

THE FALL OF RANDALL SMULLYAN

Randall Smullyan glowed with pleasure as he stepped onto the girder with a certain portly, mincing grace. He was not yet forty and still in the early stages of decline from athleticism to obesity. High above the other roofs of Midtown Manhattan, he waved his cigar excitedly, maybe for balance, or maybe as an unthinking reflex demand for attention. Unnecessary, really, because behind him, watching the glowing pink scalp as he turned his face from northwestward to southeastward, mouth and eyes opened wide, there was only me.

“Ha!” he said.

It was like an animal’s exhalation. Perhaps he was out of breath after climbing the unfinished stairs to the peak of Smullyan Tower, or perhaps he was merely excited by the grand view of the tops of New York’s most famous buildings.

“Mine!” he said, turning toward me, arms stretched out wide as though to embrace me, or the city, or the world.

“Yes, Randall,” I said, “you’ve really shown them now. It’s a fine building.”

“The building?! It’s the fucking city, you moron! My city! This is just the command post, or the fucking flagpole, or something.”

“Well, yes, they really have to look up to you now.”

I meant it as a little joke. Heights make me nervous.

“You bet your booty, jack-off. Got that camera set?”

“Check!”

I had to shout because of the breeze. Randall Smullyan always shouted anyway.

“Okay, fuckface, how’s that look?”

“Well, I think we should get a little different angle, Randall. To get that slice of the Citicorp top in it. Maybe if you step over to your left, not far, about a half a foot.”

“Shit! This is a fucking trapeze act.”

“We get a good shot, might make the cover of *New York*.”

“Yeah!”

He grinned and swung the cigar toward his mouth.

Then there was a look of terrible surprise on his face.

In the first instant, he seemed puzzled by the wobble under his left foot, in the next he must have heard the rumble as the plank began to roll, then tilt. His fleshy face paled and his arms flung wide again. I thought of a fat condor preparing to fly. Sweating with impatience, and perhaps my uneasiness at this height, I nudged the end of the plank with my foot. Then he was

free, Smullyan unbound in the ether of Manhattan at a hundred and seven stories up. For that instant, he seemed to me to have recovered an elegance of movement he probably had not known since he was a teenager.

I laughed in admiration and release.

“Gawd!” is what I think he cried as he dropped past my shoe-level.

Through the lens of my Nikon I saw an expression on his face that, in four years of running every kind of errand for the man, tending to his most elemental needs whether he was drunk or sober, I had never seen before. It was a look of disbelief and pleading, I think, such as one sees in an evil child who will do anything to escape punishment. But it was too late for Randall’s pleading. There was absolutely nothing I could do now. Besides, my hands were busy with the camera.

I had a telephoto lens and some very fast film. I snapped him as he rolled over onto his back, as though he were swimming in a pool instead of falling through the air. I lost him for a fraction of a second as the shutter clicked and mirror swung up and down inside the camera, but I was certain I had seen his face resume its customary threatening snarl. When I found his face again, smaller and more distant now, I could still see the snarl but the eyes were wider, wilder, and he was rolling back to face the ground. In my next shot, he seemed to be swimming a breaststroke, frantically pumping his limbs but still falling, and I thought of him as a gross ball of yarn, diminishing as he unraveled, one end fixed to the peak of Smullyan Tower.

His recent habit of wiping his fingers on my shirtfront unraveled, and he became smaller. His attempts to cheat me of my pay the way he had cheated anxious bankers and even older realtors and a borough president with comps to his casino, the loan of a limo and, even, the use of his alcoholic wife, unraveled, and he was still smaller. Years of nickel and dime hustling to grab up cheap buildings, harass or burn out tenants, raze and rebuild, his seduction of my daughter, and the earlier years of begging his teachers for passing grades and running and dodging from the other boys to protect his lunch money and still earlier years of—but I could not guess, did not care, what had happened back then, I could only see that he was twisting and that he was smaller and smaller and smaller until at last I lost him and then, after a moment, the tiny heads of many people rushed to cluster around a spot far below on the pavement.

He would have enjoyed these pictures, I think, especially the first one of him high upon his tower, way above the Citicorp and AT&T and the other, lesser buildings.