

She Kept A Lookout

by Katrina Dessavre

Many years later, as the smell of charring straw filled the basket she was standing in, high above faces turned upwards to watch her fly, she remembered the night her fingertips brushed snow off the Alps. It had been a night flight, one of many she had taken since Jean-Pierre died. She often fell asleep in the basket now, a breeze nudging her awake. But this time her hand was hanging limp over the side of the basket, just about to graze the side of a mountain. She always managed to get back on course, filled with the numb giddiness that recklessness gave her and sustained the flight back home.

Jean-Pierre died in September, sweating in the unseasonably warm London air, wrapped up in blankets meant to purge him of his fever. He had been dying for a long time. The view from his bedroom, overlooking Kew gardens, was a poor substitute for the landscapes he had seen, that they had experienced together.

Her job had been to keep a lookout. He steered their airborne ship, dropped sandbags to increase the altitude, picked the spot for landing. She scanned the hills, mountains, meadows and cities they flew across, informing him of what she saw and trying to match it to the topography she studied at ground level. But really, her job was to keep a steady flow of banter and levity, which he insisted kept them afloat more than the helium they used to fill the balloon.

How he knew that this timid, shy creature, afraid of walking down Picadilly during rush hour, would open up, expand as soon as she left the ground, she had no idea. It didn't matter that he had left his old life behind so brutally, that she had to answer the door to his first wife holding a child and begging for money she claimed was rightfully hers. She believed her, and yet she closed the door and dove deeper into her geography books.

After he died, she found refuge in the clouds. Thick, almost viscous clouds that made her lose sight of the tips of her fingers. She lost herself, too, floating blissfully and forgetting about the crowds that

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would be waiting for her, expecting a show. And she would give it to them, with brightly colored firecrackers, her only companions now. She dropped them to oohs and aahs she pretended were the distant sighs of wind blowing through dry leaves. It was those sounds that had kept her performing, but now they were beginning to leave a sour aftertaste and she felt like a circus elephant bored of its own tricks.

No one would know how many firecrackers she had brought with her that time, on a cloudless day in the Tivoli gardens. No one would know that she had brought one or two too many. And even when she wicker started to burn, and some spectators shifted nervously, suspecting that something was wrong, no one imagined that she would become the firecracker herself. Even she had never expected that, inhaling that bitter, cloying smell of roses in heat, she would remember the cooling, ticklish sensation of snow on her fingertips.

