

The call of the void

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I examined what was laid out in front of my eyes: the carefully planned grid of the city, the cozy donut shops weaving between offices, a path laid out to the lakeshore.

Between my toes walked the ant-sized pedestrians, on their way to work, oblivious to my observance. I stood in a completely glass box, looming over the side of the Sears tower. Now, I was never one to willingly stand in such a box, with my mild fear of heights, but something attracted me. When I realized where I was standing, a particular strain of thoughts entered my brain, “ What if the floor gave out? What if it was just an edge? You could jump right off.” I took a step back, and interrogated my own psyche.

I had no intention of jumping off, and flattening myself on the sidewalk, so why were these thoughts darting around, daring me to do the very thing I feared? I never knew there was a name for such a phenomenon until I came across the French term, “ L’appel du vide”. “ L’appel du vide” is that little voice, the devil on your shoulder, whispering “ Do it! Jump off! Jerk the steering wheel! Keep walking into the ocean!” These intrusive thoughts are not the product of suicidal contemplation, but rather a security response. The brain alerts our body to step back, even though we are conscious that there is no present danger. This person then assumes that they wanted to jump, otherwise why would they have stepped back if they were not in any danger? A Freudian may argue that this confusion is the drive towards self-destruction and ‘ the return to the inorganic’. The” L’appel du vide” phenomenon occurs because it is the brain’s way of taking control of the situation; It is the strongest choice the brain can make at that moment. The

French phrase can be literally translated into “ The Call of the Void”, but the English translation does not hold the same dooming impact.

Like said in a Supernatural episode, “ It’s funnier in Enochian.” The more common name for the feeling in English is the “ High Place Phenomenon”, which sounds very dull and textbook-ish. It does not hold the same emotional appeal as “ The Call of the Void”, which does not even compare to the original French idiom. “ L’appel du vide” encompasses the thoughts of someone experiencing the phenomenon. The urge to jump is strangely appealing, even though the person strongly does not want to jump. It sneaks into your mind, and whispers into your ear.

“ L’appel du vide” will always greet those who look down from a tall bridge, those who stare into the depth of the ocean, and those who dare lean over a skyscraper. It serves as the mind’s greatest magic trick, transforming precautionary signals into intrusive thoughts. Last April, I stood atop of 30 Rockefeller Plaza, and leaned against the glass. I felt that instinct to jump, and could not help but smile. “ L’appel du vide” was in my mind, this time comforting me as I stared at the tourists below.