

The Man Who Walked Between the Towers

By Mordicai Gerstein

Once there were two towers side by side.
They were each a quarter of a mile high;
one thousand three hundred and forty feet.
The tallest buildings in New York City.

A young man saw them rise into the sky.
He was a street performer. He rode a unicycle.
He juggled balls and fiery torches.
But most of all he loved to walk and dance
on a rope tied between two trees.

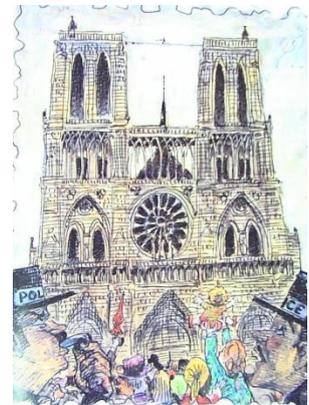


He looked not at the towers but at the space between them
and thought, what a wonderful place to stretch a rope;
a wire on which to walk. Once the idea came to him
he knew he had to do it! If he saw three balls, he had to juggle.
If he saw two towers, he had to walk! That's how he was.

Hadn't he danced on a wire between the steeples of
Notre Dame Cathedral above his amazed home city, Paris?
Why not here, between these towers?

Of course he knew that, as in Paris, the police
and the owners of the towers would never allow it.
You must be crazy! They would say. You'd fall for sure!

And so Phillipe-that was the young man's name
began to plan to do it secretly.
The buildings are not quite finished, he thought.
Maybe if I dressed as a construction worker...



Early on an August evening, he and a friend entered the south tower.
They got a four-hundred-and-forty-pound reel of cable and other
equipment into the elevator, took it to the unfinished top ten floors,
and waited till nightfall when everyone had gone.
They carried everything up one hundred and eighty stairs to the roof.

At midnight, on the other tower's roof, two more friends tied a thin, strong line to an arrow and shot it across to
Phillipe, one hundred and forty feet away.

It missed, and landed on a ledge fifteen feet below the roof.
Bad luck! thought Phillipe.

He crawled down to the ledge, over the sparkling city, and got the arrow.
To its line he tied a stronger line, which his friends pulled back to their tower.
To his end of the stronger line, Phillipe tied the cable
on which he would walk. It was five-eighths of an inch thick.

His friends pulled the cable over to their tower
but it was so heavy that it slipped from Phillipe's grip.
The cable's middle plummeted toward the street
Pulling the friends on the other tower
To the very edge.

It took three hours to pull the cable back up.
Frantically, as the stars faded, they tightened it between the towers.
It was past dawn before they were ready.

Phillipe put on his black shirt and tights.
He picked up his twenty-eight-foot balancing pole.
All his life he had worked to be here; to do this.

As the rising sun lit up the towers, out he stepped onto the wire.

Out to the very middle he walked, as if he were walking on the air itself.
Many winds whirled up from between the towers, and he swayed with them.
He could feel the towers breathing.
He was not afraid.
He felt alone and happy and absolutely free.

A woman coming from the subway might have been the first to see him
“ Look! Someone walking on a wire between the towers!”

Everyone stopped and looked up.
They gasped and stared.
It was astonishing.
It was terrifying and beautiful.
A quarter of a mile up in the sky
someone was dancing.
Police saw it, too.

Officers rushed to the roofs of the towers.
“ You’re under arrest!” they shouted through bullhorns.
Phillipe turned and walked the other way.

Who would come and get him?
For almost an hour, back and forth,
he walked, danced, ran and knelt in a salute upon the wire.

He even lay down to rest.
The city and harbour spread beneath him.
The sky surrounded him.
Seagulls flew under and over.
As long as he stayed on the wire
he was free.

When he felt completely satisfied, he walked back to the roof
and held out his wrists for the handcuffs.

They brought him to court. The judge sentenced him
to perform in the park for the children of the city.

This he did happily...though during his performance some boys playing
on his wire jerked it and Phillipe fell....
but caught himself.

Now the towers are gone.

But in memory, as if imprinted on the sky, the towers are still there.
And part of that memory is the joyful morning, August 7, 1974,
when Phillipe Petit walked between them in the air.