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My Life  
Among the Electric  
Tower Giants

Strings of Light

I was a child when they erected the towers. I watched them, summer afternoons, while my mother slaved at the factory, twisting her hands and fingers around electric vacuum motor parts. Her hands had aged more quickly than her face, but it too showed signs of toil and duress beyond her years.

She was a joyous woman. Always laughing, nights when she and I and my younger brother Stephen would sit out on our old wooden porch drinking cherry lemonade and playing gin. I'd always thought those lines were from laughing. But when they took me down to the factory to see her, after four of her fingers had been sheared off by the blades of a motor she'd been fabricating, and I saw the conditions of the building she'd worked in since before I was born, I understood that those lines were not formed by joy.

Summer days, I was supposed to stay indoors, or at most confined to the borders of our property. The hen house, the driveway, the old dirt road, and the chicken wire fence that divided our yard from the grass field that reached out behind it to vacant hills, were the decreed borders.

But still, I would breach the boundaries. I would abandon Stephen, set out upon the old Frankenstein bicycle the old man who lived next to us had patched together for my brother and me, and ride through the field of grasses to the feet of those hills.

That's where they built the towers, in a long line along the hilltops. They were an infinite row of steel soldiers, their shoulders laden with endless lines of electrical cable. To watch the work was fascinating, and I each time I could steal away, I would go there and crouch down behind some brushy shrubs, and watch the men work until I was spotted.

Sometimes they would throw rocks at me, or big steel bolts, yelling *scram* and *giddout* and I would hop on my bike and peddle as fast as I could, terrified and smiling, never stopping until I reached the chicken wire fence where I would leap from my bike to the ground, collapse onto my back. I would just lay there, breathing, and sweating and smiling, electricity speeding through my arteries, the chickens pecking at my forehead through the fence, until my face was covered by many tiny bloody spots.

It took them over a year to complete it. And when they finally had, a celebration was held in commemoration of the event.

I remember it was a Saturday evening. My mother had dressed Stephen and me in our church clothes, combed and parted our hair neat. She had put on a light green summer dress, pulled her own hair back in a bun, wore clip-on earrings and red lipstick. She looked beautiful.

A man who worked down at the grocers came and picked us up in his pickup truck, and my mother let me and Stephen and his favorite chicken Lu Lu ride in the back. The man had a radio in the cab, and he turned it up loud enough so that even us kids could hear it.

The music was sweet and summery, with clarinets, flutes and softly strummed guitars, and I heard the man singing lowly to my mother as he drove slowly down the old dirt road toward town, the sun setting slowly behind us.

Downtown the streets were strewn with red, white and blue banners, and signs bearing phrases like *Welcome to the electronic future* and *Let there be light!* Children ran everywhere like packs of well-dressed chimpanzees, sparklers twinkling at their fingertips, little terriers nipping at their ankles.

There was the smell of hot pie, and sausages, and deep-fried doughnuts. And all along the streets thousands of tiny bulbs on strings glowed the happy glow of hot electric light. It felt as if deep inside of me, a tiny filament burned and beamed as well, and it felt as if the light had filtered through my body and would very shortly shine out of my ear holes and nostrils.

For a while we all walked together, and the man from the grocer bought candy-apples for my mother and my brother and me, and he pitched baseballs at milk jars and won a periwinkle lion stuffed with sawdust for my mother. He held her fingerless hand gently in his large palm, and in the soft light of those tiny electric bulbs, it seemed as if all those lines of worry and duress just faded away from my mother's visage. And her face seemed young and soft, and I was happy.

It was Stephen who spotted the tears that were running down my face, before I'd even felt them. And I told him not to worry, because I thought now that everything was really going to turn out all right in the end.

There was still an hour to kill before the Great Spazzarini would perform his death-defying feat; the man from the grocer gave my brother and me some coins. My mother said it would be alright if we went off alone to see the freak show, as long as I kept a close eye on Stephen and Lu Lu, and we were back to meet her in time to watch the stunt.

Stephen was nervous. The sight of carnival freaks had always filled him with anxiety and dread, but I took his hand in my own, and together we entered the tent.

Inside the tent was dark, lit not by electric bulbs, but by the now obsolete oil lamps, which hung from hooks on wooden posts. In the shadows, malformed humans sat atop shaky stools, their disfigured limbs and tumor-laden dermas made even more ugly by the flickering light and shadows.

I wasn't long before Stephen wanted out. But there was still one freak to see, and something was pulling me onward. I was unprepared for the final sight.

We stepped forward to the end of the tent, where the light was the dimmest. A large square hole had been dug into the ground beneath the tent; a sheet of chicken wire was staked down to cover it.

I peered down into the hole, but saw nothing. I leaned closer. Finally, I got down on my knees, my hands and forehead pressed against the chicken wire; I could vaguely make out the form of some huge and slimy lump at least six-feet around. Suddenly, it let out a sound, a deep rumbling croak, and I fell back onto my behind. Stephen took off screaming, and I high-tailed it after him. Neither of us stopped running until we had reached our mother's side.

The man from the grocers was upset that we'd returned so soon. We'd found them sitting together on a park bench behind the carousel, my mother nibbling an ear of corn, while the man whispered secrets into her ear. He was sweaty and red when we pushed him aside, crowding up onto the bench beside our mother.

“I thought I tol’ you kids t’ take a hike. Can’chasee yore ma an I are havin’ a moment?” He said, swatting at the air with his fedora.

But our mother didn’t mind; she hugged us, smoothed our messed hair with her palm and kissed our foreheads. She told us not to worry about the giant sweaty frog in the pit at the freak show. Anyway, she said, it was almost time to watch the big stunt by the Great Spazzarini, and we’d all better get a move on if we hoped to get a good spot for the show.

The town had arranged for large flatbed trucks to be waiting outside the fairgrounds to carry the townsfolk out to the *Rest and Relaxation Ranch* near the power lines. My mother, Stephen, Lu Lu the chicken, the man from the grocers and I took spots at the end of the line, and soon we all piled up onto one of the flatbeds, each taking a seat atop a bale of hay.

The caravan of trucks rolled slowly up the road, and we sat enjoying the loose bumpy ride atop the wobbling cubes of fresh cut hay. There was a kid from my class at school sitting across from me, and when the hay bale he was sitting atop bounced and tumbled off the flatbed down to the road, he went with it, and the truck didn’t stop and no one else on board seemed to have noticed his fall.