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A Fall From Grace

Those years the children – in Brittany, Bordeaux and the Loire Valley, even as far away as the Low Countries, Andalusia and the Riviera – missed their acrobats. In the Circus the dingy wild animals, the clowns, illusionists and freaks remained, but earthbound. Gravity held the Circus, and the mud, the stench and the poverty were more evident. The magic-makers, the sequinned stars that flashed and poised and flew and sparkled through the smoke above the watchers' heads, the death-defiers who snatched the Circus from the mud and turned it into flowers and frissons, were gone.

Gone away to the strange camp on the Champs de Mars where they were needed to help Monsieur E. build his beautiful tower. Oh, the local residents might tremble in their beds with fear at the fall from heaven; intellectuals and artists might protest that 'Paris is defaced by this erection'. But the Circus people, the artists of body and philosophers of balance (with wild libidinous laughs at so unfortunate and accurate a turn of phrase), they understood; the acrobats – without words and with a regular fifty centimes an hour – knew. They alone could comprehend the vision. They knew in the marrow of their bones and the tissue of their muscles the precise tension – that seven million threaded rods, and two and a half million bolts could, of course, hold fifteen thousand steel girders in perfect balance. With sinews and nerves and cartilage they did it nightly: that tension and harmony against gravity was their stock-in-trade. Their great delight was that Monsieur E., a gentleman, a scientist, knew it too, and knew that they knew

and needed them to translate his vision. High above Paris they swooped and caracoled, rejoicing in the delicacy and power of that thrust, upwards, away from the pull of the ground. And so they left their Circuses, sucked towards Paris by a dream that grew real under their authority – and for two years the acrobats and trapeze artists and highwire dancers and trampolinists abandoned their musical illusions to participate in historical, scientific reality.

Eva and Louise too came to Paris. Not that they were allowed to mount up ever higher on the winches, hanging beside the cauldrons which heated the bolts white hot; not that they were permitted to balance on the great girders, shifting their weight so accurately to swing the heavy strands of lace into place. Their skill, as it happens, was not in doubt, but they were women. They drifted northwards, almost unthinkingly, with their comrades and colleagues, simply because the power of Monsieur E.'s vision was magnetic and all the acrobats were drawn inwards by it and Eva and Louise were acrobats. And they lived with the other acrobats on the Champs de Mars, poised between aspiration and reality, and the city of Paris went to their heads and they were, after a few months, no longer who they had been when they came.

Their Circus had been a disciplined nursery for such children. Born to it, they had known its rhythms, its seductions and its truths from the beginning. Precious to their parents because identical twins are good showbusiness, they were only precious inasmuch as they worked and made a show. With each lurching move of the travelling caravans they had had to re-create the magic from the mud. Only after the hours of sweat and struggle with the tent, with the law, with the unplanned irregularities of topography, and with costumes which had become muddy or damp or creased or torn – only then were they able to ascend the snaking ladders and present the New Creation, where fear and relief were held in perfect tension; where the immutable laws of nature – gravity and pendula arches, weight, matter and velocity – were apparently defied

but in fact bound, utilized, respected and controlled; where hours of dreary practice, and learning the capacities and limits of self and other, where the disciplines of technique and melodrama and precision were liberated suddenly and briefly into glamour and panache. And still were only a complete part of a delicately balanced and complete whole which included the marionette man, the clowns, the seedy lions and the audience itself.

But Paris, and a Paris in which they could not do what they were trained to do, was a holiday, a field day, where the rewards were quick and detached from the labour. As the tower grew so did Eva and Louise, but the tower was anchored and they were free-floating. They learned to cross the laughing river and seek out the *boîtes* of Montmartre. Here, their white knickers and petticoats frothed easily in the hot water now available to them, they learned to dance the new dance – the Cancan. Here their muscularity, their training, their athleticism stood them in good stead. They were a hit: with the management who paid them to come and show off round bosoms, shapely legs, pink cheeks and bleached petticoats; with the clientele whose oohs and ahhs were more directly appreciative than those of any Circus audience.

Yes, the beauty and the energy of them as they danced and pranced and watched the tower grow and watched their comrades labour upwards. They walked under the spreading legs of the tower and laughed at the jokes called down to them; they ran among the tents and teased the labourers; they turned the odd trick here and there for affection and amusement, although they could get better paid across the river where the rich men lived. Monsieur E., coming each day to see how his dream was developing, soon learned their names and would stop and smile for them, and they smiled back, arms entwined with each other, but eyes open for everything that was going on in the world. And they reassured him of his beauty, his virility, his potency, all of which he was manifesting in his tower which broke the rules of nature by the authority of

science and the power of men. One day he told them, for the simple pleasure of saying it, for he knew they were simple girls and simply would not understand, that when his tower was finished it would weigh less than the column of air that contained it. The girls laughed and wanted to know why then it would not fly away, and he laughed too, indulgently, and explained, paternally, about displacement. But from then on the idea of the tower simply, ooh-la-la, flying away with them was fixed in Eva and Louise's minds and it made them laugh because of course they knew that it was impossible.

And walking in the streets and parks they learned new styles of dressing and new styles of living; and their eyes were wide and bright with delight. Having little to do all day they wandered here and there, through boulevards and over bridges. In the flower markets they were overcome by the banks of sweetness, the brilliance of colours; in the antique-shop windows they saw the bright treasures from China and Egypt, from far away and long ago; and in the cafés they smelled new smells and heard raffish conversations about things they had not even dreamed of. And everywhere they went, because they looked so alike and smiled so merrily and were always together, people came to recognize them and smile at them, and they felt loved and powerful and free as they had never felt before. All Paris was their friend and the city itself was their Paradise.

They were a hit too in the *Salons des Femmes*, where the strange rich women, who dressed like men and caressed Eva and Louise like men too, were delighted by their health and energy and innocence. And by their professional willingness to show off. Louise enjoyed these evenings when they drank tiny glasses of jewel-coloured drinks and performed – dances, tumblers, stage acrobatics – and were petted and sent home in carriages. But Eva felt nervous and alarmed; and also drawn, excited, elated and it was not just the coloured concoctions that made her giggle all the way back to the Champs de Mars and swear that they would not go again. In the dark warmth of the bed they shared, Eva's arms would wind round Louise as

they had done every night since they were conceived, but her fingers crackled with new electricity and she wondered and wanted and did not want to know what she wanted.

And of course they did go again, because it was Paris and the Spanish chestnut flowers stood out white on the streets like candles and the air was full of the scent of them, giddy, dusty, lazy. At night the city was sparkling and golden and high above it the stars prickled, silver and witty. And Monsieur E.'s tower, taut and poised was being raised up to join the two together. In the hot perfumed houses they were treated as servants, as artists and as puppy dogs, all together, and it confused them, turned their heads and enchanted them. One evening, watching them, the Contessa della Colubria said to her hostess, 'Well, Celeste, I think they won't last long, those two. They'll become tawdry and quite spoiled. But they are very charming.' 'I don't know,' Celeste said, 'they are protected. By their work of course, but not that; it must be primal innocence to love, to be one with another person from the beginning, with no desires, no consciousness.' 'Innocence? Do you think so? Perhaps it is the primal sin, to want to stay a child, to want to stay inside the first embrace, the first cell.' The Contessa's eyes glittered like her emeralds. 'Do you think it might be interesting to find out?' Celeste turned away from her slightly, watching Eva and Louise across the salon; she said quickly, 'Ah, *ma mie*, leave them be. They are altogether too young for you to bother with.' The Contessa laughed, 'But, Celeste, you know how beguiled I am by innocence. It attracts me.'

She was mysterious, the Contessa della Colubria, strange and fascinating; not beautiful *mais très chic*, clever, witty, and fabulously wealthy. She had travelled, apparently everywhere, but now lived alone in Paris, leaving her husband in his harsh high castle in Tuscany and challenging the bourgeois gossips with her extravagance, her outré appearance and the musky sensation of decadence. Rumour followed her like a shadow, and like a shadow had no clear substance. It was known that she collected the new paintings, and Egyptian curios and

Chinese statues; it is said that she also collected books which respectable people would not sully their homes with, that she paid fabulous sums to actresses for ritual performances, that she slid along the side of the pit of the unacceptable with a grace that was uncanny. But she had created a social space for herself in which the fear, the feeling, that she was not nice, not quite safe, became unimportant.

She took Eva and Louise home in her carriage that night. Sitting between them, her arms around each neck, her legs stretched out, her long narrow feet braced against the floor, her thin face bland, only her elongated ophidian eyes moving. The sharp jewel she wore on her right hand cut into Louise's neck, but she did not dare to say anything. The Contessa told them stories.

'You see the stars,' she said, and they were bright above the river as the carriage crossed over it. 'Long ago, long long ago, it was thought that each star was a soul, the soul of a beautiful girl, too lovely to die, too bright to be put away in the dark for ever. The wild gods of those times did not think that so much beauty should be wasted, you see. Look at that star up there, that is Cassiopeia, she was a queen and so lovely that she boasted she was more beautiful than the Nereides, the sea-nymphs, and they in their coral caves were so jealous and angry that they made Neptune their father punish her. But the other gods were able to rescue her and throw her up to heaven and make her safe and bright.'

'And those stars there, those are Ariadne's crown; it was given to her by Bacchus who was the god of wine and passion, not an orderly god, not a good god at all, but fierce and beautiful. Ariadne loved Theseus first, who was a handsome young man, and she rescued him from a terrible monster called the Minotaur who lived in a dark maze and ate people. Ariadne gave her lover a thread so he could find his way out and a sword so he could kill the monster. But he wasn't very grateful, as men so seldom are, and he left her on an island called Naxos.'

'I know those ones,' said Louise, pointing, breaking the soft

flow of the Contessa's voice with an effort, 'those ones up there, those are the Seven Sisters who preferred to be together.'

'The Pleiades, yes, how clever you are. And you see that one of them is dimmer than the others. That is Meriope, and her star is faint because she married, she married a mortal, but the rest are bright and shiny.'

Louise's neck hurt from the Contessa's sharp ring. She felt tired and uneasy. She wanted to sit with Eva, their arms around each other, tight and safe. She did not understand the Contessa. But Eva liked the stories, liked the arm of the Contessa resting warm against her skin, admired the sparkling of emeralds and eyes and was lulled, comfortable and snug, in the smooth carriage.

The balance shifted. They knew about this. As Eva leaned outwards and away, away from the centre, then Louise had to move lower, heavier, tighter, to keep the balance. As Louise pulled inward, downward, Eva had to stretch up and away to keep the balance. On the tightrope they knew this; but it was a new thing for them. There was another way, of course; their parents had had an act based on imbalance, based on difference, based on his heavy grounding and her light flying, the meeting-place of the weighty and the floating. But they had not learned it. Even in the gravity-free place where they had first learned to dance together, in the months before they were born, it had been turning in balance, in precise sameness. It was the poise of symmetry that they knew about; the tension of balance. And it was foolhardy always to change an act without a safety net and with no rehearsals. They did not know how to discuss it. The difference was painful, a tightening, a loss of relaxation, of safety. The acrobat who was afraid of falling would fall. They knew that. But also the acrobat who could not believe in the fall would fall. They knew that too.

The Contessa took them to a smart *pâtisserie* on the Champs-Élysées. She bought them frothing hot chocolate, and they drank it with glee, small moustaches of creamy foam forming on their pink upper lips. They were laughing and

happy. 'Which of you is the older,' she asked, 'which was born first?' 'We don't know,' said Eva and giggled. 'No one knows. We tumbled out together and the woman who was supposed to be with my mother was drunk and she got muddled up and no one knows.' 'If they did it would not matter,' said Louise. 'Our mother says we were born to the trade, we dived out with elegance.' Eva and Louise were pleased with themselves today, with the distinction of their birth, with their own inseparability, with the sweetness of the chocolate and the lightness of the little apricot tartlets. The smart folk walked by on the pavement outside, but they were inside and as pretty as any grand lady. And in the bright spring sunlight the Contessa was not strange and dangerous, she was beautiful and glamorous, she was like something from a fairy story who had come into their lives and would grant them wishes and tell them stories.

The Contessa came in her new toy, her automobile, roaring and dangerous, to seek them out on the Champs de Mars. She was driven up in her bright new chariot, and stopped right between the legs of the tower. The acrobats swarming up and down, labouring, sweating and efficient, swung aside to make space for her, as she uncoiled herself from the seat and walked among them. And she knew Monsieur E. and gave him a kiss and congratulated him on his amazing edifice. Louise did not like to see her there, but she invited them into her car and they rode off to the admiring whistles of their friends. 'In Russia,' the Contessa told them, 'the people ride in sleighs across the snow and the wolves howl at them, but it does not matter because they are snugly wrapped in great furs and the horses pull them through the dark, because it is dark all winter in Russia, and the motion of the sleigh is smooth and the furs are warm and they fall asleep while the horses run and the night is full of vast silences and strange noises so that they hang bells on the horses' bridles, and all the nobility speak in French, so that people will know how civilized they are, and not mistake them for the bearded warriors who live in snow houses beyond the northern stars. And even the women of

these people wear high leather boots and ride with the men on short-legged, fierce horses. They ride so well up in that strange land that ordinary people have come to believe that they and their horses are one: they call them Centaurs, horses with human heads and trunks and arms. Long, long ago there were real Centaurs who roamed in Anatolia and knew strange things and would sometimes take little babies and train them in their ways and they would grow up wise and strong and fit to be rulers, because the Centaurs taught them magic, but for ordinary people the Centaurs were very dangerous because they were neither people nor animals, but monsters.'

And they rode in the Contessa's car round the Bois and she took them back to her house and taught them how to sniff up a white powder through slender silver straws and then they could see green-striped tigers prowling across the Contessa's garden with eyes like stars, and butterflies ten feet across with huge velvet legs that fluttered down from the trees like falling flowers. And when they went home they found they could believe that Monsieur E.'s tower could fly, and they could fly on it, away away to a warm southern place, but they did not want to leave Paris, so they waved to the tower and they were laughed at for being drunk, and they did not tell anyone about the white powder.

One day at a party, in a new beautiful strange house where they had been invited to do a little show, the Contessa sought out Eva for one brief moment when she was alone and said, 'I have a pretty present for you.' 'Yes, madame.' 'See it is earrings.' She held out her long, thin, dry hand, the palm flat and open, and there was a pair of earrings, two perfect little gold apples. 'These are golden apples from the garden of the Hesperides; Juno, the queen of all the Gods, gave them to Jupiter, the king of all the Gods, for a wedding present. They grow in a magical garden beyond the edge of the world and they are guarded by the four beautiful daughters of Atlas who carries the world on his back. And around the tree they grow on lies a huge horrible dragon who never sleeps. So you see

they are very precious.' Eva looked at them, amused; she had little interest in their value, but liked their prettiness. 'One for me and one for Louise, madame?' she asked. 'No, both are for you. But you will have to come by yourself one evening to my house and collect them.' 'But madame, we always go together, you know that.' 'Eva,' smiled the Contessa, 'I'll tell you a little story: once there was a woman and she was expecting a baby, and she wished and wished good things for her baby and especially that it would grow up to have good manners. Well, her pregnancy went on and on, and on and on, and still the baby was not born. And none of the wise doctors could make any sense of it. And in the end, ever more pregnant, after many many years, as a very ancient lady she died of old age. So the doctors who were of course very curious opened her up and they found two little ladies, quite more than middle-aged, sitting beside the birth door saying with perfect good manners, "After you," and, "No, no, my dear, after *you*". *C'est très gentil*, but what a waste, what a waste, don't you think?' Eva giggled at the silly story, covering her mouth with her hand like a child. She did not care about the earrings but she knew that if she went to the Contessa she would find out, she would find out what it was she did not know, what it was that made her nervous and elated. She could feel too the weight of Louise, the weight of Louise inward on both of them, the weight swinging out of balance. She had to correct that inward weight with an outward one. Had to remake the balance, the inward weight with an outward one. Also she wanted to know, and if she went she would know that and something else perhaps.

'Yes, madame,' she said, 'yes, I will come.'

And the Contessa smiled.

She did not know how to tell Louise. She could not find any words for what and why; they have never needed words before, they have not rehearsed any. Next Tuesday she would go to visit the Contessa. This week she had to find words to tell Louise. Instead she drank. Louise, who knew she was

excited but could not feel why, could not understand, could not pull Eva back to her, drank too. Their comrades on the Champs de Mars thought it was funny to see the girls drunk; they plied them with brandy and wine. Drunk, Eva and Louise showed off, they performed new tricks, leaping higher, tumbling, prancing; they do not stumble or trip, they cannot stumble or trip. They are beautiful and skilful. This is their place. The men clap for them, urging them on. In the space under the tower they dance and frolic. They start to climb, swinging upwards; from each other's hands they ascend. Somersaulting, delighting, they follow the upward thrust of the tower; its tension, its balance is theirs. The voices of the men fade below. Once, as they rise above seven hundred feet, they falter. 'It's your fault,' says Eva, 'you lean in too hard.' 'No,' says Louise, 'it is you, you are too far out.' But they find their rhythm again, trusting the rhythm of the tower that Monsieur E. and their hard-worked colleagues below have structured for them. On the other side of the river they can see Paris, spread out for them now, the islands in the Seine floating on the dark water, the gay streets shining with golden lights. Above, the sky is clear: the moon a bright dying fingernail, the constellations whizzing in their glory. The tower seems to sway, sensitive to their need. It is not quite finished, but as they approach the top they are higher than they have ever been, they are climbing and swinging and swooping upwards. Suddenly both together they call out to one another, 'It was my fault, I'm sorry.' The rhythm is flowing now, their wrists linked, trusting, knowing, perfect. It is their best performance ever. Down below the men still watch, although it is too dark to see. They know they will never see another show like this. They know these two are stars. They make no error. They do not fall. They fly free, suddenly, holding hands, falling stars, a moment of unity and glory.

But it is three hundred yards to the ground and afterwards no one is able to sort out which was which or how they could be separated.