

Ascension

A Novel

STEVEN GALLOWAY



VINTAGE CANADA

“This refreshing book has a quite fabulous quality ... one of the year’s best books.”

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“Galloway has done his research, which, along with his soaring imagination, enables him to transport us to an exotic and spellbinding aerie.”

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“Galloway is a master of suspense, dangling his readers by an elbow or foot from a sagging wire.... His narrative is so gripping that I often had to pause and take a breath before carrying on.... You simply will not put this book down until the final sentence.”

—*The Sun Times* (Owen Sound)

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About the Author

There is a steady wind, and it blows cold on Salvo Ursari's face and hands but does not deter him. He dips a hand in the pouch he wears at his waist, pinching out a clump of baby powder that he rubs onto both of his hands. Beyond the practical purpose of preventing the slippage of the seventy-pound pole he carries for balance, the powder has a distinctive odour that reminds Salvo of the past, of walks done half a lifetime ago, of his twin daughters when they had been tiny, shrieking infants, of his wife after bathing.

Salvo smiles as one such moment floods into his consciousness. It is nearly forty years earlier, his daughters barely two years old, and his wife has just put them down for the night. Salvo is lying on his back, trying to stretch out a hamstring he has needlessly overexerted. Through a wince of pain he sees his wife's legs as she glides by him, pale, ghostly apparition, and his eyes follow her as she moves across the room and sits on the ledge of the window. The streetlight outside illuminates her from behind, makes her glow, and Salvo is reminded how breathtakingly beautiful his wife can be.

A gust of wind brings him back to reality. Now is not the time, he tells himself. You are not a young man and you had better keep your mind on the task at hand.

At sixty-six, Salvo has been told he's out of his mind to attempt a skywalk between the twin towers of Manhattan's World Trade Center. Salvo partly agrees with this assessment, but it makes no difference. Of course he's afraid, of course he knows the danger—few have suffered more than he as a result of walks gone bad—but that is of no consequence. It is his fear that lets him know he's sane; the day he's not afraid is the day he won't go out on the wire. He knows he can do this walk.

Salvo is standing nearly fourteen hundred feet above solid ground. It is the highest walk Salvo has ever done, but height is unimportant; you're just as dead if you fall from forty feet as you are from fourteen hundred. Distance-wise, Salvo has walked two and even three times as far, which is tricky because the longer the wire, the greater the danger that it will snap. A very long wire will sag in the middle, and there are few things more difficult than walking the downhill slope of a wire. At least Salvo has the comfort of this being a solo walk. He alone is responsible for the outcome of today's endeavour.

For his efforts Salvo will receive a sum of twenty thousand dollars, but the promoter's insurance company has steadfastly refused to extend coverage to Salvo himself; the policy only covers damage caused should Salvo fall onto someone or something below.

The area beneath the wire has been cleared. From where Salvo stands with his toes curled over the edge of the building, the mounted crowd-control policemen are barely visible, the crowd itself nothing more than a dusty smear. He dislikes that the audience is such a distant entity. Without the immediacy of the audience, without their energy to feed on, the wire can be a lonely place. The only consolation Salvo has is that he has performed so many times he instinctively knows how the crowd will react, can picture the people far below as clearly as if they were fifty feet away.

Salvo receives the signal to begin. He takes a deep breath, collecting himself, and offers up a silent prayer. He's seen enough on the wire over the years to know that skill and luck are not enough to get across. To survive he needs God on his side. At the very least he requires

Him to be a benign presence; the last thing he wants is to have God against him.

Hoping that he'll have only earthly challenges to deal with, Salvo picks up his balancing pole. The wind moving across the wire creates a sound not unlike that of the highest string of a violin. As he steps onto the wire, the weight of his body momentarily silences it, before it resumes its singing. Each step Salvo takes interrupts this one-note song, but between steps it always begins again. It is as if this wire is trying to play me a death march, he thinks, and each step I take forces it to start over. As long as I keep taking steps, it can't complete its song, and everything will be okay.

The wire digs into his feet through the ballet-style slippers he wears, and he can feel the wind go right through the cotton of his jumpsuit. Salvo doesn't wear conventional, tight-fitting costumes. He doesn't mind them when performing under a roof, but on a walk like this one he prefers slightly looser clothing, the folds of his snow-white jumpsuit acting like antennae, a way to feel the wind's strength and direction.

For a man his age, indeed even for a man half his age, Salvo is in exceptional shape. He is thin and lithe and undeniably strong, his slight form belying a muscularity that is rare for his body type. His hair has turned from the darkest brown to a peppery silver with the utmost dignity, even if his hairline has slipped back a little. Thick, leathery lips lie on top of a set of teeth that, despite a minimal regimen of oral hygiene, are almost unnaturally bright. His face is still handsome after being weathered and beaten by sixty-six years of hard living, is quiet and inviting, trustworthy. A person would, if they were to meet him on the street, be inclined to like him. But the most striking thing about Salvo is his eyes. Set deep in their sockets and veiled behind thick, dark eyebrows, they are the colour of an emerald forest, capable of being cold and piercing one moment, calm and soothing the next. They can speak kindness or anger more loudly than words. Whenever people think about Salvo, they think first of his eyes.

The sky is grey, gloomy, not at all the sort of weather that is good for a Fourth of July, let alone a wire walk, but Salvo would rather have this kind of weather than the bright sun and sweltering heat the forecasters had predicted. Hot air rising off the streets can create nasty updrafts, which are considerably more dangerous than a slight breeze. Still, he would not want to be up here in a thunderstorm.

You old fool, he reprimands himself, here you are 110 storeys in the air and you're worried about getting struck by lightning. He pushes such thoughts out of his head, ignores the fact that here, almost fourteen hundred feet above the ground, carrying a large, conductive pole and walking on a steel wire, he is the human equivalent of a lightning rod. He takes another step forward, again silencing the wire.

Salvo settles into a state of intense concentration. He is barely a quarter of the way across and the most difficult part of the walk is yet to come. The balancing pole is getting heavier with every passing second, but instead of becoming fatigued he makes it an extension of his body, its weight holding him steady. The fabric on the left leg of his jumpsuit snaps taut as he is buffeted by an unusually strong gust of wind. He uses the pole to correct his balance and makes a mental note to pay closer attention to these gusts. There is a fierce way the wind whips between these buildings that both frightens and invigorates him.

Once, a newspaper man asked him what it felt like to walk high above the crowd, with death looming beneath him and success a long way off on the other platform. Not knowing

how to answer, he had told the man that it was like being a bird, an eagle, but he knew that wasn't true at all. An eagle has wings. When an eagle flies, it knows it will not fall. He is a man, nothing more, but he is a man who dares do things other men merely watch and admire with awe and envy. He used to walk for these people as much as for himself. Today, however, he walks only for his own fulfillment. That is the difference with these solo walks. All the past successes and failures and problems of the world below are erased from memory. When he is among people, he is one of them, with hopes and fears and memories of things gone wrong. Here he is timeless, one man on a wire far above it all, in a separate place. He is not free, but he is as free as he will ever be.

Salvo is nearly halfway across now, making good time but not hurrying, and things are going very well. The wire is holding tight, and the wind isn't bad. At the halfway point there will be a piece of red tape marking the place where Salvo has agreed to do a handstand, a special bonus for the crowd below. The promoters had also asked him to unfurl an American flag from his leg. He refused. Not only is such a stunt unnecessarily dangerous, but Salvo is a performer, not a politician. Besides, he isn't even American.

For Salvo, a handstand on a wire isn't that difficult, and the height of this wire will actually work to his advantage. Because the audience is so far away, he has decided not to bother to "sell" the trick. Ordinarily, if he were working at a lesser height, he would waver and wobble his handstand slightly, not so much that he would lose control but enough that the audience would wonder if he were about to topple. At this height, however, there's no point in such theatrics, which is too bad. The selling of the trick is the real essence of it, but from a safety standpoint, at fourteen hundred feet, it's a good thing he doesn't have to bother.

Salvo lowers his body to the wire, bending at the knees and placing the pole perpendicular to his path. He bows his head and thrusts his legs skyward. His hands hold the pole on either side of his head, allowing him to correct his balance from side to side and to use his inverted legs to control his back-and-forth movements. Only the slightest of corrections is possible: if he over- or under-corrects he will fall. That gets most people, he knows. Once you over-correct, you have to compensate on the other side for your mistake, and more often than not that gets you wobbling from side to side until you lose it and you're gone.

When his legs reach their apex he arches his back, and the handstand is complete. There follows a brief moment when the wind catches his body at an unfortunate angle, and he's not sure if he will be able to right himself. His arms tighten, and his stomach and thighs strain to halt his momentum. A streak of pain shoots through his hip, but he ignores it and struggles to undo the damage. His torso has twisted slightly and he rotates it back into alignment, almost going too far, barely saving it. His left arm, exerted to its fullest capacity, begins to shake but he continues to struggle, pushing his body so that it screams in protest, then pushing still further, until he is balanced again and the danger has passed. He holds the handstand for several more seconds, partially to make sure he has fully regained his equilibrium before attempting to dismount, and partially to assert his control over the wind, to show it that it can't blow him over that easily.

Satisfied that he has conquered the handstand, Salvo gingerly returns his feet to the wire. He pauses and lets the blood rush through the capillaries emptied by his inversion, feeling his flesh tingle as sensation returns, his face hot and red. When he has recovered completely, he stands, heaving up the balancing pole and continuing his journey. Salvo knows that what he

just happened would have caused most wire walkers to crumple. He has seen others in le trouble give up, and if they hadn't fallen they'd held on tight to the wire and either dropped into makeshift nets or were forced to traverse the rest of the way hand over fist. No matter which, the walk ended in defeat and disgrace. The difference between Salvo and other wire walkers is that Salvo has long ago learned to tell his body to keep going, even when it seems that he has reached the end of his endurance.

He imagines what it must be like on the ground, how the street would be so quiet that you could hear the person next to you breathing, except during his handstand, when some would have been unable to stop themselves from gasping. When he'd teetered to the side it must have seemed like something had burst; the whole crowd would have erupted into shouts and cries. After he'd righted himself and returned his feet to the wire, people would have applauded without reserve, smiling at the stranger beside them as if to say they'd known all along that this was how it would turn out.

His confidence and strength renewed, Salvo steps forward, glad to feel the wind across his face, glad for the cool freshness of the air, glad for the busy smell of the city and the solid steady beating of his heart. Salvo knows that if he were to fall he would stand absolutely no chance of survival. After only one second he would be over 160 feet from the wire, travelling at a speed of twenty miles an hour. After five seconds he would be four hundred feet down, going nearly 110 miles an hour. At this point he would reach terminal velocity, the highest speed at which a human body can fall. That he would hit the ground a mere seven seconds later, twelve seconds after leaving the wire, he knows because he read it in the paper the very morning, a not so encouraging piece about today's skywalk.

Salvo has long maintained that most people do not want to see him fall. Perhaps one in twenty do, and perhaps nine in twenty come so that they are present if he should fall. The other half of the audience is there to see him face death and make it. It is for these people that Salvo has spent a lifetime performing. He has fear, but he's not afraid. He likes to think that if people see him face his fear, they will in some small way be able to do so as well. That's what he thinks when he's being most optimistic. Newspaper articles like the one that ran today do much to deflate him.

It doesn't matter now, however, because he is advancing steadily and feels certain he will not fall. He is three-quarters of the way across and moving at a good pace. The wind has died down, stopping the wire's singing. Sweat covers his face, and he licks his lips, savouring the salty taste of his hard work. His hip is throbbing a little, but Salvo doesn't mind the pain, having grown used to it long ago. He pictures the crowd below grinning with anticipation; he has completed the handstand and, he believes, even managed inadvertently to sell it. He has visions of his wife, Anna, down on the ground below, pouring rye whisky over ice—one for her, two for him. He always drinks two ryes after a walk; to him, the smell of whisky has become the smell of success.

With his next step he feels the wire slacken. Not a lot, but a little, and that's how trouble starts. He is not overly concerned; his crew can tighten the guy lines and winch up his wire and everything will be fine. But as he takes another step the slackening grows, and for the next three steps it continues to worsen. He is now more than a little worried and contemplates stopping to wait for the wire to tighten. Just as he is weighing his options the wire does begin to pull taut. He breathes a sigh of relief and picks up his pace.

There is still a little slack in the wire when Salvo is hit hard from the side by a gust of wind, the strongest yet. He strains against the force of the blow, dipping his pole precariously low to one side, legs and arms and stomach fighting for equilibrium. A split second later the wire beneath his feet drops at least three inches. Salvo drops with it, aware that the worst is happening.

Because of their massive height, at their summit the twin towers of the World Trade Center can sway as much as four feet in any direction when confronted with a hard wind. Although Salvo had no intention of walking in any wind capable of blowing an entire building four feet to the side, even a slight movement could threaten him. To compensate, the wire has been mounted onto large, stiff springs at either end. The springs are strong enough that it would take a fair amount of force to move them, only barely less than it would take to snap the wire in two.

He knows that the wind that just hit him has caused one of the towers to sway towards the other, slackening the wire. He instantly prepares himself for the wire's imminent tightening. He bends his knees and drops his arms, lowering his centre of gravity: there is a great danger of his being tossed into the air, which would be very difficult to recover from. Of course there is also the danger that the wire might snap, but if that happened there'd be nothing Salvo could do. It would be over.

The wire comes taut with a crack that cuts through the air. As much as he tries to hold onto the wire, he can't. He doesn't panic when he feels the air under his feet. With honed reflexes he straightens his body and feels his upward momentum halt. For the tiniest part of a moment he is motionless, hanging in mid-air six inches above the wire, nearly fourteen hundred feet above the ground. Then he is moving downward and his feet connect with the wire. He bends at the knees, and every part of his body—from his toes up through his ankles, shins, thighs, into his stomach and chest, arms, neck and head—works to buoy his balance and keep him upright. Even his breathing plays a part in his struggle.

All Salvo is aware of is his muscles tensing and relaxing, and the only sound he hears is the coursing of his blood. There is no past, no future, only this fraction of a second, and then this one and then this one. In four seconds Salvo lives more than many people do in a lifetime with a singular purpose few can comprehend. He does not think; he does not even start to think. His survival depends on reflex, training and luck.

Reflex and training he has. Luck, however, does not seem to be on his side today. Just as he feels his balance returning, just as it seems as though the situation is once again under control, his left foot slips off the wire. He is fast to act, and he manages to recover somewhat but not completely. His right leg is bent impossibly at the knee; his left hangs orphaned in the air.

He freezes, considering his options. Just don't move, he tells himself. There are things that can be done. He can try and lower himself even more, rest his pole on the wire and lift his left leg. Or he can try to stand, using all his strength to force his right leg to straighten.

Neither option offers any guarantees. If he tries to stand up and doesn't have the strength, he will topple. If he tries to lower himself onto the wire and a strong gust of wind comes before he is ready, he will be blown off. Better to go to the wire, he decides. At least that way if he fails, he can always grab the wire.

Slowly, with great care, Salvo lowers his body. His right leg feels as though it is being

burned with a torch. He can hardly keep his grip on his pole. His jaws are clenched so tight he can hear his teeth grinding against each other, and his vision begins to blur. The pressure in his arms is relieved as the pole comes to rest on the wire, and as his left knee rises to the wire, the pain in his right leg lessens. For the next few seconds he rests. Do not stay here too long, he thinks, knowing that his right leg will cramp if he doesn't stand up soon.

He exhales, feels his lungs burn as the air escapes, and breathes in deeply, summoning all his remaining strength. There's not much left, he knows. Better make good on what's there. I can stand up, I'll be fine, he thinks. Just stand.

And so he stands. It isn't as hard as he expected; the wire has become solid under his feet and the wind is gone. High above, the clouds have parted slightly, and a weak beam of sunlight streams down onto the wire in front of him. He confidently steps into the light, scanning the horizon. He is so far above the skyline of New York City, it seems small and insignificant from where he stands. Steel and bricks and concrete are reduced to lumps in a child's sandbox.

Salvo takes a step, then another. The wire feels good, like a familiar warm coat, and he's glad to be where he is. Fear has left him completely. He has faced the worst and has not fallen. That's good, but don't get too happy, a voice inside him says. You're not on the other side yet.

He pushes the euphoria to the back of his mind. There will be plenty of time for celebration later. He won't think of it again until he's down in the trailer with Anna, drinking a rye whisky.

He pauses on the wire, centring his balance, adjusting his grip on the balancing pole. He catches a whiff of baby powder but ignores it, stopping memory from invading his focus. He takes a slow step forward, settles himself and lifts his foot to step again. At that precise moment, the wire drops once more. As he follows the wire downward, the wind hits him like a wave, more than he can handle. When the wire springs up he does not go with it. He pitches to the side, his left leg completely off the wire. He feels the wire snap into the back of his right knee and buttock, and his pole twists far to the side. He can hardly hold it any longer then his fingers release and the pole is no longer in his hands. His hands reach blindly for the wire, and somehow he manages to clutch it and capture the falling pole between his forearms. Whatever happens, he believes he must not lose the pole. His belief is pure instinct; at this point the pole is irrelevant, but Salvo has been walking the wire for so long that reflex overrides logic. He can hold onto the wire or hold onto the pole, but not both.

His body corkscrews further to the side, and now only his right calf is on the wire, not only his ankle. Salvo is off the wire. He is falling. In his arms he still clutches the balancing pole.

He knows instantly that he's falling, he's dead. He isn't shocked and he isn't afraid. Yet as he falls, he remains focused on one final task. He twists and writhes, hands still tight around his balancing pole, manoeuvring his feet so that they are beneath him, fighting to stay vertical. In the many still photographs that are taken of him as he falls, it appears almost as though he is still on the wire.

He remembers a Romany proverb his father would mutter in times of hardship: *Bury me standing. I've spent my whole life on my knees.* Salvo has a different idea, though, one he has kept in the back of his mind nearly his whole life, one which will be his last earthly thought.

Bury me however you do. I will die standing.

Salvo wiped the dust from his eyes and stepped quickly, trying to keep up with his father. It had been a hot summer, and the fields were as dry as the dusty road they were travelling. It was 1919, less than a year since the war had ended and the Romanian army had claimed this formerly Hungarian province. If four years of war hadn't been hardship enough, now there was drought. The people of this rural section of Transylvania would have to go without for yet another winter.

Salvo's father seemed unconcerned at the prospect of things going from bad to worse. Miksa Ursari was a thin, gaunt man, with callused hands and scars on his back from having been beaten as a youth with a piece of barbed wire for stealing a chicken. He had indeed stolen the chicken, and hundreds more like it, and when the owners beat him he did not fight back, nor did he cry out. When they finally stopped, he got up and stole a horse and moved on to the next town. Revenge never even occurred to him. What would be the point? He was a Rom, a gypsy, and for a Rom the best way to get revenge was to live another day.

All throughout Europe the Roma were scattered, some having settled into towns and villages, most remaining wanderers. Since the beginning of the war, more and more people had been displaced, more Roma found themselves refugees from battlefields, starvation and conscription. But now there were non-Roma fleeing as well. These *gadje* did not readily take to a life of transience. Miksa felt sorry for some of them. He had no idea what it was to live your whole life in one place and then to be cast out. Old women with appled faces and a lifetime of belongings behind them in ox carts—he felt worst for them. There were other people, though, spiteful men with lowered eyebrows, whom he did not feel sorry for. Wherever he went there were *gadje* who would try to lay blame on those who had nothing to do with anything, and nearly always it fell upon the Roma. But while the Roma undoubtedly lied and stole, it was never on such a scale as to do any real harm, and they were certainly not the ones who had brought the war, any more than they were the ones who had lost it. Miksa Ursari knew that there were many people who were looking for an excuse to make scapegoats of the Roma, and he tried hard not to think about what might happen if there were too many of these people and they got too loud.

So if Miksa seemed indifferent towards the drought, it was because he had other preoccupations. Still, he was far less concerned with the things on his mind than others were about the things on theirs. Life had always been hard; why should now be any different? There was no point in becoming obsessed with troubles. Even if life was mostly bad, there were still times that were not. And if you were to spend all your days worrying about the bad parts, you would miss the fleeting moments of good. Whether this was completely true Miksa was not sure, but he had learned that a man had to have a way of looking at things, and at twenty-seven, he thought his was as good as any.

Nine-year-old Salvo tugged at his sleeve. Miksa knew he was walking fast, too fast for the boy to keep up, but he had pressing business waiting and could not afford to slow his pace.

"Step quickly, Salvo, and I'll tell you a story," he said, knowing that his son would run to keep up before he would turn down the offer of a story.

His father had judged correctly. Salvo picked up his pace, eager for one of his father's tales.

His father told the best stories of any Rom he knew, and the Roma told the best stories of anyone in the whole world. On clear evenings his father would often gather the family around a fire and tell them stories until Salvo had to fight to stay awake, and when he finally did slip into sleep, they continued in his dreams.

Miksa Ursari swallowed, pushing the grit and dust down out of his mouth. He moistened his tongue and scratched at the stubble prickling his neck, racking his brain for a story to tell his son. He knew a lot of stories, but not all of them were good to tell an impressionable boy like Salvo, especially one who listened so intently and took every word as the truth. For a Rom, his son was ridiculously gullible. Miksa worried for the boy's future.

"Do you know why there are so many Roma in Hungary?" he asked the boy.

"No," Salvo answered.

"Well then, I will tell you." The tone of Miksa's voice shifted from that of normal speech to that of a man who is telling a tale and doesn't want to be interrupted. If there was one thing Miksa would not tolerate, it was being interrupted while telling a story. It caused him to lose his place and ruined any effect he was trying to create. There would be plenty of time for questions after the story was finished.

"A long time ago, maybe before my great-great-grandfather was born, there were no Roma in Hungary. They passed through but they never stayed, finding themselves unwelcome. Then it came that one day a husband and wife and their baby were travelling through Hungary. Now, the husband, he was a great thief. He was so great a thief that it was said he could steal the tongue from your mouth while you were talking with him, and you would never even know it. That is what was said.

"Well, he was a great thief all right, but not so great that he did not get caught. And the Hungarians who caught him took him to prison, leaving the young wife and her baby on their own in this strange land, with no horse and no ox and no mule. The wife walked for many days in the direction the Hungarians had taken her husband, the thief, hoping that if she could find the prison he was in, she could plead for his release.

"On the third day of her walking she came to a village that was deserted. She was tired and her baby was hungry, so she went into a stable and sat on the straw floor and put the child to her breast to suckle. The wife was very beautiful, having had only this one child, and she had long, thick hair that she wore loose about her shoulders, where it fell down to the end of her back. She knew that it was dangerous for a beautiful young woman to travel alone, but she had a small knife and her husband had shown her how to use it, so she was not worried too much for her safety.

"She was just falling into sleep when she heard a noise outside, and not wanting her child to cry and alert whatever was there, she put the child to her breast again. There was no noise for a very long time, and the young wife thought that maybe whatever it was had gone away. And then she saw a snake, a huge snake, slither through the door of the stable and right up to her.

"This snake was enormous, long and wide as the forest's oldest tree, long and wide and fat with skin so tough and thick that an arrow could not pierce it. It had such an appetite that it had devoured everything in the village, the people and the livestock and the feed. Only a few lucky souls had managed to escape.

"Most wives would shriek at the sight of such a beast, but this young woman was a Roma

and the wife of a great thief, so she did no such thing. The snake slithered closer still, smelling her milk, wondering if it tasted as good as it smelled. The young wife recognized the look in the snake's black eyes, and she knew what it was thinking, so she gently took the snake's head and brought it to her breast, side by side with her own child's.

"There the snake suckled, so hard and furiously that the young wife thought it would pull the heart out of her, but she did not pull back. She gently stroked the snake's head, caressing the scaly hide as if it were her own baby's soft flesh.

"After a time the snake fell asleep, and as he slept she reached into her skirts for her knife. She knew that her knife couldn't cut into the snake's strong skin, but she wasn't deterred. She was the wife of a cunning man, and she thought of a plan. Taking great care that the snake did not stir from her breast, she took the knife and she cut off all of her beautiful, long hair. She braided the hair into a good strong rope. At her feet was a fetter used to secure the horses, which had all been eaten by the snake. She tied one end of the rope to the fetter, then took the other end and put it around the snake's neck, tying the rope into a hangman's noose.

"In the morning the snake awoke, and he was hungry, and he drank from the young wife's milk with an appetite suited to such a voracious creature. So intent was he on his breakfast that he did not feel the rope around his neck. The young wife stroked his head and did not flinch. She allowed the snake to drink its fill, knowing it would grow careless with its hunger satiated. After what was a long time to the young wife, the snake grew full and ceased to suckle.

"In one quick motion the young wife gathered up her baby, pushed the snake from her breast and darted towards the back wall. The snake lunged at her, fangs bared, but it was not fast enough to catch her, its belly full of milk. When it reached the end of the rope, the hangman's noose pulled tight around its neck. The beast thrashed wildly to free itself, and the young wife was afraid the rope of her hair would break. But the rope held, and the harder the snake struggled, the tighter the noose became. Slowly the snake began to die, his air choked out of him. At last, his tail grew still and his eyes bulged out, and he was dead.

"When the *gadje* who had escaped from the snake found out what had happened, they were grateful, and they immediately found the prison where the young wife's husband was being held and had him freed. They welcomed the Romany couple and their child into their village and told them they were welcome there always. But the husband, he was a thief, and he didn't want to steal from people who had treated him and his wife and baby so well, so the family left the village.

"When other Roma heard how well the people of Hungary had treated the great thief and his young wife, they wanted to go to that village. The thief, not wishing to see anything bad happen to the village, did not say exactly where it was, but still the Roma went to Hungary. And a great many of them are still looking for the village where the thief and his young wife had been treated so well, as it has been said that if that village could be found again, the Roma would cease to wander."

Miksa continued walking at his brisk pace, and Salvo was half walking, half running to keep up with him. All that could be heard was their feet thumping in the dust and a faint wind rustling in the brittle branches of the trees.

When he was sure that the story was over, Salvo spoke, his breath laboured by the pace his father had set. "Did her hair grow back?"

“What?” Miksa’s mind had drifted to other matters.

“The young wife. Did her hair grow back?”

“Oh, yes. It grew back longer and thicker and darker than ever, and she was even more beautiful than before.”

“What about the baby?”

“He grew up to be a great thief, like his father.”

“Did he ever go back to the village?”

“No. Like his father, he was grateful to the people of the village and didn’t want to steal from them. Besides, he was only a baby when he had been there, and he didn’t know where the village was.”

Salvo thought about this for a moment. He was sure that, as a baby, he had been places he could no longer remember. He had been many places, even as far as his aunt and uncle’s house in Budapest, which he could recall, but also into eastern Romania and Bulgaria, which he could not. So it made sense.

“Do you know where the village is?”

Miksa looked at the boy. Why did he have to take everything so literally? “No, I don’t.”

“It isn’t where we live?”

“No,” Miksa said. “It isn’t.”

They continued down the road, past a ditch that had a dead goat half sticking out of it, its rotting legs grotesquely splayed.

“What about the snake?”

“It was dead. It was no more.”

“Were there any more snakes like that?”

“I don’t think so. If there were, they probably all got killed in the war.”

Salvo was relieved. He did not like the thought of such a beast.

SALVO WAS THE SECOND OLDEST of the three living children in his family; his older brother, András, was eleven years old and very strong for his age, able to lift a large wash basin full of water. There was also a baby girl, Etel. There would have been six children, but three had died when they were very small. Salvo had not known them at all, really, so he hadn’t been saddened by their deaths, but he heard the keening of his mother at night and he was sad for her. He also heard words like *influenza* and *diphtheria*, and he wondered if he too would die. He kept himself awake, afraid that when he woke up he would be dead, but he always went to sleep and he always woke up very much alive, so lately he worried less.

Before the war had started, Salvo’s family had owned a tame bear. Their family name, *Ursari*, meant “bear” in Romany, and the family had made a living from the animal, which could do several tricks and was very smart. The bear’s name had been Bella, which someone told them meant “good” in Italian. *Bella Ursari* the Bear, or “Good Bear the Bear,” supported Salvo’s family for seven years, but when the war started there was not enough food, and even though he ate better than anyone else, Good Bear the Bear got sick and, after a while, he was dead. Salvo had not seen his father cry when his younger sisters and brother died, but when Good Bear the Bear finally died, his father had buried his face in the creature’s fur and cried like a young widow at her own husband’s funeral.

For a long time after that Salvo’s father refused to go out. He sat cross-legged on the floor

and drank strong coffee and smoked cheap cigarettes, eating little, rarely sleeping, and never ever telling stories. Then, in the spring, Salvo's mother's stomach began to swell, and three days before the war ended she gave birth to a girl.

After that Salvo's father seemed to forget about Good Bear the Bear and set to work providing for his family. He knew how to work as a blacksmith, and he made a little money shoeing horses and doing the odd repair job. The war had brought a shortage of skilled labour, but as more men returned from military service there was less demand for his work. Most people would rather go to a Hungarian smith or a Romanian smith than a Roman smith, even if the Rom did a much better job. The only jobs Salvo's father got lately were those that were either too difficult or too dangerous for anyone else.

THE ROAD CURVED TO THE LEFT, and as father and son rounded the corner, a church came into view. It was still half a mile away, but its steeple was tremendously high, so high as to be seen from a long way off. It was a very old church, at least four hundred years old—remarkable given the amount of fighting this land had seen in that time and the fact that the church was made of wood. Rarely did a wooden structure see such an age in a place where people were prone to setting torches to buildings during times of upheaval.

The church was not particularly large, but it did not have to be. There had never been more than six or seven hundred people living in the vicinity, and of that number perhaps only two people in five were regular Catholic churchgoers. The main part of the building was two storeys high, with a steeply sloped roof designed to withstand the large amount of rain that usually fell there. Its white paint had long ago peeled away. Though the church was well maintained by the new priest and his helpers, there was simply no paint to be had.

On the west side of the church, directly above the entrance, was the steeple Salvo had seen from half a mile down the road. It stretched from the roof up towards the sky for eighty feet—square for the first fifty, then tapered for the last thirty and peaked with a flattened knob less than four inches across. What was most remarkable about the steeple, however, was the lack of a cross upon its summit.

The church did possess a cross for the steeple, the cross itself perhaps more valuable and remarkable than the actual church. It was said to be over nine hundred years old, made from an iron that had been forged in Rome and sent from a pope to celebrate the coronation of Saint Stephen, the king who had brought Christianity to Hungary. The cross was on its way to Budapest when the knight sent to accompany it had become ill and died, as luck would have it, in this very village. Since then it had consistently graced the steeples of a succession of churches built on this spot.

When the war came the old priest was worried that the church might be burned, and he had the cross taken down. Exactly how he had done it no one knew; he had died soon after. There had been a succession of temporary priests, but none of them much cared for the place and they had left one by one. It wasn't until a year ago that a new priest had finally come and stayed. He did not mind this place so much, he said, but he did not like that the cross was not upon the steeple.

While it was decided that the cross should be restored to its proper place, no one knew how it could be done. Various people from the church had tried, but none had even succeeded in climbing the steeple, let alone in getting the hundred-pound cross to the top. Finally the

priest had put up a small reward for anyone who could figure out a way to raise the cross. Knowing the inventiveness of the Roma, he made sure that the news of the reward would reach them, and that is how Miksa heard of the problem.

He immediately volunteered for the job, telling the priest that all he would require was strong rope twice the length needed to reach the top of the steeple. The priest was puzzled, wondering how he hoped to climb the steeple, but Miksa remained tight-lipped. He told the priest he would have to wait and see and that he would come the following day to do the job.

A crowd of about forty people had gathered to watch, not all of them happy about the prospect of a Rom being the one to restore the cross. As he and his father edged through the crowd, Salvo heard the mutterings of an old Bible legend, often told by people who saw the Roma as descendants of Cain, and told by Roma who appreciated it as a good story. Salvo remembered his father telling it to him and his elder brother, András.

“When it came that the Romans decided they would crucify Jesus, they sent two soldiers to buy nails to do the job. The soldiers were given money to buy four nails. But instead of going out and buying the nails, they spent some of the money on drink and food and women. After they had had their fill, they realized that they must have nails for that morning’s work, so they went and found a blacksmith, a Jew.

“‘Make us four nails, quickly, man,’ they said to him, and they lit his beard on fire to make him hurry.

“The man screamed from his beard being on fire, and the soldiers stuck his head in a water trough. ‘Hurry! We must have four strong nails so that we can crucify Jesus this morning,’ they said.

“The man, knowing who Jesus was and not wanting to have a part in killing him, refused to make the nails. The soldiers stuck their swords into him and spilled out his guts. Then they went to another blacksmith, a Serb, and they said the same thing to him, and he refused, and they killed him.

“Then they came to a Rom, who was hard at work in his forge. ‘Make us four nails,’ they said, ‘or you are dead where you stand.’ The Rom hesitated, and one of the soldiers took out a little money, a very small amount, the little that was left in his pocket from the night before. ‘I will give you this coin for the nails.’

“Well, the Rom did not want to be killed, so he took the money and put it into his pocket and set about making the nails. When the first nail was finished, the soldiers took it and put it in their bag. When the second was finished they did the same, and again they took the third nail as soon as it was finished. The Rom had just started to forge the fourth nail when the soldiers said to him, ‘Thank you, gypsy, for soon we’ll have four nails with which to crucify Jesus.’

“At that moment the souls of the men the soldiers had killed appeared and began to plead with the Rom not to make nails that would kill Jesus. The soldiers became afraid and they ran off, leaving the Rom with the fourth nail still hot in his forge. Not wanting to waste good iron, the Rom finished the nail, but when he poured water on it, the metal would not cool; it remained glowing hot. All day long he poured water on it, but the nail never ceased to glow red, like a burning body with fire for blood.

“Terrified, the Rom packed his wagon and moved on. He pitched his tent again only after he had travelled several days, but when he did a man brought in a wagon’s wheel for

mending. The Rom took the fourth nail and fixed the wheel with it, and the man took the wheel away with the nail imbedded within it. The Rom again moved on, fearful that the man with the nail would return.

Months later, he was many miles away when a different man brought him a sword to be repaired, and when he touched the sword he saw the nail in the hilt, glowing red. He fled again but wherever he went the nail would eventually find him, and he would have to flee. So it went for that man and all his descendants, and that is why the Roma always have to keep moving on, and that is also why Jesus was crucified using only three nails.”

The people around them knew this story well, and they knew versions of it where the Rom was not such an unwilling victim of circumstance. Salvo could feel their eyes upon him, and he knew that they were not friendly eyes. This was surely not the village the great thief's wife had saved from the snake.

They made their way to the front of the crowd, where the priest was waiting, the crowd lying on the ground at his feet. He shook Salvo's father's hand and spoke to him in a hushed tone that Salvo could not quite hear. And the priest gave Miksa the longest rope Salvo had ever seen.

“You go wait over by that tree,” Miksa told his son, pointing to what was once a flourishing tree, standing dead at the edge of the clearing in front of the church. The boy reluctantly obeyed, making his way back through the crowd. Miksa didn't want his son to wait with the Hungarian Christians. There were a lot of bad feelings going around, on account of the war and the revolution and Romania's troops going in and out of the area, and he didn't want the boy to become the object of anyone looking to vent a little frustration.

When he saw Salvo reach the tree, Miksa went inside and climbed a narrow, twisting staircase to a catwalk that traversed the length of the church's interior. It ran to the very back of the building, made a turn and spanned the width. In the middle of the rear catwalk there was a window, very small, just large enough for a man to squeeze through. Looping the coiled rope over his shoulder so his hands would be free, Miksa pushed open the window and, headfirst but facing the church, climbed out. He stood on the narrow sill, up on the tip of his toes, and was only barely able to reach the lip of the roof. With all the strength in his bony fingers he pulled himself up, as if doing a chin-up, until his chest was touching the edge of the roof. Because it was so severely sloped, he was able to swing one foot, and then the other, over to the side and onto the roof. He walked along the ridge towards the front, where the steeple began. There he saw the crowd of people below, and beyond that he saw Salvo perched in the crook of the dead tree.

It was at this point that the others had failed in their attempts. The steeple was nearly straight up, and there was nothing but smooth wood to hold onto. Miksa adjusted the rope slung over his shoulder and spit on his hands. His foot stepped into the air and outwards towards the far edge of the steeple. As he reached the top arc of his stride, his foot landed on a nail, no more than three inches long and less than half an inch thick, nearly invisible to the eye, certainly invisible to the crowd below. Even those who had been up here before had missed the nail, but Miksa had known about it and the others that pierced the steeple, and he was relieved when it held his weight.

Miksa Ursari knew about the nails because he was the one who had put them there. In fact he was the one who had helped the old priest remove the cross in the first place. The o

priest had been something of a friend to Miksa, and when he asked him for his help Miksa had agreed without hesitating. They'd taken the cross down early one morning, in secret, and hid it in the forest to prevent it from being stolen. After the old priest died, Miksa wondered if he should go and tell someone where it was, but he hadn't trusted any of the successive priests. They never lasted long enough anyway. Apparently it didn't matter; the old priest had written down where it was, fearful that something might happen to Miksa or that in his old age he would forget where he had hidden it. The new priest found the paper and recovered the cross, but had no idea how the old priest had got it down. When Miksa offered to put it back up, he thought it best not to mention that he had been the one to remove it. Nowadays he did not volunteer any more information than was absolutely necessary.

At its base, the steeple was about five feet wide for the first fifty feet, and Miksa had placed the nails in an upward spiral, each two and a half feet up and over from the previous one, leaving a nail in each corner and one in between. When he was on the corner he was relatively safe—it was easier to hold on and to switch his feet on the nail—but when he was on the middle nail, he had to stretch his arms out all the way, barely able to wrap his fingertips around each corner of the steeple. The wood occasionally splintered into his hands but he dared not wear gloves for fear of losing his grip. There would be a brief moment on each nail when he had to switch feet, and here he was most vulnerable. Very quickly, using all the strength in his thickly skinned fingers to clutch the edges of the spire, he would pull his body up, just slightly, lifting one foot off the nail and replacing it with the other.

As Miksa ascended in this manner, he discovered something he was not prepared for. The last time he had climbed the steeple, it had been early in the morning, before the sun had risen. Now, however, in the heat of the afternoon sun, the wood of the steeple had been heated to a temperature that made holding on to it much more difficult. He could feel its heat on his cheek, which he'd pressed roughly against the siding, and his fingers protested vehemently, though he was sure they weren't actually burning. At any rate, it was not the decision whether to hold on or not, so he kept climbing. He wound his way around the spiral, rising five feet on each side, making two and a half full revolutions. He reached the top of the square section, fifty feet from the roof of the church, pulled himself over the lip of an eight-inch ledge, and there Miksa Ursari rested.

To the people below it appeared as though Miksa was able to stick to the side of the steeple like a fly to a wall, although there were some who guessed that there were nails. Salvo didn't need to figure the nails out; he had known about them all along. His father had sworn him to secrecy, a secret that Salvo would keep if it cost him his very life. As he watched his father climb the spire that stretched towards the sky like a holy finger, Salvo's heart swelled with joy, and a little envy.

His father rested on the edge of the upper part of the towering steeple for several minutes before continuing. The final thirty-foot portion was triangular in shape, so instead of circling the structure as he had done in the lower section, Salvo's father shimmied straight up. As the steeple narrowed he was able to move faster, and to Salvo it didn't feel like very long at all until his father had reached the top. From where he sat in the crook of the dead tree, Salvo thought his father seemed a long way off, almost in another world. Salvo wondered what it must feel like to be up there, where no one else had been able to go, and as he saw the jealous faces of the *gadje* in the crowd, he was glad that Miksa Ursari was his father.

Miksa did not look down to see the admiration on his son's face. Though he had never to anyone, he was slightly afraid of heights. Sometimes it bothered him and sometimes it did not, and that day it did. He continued, drawing in a sharp breath and digging his fingertips into the hot wood. His face was slick with sweat, and his heart was beating so loudly that for a moment he wondered if the people below could hear it. He glanced down to confirm his suspicion, and the ground swayed and twisted, and he felt his chest tighten up and his stomach flip, but still he made himself keep looking. Face it, and you will either fall or you will get past it, he told himself. So he kept focusing on the ground, and just when he thought he might not be able to control his fear any more, it vanished, and he was as comfortable up on the top of the steeple as he would have been standing on the top of a fence post.

He reached into his pocket and removed an iron ring, four inches in diameter, and hooked this ring over an iron peg that protruded from the top of the spire. The peg was intended to bolt onto the bottom of the cross. Then he untied the rope from around his neck and his shoulder, glad to be free of its oppressive weight. Through the iron ring, he strung one end of the rope, lowering its length to the ground. When the one end was on the ground, he dropped the other.

On the ground, one end of the rope was attached to the cross, and three men pulled at the other end. Slowly the cross rose to the top of the steeple. Miksa saw the new priest smiling at himself down below as he watched its ascent. The old priest would never have seen a symbol of resurrection here. All he would have seen was a cross going up on a rope.

When the cross reached him Miksa moved down slightly, resting his feet on two nails that were about eighteen inches below the apex of the structure. He flexed his knees together and removed his hands from the steeple. He supported the weight of the cross with one hand and unhooked the iron ring with the other. Then, with all of his strength, he lifted the cross to rest its base on the edge of the steeple. The peg that held the cross in place protruded six inches upwards, and the base of the cross had a hole to receive it, but a great deal of effort was required to lift the hundred-pound cross that extra six inches and then guide the peg into its sheath.

Miksa braced his knees more tightly than ever and took a deep breath. With a hand on each arm of the cross he lifted it up and over, shifting the base back and forth until he felt it meet the peg. He rested the cross on top of the peg for a moment and attempted to force it down. He managed to get two inches through, but the peg was rusted from its recent exposure and wouldn't go in any more. Slowly, tentatively, Miksa removed one hand and then the other from the cross, prepared to quickly grab it should it move, but it didn't. He tested its stability with a shake, first light and gradually harder, and still it held. Satisfied that it wouldn't fall on him, Miksa turned his attention to the rusted portion of the peg, which was about twice as thick as his thumb. With one hand he rubbed at the rust, feeling it crumble roughly under his ministrations. He jerked his hand back as the cross settled an inch further on the peg. Then he took the cross by the base and twisted it from side to side, feeling it move downward a little at a time.

When there were only two inches left Miksa felt the cross drop suddenly, colliding with the iron skirting around the base of the peg with a metallic clang. A shower of reddish grit skidded down the spire, and out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw a piece of the peg, perhaps half an inch wide, break loose and fall to the ground. The sight concerned him, but

there was little he could do about it, as he didn't have the strength left to raise the cross and inspect the damage. Miksa untied the rope from the cross, returned the iron ring to his pocket, and prepared for his descent. The last time, when there had been only him and the old priest, he had looped the rope around the cross and, after the priest tied one end to a tree, had rappelled down the steeple. This time, however, there were too many spectators that he simply didn't trust. There was no way he was going to risk having some *gadjo* cut the rope as he came down.

Miksa dropped the rope and began to climb down. The triangular section was easy enough, like walking down a ladder, but the square part of the steeple was far more difficult. Each step had to be aimed correctly or else he would be stepping into thin air with little means of correcting himself. At this point, Miksa could almost feel the ground beneath his feet, and even though it took less time to climb down the steeple than it had to climb up, it felt like forever to him. Instead of traversing the roof of the church and swinging back through the second-storey window as he had done before, Miksa sat and slid down the steeply pitched roof. When he neared the edge he used his feet as brakes, slowing enough to allow him to stop up and halt his momentum.

Beside the church stood a tree, and Miksa leapt into its branches. He was on the ground in a matter of seconds, immediately beginning to look for the priest, not wanting to hang around any longer than necessary.

Miksa could see the disdain in the eyes of the onlookers. He imagined that they must be upset because none of them had been able to restore the cross. They'd come today to see him fail at it too, and now they were disappointed because he had not failed. Their situation was no doubt confused by the fact that some part of them knew they should be happy that the cross was back where it should be, and they were not, which also made them angry, more with themselves than him. But Miksa knew that people seldom take out anger on themselves. He began to wonder if he had been wise to do this job.

The priest, seeing Miksa approaching, stepped forward with his hands outstretched. Unlike the rest of the onlookers, he felt no animosity. In his eyes all he saw was the man who had restored the cross to the top of his church. If he knew what others were seeing in Miksa, he gave no indication.

Miksa forced a smile and grasped the priest's hands. They were smooth and soft, while Miksa's were rough with calluses and scarred by this and other days' work. Even Salvo, only nine years old, had more world-weary hands than the new priest, who had come from a seminary in Budapest just before the Romanians had marched into Transylvania and claimed the territory as their own.

The new priest had worried that the Romanians would take away his church, but they hadn't so much as spoken to him, and since it was well attended, he assumed that he was safe enough in his position. His only regret had been the lack of a cross on the church, and he had for a long while been distressed as to whether he would ever be able to place a cross on top of the mammoth steeple. He had even considered having the steeple torn down and another shorter structure erected in its place, one with a cross, but he had been discouraged from that course of action by the people of the town. He had been in a state of utter despair until Miksa Ursari had volunteered.

Now, as the new priest looked at the cross—which he did not believe was a waylaid gift from

Saint Stephen for the simple reason that this town was nowhere near the road from Rome to Budapest—his heart swelled. He would not allow himself the luxury of joyous tears in public. He thrust a leather pouch containing coins into Miksa's hand, wishing he had more with which to reward this Rom.

As soon as the coins were in his possession, Miksa turned and moved towards the tree where Salvo waited, only to find his son momentarily distracted by a butterfly that had landed only inches from his hand. Salvo watched its wings twitch as it settled in and appeared to assess its surroundings. The butterfly seemed intent on spending some time in the tree, unconcerned with Salvo's presence. A sudden boyish instinct seized Salvo, and slowly he pinched his thumb and index finger around one of the butterfly's wings. The butterfly, to Salvo's surprise, did not protest or struggle. It remained calm as Salvo gently plucked it off its branch. He felt moved by the butterfly's courage and released it just as his father reached him.

Miksa lifted Salvo down from the fork of the dead tree. Without speaking, they started quickly down the road back home. The crowd had not grown any more hostile, but Miksa saw no reason to test their resolve.

Behind them, the new priest was blessing the cross. He stood in front of the church, arms raised to God, as the more-or-less faithful kneeled before him. It was apparent to all how happy the priest was, and his elation was beginning to rub off on some of them.

When Miksa and Salvo were about a quarter-mile from the church they heard a scream. They stopped and turned back in the direction they had come.

There was no way to tell who had looked up. The people kneeling in prayer were supposed to have had their eyes closed, or at least cast downwards, and the new priest had been facing away from the church, towards Salvo and his father. But everybody had heard the scream, so it was obvious that someone had looked up. And at that moment, when the scream pierced the priest's prayer, nearly everyone opened their eyes to see what had caused it.

The priest was somewhat irked; he was just getting to the end of the blessing, and now he would have to start over. It was a hot day, the heat all the worse for him in his black robes, and he did not want to spend any more time standing in the sweltering afternoon sun than necessary. He scanned the devotees for the source of the disturbance, and in a split second he came to the realization that the crowd's attention seemed to be shifting skyward, and the air was filled with more cries. He turned to see what the people were looking at, expecting to see some sort of holy miracle on the summit of his ancient wooden church. Of course they would receive a miracle fearfully; they were a rural, superstitious bunch, and miracles had historically inspired fear in even the most worldly of souls, but he was not afraid. He would accept this miracle with open arms, and he would help these people see it for what it was. Today was indeed a joyous day.

The new priest had not yet completed his turn when the falling cross landed squarely upon him, striking him on the head. It was doubtful that he ever knew what had delivered the blow, so intent was he upon receiving a miracle. The people on their knees certainly saw it, though, as did Salvo and Miksa. From where they were up the road they saw the priest crumple to the ground like an empty sack; they saw the crowd of people leap to their feet and rush to him. They were too far away to hear either the dull thud of the cross's impact or the sharp crack that followed as the priest's skull split in two. Likewise they could not see his

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