

James gets suspended

On a Monday afternoon in July 2004 a news team stumbled across people suspending themselves on hooks in the shallow blue water of Whale Harbor in Islamorada, Florida Keys. Although the people insisted they were enjoying themselves the reporters called the emergency services on their behalf. The event ended up being reported across the world, provoking reactions of shock and disgust about the degeneracy of what happened. A policeman called to the scene, Lt Tom Brazil, described it as the weirdest thing he had ever seen. And he has dealt with a naked woman screaming about people coming out of paintings in her house, and on a separate occasion, a family wearing aluminium foil hats to divert the dual threat of malevolent radio waves from their neighbours and aliens trying to encase them in a pressure dome.

Why the strong reaction? Simply because the people were literally hanging about; suspended from hooks attached to a bamboo tripod erected in the ankle-skimming water. In no time the media were condemning a “sick new craze” of confused and disenfranchised kids. Failed agony aunts and self-appointed moralisers wrote ‘Won't someone think of the children!’-style articles speculating on the symbolism of hanging yourself up like something in a butcher's window. They claimed it represented how a lost generation felt about their worthless lives. Some kind of self-loathing. A pointless escalation of piercing and other body modifications. Whatever it was, it was wrong and people shouldn't be allowed to do it.

I don't know about you, but although I understand why and how and when people get suspended, none of this explains the feeling it produces. The majority of people I asked about the pain and the sensation of suspension told me the same things: you can't really compare it to anything and the only way you can understand it is if you actually do it. So, as being suspended seemed like the only option left, I contacted some people to see if they could suspend me.

Lots of people told me it would take time to prepare. Others told me they couldn't recommend anyone in the UK. But everyone who was willing to recommend someone gave me one name – Sue – and before I could think of a reasonable excuse to get out of it I was sitting in her living room talking to her about my impending experience.

They described the procedure, I shuffled nervously, then Sue showed me videos of some other suspensions, including footage of her own first time. There she was in a warehouse at a piercing convention, swinging about like Peter Pan in pantomime (only naked) and smiling like Dave Grohl at a beach wedding in the Bahamas.

This was probably where it started to seem like a good idea. Until then I loved being able to tell people I was going to have it done because of the ‘Ooooh’, ‘Ahhhh’ and ‘Are you mental?’ reactions, but the chances of it actually happening were probably never more than about 30 per cent. But seeing Sue's first suspension changed my mind completely. All the things people told me (and I hadn't believed) were evident: the feeling you got

when you went up, the rush it gave you. “For days after that,” she told me, “I was euphoric.”

On other videos people’s facial expressions transformed from terror to bliss as soon as their feet lifted off the ground. Some people cried with joy. Everyone seemed to be genuinely moved by their experience. So I went ahead. I chose a vertical back suspension (also known as a Suicide Suspension) and lay face down on a medical table, topless and waiting for the hooks to be inserted. Which was going to be done without any anaesthetic.

The first hook was fine, mostly because I didn’t know how much it was going to hurt. The second was tolerable simply because although I knew how much it would hurt and I wasn’t going to quit after just one hook. The third was OK. The fourth one hurt like hell simply because I obsessed over it and every time Sue so much as brushed my back I jumped. The fifth and sixth hooks hurt but I figured that having gone that far there was no way I was going to back out.

After the hooks were in, all I had to do was get myself rigged up to the scaffolding and be winched off the ground. Simple, huh? For some people, yes. For me, no. It took me half an hour (at least), three cups of sugary tea, two sugary lollipops and two moments where I thought I was going to pass out before I could even be hooked up to the rig.

Even then there were several moments before I was even off the ground where I felt like the hooks were going to rip all the skin off of my back and leave me a bloody mess on the floor, flapping about, spraying my blood all over the people watching. Sue told me: “The best thing to do is walk backwards and forwards as the rope is slightly raised and then before you know it you will be lifting yourself off the ground.” But I didn’t have any faith whatsoever in that approach.

I went for the ‘push off someone else’s shoulders and scream like hell if it hurts too much’ approach. But the pain never came. In fact it didn’t hurt at all. The sensation is like it must be for a week-old lion cub being picked up by its mother. Actually, pain is the wrong word. It’s not even discomfort.

But there was no seeing God. No transcendence. In my state of mind if I had seen God he would have probably said something like, “What the hell are you doing, you idiot?” But please don’t think that means suspension doesn’t work. The enthusiasm and the reactions I saw from other people were genuine, I was just too cynical to experience what everyone else did. I don’t think anyone has ever done it for a worse reason and I am certain if you do it because you want to it is an amazing experience.