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EMANUEL ON THE TIGHTROPE

In this small corner, snow drifts higher than the last flock of swallows, and the wind beats cherry trees as if they were cheap tin drums. But 1,200 miles in south, in the big city, a man sits on a tightrope, eating cheese sandwiches and watching a television strapped to his wrist.

His name is Emanuel, and, 600 feet above sidewalks and cigarette butts, lawn mowers and potted palms, he's no longer a man with a dozen lug wrenches and a weary blonde wife. He's the man on the tightrope.

I know the truth. Today, as I shiver again while another round of winter pounds on my front door, repeating, "you, you, you," I know that this man is afraid of the earth. I am sure of this as I am sure that sky and lake can freeze together, that February follows January like a well-trained mutt, and that this man too has shuddered in his sleep.

Emanuel blows kisses to the crowd below. "It's a dream," he tells them, "the dream of a real, everyday man." He turns away from the sun that drags itself across the horizon, straightens his shoulders, and waves two fingers as if they were his flag.

Up there, he is safe. Yet all over the earth, people are shrinking back. Wrapped and huddled, they think of Emanuel growing taller, his bare chest catching last night's drizzle of stars. "Hold on, Emanuel," we whisper through our clenched right fists. "Hold on."