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Golden Years

WHEN I PICTURE the city now, I see it from overhead. Bird's-eye. A long, lonely aerial view looking down onto orange clay rooftiles curved like the shells of snails. The city shrinks, small enough to be covered with a palm—my palm, my twin brother's. We both seem to remember those years from above, as if we were often sailing out over the streets that opened up into squares, the ice skating rink dusted blue, that high clocktower with its windows sealed shut, the bridge a long spine of black bone straining across the bread-colored water. And I guess it's true that the city rises, tiered, made up of slopes and heights, spires and hilltops and towers—all these high places you could climb, to get a better view of things, and I guess it's also true that I was always climbing them.

I remember once wandering home drunk and coming upon a bit of scaffolding along the back wall of a church and starting to climb it without even blinking. My brother was there too, but he didn't follow. He stood with his hands shoved into his coat pockets, whistling "Golden Years" and rocking forward and back on the balls of his feet. Always so careful, my brother—it's strange that eventually he was the one to fall.

I stood up there with the frost in the air hitting me just right so that the skin on my face came awake for a moment and then: my cheeks went all sleepy and numb, and there was a faintly greenish mist coming up off the snow that sat in gutters, tram

lights glancing upward. Nick waited down below, until finally he called up,

“Hey, sis. You get your kicks yet?”

And I guess I had.

I don’t know what it was I hoped to see from up there—the street getting smaller as though I was looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope, the spires at the base of the hill poking holes in the tame rounded skyline. I was always daring just a little too much in those days, putting space between myself and the ground, myself and safety, myself and my cautious slope-shouldered brother who was singing under his breath, *Don’t let me hear you say life’s taking you nowhere, angel. Come get up, my baby*, the whole time I was climbing dizzily back down to him.

The Curse

THERE’S A SUPERSTITION in our family about falling—a kind of tight-lipped joke that’s no longer a joke because it’s happened too often over the years: cousins leaning against railings that wouldn’t hold their weight, uncles losing their footing while cleaning leaf debris from slimy gutters, aunts toppling from ladders, their spines folding up on themselves like coat hangers. Something in our bodies wants to fall, blood magnetized to pavement, iron and concrete greeting each other across a stretch of air, the downward plunge and crack, like a pink Easter egg dropped from a window—we splinter that easily.

We can trace it back a century or so—the story of our great-great-grandfather Jim in 1849, who was said to give a gentle

push to the back of a Roma stonemason where he stood placing chunks of limestone smooth and flush to form the bottom sill of a paneless window in a high church steeple. It was 1895 and there was a resurgence of new architecture, renovation, the city preening and polishing itself like a vast peacock with slate and granite and sandstone feathers. Jiří oversaw many of these building projects, gained a reputation for precision and efficiency. The stonemason, it was said, had seduced Jiří's youngest daughter, but who knew anymore if this was true. What was certain was that the stonemason landed below on rain-slick cobblestones, and his body bent into a hook, curving strangely like a treble clef and, according to legend, witnesses afterward reported that the body didn't bleed. No, they said, not even a trickle.

I couldn't tell you what Jiří felt looking down at the question mark the stonemason's bloodless body made against the wet cobbles, the slice of October light that fell across him like a sash, whether our ancestor felt triumph or shame or a rage that still itched in his palms after the suddenness of the shove. But I can tell you that it was the end for him of his hard-won reputation, the end of a long and respectable career, and he fled with his wife and children to the American Midwest where he found work as a mule driver in a coal mine. It was there the family stayed, and there my brother and I grew up.

The belief is that the stonemason's fall has somehow been handed down through the years, that for generations our family has held on to this death and never been forgiven. You could call it a curse, but that's a word we never seemed to use.

"It's only a story," our mother always told my brother and me, but I remember some nights her superstition would get the better of her, and she would come into our beds with

pillows, tucking the blankets so tight around our little bodies that we struggled and thrashed after she switched off the lights, straining against our cocoons like Houdini escaping from a straitjacket.

Someone, some relative perhaps, had given our mother a coffee mug that showed a simple cartoon illustration of a man and woman perched on the edge of a deep swimming pool, peering into it. The pool had been drained of all but a foot of water, and, standing in the shallow water down below, the pool's high walls looming around him, was a little boy with a tiny rubber inner tube around his middle. The image's caption read *Better safe than sorry, son.*

It was this mug that often rested on the squat nightstand between our twin beds while our mother kissed our foreheads, made the blankets tight around us. A smell came up from the mug like leaves going soft at the bottom of a well—mint, citrus, chamomile—as deep and unfathomable as the earth's molten center. And I remember turning my head on the pillow to stare at the mug: the two parents side by side, their legs dangling into the emptiness of the drained pool, and I remember hating them a little for their stifling caution.

I think a part of me always longed for the fall. I know it's morbid, but I remember growing up with a kind of envy for that sweet, endless plummet—how your body can be given a measure of grace as it greets the air, feels its own heft and buoyancy.

Some members of the family are so superstitious they will not go higher than the second floors of buildings—will keep far back from balcony railings or the sharp sudden edges of hiking trails. But I've always dared more than the others, climbing up onto steeply pitched roofs, looking down at towering views with

an arm slung loosely around a chimney, skirting close to ledges, daring my own weight to pull me down, daring a phantom push from behind, feeling the height lift through me, all the way from feet to forehead.

When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a trapeze artist, a stunt pilot, a high-dive champion, a female Evel Knievel.

“Your mother will *not* go for it. Not a chance,” my father said when I showed him a flyer for a circus camp when I was eight—glossy pictures of arched bodies poised on high platforms, lifting their arms above their heads as if straining to get even higher before rising into the air like gaudy smoke, ruby sequins dusting the air with light.

“It’s safe,” I protested, showing him pictures of padded mats on the internet, showing him harnesses and cables.

A year or so later, I showed my mother an article in *National Geographic* about cave divers. “Now, don’t you go getting any ideas,” she said, shaking her head a little wildly, her earrings tinkling like tiny bells. She held me and I squirmed in her lap. She sniffed at my hair and I imagine that it smelled like the high branches of elm trees, like sap and sunlight and too much air.

We all make our way through a world of so much danger; I could never believe that our fear should be any greater than anyone else’s. I didn’t want to believe that my body would be asked to pay any consequence for the actions of a relation I’d never met, of whom not even a single photograph exists. Not that I couldn’t imagine him. I felt at times that I knew his face, craggy and sunken-eyed, heavily shadowed from the sight of the stonemason stumbling forward into all that air, swallowing gusts of it on the way down, and on the pavement below, his chest swollen with that huge funereal breath.

Defenestrate

ONE THING THE city of Prague is famous for: throwing men out windows. The word for this is *defenestration*. Tourists can climb the narrow stairs to the room where Catholic noblemen were defenestrated because of a religious dispute in 1618. You can look down from the window to see exactly the length of their fall. Catholics say these men were saved by angels, cradled in the arms of the Virgin herself, lowered gently to earth. Protestants say the men survived because they landed in a dung heap piled below the window. Looking down from that window, it is easy to imagine an angel in the expanse between sill and cobblestones; easier still to imagine a pile of shit, and easiest of all to conclude: the city holds both of these in the loose clasp of its hand.

The Patron Saint of Sudden Death

OUR MOTHER. SHE lined the walls of our house with crosses of different shapes and sizes. Elaborately filigreed wrought iron, wood, even animal bone. She matched the ends of her fingers together, held the tips beneath her chin, and breathed small prayers, pleas that gravity would no longer wreak havoc on our little clan. From her bedroom, clouds of incense sneaked through the crack under the door and still managed to make us choke as we tiptoed past on the way to the bathroom.

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“God,” she told us, “will show us the way to live.”

By which I now think she meant: survive.

At the stove she stirred thick soups as if making potions. Her cheeks puffed around the spells she muttered as she halved garlic, crushed rosemary in her hand. We passed behind her through the rooms like stocking-footed ghosts, and she'd turn at every shift in the air to reach for us. She patted our hair. She wiped at our faces. Even my father's. She wanted evidence, the proof of touch, before she would allow herself to believe that, yes, we were alive, unhurt. Yes, we were surviving. A cut, a bruise, and she tended it, always thanking God himself that the gash was no deeper than it was, the scar a temporary bridge toward healing.

I think that, as a deeply religious woman, painfully devout, our mother always felt a bit guilty about her belief in the family superstition—as if these legends of falling could somehow replace her faith, grow upward through thinly lit cracks like a tree pushing aside slabs of sidewalk as it aged and spread its roots. And this was why she continued to tell us,

“It's only a story.”

But she was thorough. She wrote out psalms on fluttery pastel Post-it notes and stuck them to the walls above our beds. The notes lifted and trembled in the gusts of private cyclones that the ceiling fan kicked up: *“Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; For the Lord upholds him with His hand.”*

Certain saints she thought could be of particular help. Rita of Cascia or Jude Thaddeus, these patron saints of lost causes, impossible cases, desperate situations.

With every step, we were in danger. And so she prayed.

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She prayed in English. She prayed with the feeble scraps of Latin that she knew. She prayed the only prayer she'd ever learned in Czech: the Lord's Prayer. I liked hearing her tongue enter the sharp-angled maze of consonants when she got to the line: *přijď království tvé*, "thy kingdom come," then drop into the open loop of vowels at the end: *ale zbav nás od zlého*, "but deliver us from evil," the final word, *zlého*, like its own deliverance—all breath.

She prayed to martyrs who, in life, had known all kinds of strange and elaborate pain—tangled limbs, jutting bones and stretched skin. She prayed to Saint Andrew Avellino, who, because his brain filled up with blood one morning without warning, is traditionally invoked against sudden death.

If any of us came upon her while she knelt and murmured, we would back away slowly, as if from a crouching panther. We would hush our breath and soften the fall of our feet. The creak of the floorboards blended with her whispered entreaties like weird, wobbling notes of music. Sometimes our father would shake his head as if he felt sorry for her.

She'd grown up in a household driven by fear, and prayer was the only weapon she had against it. If any family member should fall but survive the fall, this success was attributed solely to the power of prayer, and candles were lit in gratitude to Saint Andrew Avellino, who had intervened on behalf of generations of sinners. And while she lit those candles, I was climbing up to the bird's nests in backyard sycamores, adding locks of my own hair to the soft interiors so that some small piece of my body could always be up high, surrounded on all sides by air and light. And while she prayed, I breathed down onto clusters of turquoise eggs the single word *zlého*, again and again. To me, it sounded like air and light.

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She lit candles for every fall, for cousins she barely even knew.

What I do not know is whether she lit a candle after my brother fell, or whether she had stopped praying for him years before.

Builder of Small Worlds

OUR FATHER. OVER the years, he meticulously built a very small town for his model train layout. Every single stop sign and mailbox was painful in its smallness, hard on the eyes. He glued together tiny trees like tufts of broccoli. He built, tree by tree, an entire miniature forest that he placed beside the closed loop of the railroad tracks. In the branches of some of the trees, there were nests. In the nests, eggs so minuscule they made the eye shrink, made you blink and squint, each one just the faintest oval of pale blue, each a contained world the size of a dust mote, without the faintest hope of ever hatching.

While he worked, he kept his breath small in his chest so as not to shift the branches before the glue had dried. He took careful sips from the plastic cup full of caffeine-free root beer going flat and warm at his elbow. He hummed, the melody so soft it barely made it past his lips, and if you bent close over him, you could make out the song, could sometimes even hear a faltering brush of words: *Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea, joy to you and me.*

He kept himself busy, building that tiny world. And I sometimes wish, now that he is gone, that I'd tried to understand this a little more. **Copyrighted Material**

About the train tracks, about the teeny eggs in the trees, I never once asked him: *Why?* Never asked if this was his way of accessing a high, towering view from the safety of a kitchen chair.

Our father was always a frail man, never dared much. His own father, our Grandpa Frank, was an airline pilot who never once crashed and who died unglamorously of heart failure in his late seventies. Perhaps this was one of the reasons our mother married this man—trying to work something tame and earthly into our bloodline. To ground us a little.

She told my father about Jiří and the stonemason on their wedding night, as if she were afraid the story might drive him away.

“Why are you telling me this?” he asked, their bodies close in the glow of white sheets, and years later I would think of this whenever I’d tell the weird stories of family deaths and injuries to strangers in bars who often paused afterward, swallowing their beer, confused, to ask: *Why are you telling me this?*

“I’m telling you,” my mother told my father grimly, “because it happened.”

She paused, rubbing her hand over one side of her face, unclenching her tight jaw.

“And some of us believe that it’s still happening,” she added. It was ominous but sweet and strange, and so my father nodded and kissed her forehead and told her that maybe they should’ve asked for helmets and mouth guards as wedding presents.

“Don’t joke,” my mother said, but she laughed anyway. And my father did not ask her if she was one of those who still believed in the superstition, because, I suspect, he already knew.

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Miniature Museum

IN PRAGUE, NEAR the Strahov Monastery, there's a brown door tucked back from the street with a sign just above it: MUZEUM MINIATUR. The museum is a single room. You bend over low-power microscopes, peer down to see, tucked safely behind little glass windows: a flea wearing infinitesimal shoes made of copper, a train of camels in the eye of a needle, a grasshopper with a minuscule violin propped beneath his chin. These things, too small to be understood by the naked eye, were made by a man who had to practice breathing exercises, had to "work between heartbeats," because even the blood pulsing in his fingertips would make the flea's shoes tremble, could cause the camel's slender neck to break. The smallness of these things was terrifying—inscriptions on a shaft of hair, a microscopic book with pages that could be turned but were too fragile to be handled by anyone but the maker. I was told by the curator, "Some miniature artists go blind after only a few years of work." I was told that some of the tools needed to make these things were themselves too small to be seen without magnification. My body, bending to look, seemed massive. Outside, the city itself was impossibly, scarily vast. Lost within it, I held my breath, tried to still my pulse, looking through the curved lens.

I would like to ask the miniature artists who went blind from looking: *Was it worth it?*

I would like to ask my mother if she believes her God went weary and squint-eyed, piecing our world together.

I would've liked to ask my father, who spent hours at the kitchen table, sculpting a landscape that he loomed above,

gigantic—the only time he was ever so giant—if this tininess put strain on his body, if maybe his heart went weak and tired from his attempts to quiet its beating. I wish I could've asked him, the only truly sane one among us: *How will any of this possibly keep us safe?*

Master of the Pratfall

MY TWIN BROTHER, Nick. Winter was always his favorite season—ice on downward-sloping sidewalks when we'd walk home from school together, skating on the soles of our shoes. He was always primed for a fall, my brother—keeping his muscles loose and relaxed. We tossed ourselves down into the safety of snowbanks, practicing the pratfalls we picked up from watching hours and hours of old Buster Keaton films.

Nick was very good at that one-legged slip backward, as if his tilted shoe might reveal a smear of yellow banana peel underneath. His rear end would meet the piled-up snow with leg extended, and no matter how quickly they happened, his falls always seemed slow, measured. He'd pinwheel his arms for comic effect, waver lengthily over his own fall as if making up his mind whether to surrender to it.

He tried to teach me: “The trick is to learn your weight. Lean back into the air, and feel the angle of the fall rising up to you.”

The snow was mashed and flattened by our attempts—our slides and rolls.

I envied him. Grace was always so easy for him—how he'd be carried forward through slowed-down seconds just by the force of his own slide, then go down quick in a sweet

backward flail, as if he'd known all along the exact instant it would come: that inevitable clutching of gravity.

As for my own falls, I could never seem to keep a straight face. I laughed each time I went down—laughter that was loud and sudden and shocking, neighbors staring at us from their porches and driveways, snow powdering down from the ends of their shovels.

Nick's mouth remained thin and grim while he fell, as if he were studying for an exam, measuring his body's strange geometry. His face was so beautiful and still, a point of calm in the midst of those arcs and flurries of movement.

He saw each fall as a thing he could make perfect. And if there were times when his rhythm was off, or he landed too hard on an elbow or shoulder, often he would spit and curse, dusting himself off angrily. He came close to real rage at times, when his falls weren't quite right—though this strain toward perfection was never something he tried to force on me. My falls could be loose and sloppy and oafish, and he would only nod and offer quiet advice.

Once, not long after we'd returned home to the Midwest after our years in Prague, I saw him go down hard as he was coming up the little half flight of stairs outside his apartment building, and I laughed, seeing him flatten out and books spill from his arms. I almost wanted to applaud. It was a good fall, there was abandon behind it, clumsiness and grace married in the way he greeted the concrete steps with a comical shrug of surrender: afraid, startled, and then—unhurt. He knew the miracle of it, I could tell. There was no one else around, only me there, laughing. And he looked up, met my eyes, surprised by me, surprised by himself, by gravity, by the sweet solid lump of his own body, and he said

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“I’m glad you were here to see that.”

And I told him that I, too, was glad. I loved him then—the way that, as a child, watching Buster Keaton fall over and over, so many times, made me feel I knew him, made me feel he was no longer a stranger.

The Longest Fall

THESE DAYS, SLEEP comes on gradually, lifting its face to mine, offering the kind of solitude that consoles—no one else there with you, your dreams so vibrantly unwitnessed.

I’ve dreamed of my own fall so many times. But each time is a little different, and so it’s difficult to know which one is really mine.

In Prague, Nick once told me, “There are some of us who just never seem to get over how strange it is that we are here,” and I knew what he meant. He wasn’t talking about the city and our lack of belonging there; he was trying to get at how odd it is that our lives ask us to live them, that the world is so dense and clammy with all these lives being lived all at once.

Walking is a lot like falling—or at least like waiting for a fall. We risk that fall with every step—onto our faces, the heels of our hands. This is why our mother used to pray so unceasingly. To pray against *zlého*.

Last night, it happened. I’d been visiting Nick in the hospital, and I stopped at a bar on the way home. I drank beers one at a time, letting them coat me from the inside, like a chemical poured down a drain to break apart a clog, and then I walked the rest of the way home at two in the morning, thoroughly coated.

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I stumbled and fell in the street, and the pavement scraped a layer of me away. I was all spread out, one arm reaching up above my head like those old pictures of circus girls, and I rolled onto my side, lifting my chin from the asphalt to see if anyone was around. No one. Another dream unwitnessed.

My shoe had filled up with blood, and afterward I lay in my bed and that sentence kept coming: *My shoe filled up with blood.* I thought maybe it would be with me forever, like those people who, after a head injury, will hear over and over, for the rest of their lives, a pocket-sized marching band constantly playing “The Stars and Stripes Forever.”

Eventually I surrendered. I counted out a trio of sleeping pills from the bottle on my bedside table. They formed a cluster in my palm like the miniature eggs in the trees of my father’s elaborate train layout. I swallowed, and the repeating sentence left, the throbbing in my chin left, the last beer-heavy faces I’d seen at the bar left. Sleep grazed me lightly all over, and in dreams, my fall was made more lovely—perfect almost, a fall that Nick could be proud of, telling me through the dense curtains of sleep: *I taught you well.*

Today, in Nick’s hospital room, I lifted a corner of the Band-Aid to show Nick the carnation-shaped wound on the heel of my hand. I angled my chin like a woman trying on a hat to show him the purple cloud climbing up my throat. He whistled.

“Good thing you weren’t five stories up,” he said.

I told him that a Serbian flight attendant holds the record for surviving the longest fall with no parachute. Her fall was slightly over 10,000 meters after a small bomb exploded in the luggage compartment of a twin-engine jet airliner that went down near Srbská Kamenice, Czechoslovakia, in 1972. She was the sole

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survivor of the crash, and although she spent several days in a coma and sustained injuries to her skull, spine, ribs, legs, and pelvis, she eventually made a complete recovery except for a minor limp when she walked.

“Stop trying to steal my thunder,” Nick said.

Hymnal

AS A LITTLE girl, I joined our church choir only so I could sit up in the loft and feel my voice rise into the high vaulted ceilings, then sink downward to settle like snowflakes on the hair of the congregation. I warbled, my voice doing cartwheels in the air, my own private trapeze act, while the choirmaster frowned and waved his hairy hands.

Down below, my mother’s face was always turned toward me—vigilant, as if afraid I might suddenly lurch out into the arched space below that domed height, shoot through the clerestory windows like a beam of light, swing wickedly from one of the silver hanging chandeliers. She watched my mouth shape itself around the music, nervously twisting the church bulletin in her hands until the pastel-tinted paper became a pair of small, distant wings.

I sang. I sent my voice out through ripples of multicolored light: *Though the mountains may fall and the hills turn to dust, yet the love of the Lord will stand as a shelter for all who will call on His name.*

Some days, I’d watch my brother down below carefully ripping pages from the hymnal, one by one. He scratched out words with a stubby pencil, replaced them with his own

longings, rewrote the hymns until they became earthly love songs, luscious and unholy, and these he delivered to only the most beautiful of the altar boys, the one that glowed like dew.

My mother never noticed my brother's scribblings, because she was always looking up at me.

The Followers

STARTING AT THE city's center, it took Nick and me a full year to build any kind of useful map, to stop moving through the ready-made underground tunnels of the metro and find instead where the alleyways spit us out. The streets unraveled, stray threads from spools of city squares that always offered assortments of easy landmarks: the statue of a saint about to be burned alive, the ornate clockface hung with sapphire planets and gold numerals, the red awning of a cart that sold halved rolls and slim bricks of fried cheese. We learned to orient ourselves by these fragments, and eventually we no longer needed to look for them, didn't need to scan the face of the tower for the small window near the top where the head-and-shoulders outline of a man could always be seen, unmoving.

Sometimes, in the days when it was all new, Nick and I would set out, passing a flask of whiskey back and forth between us. We'd grow careless, indifferent—drowning so slowly in the city's intricacies that we scarcely noticed. We'd follow the curled lips of the streets for hours, their tugging little currents, until one of us would say, "Are you sure this is the right way?" and the other would say back,

"What do you mean, I just been following you."