

When People Fall, I Laugh

(after Édouard Levé)

At a certain stage of life I divided my belongings into “things I could not part with” and “things that were part of me.” The first group included a granite table designed by a man I loved. The second group included my father’s ashes. In the period before cell phones, I liked checking messages from pay phones. Their sweet-and-sour tang became associated with hope. Plot devices in narratives that rely on people being out of touch are no longer credible. In subways, I push back against the thighs of men who encroach on me. On the street, if someone compliments me, I say, “Thank-you.” Growing up, I did not know what was expected of me by my parents. As I get older Marilyn Monroe appears more and more beautiful. When I meet someone, I feel I know them. As I get to know them, the stranger they become, but by then I am used to them. I wear new clothes over and over until they are no longer new. A friend suggested I wear a different shade of lipstick. I didn’t want to think she was looking at my mouth. I asked Richard why some people are more interested in monkeys than other people are, and he said, “Some people, when they look in the eyes of a monkey, see their relatives.” When I was four, I picked out an expensive dress embroidered with strawberries. The saleswoman disapproved of a child so young making the choice. My mother remembered the incident because she told the woman off. I remember the story because my mother defended me. I like being a guest in other people’s houses. When I offer my apartment to friends, it is because I have to. When a young woman quickly established she was teaching at a prestigious university and working on her third book, I disliked her. When she said her son was mentally disabled and her husband had recently lost a third of his body weight, I felt guilty. When she said, “I never wanted children,” I thought we should be friends. In skiing, falling is flying. My mother used to say, “A Leopard never changes its spots.” I wondered why a leopard would want to be spotless. I hunted for chocolate she hid in the bookcase. Leopards don’t have spots when they are born. Spots develop for camouflage. On the coldest day of the year I said, “Hello,” to a homeless man swaddled in a dirt-caked blanket in front of a Victoria’s Secret on Broadway. He looked up under a mop of dark curls and said, “Another place, another time.” I discovered I had been unfriended by a

writer on Facebook when his name appeared among people I might like to know. There was his picture in a little box, with his dark eyes and a jaunty wool cap pulled low on his brow, as if where he lived it was permanent winter. When I met him I was in love and loved everyone. He didn't have a boyfriend, and I hadn't had one in a long time. When I realized he had unfriended me, it reminded me of times I had found myself alone on a set of swings, a stretch of beach, a park bench. When I was a child, puppets scared me. Puppets are closer in size to children than adults. By the time I was old enough to articulate this, I had grown interested in puppets as abstractions. When I consider that most of humanity will drown in floods within the next 40 years, I file this with wild, apocalyptic predictions, even though the ice caps are melting and the likelihood is great. I answered an ad on Craig's List for free tea and spices and arrived at a stately brownstone on 10th Street. The man who had placed the ad said he was in the tea business and was giving away what he didn't need. He was small and recovering from a cold, and he sat at the end of a large table arrayed with teapots and books related to tea. I took a box of black tea mixed with lavender and a box of chai tea threaded with orange peel and spices. He offered me a new, enamel kettle. I accepted it for a friend. I was happy on the floor, rummaging in his boxes. He said, "I hope you are dangerous," and I didn't think I was dangerous enough, and I wondered if I would cross paths with a man who had broken my heart. He lived nearby, and I imagined he would encounter me with the loot and say, "This is the reason I had to let go of you." I say things I don't mean. I may mean them in the moment or tell myself I mean them in order not to appear a liar to myself. A psychoanalyst I was in treatment with took me into his bed twice and tried to have sex with me when I was fourteen. I wonder how he knew I wouldn't tell my parents. At the beginning of the day I name three things I love. I used to imagine I would die of cancer, but as I get closer to death I think less often about how it will happen. I laugh when people fall, even if they hurt themselves. I like to do the same things every day. I prefer eating on the street to eating at home. I consider the time it takes to shop, prepare a meal, serve it, eat it, and clean up a kind of death. I once ate three hash brownies by accident and went for a walk. When the air cracked open and I could not feel the pavement, I wondered if I was having a stroke. After the man who made the granite table died, I had sex with a doctor and cried twice. I have drawn blood in fights. When I used to look at my dog, I would see all the other animals in existence. In my thoughts the man who made the granite table is cocking an eyebrow forever. I think shame is something animals feel, but

animals do not feel guilt. I am not interested in satire, but I appreciate slapstick and farce. One day a man approached me in the Guggenheim Museum. He smiled and asked how I was. He looked like someone I might like to know with his warm, brown eyes and unbuttoned tweed coat, but since I did not know him I thought I had forgotten my life. As I walked down the ramp, I remembered the man's name and that we had worked together on a job and finally that we had had sex one night with an awkward aftermath. When I passed onto Fifth Avenue, I didn't know whether I was relieved to have departed or sorry I had missed the chance to pretend nothing had happened. When I was ten, my mother came into the den where I was reading and said, "I wish I had been a WAC." I thought she was saying she wished she hadn't married and given birth to her children, even though she was saying something different. Storm clouds over the desert are extra black, making up for the fact it seldom rains. One day Richard and I were running from lightning. I turned and a white streak split my life in two. In my apartment, when I used to wait for the buzzer to ring, I would dance around to Jimmy Cliff singing, "The Harder They Come, and The Harder They Fall." When my friend Lucy and I were in our 60s, she said, "I am no longer interested in excelling." She suggested I try it. We were sitting at her kitchen table, tearing off bits of a banana muffin. I said, "Okay," meaning no. I didn't think of myself as excellent in the first place. A friend had a cancerous lump removed from a breast. She was dark-haired and pretty. As she unhooked her bra, she stood before me with her chin up. A divot of flesh was missing from one breast, and I knew I would not forget the moment. She said she felt disfigured. I said she was beautiful. She did not have a boyfriend and neither did I. When my mother was in her 90s and close to death, she leaned against the door of her bedroom and said, "I wouldn't have had children if anyone had asked me, which they didn't." The remark makes me miss her much in the way I missed her when she was alive. I think women who live in secular countries and conform to religious dress codes make the lives of all women less free and less safe. I love money as a possession as distinguished from the love of money as a means to the enjoyments and realities of life. John Maynard Keynes called this "a somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease." I like the rag-tag look of homemade signs at political demonstrations. I like the way alcohol makes you want to fuck away your life. I order whipped cream on drinks although I have high cholesterol. I don't think artificial intelligence will be any more intelligent

than the other kind of intelligence. I fall asleep at night only if I have awakened early the morning before. I once rode the horse of a mounted policeman in Central Park. I think the act of looking is erotic. A friend said, "There are stories that are mine to tell and stories that are not mine to tell." I do not make that distinction. Richard said, "The problem with origin myths is they contain a story about the ending of things, too. People read into evolution a narrative that justifies human domination." I said, "My life will go dark if you die." He said, "No, it won't," and I could see what he meant.