

PAUL CRESEY

EXIT STRATEGIES #1-#3

#1: THE LOVE STORY OF VLADIMIR FISER AND MARIKA FERBER

On October 13, 2013, Vladimir Fiser and Marika Ferber jumped to their deaths from the eighteenth floor of their apartment building in Toronto in an apparent double suicide pact. Friends and neighbours reported that Ferber, a retired ballet instructor and former ballerina, had long suffered from chronic back and leg pain, and it was for this reason police believe the married couple jumped. (Suicide notes exist but, for obvious reasons, have never been made public.) The question of why they chose to end their lives in such a sensational manner when more private methods remained available to them is certainly more compelling than why they chose to end their lives at all. The fact that Ferber was wheelchair-bound and physically incapable of climbing the balcony railing without Fiser's help favours a motive beyond mere convenience. Being Holocaust survivors, the similarity of their suicides to the suicide of Primo Levi, who threw himself from a third-storey apartment landing, cannot be overlooked. Perhaps something happens to a person psychologically after experiencing such unimaginable violence that later induces them toward a violent end, or perhaps it is an act of solidarity with those friends and family lost to the Nazi scourge. But this is unfair speculation. People are never as simple as that, and surely a summary of their lives up until that point is required before any answer can be surmised.

Fiser was born in 1924 in the city of Osijek in what would become modern-day Croatia. At the time Croatia existed as part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and it was one of many such conglomerate countries formed during the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I. Five years later, in 1929, King Alexander I proclaimed a royal dictatorship over the newly named Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Ferber was born that same year, also in Osijek.

Fiser and Ferber grew up together in the same tight-knit Jewish community and knew each other as children. Before the Nazis invaded in 1941, there were approximately 3,000 Jews living in Osijek. At the end of the war, fewer than 600 remained. Only ten of those deported to concentration camps returned alive. Among those who perished in the first year of the invasion was Fiser's father.

Not much is known about Ferber's survival of the Holocaust. She might have gone to the camp at Đakovo, but that is unlikely, as almost all of the 1,200 women and children sent there ended up perishing in either Auschwitz or Jasenovac. It is also possible that she fled to Italian-occupied Yugoslavia, as Fiser did after his father's death, or that she was one of the few Jews who remained hidden in Osijek until the war was over.

More is known about Fiser's path through Nazi-occupied Europe, though details are still limited. He remained in Italian-occupied Yugoslavia until 1943, when he was smuggled into neutral Switzerland, apparently aided by the controversial police officer Giovanni Palatucci. Upon returning to Croatia at the end of the war, Fiser received a degree in economics. Shortly thereafter, Fiser and Ferber settled independently in Israel and reconnected as platonic friends.

They were married to other partners for most of their adult lives, and Ferber conceived two children with her first husband, while Fiser remained childless. It was only after their spouses died of cancer one day apart—the kind of remarkable and tragic coincidence with which great love stories like theirs seem preternaturally rife and which, if not true, might be criticized as a cliché of the most damnable sort—that they ended up marrying one another and moving to Canada.

I arrive at Pearson International Airport at around noon and take the bus to the apartment building where Fiser and Ferber lived and died. Its semi-circular north-facing front is a layer cake of brick and concrete. It might have passed for a luxury high-rise at one time, but the uniform, sparsely windowed exterior now recalls the Khrushchyovka buildings of Soviet-era Russia. I cannot imagine anyone would ever be tempted to call it beautiful. The front courtyard, however, is well-maintained, and the floral arrangements and tall trees are a welcome distraction from the oppressive architecture.

Earlier in the week I made an appointment to view the apartment with Mr. Wenutu, the current tenant. Being aware of its morbid history, he was,

at first, reluctant to agree, but I explained to him that I was a journalist working on an article about “exit strategies” and that I merely hoped to include Fiser and Ferber’s story. I also said that my article might mention his name, and I believe it was this final appeal to his vanity that led him to consent.

I dial the apartment number and am buzzed in by Mr. Wenu. In the elevator, I time how long it takes to travel seventeen floors. (As with most apartment buildings in the west, the thirteenth floor is skipped, so the eighteenth floor is really the seventeenth floor.) I discover that it takes ten seconds, which is almost three times as long as a fall from the same height.

Stepping out of the elevator, I look left and see a short, stubble-faced man lingering in his doorway.

“Mr. Wenu?”

“Please,” he says, “call me Wayne.”

We shake hands in the hallway, and I follow him inside. The apartment smell is a blend of Lysol, vacuum cleaner, and burnt coffee. He leads me on a path through the apartment that purposefully avoids the balcony, saving it for the end of the tour. Everything in the apartment appears in its proper place. Even the messy parts have an order to them that evinces a morning of obsessive cleaning.

“And this is the balcony,” he says.

The stone balcony runs the entire length of the living room wall, which is about fifteen feet long. I am surprised to see that there is nothing on it—no furniture, no barbeque, not even a plant.

When I ask him about this, Wayne says, “I never had a problem with heights before, but for some reason I get this weird feeling standing out there, like I’m going to fall. I guess you’d call it vertigo.” He pauses. “That’s what you’re here for, isn’t it? To look over the edge?”

“I was hoping it might help me to answer the question of why they jumped.”

“There’s no one knows why but them and God.” He bends over, picks a crumb off the ground, and squirrels it in his hand. “If it had been three years later, they could’ve had the doctors do it, but what would be the story then?” He points over his shoulder toward the kitchen. “You want something to drink? I’m about to make myself a coffee.”

“I’m all right, thanks.”

It is believed that Fiser and Ferber jumped sometime between 7:30 and

8:00 in the morning. According to weather reports from that day, the skies were cloudy over Toronto. Today the skies are clear. I open the sliding door, step over a lip tall enough to stop a wheelchair, and walk out onto the balcony. I put my hands on the solid cement railing and peer over the edge.

I imagine myself as Vladimir Fiser. I have survived dictatorships, wars, persecution, exile, the death of most of my family, the death of my first wife. Yet even as I suffered there was someone who has been with me since the beginning, who has suffered as I suffered. *Marika*. I remember how she danced. I remember her poise, her perfect control. But for this gift of dance the gods demand recompense, and Marika is made to pay dearly for those years. Her body, once an attuned instrument of time and space, disharmonizes. She is eventually confined to a wheelchair. And when the pain becomes too much, she begs me for an end to her suffering, which is also my suffering and which I know will require an end to us both. I carry her onto the balcony. My own weak heart strains from the effort, but as this will be my last effort in life, I am able to see it through. I set her down on the stone railing then climb onto it myself. Once more I take her into my arms, and for three and a half seconds we dance.

#2: CARAVAN

It was Palm Sunday when Silvia Valle joined the caravan departing San Pedro Sula for the United States. She had first heard the story of Palm Sunday from her abuela, who, before she died, would sit the children around her at the start of Holy Week and tell of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. He too had travelled in a caravan and was welcomed at the Golden Gate by crowds of people waving palm branches and shouting, "Hosanna! Hosanna!" To Silvia, the fact that the organizers had chosen Palm Sunday for the day of departure seemed not coincidence but rather providence. The caravan was certain to meet with great resistance at the border, so it stood to reason that, if she made it across, her life would be awaiting her on the other side.

For months she saved every lempira she could from her job at the cafeteria. She spent two thousand on a new pair of black Nikes, which would equate to one lempira per mile walked by the time she reached her destination, as well as five hundred on a backpack that contained water, some food, the remainder of her money, and a change of clothes.

In the first hour of walking Silvia met a man named Geber. He was a

dark-complexioned mestizo with wispy hair and spacious teeth. A past injury to his left leg caused him to walk with a limp.

“Why are you leaving Honduras?” he asked.

“My family is dead,” she answered.

“I will open a McDonald’s,” he said with a chuckle. “Eat hamburgers all day.” He lifted his t-shirt, slapped his shapeless hairy stomach, and slipped away into the crowd.

She didn’t see Geber again until late evening. Because she had heard stories of violent men joining caravans for only as long as it took them to commit their evil deeds, she asked if he would stay with her, and he agreed. In the night she awoke to his hand sliding up her stomach toward her breasts. Geber fondled one, then touched upon the thin chain of her crucifix. He followed it down to the image of Christ, at whose figuration his hand abruptly cowered and withdrew.

Silvia and Geber fell easily into this routine of spending their days apart and their nights together. She tolerated his wandering hands, and in exchange he provided her a sense of security. Even as the caravan grew, picking up thousands on its path through Guatemala, they always managed to find each other before nightfall.

One night Silvia felt hot tears on her forehead. Geber was crying and stroking her hair. “*Lo siento, lo siento,*” he said.

“I forgive you,” she said.

At the southern border of Mexico the caravan encountered an unexpected obstacle: the Mexican National Guard. The soldiers were stationed on the bridges and along the shoreline of the Suchiate River. It used to be that migrants were able to wade through the river to the other side uncontested, but apparently not anymore.

There were at least a hundred migrants for every soldier, which meant that if they rushed the border many would make it and only an unlucky few would not, so that was precisely what they did.

Since the night of his apology, Geber had stopped leaving Silvia in the mornings. “*Mi alma,*” he called her. My soul. With Silvia on his back, Geber waded through the waist-high water. Being a little shorter than five feet and weighing fewer than a hundred pounds, Silvia was grateful for Geber’s assistance; even with hundreds of bodies obstructing its flow, the current of the river remained strong. Landing on the other side of the river, they ran hand-in-hand. There was fighting, shouting, and weeping all around them,

as mothers cried out for their children, and husbands cried out for their wives. They saw a man stumble and get beaten where he lay. Many of those arrested were only caught because they became separated from their loved ones and made the mistake of stopping to look for them. As for Geber and Silvia, they stuck to the middle of the crowd like schooling fish and in that way evaded capture. And when others stopped to rest, they kept going. They ran until their shoes dried and they could see the lights of Tapachula in the distance. If Silvia had taken every precaution to avoid damage to her feet, then it had all been in vain: after running for so long in wet shoes, her feet and toes were blistered and swollen inside her socks. Geber asked her to show them to him, but she worried that if she took the Nikes off she would never get them back on. Against her pleading, Geber removed his own shoes. A putrid smell like toenail clippings wafted up from his partially degloved foot. When he tried to put his shoes on again, the pain was so intense he needed her to do it for him.

Silvia and Geber rejoined the caravan in Tapachula. There, they mixed with thousands of Mexicans also headed north. When once they had moved together in one large mass through Honduras and Guatemala, the caravan splintered into smaller factions for the journey through Mexico. Unfortunately, this made them vulnerable to raids by the very authorities they were hoping to avoid. It seemed every second night Silvia was awoken by sirens and screams. Every time this happened Geber would drag her into the jungle, and they would crouch down and wait in silence, heads swivelling and eyes darting.

Then came the traffickers. They used similar methods to the police, so Silvia could never be certain what fate might befall her if she were captured.

She met a mother with a five-year-old girl that liked to sing while they walked. Geber often joined in the chorus with them, which was how they all became acquainted. A week later there was a raid, and the next morning the mother and daughter were gone.

That same night Geber said, "No one will ever touch you."

When she fell asleep, he was holding her so tightly across the chest Silvia thought she might never wake up.

Word soon spread through the caravan of a program called *Estás en tu casa* (You Are Home). Those migrants who stopped in Mexico instead of continuing to the United States were promised education, healthcare, and

access to employment. Geber believed it was a ruse.

“The moment they have us,” he said, “they will send us back.”

Still, the program tempted many away from the caravan. Passing through Mexico City, their number halved from six to three thousand.

In the market migrants bargained with sympathetic locals for transportation. Geber found a truck driver named Rafael, who agreed to take them to Guadalajara for eleven hundred lempira and the cost of gas there and back. Geber was out of money, so Silvia paid, and she noticed him looking as she removed the bills from a secret pocket sewn into her backpack. His eyes shone like she had never seen them before: bright and menacing. “Beware of wolves in sheep’s clothing,” her grandmother used to say. But she had been with him since the beginning, and she couldn’t imagine a scenario in which he might steal from her.

They rode in the cabs of trucks or the backs of tractor trailers for the remainder of the journey. Some took them short distances for a lot of money, while others took them long distances for free. The break from walking afforded their feet adequate time to heal, and they needed them healthy and strong, as the hardest part still lay ahead.

In Sonoyta, Geber convinced Silvia to abandon the caravan before Tijuana, which was their planned point of entry.

“We will find our own way together,” he said.

Silvia was worried about their safety. “Alone we will be easy targets.”

“Yes,” Geber said, “but the Americans know we are coming.”

That was true. Nothing else could explain Mexico’s initial blockade and then sudden receptivity. Silvia relented. They spent the next hours buying supplies to survive a trip across the desert. If they wandered in the wrong direction, they might go a week without seeing a person or being detained, so they needed to be smart about it. To start, Silvia bought Geber a backpack. He picked out a pink one too small for him and flaunted it around. Silvia laughed as if she had just remembered how. She wished she could spare a few lempira for a disposable camera, but she wanted to save the extra money for when she would really need it. They also bought hats, two blankets for the cold nights, enough food for a week, and two one-gallon glass bottles of water, as Silvia was concerned that plastic bottles might weaken and burst in the continuous heat.

Silvia and Geber left the following morning and arrived at the border fence by mid-afternoon. Silvia looked in either direction and could see no

end to the steel bollards. They were as tall as palm trees and coloured orange from rust. That they had been spaced apart just enough for her to be able to put her arm through to the other side seemed an especially cruel feature. Geber grabbed on to one of the steel bollards and attempted to scale it, but his inflexible leg arrested him. He suggested they continue west, and he promised they would soon find an opening. She agreed to go along with him, as she was worried he might abandon her if challenged, and she knew it would be better to perish with somebody than alone.

At night they lay on their backs and looked up at the stars. Silvia tried to fall asleep, but something inside her gut kept her from relaxing. She could tell Geber was still awake, as his breathing was irregular, and she wondered what he was waiting for. Then, in an instant, he was on top of her with his hands around her throat.

“No luches,” he said as he squeezed tighter.

Silvia clawed at his face. When that didn't work, she struck her forearm against the glass bottle in her backpack until it shattered inside. The water seeped out and flowed beneath them, turning the dusty ground to mud. Geber tried to catch her arms underneath his legs, but she managed to finger a piece of glass and swung it at his throat. His blood splashed over her face and down her chest, drowning the image of Christ where it lay, still and somber, in the small divot above her breasts. Coughing and gasping for air, she crawled backward away from him. All the while she watched him to make sure he did not come after her again. His eyes blinked one after the other like a severed chicken's head and then stopped suddenly so that one eye was open and the other was shut.

In the morning Silvia wrapped Geber in a blanket and rolled him up against the wall so a border patrol might find him. She took his backpack and left hers behind. Some hours later she came upon a bollard sawed off at the base and was able to fit between the adjacent two to the other side. Then she clutched her necklace, whispered a prayer for her grandmother, and heard from Heaven the holy words of welcome, *“Hosanna! Hosanna!”*

#3: NOT THE SUMMIT BUT THE PLUMMET

Tenzing and I wake up at eleven for the summit push. We don't realize until we are dressed and standing outside our tents at Camp Four that the team from Rapid Ascents has already left. They are perhaps one or two

hours ahead of us by now, which means we will most likely meet them coming down the Hillary Step, where bottlenecks are apt to form. Having slept fitfully for the three hours Tenzing allotted us, I'm frustrated by the coincidence of my deepest moment of sleep arriving at the moment of their departure, and I have to suck a breath of oxygen from my portable Mountain High to interrupt my anger before it barrels out of control. At 26,000 feet I experience oxygen for what it truly is: the fire of life, for whose wielding we, as Prometheus' spawn, are slowly pecked away. But I am alluding to the wrong myth. I am, in fact, a contemporary Icarus—though, if told correctly, the myth would see his wax wings not melted by the sun but frozen in the thin air of high altitude.

Tenzing reminds me that it is “not the summit but the plummet” that makes the difference. He is full of little sayings like this, which are particularly useful in stressful situations. It is much easier to remember “not the summit but the plummet” than it is to remember “the descent is four times more dangerous than the ascent” or “it is a well-known fact many more people die on the way down than on the way up.”

Days earlier Tenzing tagged along with two Sherpas from Rapid Ascents to help fix the ropes, on which we now clip our carabiners to begin our push. We are carrying two oxygen bottles each, which will provide ten to twelve hours of continuous oxygen. This will sustain us to the peak and part of the way back, but we will need to stop on the South Summit and pick up a third bottle to complete our descent.

Before we leave, Tenzing reminds me, “Not the summit but the plummet, okay boss?”

I give him a thumb's up because it is easier than talking. I hate it when he calls me “boss,” but he uses the tag unconsciously, like a waitress uses “honey.” I have told him a dozen times to call me “John,” but he seems incapable of shaking the habit.

As we ascend the Balcony, a strong westerly wind crowds the darkness of night with flakes of ice and snow. With my left hand I trail the rope like an arthritic senior using the railing up a steep set of stairs, taking each step with judicious care, fighting against the screaming of my bones, the pins and needles in my feet, and the stiffness of my muscles. An oxygen revolution fomented inside me at a cellular level. My fingers are also beginning to numb, though I am so familiar with this feeling by now that I don't need to maintain a conscious grip on the rope; my hands simply work in the unfeel-

ing reality like those mechanical hands that react to signals from the brain. I am only scared when transferring between anchor points, but Tenzing is never far behind. Attached to me at the waist, he scrutinizes my every movement for error, knowing any mistake of mine will have potentially deadly consequences for both of us.

There is a spot along today's route where plummeting is a genuine concern, and that is the Cornice Traverse. We stop at the South Summit to exchange oxygen bottles after several hours, and I experience an anxiety of the prophetic kind knowing the Traverse comes next. Fortunately the weather clears precisely as forecasted, and soon we can see the Rapid Ascents team up ahead. They have successfully surmounted the Hillary Step, and their headlamps look like Christmas lights strung toward the peak. When we arrive at the Cornice Traverse, I hesitate a glimpse down the 11,000-foot Kangshung Face, which looks like a never-ending chute into the void of space. At this point my exhaustion seems total, but there is still much farther to go, so my mind whips my body into suffering submission.

We arrive at the Hillary Step in full daylight. Five team members from Rapid Ascents await us at the bottom. There is one person currently descending and three more waiting to descend. If this is the most challenging part of the summit, then it is only because I must tackle it alone. Fixed ropes have greatly reduced the difficulty for less experienced climbers, but I don't know if I'll be able to summon the effort required to deliver me up the sheer rock face without Tenzing's close encouragement.

Five times Tenzing and I unclip from the rope to pass the other climbers. Each time we do this the odds of a fatal error rise exponentially. One mistake, one misstep, and we risk embarking on the longest and last toboggan ride of our lives. With the arrival of their sixth member, the leader of Rapid Ascents radios for the others to wait while Tenzing and I take our turn. I go first. Almost immediately my crampons slip, and I'm forced to retest them against the ice.

"You got it, boss," Tenzing says. "Don't wait for me at the top. Keep going. I'll play catch up."

I ascend slowly using a careful alternating method: left foot up, right pick up, right foot up, left pick up. When fear strikes me halfway to the top, I remind myself that eight other climbers have already succeeded today, and it is unreasonable to think that my fate will be any different. Afterward, it is only a short jaunt to the peak—a leisurely stroll compared to other sections

of the mountain.

I'm congratulated at the top with pats on the back and rear end.

"How is the peak?" I ask.

I'm told it is beautiful, indescribable.

I continue alone. For the first time I experience what is called "summit fever"—an adrenaline high that comes upon the realization of certain victory. My steps quicken; I'm crazed with joy. People with this condition can sometimes find it impossible to turn around, even in the face of certain death. Doug Hansen of the 1996 Everest expedition was a notable victim, and by extension Rob Hall. "Summit fever" is the siren call of the mountain—the god's final trick of seduction—as it obscures the truth that it's "not the summit but the plummet."

I'm halfway to the peak when the wind picks up. Though it has been blowing steadily the entire way, I feel the difference like a small change in acceleration; it is there one moment and gone the next. I look to the south and notice a haze settling over the Western Cwm. To the north the sky is azure blue, but to the south it appears a lighter cerulean. A pale mist spreads over the Lhotse face, and in it I discern the delineations of clouds, inchoate, frail, like I could clap my hands in their direction and scatter them. Still, they frighten me. If Tenzing were here, I might point them out and ask his opinion, but he is at the top of the Hillary Step and will be another fifteen minutes in reaching me. I cannot stop now—not when I'm so close.

My mind fractures. One half descends the mountain ahead of me to secure my way back, while the other rushes me forward to my accomplishment.

Tenzing catches up steps from the peak. "What's the hurry, boss?"

I point toward the Lhotse face.

"Nothing to worry," he says.

I spy the flapping prayer flags, and tears come to my eyes as I reach over them to lay my hand on the peak. Though I've seen pictures of it before, I'm still disappointed that there is no exposed point of rock. It is merely a hump of snow of the sort that one might find dumped beside a shovelled driveway. All around it are scattered the trinkets and tokens of hundreds of climbers before me, who, in hoping to leave their special mark, have instead perverted the highest point on Earth with tiny vanities. To light a candle in a church, to set flowers on a grave, to clip a lock to a bridge—those are suplications. An empty Coke bottle, a teddy bear, a keychain from the Space

Needle—that is litter.

“Say cheese!” Tenzing snaps a photo.

Once the picture is taken, I start back the way we came.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

“Not the summit but the plummet,” I say.

He shakes me gently. “Relax. Enjoy. You deserve it.”

But I cannot enjoy it. I have three hours of oxygen left. A new oxygen bottle awaits me at the South Summit. If I leave now, I will just make it there in time.

“Why have you come all this way, huh? To turn around?”

I don’t have an answer for him other than I shouldn’t have come. A loud cracking noise makes me flinch. Tenzing laughs. We watch a piece of glacier ice tumble down the mountainside and vanish in a splash of snow.

Tenzing and I make it safely down to Base Camp the following day, after an overnight at Camp Three. While packing up my tent, I’m approached by another climber about to embark up the mountain. She is curious to know what it was like to reach the top, but I tell her I never got there. I tell her the moment you start planning a way back is the moment you stop going up. I tell her if you worry about the plummet, you’ll never reach the summit.

“Worry about the plummet, never reach the summit.” She thanks me for the advice and heads off to join the rest of her team.