
The Art of Falling

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Isabel Wainwright was six when she saw a picture of the Leaning Tower of Pisa for the first time.

Any moment now and she will finally see it in life. The decision to come has not been easy. So far, she has no regrets. It is a delicate balance, though: travelling both hopefully and with defences intact from the past to whatever lies ahead; her heart pounding in the hard pinch of the present.

In the taxi from the airport, Isabel stares intently out of the window at the streets and buildings, as if she can make herself familiar with them by sheer force of will.

The evening is silky warm. A sensuous light drapes the palazzos lining the Lung'Arno, the colours apricot and umber beneath the indigo mountain backdrop. The city seems empty and shuttered. At the top of one of these elegant, aristocratic buildings, a line of washing is strung between two tiny windows.

'You have come to Pisa before?' The driver cuts across her thoughts.

'No, never. I've always wanted to . . . but, no.'

'You have holiday? Business?'

'I . . . well . . . ' It is a good question. How should she think of this trip? 'A little of both, I suppose,' says Isabel. 'I've come for a ceremony.'

'Aah!' The driver grins, a leer in the rear-view mirror, confident that he knows exactly what she is saying.

Isabel lets him think what he likes.

He drops her at a hotel on the Via Santa Maria. It seems comfortable - elegant even - although the prices are reasonable. It seems she has struck lucky.

Her room on the second floor looks out on a bustling street. She cranes to see the end of it as she dials the telephone number she has been given for the Criachi family. She has promised she will let them know she has arrived safely. But, even after several attempts, the number is engaged.

Isabel can wait no longer.

The light is fading rapidly as she hurries towards the Piazza dei Miracoli where the great marble cathedral stands with its pepperpot baptistry and failed bell tower. There are thick steel cables wrapped around the tower. No visitors are allowed to climb up; it has been closed to the public for more than a decade. The tower bends towards her, straining in its harness.

She has a picture on a wall of her office: a framed print of a drawing of the Leaning Tower of Pisa by Edward Cresy and G. L. Taylor, a pair of early nineteenth-century English architects who had made a survey of the famous bell tower. Their obscure names have been a part of her life for so long that it seems the most natural thing in the world for her to have a print of their drawing on the wall. Most people - if they notice it at all - take it to be a grand visual joke in the same way that others pin up newspaper cartoons that encapsulate the particular humour and despair of their working hours, for Isabel works as a chartered surveyor in a mediumsized firm in the south of England. She ensures that houses are safe: inspecting foundations and damp courses, assessing cracks in walls, making judgements about the true solidity of what appears to be whole.

She feels a tremor in her legs as she walks closer.

Her father showed her the picture of it in a large red book. It appealed to her sense of drama; even at that early age her practical tendencies were already in place. How long would it be before the tower fell? Surely - a delicious thrill - it would be soon. Naturally the expectation faded, as she enquired periodically of its tantalising progress towards destruction only to be told that - somehow - it had failed to topple. She was given renewed hope when she discovered, in another book, that in 1902 the campanile in Venice had crashed spectacularly into a pile of red rubble. It was promptly rebuilt, which had seemed pointless to her, given that the lucky Venetians had had their fun and it was unlikely to fall twice.

Her father Tom was obsessed with the leaning tower, although she has never been sure exactly why that should be, only that it became one of his defining quirks of character.

As a buildings surveyor, Isabel is naturally interested in (and more than a little appalled by) the fact that the foundations of such an ambitious project were set at the ridiculously shallow depth of less than three metres, and then on a pile of dry masonry. This rested on alluvial subsoil, which, although it was relatively cohesive on the surface, tended to give way at any depth. The miscalculations were fundamental, right at the start. The first stone was laid on 9 August 1173; in this place of uncertainties, the date is confirmed by an inscription to the right of the entrance door. By the time the third ring of pillars was completed, the slide had begun. The soil beneath it was subsiding.

Tom Wainwright had been missing for twenty years when the letter came.

The envelope was thin with an indecipherable postmark over an odd speckle of stamps.

'Italy,' said Patricia through tight lips, as she allowed Isabel to take it.

After Tom went away, Isabel's mother Pat became a reader of detective stories and solver of crossword puzzles, unwilling to speak of him. It was her way, Isabel rationalised, of reassuring herself that there was order in the wild uproar of life, and that she was able to sit in her armchair and find answers. The police told them that people who went missing could be found, but only if they wanted to be.

But two months ago it was Patricia and Isabel who were found.

Pat broke the news.

'Your Aunt Margaret has rung. She said she was going to get in touch with you.'

This was rare, now, and Isabel acknowledged as much. Contact with her father's sister had never been easy.

'She's had a phone call from someone at the district council.' A sharp exhalation of breath from Patricia proclaimed the difficulty she had with the crux of this information. 'Whoever it was - they were trying to find your father. Something to do with . . . Italy.'

'I see.' A lump formed in Isabel's throat. 'Go on.'

'It seems there 's a village where they want to . . . honour him.' Pat pursed her lips tight with the irony of that. 'For what he did in the war.'

'What was that? I mean, I know he fought there - but what in particular?'

'I'm not sure.'

'He never mentioned anything that might - ?'

'No.'

'Does Margaret know?'

'I've no idea.'

Over the following weeks they received a series of telephone calls. An official letter arrived at Patricia's house, expressing heartfelt gratitude for her husband's brave actions. Gradually it transpired that, after all these years, a group of village elders in northern Italy intended to name a small piazza in honour of ex-army Corporal Tom Wainwright, for services rendered above and beyond the call of duty.

They were delighted - more than delighted - to have made contact with his family. The chances of doing so had been slim. More than one stroke of luck had been involved.

After much discussion between Margaret and Pat - the first time in many years the two women had spoken - it was decided that an honest reply was required. The request could not be ignored and neither could Tom Wainwright's brave actions - Margaret was firm on that.

So the three women wrote back to the Italians, hoping for a fair translation by the bureaucrats of Perugia, that they felt he would be delighted to accept the accolade but they were unable to verify this, for they had had no contact with him for some twenty years.

A letter was dispatched in return. The villagers of Petriano were keen to press ahead with their naming ceremony and could see no reason why, in the end, they should not name their new small piazza after whomsoever they pleased, and would be glad to accept the surviving womenfolk's acquiescence as sufficient.

So an invitation was issued and Isabel has travelled to Italy to witness the auspicious occasion on behalf of her father. Her mother has declined the invitation.

There has already been a misunderstanding, however. Somewhere, lost in translation, a crucial but mistaken impression has been given. The heroic Tom Wainwright may or may not be dead. His family simply does not know.

The women of his family - including Patricia, who calls herself his widow these days - have constructed their lives on not knowing. Isabel, in particular, knows that it is not only possible to live with uncertainty, but that possessing the skill to do so is essential.

Next morning Isabel takes the autostrada east towards Florence, then hives off south towards Arezzo. The white Fiat car she has hired at the airport goes surprisingly fast. The road is smooth. She is glad to clear her mind of everything but the road and its dangerous swooping bends.

Umbria. Now she is impatient to see signs for Assisi and Perugia. She opens the windows and lets the breeze whip her face.

At Petriano, she comes down a steep bend and sees a restaurant-bar. She swings the car sharply into a small square and parks. Her heart is beating fast from the wild drive and, she has to admit, a degree of nervous anticipation. She takes a deep breath and forces herself to walk slowly, calmly, to the small terrace where a waitress is clearing tables.

At the bar Isabel orders a beer and takes it outside to study her surroundings. The main part of the village appears to be nestling in a large shallow hollow near the top of a hill. There are houses perched higher up, and there are cascades of roofs down among the trees. It is a place that seems to be built on the vertical.

The waitress delivers a large slice of pizza. On the plate is a picture of a man serving spaghetti, the colours and outlines scraped off by years of use. Isabel forces herself to eat most of it, used to days out on site when lunch is whatever chance decides. After

ordering coffee, she wanders back to the car and, with deliberate casualness, returns with the road map.

'*Scusi, signora? Le Macchie?*' she asks the middle-aged waitress as she sets down the cup.

'Sì?' It is a question.

'Ah . . .' Isabel points at the open map.

'*Turista?*' The waitress smiles.

Isabel hesitates, unsure whether to try to explain.

The woman tries again. '*Tedesca?*' she asks, hand open towards Isabel.

'No . . . *Inglese.*'

'Aaah.' She is nodding. There is a tiny shift in her face, a subtle warming. It is not that she was unfriendly when she thought Isabel was probably German, but now Isabel senses that she is being offered, very subtly, helpfulness of a higher gear.

'*Ca Lo Spelli? Famiglia Criachi?*'

'Sì, sì.'

With a mixture of nods and smiles and pointing - and then a tracing of fingers on the wiggling lines of the map - the woman tells her what she needs to know.

Isabel leaves a good tip on the saucer.

Petriano is larger than she had expected, which is good. She wants to be able to ask questions with some degree of discretion. This may be impossible, of course. In a place where families have been interwoven for centuries, and talk is the currency of day-to-day life, news blows and swirls around the café, the shops and the bar like a soft breeze, freshening and invigorating all social contact. This is a place where the women gather to exchange gossip at the delicatessen counter in the tiny supermarket, where Signora Monti holds sway over the parmesan and the conversation in equal measure, and where a growing line of customers is regarded not as cause to hasten the service but as a pleasing addition to the party.

On a quiet day early in April, Isabel reasons, a lone female stranger in a white rental car, who produces a map and asks for Ca Lo Spelli and Le Macchie will be good for at least ten minutes of speculation.

Up the hairpin-bend climb away from the main square, Isabel catches up with a wheezing three-wheeler Piaggio, a tiny truck fashioned from an ancient motorcycle. It grinds pigeon-toed up the arduous slope emitting noxious black puffs. Away from the

sleepy dustiness of the hollow there are grand houses thrusting square towers into the fresh hilltop air.

The first time she goes too far and turns back at a sign for Faustino. Retracing her tracks on the right side of the road, she finds the turning easily. Round an inauspicious bend she is suddenly in an avenue of gnarled cypress trees, which frame a sumptuous villa with such perfection that the effect is of driving towards an illusion in sepia. She cannot see the extent of the villa, nor begin to imagine the treasures stored inside. Close by, behind a wall, is a honey stone house, grand on a domestic, country scale and fringed on either side by sentinel cypress trees, which are young and straight-backed compared with those of the avenue. This could be it.

Isabel parks the car on the road, not sure enough that she has come to the right place to surge straight into the driveway. Nor to overlay these first impressions with thoughts of her father, that this might have been somewhere he knew, where he returned on a summer's evening to drink on the terrace, where he strode around to survey the land and helped to build cosy fires in the depths of winter. She cannot allow herself to do that. So she walks to the doorstep, knocks and waits.

A youngish woman comes to the door.

'Fabrizia?' asks Isabel.

'Isabel Wainwright?'

She nods.

'At last!' cries Fabrizia, leading the way inside.

In a long room that is part kitchen part day room, with an atmosphere like the snug of a country pub, an elderly man is sitting at the head of a table. Sunshine haloes him from a window behind.

'Pappi,' begins the woman and continues in rapid sparks of an Italian dialect Isabel cannot follow. Isabel studies her as she speaks. She has sharply cut short hair, plummy with henna. Her nose is long and straight, an Etruscan nose in profile. She is wearing a rough sweater and long linen skirt, but no country apron of a garment; these are well-cut, urban clothes.

Isabel stands expectantly as a smile begins to reveal the old man's tobacco-stained teeth. The sun makes chasms of the deep lines radiating from his eyes.

'Signorina Wainwright, this is my father, Signor Criachi.' At this, he begins, with some effort, to lever himself from his chair. Isabel takes a step forward, her hand outstretched. He takes it, but then pulls her towards him in an awkward hug that threatens to topple them both. His grip is surprisingly strong. When he releases her he says, still grinning and pointing to himself, 'Massimo.'

'Isabel,' she replies.

Isabel is unsure how to proceed. They are both looking at her and nodding. There is affection in this, a softness to their stares that seems to hint that she is no ordinary stranger but some kind of lost member of the family. Appearances are being assessed for a resemblance. Her person in the flesh is being weighed against their expectations.

'We are so pleased you are here at last,' says Fabrizia.

'I am very happy too.'

The brown skin on the old man's face is pitted and wrinkled as a walnut when he smiles, which is often. She cannot read the expression in his slack lips when they relax. She is invited to sit at the table, and Fabrizia busies herself with glasses and a jug of peach juice.

The door to a rear terrace is open and Isabel can see newly chopped wood stacked neatly, its splinters and offcuts still on the concrete to be cleared. There are a couple of cats dozing in the sun. Herbs are planted within a cook's stride of the doorstep. Beyond is a small but vigorous kitchen garden.

Massimo is still appraising her. 'So . . . Tom Wainwright's daughter . . .' he says in an Italian she can follow. 'So young - as young as my daughter. And beautiful . . . *bella*.'

Isabel smiles and shakes her head at the overgenerosity of the compliment.

Probably it is the habit of a lifetime, but there is genuine warmth here, as if he feels he already knows her.

'I can see him in your face - not too much, but he is there,' Massimo is saying. His eyes glitter. He is flirting with her, just a little. It is so gentle, so ingrained and practised that he seems to do it automatically. He must be in his nineties, she thinks; of course I seem young, to him. And he knew Tom as I never did, when he was young.

'We must drink wine together, on the terrace, Isabella. The beautiful daughter of Tom Wainwright! And we will talk, too - of wonderful times, of music and romance . . .'

'Pappi!' Fabrizia sighs.

As Isabel leaves he pops her a huge wink. She smiles back at the indomitability of his spirit.

'The next farm, it is the place where we think it will be nice for you to stay,' Fabrizia says. 'It is not like a hotel, but in summer they have visitors - tourists. There are nice apartments, and you can be very comfortable and a little bit private.'

'That sounds lovely. Thank you.' Isabel is pleased; more than that, she is delighted by their thoughtfulness.

'If you want to go there to see - I will take you when you are ready?'

A sign at the turning off the road reads: Agriturismo. Isabel and Fabrizia are in the hire car, which is lurching alarmingly. The dusty path is a shifting pattern of bumps and ruts, already set hard after the spring rains. It seems to go on for a couple of kilometres, past several unsigned turnings. Isabel wonders how any but the most intrepid tourists ever made their way to the beds at the farms without losing heart and turning back.

At last they come to what looks at first glance to be only a small house. But as they get out of the car and approach, Isabel sees that this is only the end of a long, low, two-storey building, a farmhouse of peachy-coloured plaster. Vigorous climbing plants scramble here and there up the walls as if to anchor it to the hilltop. It is a large house with no grand design; a building that has evolved to suit its use over several centuries. Doors and windows and outside staircases occur along its length apparently at random, giving the impression of a row of labourers' cottages making up the whole.

At the far end, making the building a long L shape, a tiny chapel is attached. At the apex of its shallow-pitched roof a bell hangs, silhouetted against the sky.

The house points along a spur of the hill; on either side the land tumbles away, in terraces of kitchen garden planting to the east and in steep woodland to the west. A gravel path leads along the sunny side, and at the end of the house there is a loggia of three impressive arches and an area of gravel where two cars are parked. A breeze catches the plants in pots by a doorway and ruffles the leaves. A dog barks, then another. They approach the door that looks to Isabel as if it might be a side entrance to the kitchen. Fabrizia does not need to ring the bell.

Across the grass to greet them come pigs and an inquisitive flock of geese.