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Angela Renaldo never knew if it was an act of homage or of defiance—whether it was the ultimate show of faith in God, or whether it was tantamount to flipping the bird at the Almighty.

Carlo, the eldest of her five brothers, doubtless had an opinion. From his position, planted firmly on the ground, near the bleachers, hands resting on the gray rubber rims of the twin wheels that propelled him along, there could be no doubt. God had enough to keep Himself busy looking after regular folk; He had no time for those who deliberately tempted fate.

Angela, the youngest Renaldo child, loved Carlo; she didn't love all her brothers, but her affection for Carlo was pure. He was the only one who had played catch with her, the only one who had listened to her, the only one who never seemed to mind her being around.

Now, of course, things were different. Now, Carlo didn't play catch with anyone. He just sat in his chair, almost never looking up.

\* \* \* \*

There was nothing to fear, Poppa always said. We'll be so high up that we'll catch God's eye.

The high wire ran for ten meters, three stories above the crowd, below the peaked apex of the big top. Guys along the wire's length anchored it to the ground, preventing it from swaying, minimizing its sagging.

A ladder at one end gave access to the high wire; atop the ladder were three platforms, one above another.

Poppa left the lower platform first, a twenty-kilogram balancing pole in his arms, a shoulder brace supporting an aluminum crossbar that stuck out a meter and a half behind him. The crossbar ended in another shoulder brace, and Franco, the youngest son, donned that, following his father out onto the wire, a wire no thicker than Franco's index finger, his own balancing pole held underhand in front of him.

And then Momma stepped from the middle platform, walking onto the crossbar that was supported by the shoulders of her husband and her son, her own balancing pole gripped in her hands. And on her shoulders rested *another* brace, with a second crossbar stretching behind her.

Poppa and Franco inched their way across, locked together, the length of their crossbar setting the distance between them. Neither man looked down at the ground, nor up at Momma, whose weight was distributed across their shoulders. Step, and step again. In unison. An incremental dance.

Once Franco was far enough from the lower platform, Dominic started across the high wire behind him, a third crossbar supported by his shoulders. Antonio donned the shoulder brace at the opposite end of that crossbar, and followed Dominic onto the wire.

Mario, on the middle platform, stepped off, making his way along the crossbar supported by Antonio and Dominic, just as his mother had done for the one supported by Poppa and Franco. When Mario was far enough out, he put the yoke from his mother's crossbar on his shoulders.

Below, the crowd was spellbound—ten thousand mouths agape, staring at the spectacle of six people balancing on the high wire, four on the bottom supporting two more above.

And then—

And then it was Angela's turn.

Angela, the only daughter, the youngest, stepped gingerly off the highest of the three platforms and inched her way across the upper crossbar, supported between her Momma and Mario.

Angela had her own twenty-kilo balancing beam, and—

The audience is amazed.

—and a metal chair.

She's holding a metal chair, its four legs joined by thin metal bars at the base in an open square, and she proceeds to balance this square perfectly on the crossbeam, and then—

The audience goes nuts. They've never seen anything like this. They can't believe it's possible; it defies all reason, all physics—

And then Angela climbs *onto* the chair, still holding her balance beam, and suddenly, incredibly, fantastically, the seven-person pyramid is complete: four members of her family on the bottom, two more in the next layer, and her, little Angela, balancing on a chair supported by a crossbar no thicker around than her tiny wrist, above them all, the whole incredible thing a feat of engineering at least as great as its namesakes at Giza.

The cheering of the crowd is thunderous, tumultuous.

It's almost enough to drown out the pounding of Angela's heart.

\* \* \* \*

Angela was fifteen years old, blond, thin—but not too thin. Poppa said the audience liked to see curves on a girl: give the divorced fathers something to look at while their kids enjoyed the spectacle. Sometimes, thought Angela, Poppa looked at her in that way, too.

He must have known it was wrong, she thought. She didn't get regular schooling—the circus tutor taught her, five hours a day if they were in a jurisdiction that required that much; less, if the show had traveled to places with laxer rules—but she heard tell from kids who visited the circus of the kinds of things they were learning in normal schools. Things about how to protect yourself; things about making choices for the future.

But Angela had no choice; her future was preordained. She was a Renaldo—one of the Amazing Aerial Renaldos, the star attraction of Delmonico's Razzle and Dazzle Circus. And the Renaldos were a family act; none of Poppa's children had ever left. Instead, they trained day after day, from as soon as they could walk, learning not to misstep (lest Poppa slam their ankles with a stick), learning not to fear heights, learning to move with grace, until they were ready to tackle the high wire, to do stunts far above the ground, with no net—never a net, except when they were in New York, where a state law required one; Poppa said he was never so ashamed in his life as when they performed in New York.

No, the Renaldo kids had to stay. Poppa needed them. Who else could he trust? Who else could any of them trust? A trick like this, it required family.

\* \* \* \*

They did the pyramid every day—and every day it terrified Angela. She'd position the chair just so, balancing it perfectly on the brace—for the only alternative to perfection was death—and then clamber up. She could feel the chair sway back and forth as she stood up on it, but the pyramid always held, a pyramid of flesh and metal, fifteen meters above the cheering crowd.

She hated every moment of it—hated the way her heart pounded, like a jackhammer. Hated feeling as though bats were gyrating in her stomach. Hated the overwhelming fear that she would fall, that she would end up like Carlo, who was watching and not watching far, far below.

She couldn't leave; she couldn't run away. She had to stay, and not just because it was a family act. She had to stay to look after Carlo. Franco, Dominic, Mario, and Antonio made little time for Carlo; he was an unpleasant reminder of what could go wrong. And Momma and Poppa felt too much guilt to really love him. So Angela took care of him, loving him, and fearing that she might end up like him.

\* \* \* \*

The being came to her in a dream, as all beings whose visits could never be proven must.

He wasn't as she'd expected. Oh, she knew who he was—who he must be; the Renaldos were Catholic, and Sunday mornings they always found a mass to attend. Each week a different city, a different church but, presumably, the same God.

Yes, she knew who this must be. But he looked unlike any drawing of him she'd ever seen. Indeed, he looked like a clown. But not Yuri or Pablo or Gunter or any of the other clowns who worked here at

Delmonico's; it was no clown she had ever seen before. But his face was painted white, except for rims of red makeup—no, no, of naked red skin—around his dark, burning eyes.

Some children who came to the circus were frightened of clowns, their parents dragging them despite wailed protests to see the harlequins, as if the parents knew better, as if they were sure the fear their children felt was nonsensical. But children *knew* .

“Don't be frightened,” said the figure. He moved around the room. Angela, lying in bed, wearing flannel pajamas, a sheet pulled up to her chin, couldn't see his feet, but she knew that they weren't encased in giant, floppy shoes; the *click* of his footfalls made that clear. “I've come to help you.” The voice was smooth, and with an accent that didn't so much sound foreign as it sounded *ancient* .

“Help me how?” asked Angela.

“You live in fear, don't you?” He paused. “Fear of falling, no?”

“Yes.”

“I fell once,” said the clown. “It's not as bad as you might think.”

“It was that bad for Carlo.”

“That's because he refused me.”

Angela felt her eyes go wide. “What?”

“I offered Carlo what I'm about to offer you; he turned me down.”

Angela knew she should abjure the being, but ... but...

He'd said he wanted to help.

“Help me how?” she said again, her voice small, wavering, uncertain.

“I could make sure that you never fall,” said the clown. “Make sure that you will never hit the ground, never end up like Carlo.”

“You could do that?”

The clown cocked his head. “I can do anything, but...”

“But what?”

“There would be a small price, of course.”

“I don't have any money,” said Angela. Poppa said he was saving her money, her share of the circus take, until she turned eighteen.

“It's not money I want,” said the clown.

For a horrible instant, he was looking at her the way Poppa sometimes did, as though he were hungry all

over, eyes seeing beneath her clothes.

“Not that...” she said, softly. “I ... I'm a virgin.”

The clown roared with laughter, a torrent of molten metal. “I don't want your flesh,” he said.

“Then—then what?”

“Only your soul.”

Ah, thought Angela, if that was all—

“No tricks?” said Angela.

The clown looked sad; clowns often did. “If you are true to me, I promise, no tricks.”

\* \* \* \*

Two years passed. The Amazing Aerial Renaldos formed their pyramid another seven hundred times. Angela had come to enjoy doing it; now that the fear was gone—now that she knew she would never fall—she could relax and actually enjoy the applause.

And, yes, she realized, when you're not afraid, the applause was wonderful. Poppa had been no older than she was now when he had first heard it, back in the Old Country. She understood, finally, why it captivated him so, why he had to hear it every day of his life. When you had no fear, it was a wonderful, incredible thing.

And Angela really did have no fear of falling, and yet—

When she was younger, she had wedged herself against the wall whenever she slept; she had to, or else she would wake up in a cold sweat, arms flailing, certain she was plummeting to her doom.

Now, she no longer had that fear, but...

But, each night, as she lay awake, trying to get to sleep, she wondered if she had given up too much, if bargaining away her soul had been a mistake. She still went to mass every Sunday, the family finding a new wheelchair-accessible church in the Yellow Pages. She'd seen hundreds of Jesuses nailed to hundreds of crosses above hundreds of pulpits; she used to stare into the face—whatever visage the artist had given the Son of God this week—but now she couldn't meet his eyes.

She couldn't meet him, period. Her soul belonged to another.

She was seventeen, going on eighteen, and—

Going on eighteen...

Yes, she thought.

Yes, indeed. That was it.

But how to plead her case?

\* \* \* \*

Another day; another performance. A crowd, like every crowd—thousands of excited children, thousands of parents who looked fatigued after hours of trying to win prizes for their kids on the midway, of lining up for the roller coaster and Ferris wheel. Angela paid no attention to the individual faces; the Renaldo family was a single entity, and it played to them all collectively.

She positioned the chair on the crossbeam supported by Mario and Momma, lead weights in the square base helping it to balance on the beam, and then she herself stood upon it—a girl, atop six other people, high above the ground. The crowd cheered, a myriad of voices raised in unison.

It was intoxicating, the cheers—enough to quell, at least for the time being, the unease that haunted her, enough to—

No!

God, no.

Angela felt the chair moving under her. Dominic, in the base of the pyramid, had lost his footing, just for an instant. He had shifted left; Mario, on his shoulders, had shifted right to try to compensate. Antonio, he moved right, too, but perhaps a centimeter too far. And Momma, feeling the pull on her yoke but unable to look behind her, she let out a small yelp—never a scream, not from one of the Renaldo family, the fearless, the brave. The metal chair leaned far back.

*Giving the bird to the Almighty...*

Angela's heart was pounding, just as it had before she'd made the deal, before she'd been protected. Adrenaline surged within her.

The chair teetered, and, for an instant, it seemed as though it might right itself.

But no.

No.

The chair resumed going backward. She felt it come free from the crossbar between Mario and Momma's shoulders, felt it come free from her own feet.

Angela fell backward, too, falling separately from the chair, which, she imagined, must be turning end over end.

Time was attenuated; seconds became eternities.

Angela was indeed falling, too, but—

The adrenaline continued to surge.

She felt something happening to her body, her face. Her features felt as though they were contorting, and—

No. No, that wasn't it. They weren't contorting.

They were *changing* .

Her face was drawing out, into a muzzle. She could feel it. Flat nosed, wide-nostrilled; an animal's face.

And her ears—

Her ears were *spreading* , growing larger. She couldn't see them, but she could feel them.

And her arms, her fingers—

*That* she could see...

Her fingers were elongating. Each segment was growing, each phalanx extending. And, as they grew, something spread between them, gossamer thin at first then growing more substantial, a membrane of thick, rough skin, stretched between the bones of the hand.

Wings. Wings like those of a bat.

He'd promised her she'd never hit the ground, promised her that she'd be spared the same fate as Carlo.

If her hands had become bat hands, then her face must have become the face of a bat—the muzzle, the ears, doubtless even the shape of her eyes.

Air was flowing by her like transparent jelly; she could feel it pushing her enlarged ears back against her skull.

At last the wings were beginning to catch the air, beginning to break her fall. She looked down. She was still wearing her usual get-up, the tiny pink dress and the gold lamé top. More like a ballerina, really, and—

And now she was dancing on air.

She brought her arms forward, pushing against the air with the wings—*her* wings—gaining altitude instead of losing it.

Below, the chair hit the ground, metal legs twisting and breaking. The crash, with her attenuated time-sense, seemed low and warbling.

Surely her metamorphosis would be temporary. Surely once she was safely on the ground, she would regain her normal proportions; surely her youthful beauty would be restored. After all, he'd promised no tricks...

She beat her wings again, rising higher still. The rest of her family was now below her. They'd managed to keep from falling, thank God—

God.

The one she had prayed to in all those different churches.

The one she'd turned her back on.

Angela had never seen the pyramid from above before. The Great Wallendas had invented the seven-man pyramid in 1947; when their pyramid collapsed during a show in Detroit in 1962, two members of their troupe were killed and a third—like poor Carlo—had been paralyzed. But if the Wallendas had invented it, and the Guerreros had refined it, the Renaldos had perfected it. Even without its apex, it was still a sight to behold—a thin wire supporting four people, with two more on their shoulders, three stories above the crowd—

A crowd that was screaming, the sounds low and drawn out. And pointing, hands moving in slow motion.

She beat her wings once more, gaining even more height. Although she'd never done it before, flying to her was now like walking the wire—knowledge ingrained, no thought required, her body responding perfectly.

Up.

And up again.

She'd have preferred to become a bird—a lark, perhaps, or a jay. But *he* was a creature of the night; the gifts he bestowed were crepuscular, nocturnal.

A bat, then.

A bat who would fly to safety; a bat who would never fall.

Who could fly to safety...

She had sold her soul to the devil, and yet—

And yet she was a minor. Delmonico's Circus traveled to many jurisdictions. In some, the age of majority was eighteen; in others, nineteen; in others still, it was twenty-one.

But nowhere was it seventeen, the age she was now.

Or fifteen, the age she had been then.

Surely, this deal she'd made—this bargain with Satan—surely it could not be legally binding. Surely she could get out of it. And when would she have a better chance to make her case? If she flew high enough, surely she would catch God's eye, just as Poppa had always said.

God *was* forgiving—whether mass was in English, Italian, or Latin, they all said that. God would forgive her, take her back, protect her. She had but to confess her sins within his hearing.

Another stroke of her wings.

And another.

Of course, she was still under the big top. She couldn't just go up to escape. Rather, she had to go down.

Just *nottoo* far down...



She folded her wings against her body, letting herself fall, confident that she could gain height again with another beat of the leathery membranes. It was an exhilarating fall, a thrilling fall, excitement rushing through her, a frisson passing over her. Her time sense contracted again, to let her enjoy the rush, experience the headlong, overwhelming pull of gravity, what she'd feared for so long now what she craved the most.

She had no doubt that she could stop her fall before she hit—he had promised, after all, and she wasn't the first to have made a bargain with him. Thousands—millions—before her must have made similar deals; even if she herself didn't intend to keep it, he would have to hold up his end as long as he thought he would eventually get her soul.

The screams from the crowd had risen in pitch as her time sense had returned to normal, but now they were growing deeper again as she neared the ground—close enough now to see the spiral galaxies of sawdust here and there, the circular pits of elephant footprints, the cloud-freckles caused by a spilled bag of popcorn.

She swooped now, heading out the great tent's entrance, out into the circus ground proper, out into the stinging light of day.

And then, at once, she began to rise higher and higher and higher and higher, beating her wings furiously, gaining as much altitude as she could. Soon she was far above the big top. She longed to look down, to see the fairgrounds from this new perspective, see the trailers, the animal cages, the horizontal circle of the merry-go-round, the vertical circle of the Ferris wheel. But she couldn't. She had to concentrate, just like when she was on the high wire, allowing no distractions, no stray thoughts.

Another beat of the wings, flying higher and higher and—

*Pain.*

Incredible pain—as though she'd hit a sheet of glass, hit the ceiling of the world.

*No farther,* said a voice in her head, a voice with a strange accent, a voice like liquid metal.

But she had to go higher—she had to catch the eye of God. She beat her wings again, and felt her face flatten—but not back into its original, human form. No, it was pressing against a transparency; there was no way to fly higher.

*It's too close to Him,* said the same voice, answering her unasked question.

She wanted to beat her fists against the transparency, but she had no fists—only elongated fingers supporting membranous wings. If she could just get God's attention—

*You're not trying to cheat me, are you?* said the splashing metallic voice in her head.

Her breathing was ragged from fighting so hard to break through the transparency. “No,” she gasped. “No, I'm not.”

*I have a confession,* he said. *I lied when I said Carlo had turned me down; I lie a lot. He did take the deal, but he, too, tried to break it.*

“And so you let him fall?” The words were forced out; her lungs were raw.

*He didn't fall, said the voice. He jumped. He thought if he jumped, then the deal would be broken. Oh, yes, he would die, but his soul would go up, not down. A pause. The irony was too much for me to resist: for one who had come so close to touching the heavens to now not even be able to stand—a perfect living hell.*

“No,” said Angela, the words a hoarse whisper. “No, please—not that. Don't make me fall.”

*Of course not, splashed the voice. Of course not.*

Angela breathed a sigh of relief.

*For you, something different.*

She was hit by an explosion of hot air, like the exhalation of a blast furnace, air so hot that sweat evaporated from her skin as soon as it beaded up. The wind slapped her like an open-palmed hand, pushing her down, down, down. Its impact had slammed her wings against her body, had flattened her little pink skirt against her thighs, had, she was sure, plastered her bat-ears flat against her skull once more. She tried to unfurl the wings, spreading her arms, splaying her protracted fingers, fingers as long as her legs. But the wind continued to blow, hot as hell, and she found herself tumbling, head over heels. Instinct took over, and instead of trying to extend her arms, she drew them in now to protect her face, her torso. Soon she was only a few meters above the ground, a ball of tightly wound limbs being pushed laterally through the air.

No, no. She had to fight her instincts. It was like being on the high wire. Do what your eyes tell you to do, and you'll fall for sure; the human mind wasn't made for such heights, such perspectives. She forced her arms to unfurl, forced the wings to try once more to catch the air, and—

Such pain, pain so sharp it made her wish her spinal cord was severed.

The wings were burning now, sheets of flame attached to her elongated, bony fingers. She could feel the membranes crisping, reducing to ash. Her long digits raked the air, but there was nothing much spread between them now to catch it—just a few singed and tattered pieces of skin. Incredibly, her clothes remained intact—or, perhaps not so incredibly, for all circus clothing had to be flame retardant...

She curled her sticklike fingers, as if clawing for purchase—but there was nothing but air, blisteringly hot, a wind from Hades propelling her along past the freak show, haunted faces looking up, past the arcade, children agape, past the fortune teller's tent, the line of suckers somehow parting just in time to permit her passage barely above their heads, farther and farther still, toward—

—toward the Ferris wheel, it rotating in one plane, she tumbling head over heels in a perpendicular plane.

She'd thought for sure that she would slam into the spokes of the Ferris wheel, knocking herself unconscious, but that didn't happen. Instead, she found herself reaching out instinctively with her feet, and hanging like the bat she'd become from one of the spokes, and—

*No.*

No, he could not be that cruel, that wicked...

But, if he could not, who could be?

It was as though her ankles were pierced through, like Christ's, and yet not like Christ's, for hers were joined now by a small axle, a spindle upon which she hung, rotating along with the great wheel, always facing down, pointing head-first toward the ground.

She thought briefly of a butterfly, pinned on a collector's sheet. He was a collector, too, of course...

The wheel rotated on, and she hung from it, a macabre bauble, with skeletal fingers that once had supported flight membranes now hanging limp, like the boughs of a dead willow.

He had won, of course. Angela imagined he always won—and, she supposed, always would win. And, as she hung upside down, a pendant, she thought of her Poppa, and her fear of falling, and of failing him. No, things hadn't turned out as she'd hoped, but, still, this wasn't so bad; the old fears were indeed dead.

The wheel continued to turn. She felt sure it would always turn; no fireman could cut her free, no ladder would ever reach her. She rather suspected that the devil did not leave fingerprints, that she—indeed, the whole damned wheel, and its other occupants, whom she caught only horrid glimpses of—could only be seen when the lighting was just so, when it was not quite dawn, or just past dusk, when you weren't really looking.

She was up high now, the wheel having rotated her to her topmost position, the zenith of the cycle, the pinnacle of her punishment. Here, facing down, looking at the ground, at the hard, unrelenting earth—the crust over the underworld, the veneer over the furnace from which the wind that had propelled her along had doubtless come—here, it was frightening, for if the spindle broke, if her ankles slipped off the axle, an axle greased with her own blood, she would plummet face first to the hard, hard ground.

But that wouldn't happen. It wouldn't ever happen.

The wheel continued its rotation, with Angela always pointing down. At the nadir of the cycle she was indeed rather close to the ground, the ground that had shattered Carlo's spine, the ground that she had feared for so long.

But then she started upward again.

Had Poppa seen any of it? Had Momma? Had Carlo looked up long enough to see her transformation, her fall, her flight, her capture? Or had it all happened somewhere outside of human perception; certainly, she, just nine when it had occurred, hadn't seen anything unusual when Carlo fell—*jumped*—from the high wire.

Poppa would now have to do what he'd always feared—bring an outsider into the act, take on someone new to be the pinnacle of the pyramid.

She hoped whoever it was would look after Carlo.

The wheel took her down once more, bringing her close again to the ground.

It really was a comfort knowing that she was never going to hit it.

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