

Night Juggling

Jesse is juggling flaming torches with her husband and the man she loves, and she is afraid her hair will catch fire. The sun set on them a half-hour ago, and they put away the ten- and thirteen-inch clubs, the rings and the velour-skinned beanbags, the glowing devil sticks and rubber balls into their nylon bags. When it was dark enough, Greg and she began passing the torches, facing each other across a ten-foot gap. She bows out now because of her concern for her hair, and Greg and Neil begin.

Jesse rolls the heads of her torches on the park grass to extinguish them. In the humid summer night, her hair frizzes out around her head, kinks up to nearly her shoulders. That men love her long red hair is only part of why she doesn't cut it all off. Right now, wanting to join in the fun, she wishes she had a crew-cut.

Her husband, Greg, is the shorter of the two men, broad in the shoulders and chest, his dark hair blending into the night sky. In his ragged breath Jesse can hear the intensity of his concentration. A torch spins from his right hand to Neil's left as his left hand closes around the handle of Neil's pass. Neil is tall and thin and moves so like a dancer that he is often asked at IJA fairs if he does mime, too, a question that he always laughs off. That weekend they spent together in bed, he admitted to her the question horrifies him. He has a terror of mimes and clowns that goes back beyond memory. In public, he is all charm, fearless, free from the worries that weigh down the rest of humanity. He is laughing now as they do every-others, juggling without effort, easily grabbing Greg's poorer tosses with clever adjustments only experienced jugglers can see.

Though the section of the park they use isn't crowded, a handful of people have wandered near, the spinning yellow flames drawing them.

Rooting through her equipment, Jesse finds an empty plastic bag. Splitting it at the seams, she manages to knot it around the gathered hair at the back of her neck. The rough edges of plastic irritate her sweaty neck, but she knows that once she's concentrating on passing the torches again, she will ignore everything but her own body, the solidity of the earth under her feet, the reliable pull of gravity, the hypnotic rhythms. Even now she is automatically chanting to herself as the men juggle: *self and pass and self and pass and*, these right-handed counts syncopated to the sound of wood slapping their palms on the catches.

To the people gathered around, the fire must dance unpredictably, seem almost out of control. Jesse remembers the I-Ching this morning. Chun unchanging, her hexagram: difficult beginnings. Order comes from chaos, life from the twin tortures of birth. Sometimes she can understand that order and chaos are one in the Tao. Tonight, she sees the order in the men's juggling routine, though the people around her are endlessly surprised.

A little boy edges forward, and she makes a gate of her arm, gently holding him back. "If they miss one you don't want to be too close," she says, intending the message for his mother. His mother tugs him by his T-shirt back beyond the danger zone. Jesse hears him struggle for a moment before a sharp word from the mother quiets him.

Jesse stands and grabs her three torches. The lathed wood feels cooler than the summer night as the knobs of the torches press her palm. After work one day last year, Greg made several torches for the two of them, then made Neil a matching set of three this summer when he discovered how much he liked Neil after all. Cautiously now, Jesse touches the blackened head of one torch. It is only warm. She reaches into the bag and feels for the big plastic bottle of lamp oil. She walks several yards away to a trash barrel, knowing she has become invisible to everyone. She unscrews the lid with her teeth and dribbles the pungent oil over the torch heads. She closes the bottle. Glancing behind her to make sure no one is nearby, she swing the torches in giant circles, flinging off the excess fluid, her shoulder joint popping with every rotation. Without this precaution, flaming fluids could run down the torches onto her own fingers, or drops of airborne flame might sail onto her partner's skin.

She carries the oil bottle back to her bag and watches Greg and Neil do a three-three-ten. The last ten passes come on every right-handed throw, two torches spinning past each other then two more and two more, the sound driving, the streaking light burning bright lines in her vision, the speed of the passes seeming to race, even though she knows

the rhythm isn't really changing. At the end, Neil flashes the torches, a trick where he quickly tosses all three high in the air for triple spins, then catches them in rapid succession. Greg tries to mimic him, but two of his torches collide mid-air. Greg grabs the first one fine, but he ends up touching the second near the top of the asbestos tape and reflexively drops it. He steps back as the third one hits the ground with a thump and goes out. He laughs, but sounds angry at himself. The small audience applauds briefly.

She steps forward, puts her free arm around Greg, and squeezes. "The oil is in the bag," she tells him. He nods and backs away. She turns to face Neil. He grins at her, and in that instant, the whole park fades, all noise, all other vision. There is only Neil and the weight of the torches in her hand, her own body suspended between the dark earth and the dark sky. A surge of lust tightens her vaginal muscles, making her belly feel warm and dense. It seems impossible that four months have passed since the weekend she made love with Neil.

"Ready?" he asks, extending his torches, burning lower now, toward her.

In answer, she reaches her torches toward his. The tips of two touch. All her torches burst into flame. Jesse and Neil roll the round heads together, she giving him oil from the surface of hers. Neil's easy smile abandons him. Jesse tries to memorize the rare look on his face, then she backs away.

The hissing flame makes her torches move strangely. It lifts them from the insistent tug of the earth. Until she began juggling fire, she never realized how flame has a physical presence, a shape and a skin. The flame will show the torches' natural motion, more at first, then less as the flames burn lower.

"Fast start?" Neil asks.

"Slow start, every-others, okay?" One smooth torch handle is gripped in her left palm; two are crossed more loosely in her right.

"Fine." His smile is back in place again as they lift their doubled torches together.

Their right-handed downbeat is perfectly synchronized. She hears the flames fluttering against the heavy air, feels the resistance in the night as she forces the yellow fire downward. She snaps up her wrist and lets go of one handle. The torch spins heat in front of her face and she flinches back an inch. She lets go with her left hand, and the second torch tumbles in an arc toward her right. Before that one lands, she launches the last torch across the space that separates her from Neil,

staring at the place his catch will be made, feeling a tiny thrill when the throw lands perfectly. At the same instant, her left hand closes around his pass, which she can always rely on to be just where it should be, and they are in rhythm, passing, catching, passing.

For a time she watches his left forearm, concentrates on her throws to him. The rest is automatic, and when her passes become automatic, too, she looks up at his face. His smile is genuine, and it widens as their eyes meet. “Fake fire,” he murmurs, a reference to a Karamozov Brothers’ joke, an old standard for jugglers, one of the codes of the clan.

It’s easy for her to smile now. Her hair, safely tied back, isn’t going to flame up, and if she doesn’t think about the fire too much, this almost feels like juggling clubs. The instant she concentrates on the flame, the instant she warns herself not to touch the torch beyond the asbestos tape, she will lose her rhythm and her courage. But now she is the goddess of fire and motion. “Every one,” she says recklessly. “Until I drop.”

His eyebrows shoot up, but he says, “On zero. Two, and, one, and, *now*. And they trade every right-handed throw, the sound of the hissing flames loud, receding from her right ear as it approaches her left. The torches spin quickly, but she can trust Neil’s throws. The taste of lamp oil coats the back of her throat. Sweat runs down her back, but she keeps juggling, tossing and catching, nearly blinded by the streaks of yellow light. Their speed picks up, she swears it does, and the fire spins crazily. Neil is laughing, but Jesse can’t spare the energy to laugh. She is focused on the movement in her wrists, the pattern of the exchange, the spot where she knows her partner is. A dozen throws, three dozen, a hundred without a drop.

She is aware of the clapping of children’s hands, then of her husband saying, “Look out,” and she sees that one of Neil’s torches has burned out. As it comes toward her, the spin seems off. His throw hasn’t compensated for the absence of flame, so the torch may be taking an extra half tumble. Peripherally, she can see he has stilled his other torches, and she catches her second in her right hand, readying herself to grab the final unlit torch in her left.

“Just let it go,” Neil says, but they were juggling so perfectly, she doesn’t want to watch this last throw drop to the grass. Without the flame, the torch is only a shadow moving toward her. One spinning end is smouldering black fire and the other is safe wood. She opens her left hand and hopes she can stay brave enough to snatch it out of the thick night air.