***The Jump* by Anthony Masters**

**PART 1**

I’ll run away then, thought Rik as he lay on his bed, his skateboard on the table at his side. His most treasured possession, painted in red and silver but beautifully battered, it was a really fast deck, and he seemed to spend most of his waking hours on it. He thought about skating all the time, and he and his mate Gus were always trying new moves on the wall. They’d mastered the rock ‘n roll, the air, the rail side, but there was another one left- one that had defeated them both. The jump was too big, too dangerous, too terrifying for both of them, but Rik planned different ways of tackling it all the time.

Of course, it would serve them right he thought. They’d wonder where he’d gone – maybe get the Old Bill after him. But they wouldn’t find him, for at ten Rik knew his way around all right; living in Vauxhall had made it easy for him to know London and its skate parks really well. Nowadays they often went to the South Bank; near the Festival Hall there was a rabbit warren of jumps among the wilderness of concrete. He’d go up there, he decided, skate all day, live rough at night like the homeless people in Cardboard City. That would show his parents a thing or two and make them really miss him.

Life had been OK until the baby came along. Helen. It wasn’t that he hated her – in fact he had loved her from the start, with her little helpless cries and wriggling limbs- but they loved her more than him. In fact, they had stopped loving him completely; Rik was sure of that.

Rik was going through a bit of a crisis anyway, for he had begun to test out his parents, which wasn’t going down at all well. He had been adopted by them when he was four – when they didn’t think they could have a baby, he thought grimly. Then a couple of years ago they found they could. It wasn’t fair.

Rik had a hazy memory of his earlier life with his real mum, sometimes in the council house in Clapham, or more often in the children’s home in Wandsworth. He hadn’t spent much time at home, and when he was there Mum was usually drunk or had some guy in. In the end they had taken him away and people came to look at him in the home, a bit like as if they were shopping at Tesco, he supposed.

He could remember feeling very afraid when he had first been adopted and had come to live in the big Victorian flat in Vauxhall, but slowly a history of memories built up with his new mum and dad and he more or less forgot the old life. For a long time, it was great; days at Hastings with Mum in the week, football in the park with Dad at weekends, family trips to the cinema, to the swimming pool, to the bowling alley; just the three of them, and it had been good. But now Helen was here and they were four and it wasn’t good any longer. The past eighteen months had been lousy with him being shunted more and more in the background.

He had been interested in skateboarding anyway, but directly Rik found he wasn’t wanted, it became the central focus of his life- and his schoolwork suffered accordingly.

‘Rik!’ his mother yelled up the stairs. ‘You’ll be late. Get on with it!’

Reluctantly he levered himself slowly off the bed and went downstairs, carrying his skateboard. Rik had already made up his mind that he wouldn’t go to school that morning. He’d run away instead.

Perhaps it was because Rik wanted to make things worse that everything was so dreadful that morning. First of all, he dumped his deck on the floor and Mum stepped on it. In fact, she did rather more than that; going completely out of control, with one foot on the deck and the other on the floor, she went into a kind of rattling glide, hit the wainscoting and fell on her back.

‘You all right, Mum?’ said Rik, laughing and spitting out bits of toast. ‘I thought you were trying the rock ‘n roll.’

But she didn’t see the funny side of it, and from the look of him neither did Dad.

‘That wretched board,’ said Mum, struggling to her feet. ‘It’s going to be the death of me.’

‘That’s it.’ Dad stood up and grabbed the deck. ‘That’s it then.’ He held it in his arms as if it was alive. ‘I ought to smash this into a thousand pieces.’

Rik was on his feet now, all laughter forgotten. Dad was in one of his rages and he could be really heavy in one of those.

‘Don’t, Dad’

‘You’ve been told not to bring this thing in the house.   
‘it's not a thing!’  
‘don't be lippy.’  
‘give it back’ yelled Rik   
‘I beg your pardon, young man?’  
‘I said give it back.’  
‘right .it's confiscated .’  
‘I'll be late for work’ wailed mum in the background ‘and Helen she'll be late for her minder. Knock it off you two.’

Rik was jumping over his dad like an angry terrier and his dad was holding the skateboarder aloft as if it was a trophy.   
‘Give it, Dad.’  
‘Get off’  
‘It's mine!’ Rik managed to grab the edge of his deck and pulled as hard as he could. For a moment it was deadlock, and then Rik wrenched at it again; he caught his dad off balance, and he staggered back against the chair. Meanwhile Helen howled as if her lungs were burst.

Rik grasped his prized possession to him and ran through the living room, knocking mum’s purse off the sideboard, and was out into the hallway in seconds.

‘Come back,’ Dad roared as he thundered behind him. Rik tore at the bolts of the door and for a moment thought the top one was going to stick.

‘You'll pay for this.’ Dad swiped at him and missed while Rik pulled open the door and legged it. Then he paused halfway down the garden path and waved his deck at his infuriated father as he stood on the front step.

‘I'm not coming back,’ Rik bawled.

Dad paused, suddenly realised that he had gone right over the top. ‘now wait a minute.’

‘You’ll be sorry!’ Rik choked back his angry tears, determined not to give in. ‘You’ll be sorry when I don’t come back. Ever,’ he added ominously.

‘Let’s talk.’ Dad was uneasy now, prepared to call a truce, but it was too late.

Rik turned on his heel, but not before he had noticed old nosy Nora Norton twitching at her curtains next door. He gave her a rude sign and ran.

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**PART 2**

His bravado lasted the walk to the South Bank, but by the time he was almost there, Rik felt deflated and his anger, which had kept him going, had turned to despair. His parents had made him promise never to skate alone, but now he was breaking that promise. They didn't want him. They preferred Helen. No one cared if he ran away.

But directly he arrived amongst the concrete ramps the jump took over, because it both terrified and fascinated him. He'd never been able to do it and neither had Gus. Nor had any of the bigger boys they had both watched.

Last weekend, mum and dad and Helen had come up to watch Rik attempt the jump. He was light and small for his age and thought he had a chance because they were there, and he was desperate to show them he could do it. But in the end he had failed, and dad had put his arm round him, in front of all the skaters, and said it's okay, love- you'll do it when you're bigger. He had never felt so humiliated in his life and he was sure he could hear muffled laughter. Even Gus had grinned.

But now, as Rik looked at the jump again, all his misery left him. In fact, as usual, he didn't think - couldn't think - of anything else. There was a ramp that ran sheer up a rough concrete support that had never been finished, a short bumpy surface and then at least a four metre drop. It was terrifying, but Rik was convinced that if he got up enough speed he could leave the gap and land on another concrete surface that was narrow and lower. He was sure it was possible, although he had seen many other kids come to grief on it. Either they couldn't make the gradient on the first ramp and simply slid back again or they actually took off, only to plunge into the abyss. He had done this several times himself and had horribly jarred and scraped himself, but another bigger, heavier boy had broken his leg.

A few yards away the Thames flowed swiftly past, winking and gleaming in the October sunshine. The underneath of the walkways was in shadow, as it always was, and full of graffiti and litter. It smells of old blankets and bodies and other smells that were more unpleasant and less definable. But Rik noticed none of this. He only had eyes for the jump, and as he sized it up for the hundredth time, Rik felt the familiar stirring of butterflies in his stomach. His mouth went dry, his hands and legs shook, and the sweat stood out on his forehead. He was dead scared and knew that what he wanted was that extra bit of courage, the extra confidence that would really make him go for it. Then Rik had a brain wave.

Running away was just what he had needed. What he would do now was practise- all day long if need be- until he made the jump and perfected it. Rik knew that a one off would not be enough. He had to get it absolutely right so that he could make the jump time after time after time. Then he would ring Gus, tell him where he was and command him to bring his parents up to the South Bank. When they were all there Rik would make his jump to an admiring audience. He could see it now: mum frightened at first but then building up confidence as he succeeded time after glorious time, her eyes sparkling like the River- just as they had sparkled at him before baby Helen came along and wrecked everything. Dad would be amazingly proud of him and really sorry he had been so horrible. He would shake his hand and not put his arm round him in front of the other skaters. Baby Helen would gurgle with delight and hold out her arms to him and Gus would simply say, that was rad.

The only trouble was that he had to do it first, and the imaginary applause ringing in rik’s ears died away. He stared up at the ramp. As usual it looked in possibly high but this time, because it was a weekday, there was no one around to provide any competition. Not wanting to waste any time, Rik walked away, got on his deck and built up as much speed as he could, the wheels rasping on the scarred concrete , his breath coming in gasps. By pushing his body from right to left he knew he was building up more speed than usual, and the panic rose from the pit of his stomach as he soared up the ramp, launched off, bent down, grabbed the bottom of the deck, let go - and just failed to make contact with the other side. He fell sideways, bashing his shoulder on the road concrete, feeling his skin burn, and then landing upside down in a sea of stinking litter.

Rik lay there for a few seconds, wondering what he had broken. Then he moved gingerly and discovered that although his shoulder was smarting he seemed to be intact. He had always been good at gym at school and knew instinctively how to fall, and of course he was so light. Thankfully Rik picked himself up and started all over again.

He stayed working at it for the next hour , but every time he skated up the ramp his courage failed him and he managed to stop himself at the brink, poised on his deck on the narrow ledge, staring down at the abyss below him in horror. Then, using every last ounce of courage he had left, Rik got up speed again and on reaching the top, bent down without grabbing the deck and took off into the air. This time he crashed down on his feet, his deck following him, clunking him painfully on the head as it crashed to the ground. Trembling, jarred, sweating and virtually in tears, Rik stood in the filthy gully, looking up at the high, bleak sides of concrete above him, feeling angry and deflated.

Later, Rik walked over to Casey Jones at Waterloo station and using his school dinner money bought himself a bag of chips and a small orangeade. That completely cleaned him out and he felt very depressed as he walked back to the South Bank. His father’s words echoed in his head, he had not yet got anywhere near mastering the jump and he could imagine his parents coming home from work, petting Helen and for getting all about him.

‘He'll come home when it suits him,’ he could hear his mother saying, while his father added censoriously, ‘That boy needs a good hiding - and he'll get it!’

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**PART 3**

Throughout the afternoon Rik continued to practise, but his nerves had now gone completely, and he could only skate up the ramp - and roll miserably back. By four he was feeling exhausted, and by five sick and terribly hungry. His stomach rumbled and his head felt muzzy, yet Rik kept trying, going up the ramp time after time - and still rolling back. By five thirty he thought he was going to faint and his whole body ran with a sticky sweat, but by six he had a second wind and he felt stronger both physically and mentally.

It was getting cold now and shadows moved underneath the walkways as the homeless clambered into sleeping bags if they were lucky and under newspapers and cardboard if they weren't. I'll be sleeping with this lot tonight, thought Rik - at least, I will be if I don't make the jump. I'll never make it, he thought gloomily and with mounting desperation, never ever make it. He looked around again at the dim figures settling into Cardboard City and wondered if they'd be friendly to be with or whether they would chuck him out just like his dad had done. Why don't they come and find me, thought Rik suddenly and the tears pricked at the back of his eyes. He might as well have been back in the children’s home, feeling unwanted and uncared for.

Parents - they were all the same: hostile and unreliable- they desert you in the end. A tear trickled down Rik’s grubby cheek and then another, but he brushed them away angrily, a renewed determination coming over him. He'd crack that jump by the time the light faded or die in the attempt.

A few other skaters had turned up and he tried to look cool and not exhausted in front of them. They gave him the impetus to summon up more courage or be shown up, and he went up the ramp even faster than he had before, a new recklessness coming over him. This time he yanked the deck onto the ramp with his legs and at least half of it hit the concrete across the chasm. But it wasn't enough, and he fell backwards into the stinking pit and hit his head on an abandoned wooden box. It was this that saved him from serious injury; Otherwise his head would have been cracked open on the unyielding concrete.

Rik struggled to his feet, dazed and shocked, but no one came up to him or even sympathised with his fall. The skaters just continued their rail slides and 180s and 360s and grabs and moves, although no one, he noticed, attempted the jump. Rik stood there, gazing at them bleakly and then returned to his old cycle of dashing up the ramp and pulling back at the last moment. This seemed to last an eternity until Rik’s second wind started running out and he knew it was hopeless, that he'd never succeed in mastering the jump before dark. Still determined not to go home and admit defeat, he felt sick and afraid, knowing he would have to face hours in Cardboard city before first light.

Gradually, as the shadows lengthened, the other skaters went away and Rik was alone again, still trying, but still held him back at the edge while the sweat ran into his eyes, continually blinding him. He realised that by now he must stink as much as the pit he was trying to cross, but he didn't care. Again he got his deck at high speed, again he went up the ramp, again he faulted at the brink.

Then he saw them, standing in a half circle in the gloom. His own desperation concentration and the hooting of boats on the River must have concealed the sound of their arrival. They had closely shaved heads, gaudy clothes, chains, tight torn jeans and were wearing roller boots. All were about 16; All were grinning and mocking him.

‘We been watching you’, said one of the gang who had a spike through his nose. ‘What you doing then?’  
‘It doesn't matter.’   
‘Come on!’   
‘Just skating.’  
‘Why do you keep going up that ramp? You're not getting anywhere,’ said another with a bright orange scarf in his hair.   
‘I'm alright.’  
‘You a nutter?’ asked a third. They began to move in and the one with the spike through his nose took off his roller boots and walked over to Rik.   
‘Let's have a go.’  
 Rik picked up his deck and backed up against a pillar.   
‘come on.’  
‘ I don't let anyone on my deck.’  
‘But you’ll let me.’ He was very close now and Rik knew he was in dead trouble.   
‘No’, he said defiantly.   
‘That's not nice.’  
 The rest of the gang were grinning away now.   
‘I said- no.’  
‘Let's have it.’  
‘Get lost!’  
 He's not nice, is he?’ Said the boy, turning round to his audience who moved in still further. ‘Not nice at all. Now give it here.’   
‘No way.’ Rik was almost crushed into the concrete now, his deck hooked to his chest. ‘Hang on!’

Someone stepped out of the shadows - and then someone else. They were big men, in their thirties, dressed in sweatshirts and jeans with tattoos running down the rippling muscles of their arms. One had a beard, the other, slightly younger, was clean shaven, and it was he who was doing the talking.   
‘What's going on?’   
‘Nothing’ said the roller booter with the spike through his nose.   
‘you having a go at this kid?’  
‘ No.’  
‘ I think you are.’  
‘ Only asked him if I could have a go on his deck.’  
‘Can't you take a hint? He doesn't want you to, does he? Look- he's practically disappearing into the concrete.’  
‘I only asked –‘  
‘yeah. Now clear off!’

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**PART 4**

Both the big men advanced on the roller booters who began to back off. Hastily, the boy with the spike through his nose put his roller boots back on.  
‘All right. All right.’  
‘Move!’  
‘We're going.’

They turned tail and rollered away, making sure they cheered, and cat called from a safe distance. Then they were gone.

‘You look all in, kid’ said the younger of the tattooed man.   
‘And relax, we're not gonna take your board. We were watching you trying your jump. It will come up one day. But you should go home now. It gets dodgy round here late at night.’  
‘Can't go home’, said Rik, emerging from his pillar.   
‘Why not?’ Asked the older man. He spoke with a gravelly voice and didn't seem to be so friendly.   
‘You shouldn't be round here on your own.’  
 ‘Gotta get this right first.’

‘Wait a minute.’ The younger man eyed him curiously ‘why is it so important?’  
‘Just is’  
‘And you can't go home till it's done?’  
‘No.’  
‘I was like you as a kid. Persistent. My name is Harry. This is my mate Dennis. We're not going to stay long- and you shouldn't really be talking to us, not to strangers like- so I'm gonna give you a piece of advice and then clear off. Right?’

Rik stared at them, still clutching his skateboard as wary of them now as he had been of the roller booters. Suddenly he nodded and said, ‘What’s your advice then?’   
‘My kid brother tries jumps like this, real hard ones, and he always takes his deck a long way back. His trick is- more speed and a hard shove before he goes over. That's how he does it. So why don't you give it a try?’

Rik hesitated. Harry made it all sound so easy. His kid brother came across as a right little know it all, and yet…

‘Go on, the longer run gives you more speed, and as you come up the ramp let the deck do the work. That should do it.’ Harry’s voice was warm and enthusiastic, willing Rik to do it, and his enthusiasm was catching. ‘Why don't you give it a whirl?’  
‘Yes,’ said Rik reluctantly.

‘One other thing you need to do, kid.’ Dennis suddenly came to life and for once he didn't sound mocking. ‘Believe in yourself’ he laughed harshly but his eyes were as warm and encouraging as Harry's. ‘Go for it, kid. Remember what he said- and go. Now. Before you change your mind.’

Rik took his skateboard as far back as he could. Then he went for it, feeling the others’ confidence almost as if it was inside him, like a warm glow that was willing him on. He had never travelled so fast on his deck before and he hit the ramp with tremendous speed. But despite this his head remained cool and calm and he did exactly what Harry had told him to do and, when he came to the edge of the abyss, letting the deck do all the work, it zoomed across the gap, striking the concrete fair and square, well away from the edge. He’d done it. He was amazed- but he’d done it.

A burst of applause came not only from Harry and Dennis but from dozens of people he couldn't see, crouched in their newspapers and cardboard and bedding. ‘I did it Harry’ yelled Rik   
‘sure you did.’ Harry was very laidback. ‘Now come round here and do it again. Prove it wasn't a one off.’   
Grinning, Rik came back and did as he was told.

In all Rik successfully made the jump five times, and he gathered more confidence each time, despite the fact that it was nearly dark. It was on the six that he noticed a little group of spectators had built up on the river walk- and standing at the back of them was a familiar figure. It was his dad. When he saw that Rik had seen him he came slowly forward.

‘Dad!’

He looked very haggard as he grabbed Rik by the shoulder. Harry and Dennis grinned and walked slowly away.

‘Where’ve you been? I've looked all over. I've been to every skateboard park-‘  
‘did you see what I did? It was the jump I couldn't do. I did it, dad!

His father took no notice. ‘Do you realise how worried me and your mother have been? Anything could have happened to you.’  
‘I’ve been practising all day,’ said Rik who was hardly listening.  
‘Then these blokes showed me.’ He turned round but saw they’d gone. ‘Watch me now.’

But his father put out a restraining hand as Rik prepared to go into action for the seventh time. ‘You’re coming home.’  
‘Am I in trouble?’  
He paused and then said slowly. ‘It’s our fault as much as yours.’  
‘Wish Mum could see me do the jump.’  
His father suddenly grinned. ‘She will and all’  
‘When?’ Rik was suspicious.’  
‘Tomorrow morning. We’ll take the day off.’  
‘What?’  
‘I’ll drive the whole lot of you up here so you can show that jump to me and Mum and Helen. Would you like that?’  
‘Yeah!’  
‘Come on then.’

Rik stared into the darkness of Cardboard city. A little wind rattled the litter and sent a Coke can rolling and clattering on the pavement. Rik looked at the jump confidently; He knew he could do it again.