

Woman on the Roof

She fell off the roof in an impossible way.

Jack realized that as soon as the memory registered. If it was a memory.

She fell backwards, but slowly. That was how he recalled it. There was grace in her movements. It must have been terrifying. How could it have been otherwise? He would have been terrified. But grace.

There was no sound.

That's what Jack thought, though his windows had been up and the air conditioning had been on. In the hum of it, maybe he wouldn't have heard a scream, and certainly not a gasp of surprise. Surprise, because she had been on plenty of roofs, or so Jack assumed. The woman and the other workers, who were also women. They looked like they knew what they were doing.

The house where they were working was on the only road between Jack's apartment and the highway. He passed it all the time. He knew it.

On the day before the woman fell, Jack had been surprised at how quickly she and the other women were working, stripping the roof of the old shingles.

On the day she fell, he had stopped to watch. The woman was standing on a portion of the roof that was bare wood, waiting for someone to hand up a package of shingles.

He'd hit the brakes to avoid an animal crossing the road, something fat and furry and slow. The brakes had shrieked. The woman, the member of the crew closest to the edge of the roof, had turned her head at the sound. Then, according to the way Jack remembered it, or reconstructed it, or maybe imagined it, she had fallen backwards slowly. Languidly. As if she could have turned a flip and landed on her feet.

He knew it could not have happened that way.

Jack had been on his way to the grocery store. The store was close. In the checkout line he provided the woman at the register with the paper bag he'd brought with him. He was wondering if he should have been there. Maybe he should have stayed at the house. That's what he was thinking.

As he drove back home past the house where the women had been working on the roof, they were still at it. There was no ambulance. There were no police cars. There was no body in the bushes, which had been covered with a green tarp to prevent the falling shingles from damaging the shrubs and other plants. The tarp was undisturbed.

Jack noticed that there was no fat and furry creature in the road, so whatever it was, if there was something, had apparently made it to the other side.

That night Jack woke up and saw the woman again. She was falling backwards, arcing over the edge of the roof, head first, initially, and then twisting slightly and turning over a little as she fell.

"She would break her neck," he thought. "Falling like that, she would break her neck."

In the morning, he was surprised to realize that he'd gone back to sleep. It was the same surprise he'd felt when he'd found himself in the checkout line at the grocery store.

On his way to the post office later that morning, when he'd almost reached the house, Jack eased to a stop. He didn't want the brakes to squeal. He got out of his car and walked to the brick walk that led to the house. There were several women on the roof.

"Excuse me," he said.

None of the women paid any attention to him, so he spoke more loudly.

"Excuse me," he said. "Is everybody okay?"

The woman closest to him on the roof was on her knees. She looked over her shoulder at Jack, and she shrugged. He thought she did. She didn't say anything. Jack wondered if she'd understood him. Then he was sure she hadn't.

The women worked quickly. In another day or two, the new roof would be finished and they'd be gone, or so he supposed.

He didn't say anything more to the women, or to anyone else.

What would he have said?

Jack did what people who are afraid of what might happen next sometimes do. He watched the news and read the papers, wondering if there would be some reference to a woman who had fallen gracefully off the roof of the house he drove by everyday. He didn't find anything to substantiate what he was less and less sure had happened.

He Googled the name of the company that was stenciled on the side of the panel truck that had been parked in front of the house where the woman had looked over her shoulder when his brakes squealed, and then disappeared acrobatically off the edge of the roof without a sound, or at least without a sound Jack could hear. When he called the number printed on the truck, a disembodied voice urged him to go to the chat feature on the website. Jack felt foolish for imagining he'd have the opportunity to speak with a person. Why had there even been a number?

He did as the disembodied voice had suggested. He decided to get right to the point, and when the box under the chat feature said "How can I help you?" he typed: "Did a woman fall off the roof of a house on Briar Lane?"

Three pulsing dots appeared under the message Jack had typed. A few seconds later, the words in the box read: "Please enter your zip code."

Jack looked at the message for several moments. Then he closed the chat feature and left the site. He didn't see how providing his zip code would lead toward an answer. He wondered if he'd already said too much. Then he wondered how much somebody... anybody....everybody... already knew, and he knew he should stop wondering. They probably knew everything.

"But not about the woman on the roof," he thought. "They didn't see it. I did. I was there."

He was sure of that. Almost.

But now the image, authentic or not, was as vivid as it had been on the day his brakes had squeaked as he stopped beside the house where the women were working on the roof. The woman had long, dark hair, though he imagined that it would have been pinned up under a cap of some sort while she was working. Perhaps it had come loose as she fell. That might have happened.

But there it was. And she had looked over her shoulder at the noise, slipped a little, lost the grip she'd had, perhaps, with her back foot on the edge of the roof, and pushed her hair out of her eyes, he thought, and fell with the grace of someone diving with - what? confidence? - arching back through the still air, as nobody else on the roof did anything but the jobs they were on the roof to do.

Late one night he went back with a flashlight. He parked in front of a house with no lights on and walked the rest of the way. In the moonlight the roof looked innocent and empty. He walked quietly up to the bushes. He turned on his flashlight and bent to look behind them, into the space between the bushes and the house. There was nothing there to see. He clicked off the light and started back toward his car. He found himself walking quickly.

Had he missed something?

Sometimes he wondered if he should knock on the door of the house and ask whoever appeared about the roof. He could say his own roof needed work, and he'd been impressed by the women who'd been on the roof. He'd driven by and seen that they knew what they were doing, and that they were working hard, and that they'd finished quickly and done a fine job, as far as he could tell. He could say that. He wouldn't have to ask if there has been an accident. Whoever came to the door might tell him something.

"Did she seem graceful beyond description?"

He wouldn't ask that.

Sometimes he saw someone who reminded him of the woman on the roof. He'd see a woman's long, dark hair. She'd shake her head. She'd turn to say something to the man walking beside her, and she'd stumble a little on a bit of uneven pavement, and Jack would see that there was no resemblance between her and the woman who'd seemed to be so comfortable at work on the roof, and then so graceful, even as she was falling. Maybe especially as she was falling. The woman on the roof would never have stumbled. Each time he saw someone who reminded him of her, he would be astonished again at the grace he remembered when the thought of her.

"Maybe she was Spanish," Jack thought. "Or Mexican. I could have tried speaking to one of the other women in Spanish. Or maybe she was Greek. I couldn't have tried speaking to the other women in Greek, but maybe in Spanish. 'Oye, donde es la otra? Tu amiga. La mujer circa la borda?'"

"She wouldn't have understood," he thought. "My Spanish....no. It would have been a muddle. I might have made things worse. She wouldn't have done anything. She wouldn't have known what I was asking, even if I'd had the right words and could have gotten the tenses straight. Nothing would have been different."

But the problem was that everything was different. Now Jack could only think about himself as the man who had startled the woman on the edge of the roof. Or who hadn't, which would have been the case if he'd imagined it. Only it wouldn't, because he was thinking about the woman arching backwards off the roof. He was always thinking about her. So he wasn't sure it mattered if it had happened. Although when he woke up in the night and sat up in his bed, he was sure it had. He knew it had. He thought he knew that, just as he knew asking about her in Spanish or Greek or any other language wouldn't have made him any more certain about what he'd done.

One night he had a dream about going home. It felt like a relief while he was dreaming. He was walking from a place he knew toward the house in which he'd lived as a child. He knew the way. Then, where there should have been a railroad track and a street lined with stores, there was nothing like that. Jack knew with certainty that the house toward which he'd been walking hadn't been his home for over fifty years. If the house was still there, it was somebody else's home. And the way to walk to the house wasn't there. Not anymore.

The sadness to which Jack woke was heavy with certainty and age.

"And I am not that old," he thought.

He was.

Still, at least that night he hadn't dreamt about the woman on the roof. Or he didn't think he had.

Her name was Elena. She would have understood Jack's Spanish. She might have found it funny. More likely, she'd have been contemptuous of it. Impatient. She was at work. Who needed somebody's sloppy Spanish? Also she would have known that no exchange of words would have helped Jack understand.

And maybe she knew he would look down. Or maybe she didn't care. Or maybe she didn't think about it. Maybe it was only Jack who thought about it.

The women had worked in a rhythm. Nobody knew it but the women themselves. Anyone else would have to watch for a long time to see it. Nobody did.

They sang.

That was another thing Jack didn't know.

The squeal of his brakes. That was what Jack knew, and then that the woman whose name he did not know had turned, and seemed to slip. That was the way it looked to him, because she was on the roof, near the edge. And then she was gone. That was the way it looked to him. Because he had looked down.

When he had returned in the dark with his flashlight, he had searched in the bushes below the roof. For what?

He was looking down.

He hadn't looked up.