The immortal fall

Hannah Sikes

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It was difficult to pinpoint the exact moment in Evelyn’s life when things went wrong.

As a child, she was fairly happy. She lived in comfort; her daddy was a rich man and he loved all of his children dearly. But Evelyn’s mother was a different story – she was rarely present in Evelyn’s life. She was always quiet and aloof, even on her good days, but she was prone to bouts of depression. She would seclude herself in her room for days at a time, alone in self-imposed silence and darkness. Later on, Evelyn could not remember much in particular about what would happen in the household during her mother’s periods of melancholia; only that the quiet and the gloom would seem to permeate the whole house.

Evelyn’s mother left her father in 1930, for reasons that were never made clear to Evelyn. Evelyn only saw her once or twice again before she died. Perhaps, then, her mother’s death was the singular event, the incident that created the shadows that would stay with Evelyn for the rest of her life. The darkness was no real, physical thing; it would lurk inside her head, unseen but felt, filling her up with its coldness and yet making her feel so empty at the same time.

Or maybe the condition was inherited, and it was her mother’s fault. Maybe Evelyn was simply doomed to be consumed by her sadness like her mother was. She was never able to stand the thought of that, and so she learned to hide her problems. She did fairly well in school, even though she knew at the end of the day that she was dull as a doorknob. She strove every day to look beautiful, despite the fact that her overall looks were average. She had some friends and she went to parties, she knew how to do the jitterbug and the foxtrot, and she knew how to flirt and when to force a laugh and a smile. And no one was the wiser – not her father, not her friends, not even Barry.

Barry – who would claim to know her the best. He should know her best, but he didn’t.

He couldn’t see that her smiles were just simple movements of her facial muscles, her laughs
coming from her vocal cords as easily as music played from a well-tuned radio. He didn’t know that when she thought of him in private, all she did was wince. He didn’t know that sometimes when she was alone, she would sit down and come back to herself later, only just realizing that she’d been staring at nothing, lost, for hours. Then again, how could he know her when she didn’t even know herself?

But he was so sweet. When they met through a mutual friend early in the year of 1947, she could tell immediately that he was enamored with her. And in those early days, his gaze would make her blush and his laugh would make a fleeting warmth pass through her, combating the chill inside her for just a second. Her feelings didn’t last very long, yet she kept up the illusion that they had. And then came those words, the ones that sent her sliding towards the end.

“Will you marry me?”

“Oh. Barry, I . . . yes. Yes, I will.”

She knew the moment the acceptance left her mouth that she couldn’t be his wife. She would not trap him into a marriage like her parents’, couldn’t allow herself to waste her days away in a dark bedroom like her mother had, couldn’t bear to bring children into the world knowing she would not love them the way she should.

She spent a weekend at his dormitory with him for his birthday, and it was then that she decided what she would do. On Monday morning, May 1st of 1947, she let him kiss her goodbye and then she left for the train station. She took a train to New York City, and on the way to her destination, she penned a letter for someone to find, listing her final requests – that her body be destroyed by cremation and her wasted life forgotten – speaking briefly of how her fiancé would be better off without her, and closing with: “Tell my father, I have too many of my mother’s tendencies.”

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The elevator ride up to the 86th floor of the Empire State Building was a long one, but Evelyn didn’t mind the wait. She lived in darkness for twenty-three years, but soon it would be over. Death would be blissful emptiness, not this heaviness that she had felt for so long.

A man in the elevator tried to make polite conversation. “Is this your first time coming to the Empire State Building?”

“No,” she said truthfully. She wanted to add, it’s my last, but she simply forced herself to smile instead.

When she reached the observation deck, she calmly walked over to the edge of the building. No one really noticed, just as she hoped they wouldn’t. She set down her coat and her bag, which held her letter, and leaned over the railing. It was a beautiful morning in the city, the sun was shining, the air was crisper and cleaner than normal. A thousand feet above the hustle and bustle, things seemed almost tranquil. Behind her, someone said something, telling her to please back away from the railing, but she didn’t hear; she threw herself into the light and warmth of the sun and the open air. On her way down, she smiled.

Evelyn landed on the roof of a silver Cadillac. A young photographer, Robert Wiles, snapped a photograph of her as she lay on her deathbed of warped metal. Her image was immortalized on the cover of Life magazine. In the picture, there was still the slightest ghost of a tragic, peaceful smile on her face.

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