

Night Flight

by Katrina Dessavre

He didn't even have the energy to tell me to tie her up when he got home. He just stumbled to his bedroom without closing the door. I could hear the soft crash of his body hitting the mattress.

It was a windy night. The dry grass outside sounded like someone was whacking it with a scythe. I put on my windbreaker and sturdy boots, wrapped a scarf around half of my face, took the double-layered gloves with extra grip. Had I known I was going to fly that night I would have put on an extra layer underneath it all. But when I started climbing the staircase that snaked around the tower, all I could think of was not to look down, to put one foot in front of the other on each step, worn down by the wind to the nub of a used eraser.

The job description of a valet should include a clause that specifies that the applicant have no fear of heights. Most likely, his job is of a more horizontal nature. But what if the vehicle he's meant to park every night is a giant air balloon and the curb is a tall, narrow tower extending into the clouds?

The first hundred meters were the most difficult. After that, the more I climbed, the more I felt like I was leaving the ground altogether, that if I fell the wind would somehow cradle me down safely. The sharp, cold air blew out any nausea that might have crept up from such a narrow spiral. The tower was thin and tapered like a candle. My employer liked small, almost claustrophobic places, welcome cocoons after all the time spent in the air.

Towards the top the tower I felt like a dog chasing its own tail. The balloon was always left half tied, one of its ropes in a sailor's knot around an iron handle. It never failed to alarm me, the way the giant, humming creature relied on that one knot. I had been a sailor and could appreciate my employer's skills, but I had endured enough storms in my time to know never to trust a strong wind.

There were seventeen iron handles around the perimeter of the tower top, no more than ten paces in diameter. I had to tie the

balloon down to each one, then coax the butterflies all into the basket. Thousands of wings were still too light to weigh her down. Without the ropes, she would fly off.

But there were nights like this one, when the butterflies were restless and didn't collect willingly into the basket. Even with an elaborate dance I can only liken to the clownish movements of an air traffic controller, I could not get them all to fit. Some would escape just as they were about to go in, prompting others to follow, until all I had to show for my efforts was a jam of wings.

My employer could manage them all through even the most intense of storms, guiding them as one like the conductor of a large symphony. But I didn't have that talent, nor the patience to develop it, and somehow with the last traces of nausea still in me, I decided to jump in the basket myself.

"In here," I said, screaming, stomping my feet like I was making wine, before realizing that I strongly resembled a toddler having a tantrum. I relaxed, leaning against the side, my head tilted down for a moment to regroup myself.

It was only for a few seconds, and when I looked up, I thought I had suddenly grown taller. We were already a few feet off the ground by the time I realized the basket was a few feet off the ground. I zig-zagged across, tilting it until I almost fell out. Once I saw the distance to the ground I sat down, my back against the hard straw. The deafening sound of the wind cut off at the top like the wind was running its fingers around the rim of a wine glass.

While I gathered the courage to stand up I remembered the time the merchant ship I was captain of had struck a particularly turbulent stretch of the ocean. We had been traveling for weeks without seeing land and hushed whispers of being lost crept through the crew. I took to hiding below decks, closing my eyes and pretending that the rocking motion was my sister swinging me in a hammock.

A captain hiding in his own ship: that's what should have prompted me into action. But it was the feeling of wet and cold against my skin that got me to admit water was spilling overboard.

“Where are you going?” I yelled out to the mass of flapping wings above me, a colorful curtain shimmering in seeming perfect harmony.

I stood up eventually, unsteady as a newborn colt. The bottom of the basket felt surprisingly sturdy. The butterflies had caught a gust of wind. I caught glimpses of a few lights through the patches of clouds but for the most part the landscape was dark. It could have been the sea, I thought, and once the distance to the ground became liquid in my mind my instincts came back. I tilted the sides of the basket like a steering wheel.

