

The Amazing Arnolfini and His Wife

The day starts badly, with a final demand from Thos. Macintyre, ropemaker of Buffalo. I have mentioned this matter to The Amazing Arnolfini several times already, as we do not keep this kind of money in the petty expense account, but he has ignored me on every occasion. It hardly seems fair that the duty of dealing with these people always falls on me. But I am the one who understands the words and the numbers, not him, and in any case he says that he must be undisturbed in the days leading up to an event such as this. Until now I have respected that wish. However, as I am now threatened with a visit from Mr Macintyre's hired goons, I feel that I have no alternative.

The Amazing Arnolfini is in his room, preparing himself. I knock loudly on the door.

"Jed!" I shout. There is no reply, so I knock again. "Jed, I need to speak to you urgently!"

Eventually, he emerges. He is unshaven, with bags under his eyes.

"What d'ya – oh, it's you," he says. "I did ask you not to disturb me, baby," he says, his voice softening slightly.

"Jed, Macintyre's cutting up rough about his bill. Could you ..."

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wad of bills. He peels off several high notes and hands them to me.

"That do?" he says. "Won a bit on the cards last night," he adds by way of explanation. My heart sinks. Obviously, it's good to have the money, but I hate it when he hangs out with his poker buddies.

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“Jed,” I say, “Was it just cards last night?”

“Sure, baby,” he says, closing the door. “Now you get plenty of rest today. Final checks are at two.”

As I walk away I am trying to convince myself that I didn’t hear a woman’s laugh coming from behind The Amazing Arnolfini’s door.

At two o’clock, we’re standing on the Canadian side of the Falls. Jed is talking to Mr Upshaw, our nearside baseman, and they’re re-examining the guys and the tethering stakes. I’m taking another look along the rope over to the other side. In the distance, I can see Mr Fentiman, our farside baseman, waving his green flag to indicate that his checks are complete. We have worked with Upshaw and Fentiman for years, and you’d have to scour the whole of the American continent to find anyone more dependable.

The rope is made of highest quality three-quarter-inch hemp, and Mr Macintyre has provided us with 2000 feet of it. His references are impeccable: he has supplied both Blondin and Farini, and yet I still feel nervous about this afternoon’s traverse. Perhaps it’s Jed. When you’ve lived with someone as long as I have, you pick up on the tiniest things.

“You ready, baby?” he says.

“Sure,” I say. “How about me going over first?” He laughs and gives my cheek a playful pinch. It’s a standing joke between us. He’d never trust me to open the show for him in a million years. That’s not my job. I smile back at him as if to say, well, it was worth a try. One day, maybe. One day.

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“Four o’clock, then, baby,” he says. Upshaw bows slightly to us as we leave and then he waves his flag back to Fentiman. The Amazing Arnolfini and I go our separate

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ways. It's one his quirks; no congress in the week before a traverse. He claims it weakens him. Well, I hope it doesn't.

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Four o'clock, and a sizeable crowd is lining the banks on either side. Provided that we can extract the money from the ticketeers, — which is not always as straightforward as it sounds, — we stand to make a decent profit today. The plan is to do three two-way traverses between now and sunset. Jed is looking splendid in his doublet and tights as he steps up to the rope, accompanied by Upshaw. He waves to the crowd, who respond with a hearty cheer. Perhaps today is going to be a good day after all.

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Fentiman waves his green flag from the far end, and Jed makes his first move. The first traverse is a straightforward walk with no stunts on the outbound journey. Jed is using this to gauge the state of the conditions. We've been checking the meteorological reports all day long, but you still don't really know how a rope is going to behave at any give place and time. Obviously, the conditions are damp here, and whilst that improves adhesion, it adds weight and can cause shrinkage. There is a slight gasp from the crowd as The Amazing Arnolfini appears to wobble slightly, but this is nothing unusual. He's testing the rope, feeling how it reacts to him, and in any case, he's using an eight-foot pole to help his balance. Provided you keep your big toe on the rope at all times, and keep your torso inside the magic box, you're safe.

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A quarter of an hour later, and Jed is standing on the opposite side, acknowledging the applause. I can see him through my opera glasses: a fine figure of a man in his prime. A brief pause, and he is heading back. This time he stops at the exact mid-point and performs a headstand on the rope. He turns this into a somersault along the length of the rope and stands up again with ease. It's a favourite trick of his, and I've seen

him practice it many times. It looks a lot more dangerous than it actually is, but then that's Jed's skill as a performer. His next trick is to jump up and down on the rope several times, appearing to dance along it. It sways alarmingly, but always within the planned tolerance. Jed is a master of precision.

As he steps onto the platform, I try to catch his eye, but he's temporarily distracted, whispering something in Upshaw's ear. Upshaw shakes his head violently and Jed shrugs. Then he looks at me, and gives me an odd sort of smile. The tiniest thing.

The next traverse is more interesting. This is the one that Jed performs blindfold. When the crowd get wind of what's happening, there's a noticeable reduction in the noise level, and you can almost sense several thousand people simultaneously holding their breath. What would I do if he had an accident? I try not to ask myself this. But accidents do happen. Despite every precaution we take, it is not an occupation without risks. I wouldn't be the second Mrs Arnolfini if it hadn't been for that tragic occasion in Paris. Fate works in unexpected ways.

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Fortunately, Jed makes steady progress, and reaches the other side safely, removing his blindfold to tumultuous applause. Then, disturbingly, he puts it back on, and he steps onto the rope again without turning round. This is new. He hasn't told me about this one. I look at Upshaw, who is shaking his head again. He looks absolutely furious. I can understand why. If Jed falls, then we all fall with him.

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This traverse is agonising. I wonder when Jed has found the time to practice this without my knowledge. Or maybe he's had a brainstorm. Either way, it's odd. And scary. He's halfway across now. When you're leading with your heel, you don't have the same grip as with your toes, so it's a risky manoeuvre at the best of times. The whole universe

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is holding its breath as he nears the three-quarter mark. I sneak a look through my opera glasses, and the back of his head is held up, serene, as if he hasn't a care in the world. I can't stand this much longer.

Finally, he makes it back to the platform, and I run up to him, pushing past Upshaw, who is trying to remonstrate with him.

"What in the Lord's name did you do that for?" I shout at him. He grins back at me as if there's nothing wrong.

"Do what, baby?" he says.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about, Jed."

He puts a finger first to his lips and then to mine.

"Hey, shush, baby. C'mon, it's your turn now."

I shake my head, but he's right: it is my turn. We step up to the platform together, and we wait for Fentiman's flag. After an agonising couple of minutes, he waves.

I climb onto Jed's back, and he moves forward onto the rope. He stands there for a moment, adjusting his balance, whilst I work my way up to stand onto his shoulders. When I'm ready, I shout "OK" to him, and we set off, The Amazing Arnolfini and his Wife. We've done this more than a thousand times, and I know how to sense every little movement of his body and compensate accordingly. I know how he distributes every ounce of his weight in every single dimension, and all the little signs that indicate a slight change of pace, up or down. We are a team.

The view is extraordinary. Down below I can see the "Maid of the Mist" being buffeted by the boiling currents. I wave to the passengers, and they all wave back. There's one awkward moment at the half-way stage, where the rope is at its slackest, and

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Jed almost moves out of alignment. But I catch onto it almost immediately, and I pull us back. Harmony is restored.

With a quarter of the traverse still to go, I feel it. The tiniest thing. I'd told myself that it wouldn't happen, not today, not tomorrow, not ever, but there it is: the slightest shift, the finest adjustment, and I know what's going to happen. A split second decision, but I have to take it. I've practiced this in secret over and over again, but it's still the riskiest thing I've ever done, and I curse him for forcing me to do it out here. The backflip seems to take an age to complete, but eventually, I'm there, standing on the rope behind Jed, who is struggling to re-balance himself. I take a couple of steps back as he gathers himself and turns around.

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"What in tarnation are you doing?" he cries, over the din of the Falls.

"You tried to throw me!" I scream back at him. "Don't try to claim it was an accident!"

He is silent. He knows denial is a waste of time. I know him too well.

"Who is she?" I shout. "Who is she? Tell me, Jed!"

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He still says nothing. The water crashes below us. Then he gently takes a step towards me, transferring his balancing pole into his left hand and holding out his right.

"Baby ..." he says.

I take a couple more steps back, staring at the balancing pole dangling in his hand. He must be crazy. He is completely lopsided, and the tiniest thing could throw him off kilter now.

"Baby ..."

I take another awkward step backwards, and the rope makes an infinitesimal twitch. What happens next causes it to lurch crazily from side to side, and I have to wait for an age for it to calm down. Then I slowly move forward, my arms stretched out on either side. When I reach the end, the crowd greets me in silence. My first solo walk.

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