COBB, lighting up another cigarette)

So you say there were no warning signs?

COBB

Not that we've found. We don't know which window will be next. No one's ever been in an office when one falls.

FRANK

And what time of day does it usually happen?

COBB

Either early morning or late afternoon, around the time of the janitorial shift change. And none of them like to start their shift with plywood installation duty, I can tell you that.

FRANK

Peculiar that it always happens when new staff enter and old staff leave. Do you know of any quarrels among any of the staff members?

COBB

I don't know them too well. Not all of them anyway, but... you don't think! Could it be... sabotage?

FRANK

It could be, but an engineer never draws conclusions without evidence. I'll get to the bottom of this. That will be all, Henry. Thank you for your time and have a good evening.

(COBB exits. FRANK sneaks into a shadow, and picks up a new cigarette.)

FRANK *(narrating)*

I had a lead, and now all I needed was to wait and watch the night staff for anything suspicious. After five hours of watching six staff members do their usual rounds, emptying trash and cleaning the bathrooms, the seventh caught my attention... not just because of their steely sultry eyes or their soft handsome figure.

(MYSTERIOUS STAFFER is crawling around the floor looking in nooks and crannies. They reach their arm into a vent near the window.)

It was what they were doing at the base of that window that interested me...

(MYSTERIOUS STAFFER quickly runs to the other side of the vent near the window. They go back and forth a few times, and eventually, they pull out something small and cup it in both hands. FRANK can't tell what it is. MYSTERIOUS STAFFER runs away suspiciously.)

Now, I'm one of the most hardcore engineers at MIT, but it's been a long time since I've studied radiator dancing and it's applications to window sabotage.

(FRANK goes over to the window and takes a few measurements.)

That glass wasn't long for this world. I rigged a little something to keep it safe and continued with my case.

(FRANK builds a thing to prevent the window from falling using suction cups she is carrying in her pockets.)

(FRANK heads towards the stairs to trail the MYSTERIOUS STAFFER, but stops when she finds a note. She picks up the note and reads)

FRANK *(reading)*

"Turn back now or you'll die."

(Nevertheless, FRANK persists, following the staffer. Narrating:)

The war had taught me well. I was plenty prepared.

(She pops open a briefcase full of climbing gear)

I shook off my sudden and inexplicable bout of seasickness and headed to the roof.

(On the roof, the wind is blowing quite strongly. A large fan blows on the actors to simulate this.)

FRANK

(to MYSTERIOUS STAFFER)

All right, you. The jig is up! Whoever you are, I've caught you in the act!

MYSTERIOUS STAFFER

You're making a big mistake, Dr. Durgin.

(MYSTERIOUS STAFFER pulls back a sleeved arm, threateningly, as if to prep a punch, and then whistles.)

EAGLE *(flying in)*

Kaaaaaw!

(The EAGLE lands on MYSTERIOUS STAFFER's pulled-back arm. MYSTERIOUS STAFFER feeds it a rat. The MYSTERIOUS STAFFER is actually a FALCONER.)

FRANK

What the--

(Narrating)

I couldn't believe my eyes. It was the rare Boston Eagle. The most fabulous and endangered species in Boston. So why was the culprit on the roof feeding it?

(to FALCONER:)

What's your game? What could feeding endangered eagles have to do with your scheme to cause windows to fall out of this very tall building?

FALCONER

What are you talking about, Durgin?

FRANK

I saw you sabotaging that window moments ago!

FALCONER

What? No! I haven't touched the windows! I was catching rats for my eagle friend! The rodents that hide in the radiators near the windows taste the best.

EAGLE *(agreeing)*

Kawww!

FRANK *(narrating)*

I was puzzled. If it wasn't this mysterious and quite dashing falconer, then who left me that note? And why were the windows falling out? Some very important clue was blowing right by me. But what could it be?

FALCONER

Now get down from here Durgin! You're making a big mistake coming up here without proper wind-protection equipment!

(The wind picks up)

It's so windy, you might get blown over the side.

FRANK

What?? I can't quite hear you over this very loud wind!

FALCONER

I said, you better go back inside, because the wind is very strong!

FRANK *(narrating)*

And then it hit me. With gusto. It was the wind! I needed to get to the MIT wind tunnel right away to test my new hypothesis.

(to FALCONER)

I have to go now, Mystery Falconer.

(FRANK rushes off to a rope she's rigged and rappels off the roof of the Hancock building, but a notebook falls out of her pocket before she gets on rope.)

FALCONER *(shouting)*

Hey, Dr. Durgin! You dropped your notebook!

(But FRANK cannot hear; she's halfway down the building. She's a fast rappeler.)

FRANK *(narrating)*

My mind was racing. Racing faster than I was rappelling down those sixty stories, faster than I was running through the Boston streets, and faster than I was paddling across the Charles to Cambridge in my kayak. I had to work fast... But after a few hours, I was ready.

(At the MIT wind tunnel, unveiling a model of the Hancock Tower with the Back Bay of Boston)

I was ready to see how the John Hancock Tower stood up against the wind.

(FRANK sets the model down and turns on the wind. A giant fan on stage blows at the model. Sensors whirl. Science!)

Interesting...

COBB *(offstage)*

Frank! You can't publish that?

FRANK

Cobb? What are you doing up so late, and here in my lab?

COBB

I saw you crossing the Charles from the Prudential Tower. Please, Frank, you can't do this!

FRANK

Wait a minute... the Prudential Tower? But Prudential Insurance is a direct competitor with Hancock Insurance! What were you doing at the Prudential Tower, Cobb? Unless...

COBB

That's right, Durgin! I work for Prudential Insurance! I intentionally designed the Hancock Tower to sway in the wind, causing everyone to constantly feel sick. Subtle, infectious nausea, taking Hancock Insurance down from the top, one sick day at a time! Maybe I got overzealous and attracted a bit too much attention by making it so unsound that the windows would fall out too. The world can never know it was me! I have to stop you!

(COBB draws a fencing foil.)

FRANK

You can't stop science!

(FRANK draws a fencing foil. They duel. COBB corners FRANK, with the foil to her throat, backed up against the fan.)

COBB

I didn't want it to end like this for you, Frank. But it's curtains for you!

FRANK *(narrating)*

In that moment, I knew it was most certainly curtains for me. I was between a blade and several spinning blades. I could see my life flashing before my eyes, backwards. Those moments on the battlefield with Marianne. My high school prom. The day I learned to ride a bike. My first patient acceptance. And then...

EAGLE

(bursting through the window)

Kaww!

COBB

What the heck??

(The EAGLE flies around COBB's head, distracting her.)

FALCONER

(shouting through the window)

Durgin! Put these on!

(FALCONER throws FRANK a set of wind protective equipment: earmuffs and grippy boots. FRANK puts them on.)

Now!

(The EAGLE turns the fan on higher. A loud piercing shriek fills the room and COBB screams as she gets blown offstage.)

(The EAGLE turns off the fan. FRANK takes off the wind protection.)

FRANK

Mystery Falconer! How did you know how to do that!

FALCONER

You left so quickly, you didn't notice that you left your notebook behind. I put the pieces together and knew that Cobb was on her way and would be coming with brawn, so my eagle and I used your notes to come up with a counter measure.

FRANK

You can understand my notes?

FALCONER

Of course, they were beautiful.

FRANK

You're not such an eyesore yourself.

(FRANK and FALCONER are about to kiss but...)

FALCONER

Frank! Don't forget what most important! You need to tell Marianne about Cobb and the twisting!

FRANK

Right! I won't be long.

(narrating)

Marianne was sitting at their desk when I walked in, but I knew my news would make them jump.

(Back in the Hancock CEO office.)

MARIANNE

(jumping from their seat)

Cobb? I should have known... We're not going to take this lying down! We're going to take this rascalion to court!

(MARIANNE looks through some files and eventually grabs one.)

Henry Cobb, I hope your insurance company is ready to pay out their eyeballs!

(pointing at some papers on their desk)

Oh good, their claims number is right here!

(MARIANNE dials and calls. Another phone starts ringing in the office. MARIANNE picks up the second phone and is holding both at once. They realize they just called themselves.)

Nooooooooooooo!

FRANK *(narrating)*

That's right, that dastardly designer was insured by Hancock insurance. Cobb had this planned down to the last level of bureaucracy.

MARIANNE

Curse you, Cobb! I can't even sue you for making my windows fall out!

FRANK

Actually, Marianne, while Cobb did admit malevolent intent in her design, and while it may require you to spend an additional three-million dollars to install dampers...

MARIANNE

Wait, what??

FRANK

...the windows aren't Cobb's fault.

(pulling out her notebook to show MARIANNE)

According to my data models, the twisting wasn't enough to account for that. The design just makes people feel sick.

MARIANNE

Then what's causing the windows to fall out??

FRANK

That, my good friend, remains an engineering mystery. There may still be someone out there for you to sue, and I'll be there to help find them. No case is too big for...

(She lights another cigarette)

Engineer Frank H. Durgin. Now if you'll excuse me, Marianne, before I get back to this, I have a very important matter to settle with a certain person and a certain bird.

(FRANK leaves the office and heads to the roof. A strong wind blows. In the distance, she hears:)

EAGLE *(offstage)*

Kaaaw!

(The EAGLE flies in, carrying FALCONER in their talons. They land. FRANK and the FALCONER make out on the roof. The EAGLE joins in too, if the spirit moves them.)

(Outro music plays.)