

Falling

by Greg Stolze

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Pamela's smile would have been perfectly lovely if it hadn't had just a small touch of vacancy. She looked, perhaps, ten percent vacuous. Most men were willing to ignore that as a favor to her clear complexion, curvy figure, and the long auburn hair that always looked attractively messed up. They themselves did not realize that when she laughed at their jokes, it didn't seem to mean as much. Pam had been married for three years now, to a man who didn't make a lot of jokes, and they were happy. She was at her office, turning that slightly-daft smile on her co-worker Alice and saying, "Oh right, you do that... karate stuff, right?"

"Jujitsu," Alice said, patiently. Her parents couldn't keep it straight either, kept thinking she did aikido.

"Why would I want to do that?"

Alice blinked once, hard, then tried again. "It's a self-defense class, Pam. You won't even have to learn any Japanese, I promise. Just some stuff to keep you safe in case, you know, the worst happens."

Pam shrugged. "That hardly seems likely, does it?"

"Pam, we're real estate agents."

Pam kept smiling, but somehow its vapidness seemed greater. "Yes...?"

Alice sighed. "Think about this from some evil sex-freak's point of view, just for a minute, okay?"

The crinkle that formed between Pam's eyebrows was adorable. Alice pressed on. "If you're a rapist, what is it you want?"

"Um, Alice, I'm not sure I get..."

"You want to be alone, with a woman, in an isolated place. Right?"

"...I guess." The smile was fading.

"Now think. Who goes into empty houses with strangers *all the time* as part of their job?"

Pam's smile was completely gone. "I always have my phone with me," she said. "The office always knows where I am."

"And that's a great start, but c'mon. Haven't you ever gotten a bad vibe, Pam? A guy who just made you feel creepy, who was looking at *you* more than the closet space or floor plan or vault ceilings? Christ knows I have. From a pervert's point of view, it's perfect. He sees you or me on a billboard, calls the number, says he wants a house on a quiet street, makes an appointment for when it's deserted... if he's half-bright, picks a

house in the middle of nowhere that's already for sale..."

"Okay, quit it."

"You know I'm right."

"How can you stand to think that way?"

"Pam, we know this happens," Alice said flatly.

"You don't have to dwell on it though." Pam was looking down at her desk, and then she frowned and put a hand over her mouth. "God, I just said the dumbest thing ever, didn't I?"

"Little bit," Alice said, but she blunted it with a wry smile. It was just as pretty as Pam's and, moreover, looked intelligent. She put her hand on Pam's arm and said, "It's one Saturday afternoon. A lot of it's... simple stuff, like not letting him trail you down the basement steps."

Pam had started picking idly at a fingernail. It was glossy and painted a deep, brownish red. "I'll think about it," she said.

"Okay." Alice kept up the smile as she backed away.

#

Two hours later, a man seized Alice by her lapel and dragged it down, hard. She crouched a little in reply, sinking her weight to keep him from jerking her forward, off balance. Her left hand hooked out and off, breaking

his grip while she scabbled at his sleeve to get control of his forearm. He responded by simply stepping in, hard and close, and checking her like a hockey player. He was taller and heavier, and she had no choice but to stagger back. His left hand had taken a decisive grip at her right elbow, but she'd gotten a piece of his jacket on that side, a connection that let her feel it as he pulled. She went along partway, but stepped her left foot back and tried to drop her elbow towards her hip, tried to settle and block him. He pulled inward, then out, but he couldn't shift her posture with only one hand on one arm. He glared, then grabbed her wrist, shaking and squeezing to try and get free of her grasp. His eyes dipped to his chest for just a moment and she took the chance.

"AIIIEEGH!" she shouted and lunged forward as hard as she could, slamming her right shoulder into his and clawing at the back of his armpit with her free left hand. She latched on, plowed forward and got her hip past, she was a half-step beyond him. Her right thigh snaked between and she tried to bear down on him while swinging her leg clear through. If she'd taken a little more of his balance... if she'd had a little more mass to press... if she'd been two inches farther forward, or if she'd been stronger, then she would have knocked his leg out from under him, turning his torso into the empty space where its support had been. She almost had him, almost threw him with a fierce *osoto gari*.

But he was heavier, and stronger, and taller, and the counter to *osoto gari* is another *osoto gari*. Their positions were parallel, hip by hip, facing opposite directions, clinging close, each trying to bend forward and force the other back, each trying to lift an entangled leg behind and avoid having it swept uselessly forward. For a moment they stalled, like elk with locked antlers, and then he hopped ahead with his free foot, leaning in, another hop, using his height and his mass, she fought it but not for very long. It was strength against strength and he was stronger. A final hop and she popped into the air, twisting and falling to her back. She slapped hard, feeling the familiar impact on her palm and shoulder and hip.

“Good,” he grunted, both arms around her head and her right shoulder, pressing her into the ground. She fought to drop her arm, to turn and get her elbow to her knee, but the human arm rapidly loses strength once the shoulder opens more than ninety degrees. He had her bicep pressed against her cheek, leaving the arm useless and her head contained.

For a moment, she was distracted by a faint odor of cologne from his chest. The name of the aroma escaped her, it was blending with his sweat and the scent of laundry detergent from his clothes...

With a grunt, Alice compressed, rolling her entire body into a spiral,

contorting her hip to bring her knee to her own forehead and... she did it! She got her leg looped over him, grabbing his face with the back of her knee and exploding open, all the coiled strength of her clenched torso unwinding to peel him off and away...

She heard the sharp sound of a clap and relaxed. The man, whose name was Karl, rolled back and sat up, breathing heavily.

“You almost had that sweep,” he gasped.

“If you weren't so damn fat,” she panted back, giving him a flushed and feral grin.

He stood and reached out for her, but she was already on her feet as well.

“I can't help the way God made me,” Karl said. His own grin was nearly as pretty as hers. He had a delicate, almost effeminate face with sparkly green eyes. She could joke about him being fat because, in actual fact, his proportions were perfect.

“What'm I supposed to do, huh? It's like having a semi pass a compact on the freeway,” she grumbled, but she couldn't stop grinning.

“Good hustle you two,” Sensei Fiddler said, walking by. “Karl, can you take Bruce here and cover his falling... no, you know what? You work with Ellis, do some black belt stuff. Bruce, you're with Alice.”

They bowed and Alice straightened out her gi, moving over to a different corner of the mat. The new student followed, eagerly. His uniform still showed the long-term creases where it had been folded before its first use, but a trio of white spatter-dots on a shoulder showed it had been laundered (with too much bleach) at least once.

“Bruce, right?” She gave him a brief smile, and he blinked, as if she’d fired a camera flash in his face.

“Um, yeah. We met once,” he said, starting to hold out a hand and then turning it into a shallow bow. “My first night? You threw Ellis, Sensei Ellis, with that crazy flying headlock thing?”

“*Daikubi jime*? It’s not that difficult once you get the hang of it.”

“It looked like something out of pro wrestling.”

“It’s not a bad fall, either,” she said. “It just looks hard. Anyway, speaking of falls, show me what you’ve got. Um, simple sutemi first.”

He nodded and took a deep breath. Then he stepped out with his right foot, tilted over with a wince, and crashed to his side.

“Okay... you’ve got your chin tucked, that’s all right, but you’re *really stiff*. The point of falling,” she said, “is to make it as easy on yourself as possible, not as difficult. You have to *relax*.”

“Ellis says the same thing,” he said, scrambling up and offering her another hopeful smile.

“Well yeah, Ellis is the king of relaxation.” She rolled her eyes and shared a conspirator’s smirk. “That’s obvious. Look, breathe out as you do it this time, and you can let yourself sort of roll down the outside of your right leg. Instead of crashing down all at once, just...” She slid her own foot forward, ducking her head as she did, then gracefully dropped to the floor. In an instant, she was on her feet once more.

“Remember to stand up jujitsu style,” she added.

After a few more repetitions on each side, she asked to see his forward roll and couldn’t suppress a wince.

“Everything I said about relaxing with the simple? You’re overdoing it with the roll. You don’t want to be rigid, but you can’t go limp either. You want to be... um, springy? Here. Watch.”

She threw herself forward easily, arms making a hoop with the elbows out. Her heel kicked up over her head as she dove across the floor, ponytail pulled back and spread by centrifugal force. She popped easily to her feet. “That was springy, okay? Here’s too stiff.”

Alice exaggerated her stiffness, making her arms quiver with tension as she abruptly plunged them to the ground and did a near handstand

over them before tipping over and rolling to her feet.

“See the difference?”

He nodded.

“Here’s what you’re doing,” she said, and this time she flopped forward, sloppy and slack, going to the floor in a heap before bringing her hips over her head and struggling to her feet.

He tried again. It was a little better.

“You don’t need to try a header into the floor. Move horizontally, parallel to the surface... good, that’s better.”

Noticing how heavily he was breathing, Alice decided to talk a bit and let him recover. “Falling is all about controlling the energy, right? If you just slam down into the floor, that’s force-on-force. You don’t want force-on-force.”

“No,” he agreed, hands on knees and slightly bent.

“With the roll, you’re... re-angling the direction? Instead of crashing straight in, you come at it obliquely.”

“Obliquely,” he repeated.

“That way, instead of hitting all at once, it gets trickled off. Does that make sense?”

“Not crashing into the floor makes sense,” he said.

“Except in the straight-over, you’re going to do just that. That’s what the

slapping exercises and the simple sutemi are preparing you for.”

“Is that the one all the judo people are doing?”

“Most of the time, yeah. Watch... Hey Andrew, can I borrow you for a moment?”

Andy, down with the judo players, bowed to them and jogged over. Alice stood next to Bruce and said, “Watch his head. Andy? A side fall, please?”

With casual ease, he dropped his right arm in a chopping motion. At the same time, he whipped his left leg up behind him, jumping straight up with his right. He flipped over in midair at about waist height, dropping to the mat with a single, resounding *WHUMP*.

“With a fall like this,” she continued, “The idea is that you want to spread the force out as much as possible? If he landed on his elbow or hip, it would hurt like crazy,” she said, stepping over to Andy and pointing, “But here it’s spread out through all of his arm, his shoulder here and his leg.”

“It’s like the roll,” Bruce said, “Only instead of spreading the energy out through time, you’re distributing it in space?”

Alice blinked.

“What?”

“Never mind.”

"Can I go?" Andy asked.

She nodded and gave a bobbing bow before turning back to Bruce. "Maybe. I mean, I never thought of it that way, but if it helps you, sure, okay."

"I'm just being random," Bruce replied, watching as Andy went back to grappling a bigger, older blonde guy.

"This stuff isn't easy," Alice said with a shrug. "But last winter? One of my neighbors slipped on the ice shoveling and had his arm in a sling for a month and a half. He reached back to catch himself and sprung his elbow. Even if you never need to defend yourself, learning to fall can save you a lot of trouble in life."

"You're preaching to the choir," he said. "I'm already signed up for classes and all."

"All right, then show me the back roll."

He did. She winced again.

"Okay, the single most important thing you can do with that one is *not* compress your neck."

#

Bruce was not the only one working on falls. Blue-belt Phillip was absent-mindedly twisting his short beard between his fingertips and gently mouthing his mustache tips as Rosie tried to get him to loosen up, just like Bruce. The difference was, Phillip's falls were higher, making the forces

involved more dangerous and intense.

"You can't half-ass this," Rosie said bluntly. "You know what the word *sutemi* literally means? 'To abandon oneself.' In judo, it's just *ukemi*, just, you know, *falling down*. But these free aerial falls, you need to really propel yourself. Jump high and flip high! If you don't, you're going to crack your skull."

Phillip gritted his teeth and jumped. He felt his hair brush the floor, and heard Rosie gasp before his shoulder, then hip, crashed down.

"Okay, *stop*," she said. "There's a difference between what I was saying and being careless. Here, stand up and take my hand. Hold on to it, all right?"

"I'm sorry," Phillip muttered, and he sounded so miserable that Rosie paused to look him in the face.

"Don't apologize, but you scared me, all right? I think you're getting a little... freaked out by this, maybe?"

"It's not like... anything I've done before," he admitted.

"Well, you're like me," she said, "We're built short and stocky and we'll never be runway models but it makes us hard as hell to throw. Which means it's hard for us to throw ourselves too. Consider a stick figure like Ellis," she said, going so far as to point at him. (Karl had surged under Ellis' punch and hoisted him into a

fireman's carry, making it look as effortless as shrugging into a raincoat.) "Skinny and tall, he's built to fall over, so of course he can jump up and spin in the air and have plenty of hang time to get positioned. You and me have less margin for error, so I'm going to have you go over my hand a couple times."

"Thank you," Phillip said, and Rosie rolled her eyes.

"No problem, Philly. Think of it like running along in the dark, and you suddenly hit a waist-high fence. You just flip along the axis of your hips, right over. This time I'll be pulling you up to keep your head off the floor."

#

After class ended, Alice found herself polishing the tokonoma's rice bowl while Karl straightened out the photos hanging beside its scrolls.

"How's business?" she asked.

"Good, knock on wood," he said, tapping a mahogany picture frame. "Got the customs stuff straightened out with our suppliers in China, so it looks like we're going to beat another deadline."

"This is your, what did you call them? Server clusters?"

"Yeah, the demand is really starting to pick up."

"I thought you did something with cell phone components?"

"I sold that one off," he said easily.

"Once everyone was buying accelerometers, the margins started to drop on me. Too many sharks in the tank." He smiled.

"I could never do a technical job like that," she admitted, ducking her head, and wondering why she always did this with Karl, always belittled herself.

"My part's not technical. I just figure out where things are headed. As soon as I heard about the iPhone touch-screen, I knew people were going to want it to work like a Wii. I probably got the idea in here, in fact," he said.

"What?"

"Nothing like an imminent hip throw to make you aware of your sense of... location in space, I guess?"

"All the falling." She nodded. "Yeah, I guess I can see it."

"Feel it, maybe. Well, if we can do that, why not our phones?"

"And server clusters?"

"If I told you that you could add more closet space to your apartment, would you pay money for that?"

Alice raised an eyebrow. "Like those container places where people pile up all the unwanted junk they can't bring themselves to get rid of?"

"Sure, only for a computer."

"No storage units for me. I like to keep my life streamlined. If it doesn't fit in my apartment, hell with it."

"Wow," he said. "You're an edge case, Alice."

"For my computer though, why not just buy a plug-in hard drive?"

"You can, only this way you won't lose it or sit on it by mistake. But enough of my blather, how's real estate?"

"Going strong," she said. "Still can't get past this guy Tom in my office, he's got all the high-end connections so he's moving the big new homes... if you know someone who's in the market, you send 'em my way, right?"

"Absolutely. You'll get there," he said. "You've been doing it how long?"

"Two years."

"I bet your rival's been at it for decades. He's just going to get slower and more out of touch, you're just going to get stronger and more connected."

She giggled. She didn't usually giggle at flattery, but she didn't usually get flattered about her job. "You see it all coming, huh?"

"That's what I do." Together, they walked toward the exit to shake the dust out of their cleaning rags.

"I've been trying to get people from the office to take that self-defense course but it's like pushing rocks

uphill," she told him. "I mean, do they not understand what could happen?"

"Not everyone's good at predicting things they haven't experienced yet."

"But c'mon! Any crazy rapist could pick up a real estate guide and treat it like a carryout menu."

"And yet," Karl said, "You have to treat every customer as a potential friend, not as a potential attacker."

She gave him a glare and, as he turned, made a rat-tail of her dust rag and snapped it against his ass. He jumped, then turned and wagged a finger.

#

When Karl got home, he walked face-first into the smell of roasting meat with garlic and spices. His wife was pulling something out of the oven.

"Right on time," she said. As Karl hung up his coat, he glanced through their home's open layout at the dinner table. A bottle of red sat in the middle of the table, uncorked so it could breathe before pouring. The candles weren't lit yet, but they were positioned just so, on either side of a small bowl of cut flowers.

"Aw honey, you spoil me," he said.

"You, hell," she said, coming forward to give him a hug. "I'm the one who picked the recipe and cooked it. Though, hey, you're welcome to have some if you want."

"I'm too sweaty and gross for a formal meal," he said, though she hadn't released him, and when he ducked his head to nibble at her lips, she didn't pull away.

"We'll keep it informal," she said. "You're always hungry after one of those classes. Go wash your hands."

He did so in the kitchen sink so that he could tell her the good news from China.

"That's nice. Did you have a fun lesson?"

"Alice is getting fierce," he said, sitting as she put something steaming and pastry-wrapped on his plate. "I've told you about her, right?"

"The little punk rock girl?"

"That was when she started, ages ago. She's gotten all professional, let her nose-ring hole close up, wants to lead her fellow real estate agents into self-defense classes."

She nodded and changed the subject to her brother's kids, who were in fourth and second grade and who were, though moody, also brilliant and talented.

"It's delicious," Karl said, once the subject of nephews had trailed off.

"I think it could do with more rosemary," she said.

"If you had your way, we'd just sit down to little rosemary trees at

dinner," he said. She stuck out her tongue and refilled her wine glass.

"You can leave the dishes," he said when he'd wiped his mouth and pushed his chair back. "I'll get them after I shower, I really need to get clean."

"I can do it," she said. "I mostly cleaned as I went, there's not much."

"You're always one step ahead of me," he said, standing. "Can you at least wait until I run a tub?"

She feigned impatience. "Well as long as you *hurry*," she said, with a phony glare. "Honestly, your *insistence* on keeping me from my housework...!"

"I'm sorry, honey." He dropped his head, matching her with mock-contrition.

A few minutes later, hot water was jetting into the master suite jacuzzi with admirable force, but even at its high rate of flow, Karl knew it would be a while before it was even deep enough.

After work, he'd dropped by the house to change from his suit to jeans and a sweater. Then he'd changed at the dojo, and changed back, and was going to presently change into pajamas. But while he listened to the tone of the water deepening, he stripped and threw his t-shirt into the laundry, hanging up his jeans for another day. Naked, he walked into the bathroom and glanced at himself

in the trio of angled mirrors over the vanity.

He nodded and turned, enjoying the way his muscles were still engorged after the workout. He raised one arm and then the other, not thinking about anything in particular, then noticed a red stripe running from the top of his collarbone down towards his left nipple. He leaned in and wiped a bit of steam off the mirror. The red mark had a pattern to it, something like a checkerboard or a cable's twists.

He leaned back and relaxed. It was a gi burn or an impact abrasion, he'd had dozens. No big deal.

"Alice," he muttered, then turned to his bath.

Climbing into the inches-deep water, he stuck his head under the roaring faucet, then pulled it back, running his fingers through his chestnut locks, feeling how heavy and matted they felt with water and sweat. He ran his fingers down to his cheeks, then glanced at the razor by the sink.

He could get up and get it, but then he'd have to either drip on the floor or dry himself, only to get back in the tub and get wet again. He really should have thought ahead. It wasn't like him.

"Mona?" he asked. "Sweetie?"

"Yes, Karl?" Her voice was nearby.

"Could you hand me my razor? I don't want to get out of the tub."

Mona opened the door and paused to pose. She'd changed into a short, sheer nightie and, he suspected, had done something with her hair.

"Why don't I just do it for you?" She came in, bent over in a way calculated to make the back of her teddy climb up, and picked up his shaving gear.

"Finished the dishes already, did you?" he asked as she perched herself on the edge of the basin.

"I left them for tomorrow," she said. "I am being reckless and wanton."

She coated her hands in lotion and, presently, he became very eager to leave the tub after all.

#

Eight miles away, Alice was sitting in a much smaller tub, one whose water was much cooler. She didn't want to get out, because her apartment had cruddy weather stripping and never got properly warm. She was saving to get a place of her own, if the prices ever got within reach, or if she ever got her commissions up to a sufficient level.

She, too, considered shaving but decided to just wear a pantsuit the next day. She felt a little glum, but like Karl, she checked herself out in the mirror. Each of her shoulders had a red-lined blue star tattoo on the front, and after drying her hair she absentmindedly rubbed the left one. As her hand moved, she frowned into

the mirror. A scratch or scrape ran down the upper slope of her left breast, deep red against her pinkened skin.

She poked it, but it didn't hurt. For a moment she wondered if she'd develop some kind of callus, but dismissed the idea as ridiculous. Ten minutes later she was in bed with a mystery novel. Her thoughts faded away from the mark as it, too, started to vanish.

#

By the time Alice fell asleep, Karl and his wife were finished making love. "Now I'm all sweaty again," Karl mumbled into her hair, which no longer looked like she'd primped and styled it.

"Take another bath," she said. He chuckled.

Presently, they got up to brush their teeth, and it was only when they were in their warm and sensible pajamas that she said, "I wonder if it worked that time."

"It worked for me, baby," Karl said, with a light little laugh, but he found himself gritting his back teeth, gently, so she couldn't hear.

"You know what I mean."

He answered by pulling her close.

"Have you given any more thought to seeing that fertility doctor?" she persisted.

"It's still early days yet," he said. "Let's give it a little more time, 'kay?"

It was what he said every time.