

Dian Parker

## The Art of Falling

Lying on coarse white sheets in an unfamiliar whitewashed room she thinks of his body. White. Impossibly strong. And once again she can barely contain herself.

They rushed her to Santa Maria Nuovo Hospital where she is tended by a young Italian doctor. When he leans over the hospital bed, he smells of Noxzema from her childhood and his glossy dark eyes remind her of something equally strong; she just can't remember what. He is speaking but the room swirls wildly, so she focuses on the single black curl falling over his forehead.

“I have asked the Galleria to post danger signs countless times. And now here you – my fourth case in one month.”

Earlier this morning, when she'd first looked up at the marble form, so mighty and tall, she recognized the feeling. Her knees went soft and her head seemed to swell. She often got that way with Julian but that was to be expected with a flesh-and-blood man. Her five-foot-four had always been drawn to things larger. Julian was six-four. She liked looking up. She liked being overcome.

The doctor, whom she thought was probably the same age as her father and just as insistent continues, “They faint at Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. They faint at *Adoration of a Magi*

by our great Leonardo. Most problem – hundred patients in four years – ‘David Syndrome.’” The doctor sits down next to the bed and proceeds to rub his head back and forth in the palms of his hands. She watches his silky black curls flatten and spring back until she has to close her eyes. She cannot stop yearning.

“I’d like to ask you a few questions, *Signorina*, if I may please. We are doing a study.”

She will not open her eyes just yet. She is still consumed by how far she had to look up to find the Giant’s eyes. The arched backbend it required.

“Do you feel any anguish?”

*Anguish? Anguish from ecstasy?*

He tries again. “Have you been feeling insecure?”

She knows where this is going. These are questions for sick people and she is not sick. She is well aware how intensely she feels, but she hadn’t expected the *David* to so completely undo her. But anguish and insecurity? *Ridiculous.*

“*Signorina, per favore*, a little patience. Tourists are often agitated by Firenze. We are trying to understand.”

Understand? Understand an epiphany? Walden Pond was an epiphany. St. Paul on the way to Damascus was an epiphany. For Marissa, finding Julian was an epiphany. Ineffable things. She turns away from him and sighs.

Lying in the Florence hospital, weariness overtakes her and she surrenders. She will not call Julian or her parents or the American Embassy. It would be worth it to die in a moldy hospital from an overdose of splendor – the Italian doctor labels her case an “overdose crisis.” But for her, there can never be enough. Marissa wants saturation, baptismal fire, and explosions.

She had fainted at the base of Michelangelo's *David* in the Galleria dell'Accademia. She had waited until the last tour group left the area so she could be alone with him. Once she started down the long hall towards the statue, the magnetic pull intensified, drawing her closer into his marbled field. At that point, like all the other times, she had no choice.

Once, when she was four, in ballet class, her teacher had put on Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumble Bee*. The little girls in class were to stand still and listen to the music. When they felt the urge, they could let themselves go and dance like the wind. The music played and the other girls twirled and leapt, but not Marissa. She stood in the center of the dance floor not moving, her eyes closed, trembling from head to foot.

That was the first time rapture revealed itself to her. Years later it happened again on a Snowcoach through Yellowstone. The sleigh was gliding along through the dusk when three bison ambled across the road. The coach stopped and Marissa stuck her head out the open roof with the snow falling through. She could have touched the huge lolling head and black eyes, deep as a whale's; she was that close. When he turned his mammoth head and stared at her, his humble majesty entered her spirit. A molten quiver.

And again, the first time the sun bled through the blue stained-glass window Julian had made for her. She hung it in the East window so the light from the sunrise would strike the sleeping figure in the glass. *Wake up*, the figure cried, giving her a luscious moment of dizziness. That deeper place inside of her – fit only for the stars, for babies, for love.

The *David* now, he was there too, in her collection of crucial moments. Along with the flash of green at sunset, the rose-laced stone of Petra, waiting for the night blooming cereus to open or all of Beethoven. She never wanted to lose any of them, but each time the moment would dissipate, as if sheer beauty was impossible to sustain.

The doctor leans over her with a stethoscope. "*Come va?*"

She knows her heartbeat is normal again, unfortunately.

“We doctors have observed that it is a unique visitor that establishes a strong bond with our *David*. Usually travels alone. You admired too much, *vero*? May I suggest you start taking the pills I give you?”

He takes her pulse, listens to her now listless heartbeat, gives her more water and another pill. After he leaves, she will again spit it out, grinding it between her fingernails until it is dust she can blow away.

“May I ask if you had hallucinations?”

Marissa wants *more* hallucinations: shafts of light, bird song, riding bareback and bare-chested through hot desert wind.

Now she craves a two-ton block of Carrara marble and a chisel. Julian understands and contributes whenever he can.

“I’m so tired, doctor.”

“The ‘David Syndrome’ does that to everyone. Rest.” The doctor softly closes the door behind him.

It is the beauty of Firenze, and the rainforest, and the Karakorum and every thundering river she dared to cross. She is undone by the thousands of miles a monarch must fly before winter. The death defying leaps between trees of the gray squirrels out past her window. With Julian, playing chess by candlelight when he looks at her with his cobalt blue eyes. Love could be too much.

Julian told her before she left for Italy, “It’s best you go. If we have many more days of this, I’ll dissolve into who knows what.” They often stayed in bed together for days. The doctor seemed convinced that too much of a good thing was a malady. Sure, the malady of joy.

Maybe the key was not to react. The first time she saw the statue in the distance, her heart beginning to pump, she should have taken long deep breaths and closed her eyes for a moment. And waited. Instead, she flung herself forward into the wind tunnel without time to breathe. She flew towards the *David*. Wanted to lay her cheek next to his. Stroke his curls, kiss his lips.

The Giant was too magnificent. Her knees gave in and would no longer support her. She began to slip away from him and reached with all her might for his brave furled fist. But, as usual, she succumbed to the thrill of being overcome and fainted. Now the moment was lost forever. Wasted.

This was what made her tired. How could she explain?

The doctor comes back the next morning, asks about her parents, if they had abused her. Marissa would rather talk about the light beaming through the window. But she was shy with the language, and anyway, she didn't want light to be caught up in yet another condition. She thinks about Matisse's *Red Studio*. The window there, the soft red walls, the high-backed chair, his paintings stacked against the wall. How she longed to discuss light with Matisse.

Instead she said, "*Dottore, ho la nausea.*"

The doctor shakes his head up and down, his curls bouncing. "*Si, si si,*" he says and leaves the room. A few minutes later he comes back, smiling, and hands her a book. Its cover is worn and yellowing – *Naples and Florence: A Journey from Milan to Reggio* by Marie-Henri Beyle.

"If you please, *Signorina*, open to page one hundred one six and read to me."

She begins at the top of the page. "Absorbed in the contemplations of sublime beauty, I reached the point where one encounters celestial sensations. Everything spoke so vividly to

my soul. I had palpitations of the heart, which in Berlin they call ‘nerves’. Life was drained from me. I walked with the fear of falling.”

Marissa looks up at the doctor who is still smiling. She knows now that he thinks the whole thing amusing.

“*Per favore, Signorina*, we call it ‘*tourista* disease.’ I know you are unhappy. Maybe time to go home.” He pats her hand, bows slightly at the waist, and backs out of the room.

So it’s time to go. Marissa gets out of bed and tries to dress quickly but her hands shake, making it hard to button her blouse. She shoves her long hair into a blue wool beret and looks down at the book on the bed. She considers taking it just for spite, then turns her back to it. Still dizzy, she leaves the room, walks down the hall and out the door. No one tries to stop her.

In the milky twilight the streets are already wild with the night. Motorbikes buzz about, smutting black soot. Young boys dance in the street. Tourists walk by, holding hands, taking pictures with their phones. She walks now with the fear of falling, her heartbeat again rapid but not from euphoria. The city is vulgar now. In all the noise and chaos, she regrets leaving the hospital and her narrow bed.

She sits down on stone steps. It is night. She envisions Michelangelo in the night, his paper hat dotted with candles, searching the towering stone for *Disegno*, the true art. What lay hidden in that stone, inside the block of marble buried and cold for centuries? Would it be man or beast? What was hidden in Michelangelo’s soul? What is in hers?

The night is damp and she is cold, and suddenly hungry. When was the last time *she* had eaten a simple repast of bread, fennel soup, one herring and a glass of wine – Michelangelo’s meal?

She closes her eyes. Soon the traffic noise recedes and she is alone once more with the *David*, his block of stone emitting a musky loveliness. She watches as Michelangelo hunches over the two-ton marble. Divining. The seventeen-foot *David* is in the stone, waiting. Marissa too will wait.

Michelangelo will find it. Marissa will have it.

She leans her cheek against the Giant's bent thigh. She touches the cool surface of his marble knee. Placing her hand there, she looks up into his vanilla eyes.

With the magma of her will, she breathes life into his broad white chest. In turn, he will breathe life into her.

His great thigh rises up. His chest swells. Her heart leaps.

They are breathing together now. Their lives are dependent on one another.

She breathes with the creator. She breathes with the creation.

She will stay with it this time. Right here. Sustaining the ecstasy.