

THIN AIR

by Tom Coash

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THIN AIR

A Dramatic Monologue

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SYNOPSIS: A tightrope walker faces her moment of truth as she tries to regain her balance on the wire after a tragic accident.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(1 female)

BIRD (f) A tightrope walker.

TIME: Present day.

SETTING: Atop a platform.

COSTUMES: Workout attire.

SET

A 2' x 2' wooden platform. A 5/8th inch thick rope stretches straight out from the front of the platform into the darkness of the audience. The platform is isolated by spotlights. This could also be done on a bare stage with any combination of the above set pieces at director's discretion.

AT START: *BIRD stands atop a platform, a rope stretches straight out from the front of the platform into the darkness of the audience. The platform is isolated by spotlights.*

BIRD: One foot in front of the other, one step at a time. That's how you do it. You're standing way up here on a two foot square platform. The wire snakes out in front of you, gently swaying, trembling with anticipation. The straight and narrow as Pop calls it. The hot smell of popcorn, horse-sweat, and the tang of the big cats. Center ring looks like a target for high divers. Spotlights tunnel up through the smoke, striking sparks off the glitter on your suit. There's the dizzying mad rush of circus music, animals, and the roar of the crowd echoing around the top of the tent. You take a deep breath, focus, and step out.

Karl Wallenda was probably the best. I mean of all time. The Flying Wallendas, funambulists of the first order. Tightrope walkers extraordinaire. My heroes though were always the women. Miss Cooke, Lillian Leitzel, Josephine Berosini. And of course my favorite, Bird Millman from the '20s. You ever hear of her? She loved it you know. She'd run across that 36 foot wire like she was going to her wedding. My folks named me after her, Bird. Debuted when she was six years old. Soloed at twelve, then center ring for the Ringling Brothers. What I liked about Bird though was that she eventually flew the coop. Gave it up. Married her a Harvard graduate and quit the circus. Never went down once. Tightrope walkers don't use the word fall. It's 'come down' or 'go down'... or 'went down.' She never went down once and never went back. I admire that – knowing when to quit.

I've always heard voices in my head. All my life. Not like Martians or telepathy. I don't mean like that. I mean like – larger voices – calling me. To larger things. Bigger things. Telling me to pursue my dreams. And I have. Sixty feet up on a five-eighths inch steel wire. Without a net. Cause that's what life's all about it. Isn't it? Living without a net? "Look Ma, no hands." "Death defying."

On January 30, 1962 in front of 6,000 people at the Shrine Circus in Detroit, the Wallenda family came down off the wire. Fell as you would say. They were doing their famous seven person pyramid with sixteen year old Delilah Wallenda on top. An act they had been doing since 1947. Fifteen years. Dieter Schepp was the main understander. He was on the bottom of the pyramid with three others. They had two more on their shoulders and then little Delilah. All balanced on a five-eighth inch wire, less than two centimeters. Think about that. Think about the weight. All the support poles bent in towards the middle. Suddenly Dieter lost it. He was new to the act and lost his balance pole. He shouted... "Ich kann nicht mehr halten!"... "I can't hold on anymore."

I was pretty much born on the wire. Born to fame Pop says. Born to live in the eye of the needle. Mom says that I never kicked when she was in the middle of an act. Like I was helping her balance there on the wire. It is amazing when you think of living your life on a twisted steel wire no thicker than your little finger. Karl Wallenda said "that wire is your life." Literally. My Gran used to call it "walking in glory." Alejandro, my husband, once said "it was like stepping into fire." Referring I think to the spotlights but meaning something not unlike religion. Faith. Like those fire-walkers. A matter of belief. Belief that your skin won't burn, blister, and peel on the coals. Belief that you can do the impossible. Hubris. I looked hubris up in the Webster's... exaggerated pride or self-confidence often resulting in divine retribution. I look things up so I'm sure, you know? I like things to be spelled out. Defined. Hubris. It's right next to hubcap.

You ever watch Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner? On Saturday mornings? My favorite was where the Coyote stretched this rope across a huge canyon and then frayed it down to a thread in the middle. "Meep, meep" here comes the Road Runner straight across, no problem. So the Coyote gets mad and follows only to find the Road Runner poised there at the middle with a pair of big scissors. Snip. The rope slowly falls away from under the old Coyote but not from under the Road Runner. It's suspended in the air. You can see the realization on Wile E. Coyote's face that it's impossible and then (*Falling whistling sound.*) ... splat.

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