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FLYING TIPS FOR FLIGHTLESS BIRDS

Written by Kelly McCaughrain

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FLYING TIPS FOR FLIGHTLESS BIRDS

KELLY McCAUGHRAIN

WALKER
BOOKS

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MONDAY 12 JANUARY

Flying tips for flightless birds

Posted by Birdie

There's a moment during every trick. Circus people call it the crowd-pleaser. Or the ticket-seller. Or sometimes, among ourselves, the widow-maker. It's the drum-roll moment, the spotlight moment, the moment that makes an audience hold its breath. It's different for every act, but on the flying trapeze it always involves a lycra-clad lunatic leaping into space while dangling from a bar high above the ground, and then letting go.

But we'll get to flying later. The first thing you need to learn is how to introduce your act.

My name – drum roll, please – is Birdie Franconi and I am one half (the pretty half) of the famous Flying Franconis!

Well, so far we're only famous in our street. And it's not a very long street. In fact, it's more of a country lane in a minuscule village close to a tiny town on the outskirts

of the outskirts of the outskirts of Belfast. But Franconis' Circus School is the biggest circus in Little Murragh and we're starting this blog because we want you to be part of it.

The other half of the Flying Franconis is throwing juggling balls at my head and telling me to hurry up and introduce him. Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, allow me to present the boy who puts the "double" into "double act", my partner, brother and *practically* identical (apart from the gender thing) twin, Finch Franconi! (Crowd goes wild as Finch bows from his perch on my bedroom windowsill.)

Flying Tips for Flightless Birds is our brand-new blog of all things Franconi, written by the newest generation of the Franconi circus family! Here you'll learn to juggle, ride a unicycle, tame a lion, walk a high wire and turn somersaults on horseback. Stick around, we'll even teach you how to fly.

"Finch, it's finished. Come take a look." Birdie waves me over and nods at her computer screen. "What do you think?"

I lean on the back of her chair, resting my chin on her shoulder as I read the blog post. In the screen reflection our two heads emerge from her neck like something from a cheap sci-fi movie.

"It's great, but you didn't mention the show; I thought that was the whole point."

"Yes, but there isn't going to *be* a show unless we drum up some interest in the circus school. I can only dangle from my ankles for so long; we need more performers." She grabs her school bag, which today is a vintage leather camera case, and says, "It'll do. Come on, we're late."

We're always late. You would be stunned at how long it takes Birdie to get dressed in the morning. Almost as long as me, in fact.

As we run down the lane, skidding on ice puddles and leaping over potholes, I adjust the length of the orange braces holding up my waistband, straighten my skinny tie and hold on to my pork-pie hat. My school bag, which today is a 1930s doctor's bag, bashes against my blue checked shorts. The doctor's bag makes my books smell a bit chemically, but I reckon anything that stops teachers scrutinizing my homework too closely can only be a good thing.

We make it to first period with thirty seconds to spare. Which is thirty seconds too long.

The secret to surviving high school is this: minimize corridor time.

Every boy in our class (except me) is already there, playing football on the two-metre-wide "pitch" of the maths corridor. As we pick our way through, I manage to get kicked in the ankle twice and then score an own goal.

"Out of the way, Freak Show!"

And with that, the week has officially begun.

Birdie kicks the ball down the corridor and they go chasing after it, allowing us to make it to the classroom door, where Kitty Bond takes a break from cackling at something on her phone to glance pointedly at me and say, "Look, girls, it's the gorgeous *Miss* Franconi and her sister, Birdie."

The Bond Girls laugh, one of the footballers wolf-whistles, and Kitty's boyfriend, James, "accidentally" boots the ball at the backs of my knees.

I'm not bothered. *Miss. Her.* This is standard Monday-morning stuff. Miss Allen is on her way down the corridor already; it's *so* not worth starting anything. But suddenly Birdie, who is usually pretty good at not rising to this crap, is stepping between me and Kitty, tiny fists on her hips, going, "Oh, look, it's the hideous Miss Bond and her soon-to-be *black eye*."

"Oooooh, is that a threat, Birdbrain? Any day – you *and* your pretty sister. Unless she's worried she'll break a nail?" She arches an eyebrow at my fingernails, which are actually the same colour as hers today – bright green. Birdie was right about this town being small. It's everyone-knows-everyone-else's-business small. It's every-little-thing-you-do-becomes-gossip small. And it's *especially* boys-in-nail-polish-really-stand-out small.

I roll my eyes and take a step forward. I wouldn't

usually bother but Kitty knows getting Birdie involved is a sure-fire way to draw me in; we're kind of a package deal. I put a hand on Birdie's trembling shoulder, which in twin-speak means *I've got this*, and say, "The colour looks better on you, Kitty. What shade is that, 'Wicked Witch of the West' or 'Hulk'?"

"I don't care what's going on here, it stops right now," Miss Allen says in her sternest teacher voice, which isn't very stern at all, but it's Monday morning and no one has the energy anyway. She unlocks the door and waves the class in. Kitty barges past us, leading the Bond Girls and making sure Birdie and I are last. On our way through the door, Miss Allen mutters, "Ignore her, Finch. Anyone who uses their own gender as an insult has issues." I grin at her and hope her sympathy lasts until she's seen my half-finished homework.

THURSDAY 15 JANUARY

Two buckets and a barrel (or one way to start your own circus family)

Posted by Birdie

The famous Franconis began with our great-great-granny, Alouette Franconi, and our great-great-grandfather, Ennis Mullins.

Alouette was half French, half Italian, orphaned young, and given away by her remaining relatives to a passing circus, where she grew up sewing costumes for the horse acrobats (that's acrobats on horses, not horses doing headstands).

She soon got bored with washing sweaty tights and began learning the tightrope instead, and by the time she was sixteen she was so good she was the star of the show. She travelled all over Europe and America with the Rossetti Brothers travelling circus, making her act more and more daring all the time. She didn't just *walk* the tightrope, she

danced on it, rode a bike across it, stopped to fry eggs in the middle of it, carried children across it, did acrobatics on it – and she did it all without a safety net.

In 1899, aged seventeen, she walked across Niagara Falls; a thousand metres from one cliff edge to the other, in high winds, sixty metres above the raging river below.

And then she did it again with buckets strapped to her feet, just to make things interesting.

There's a photo of her, about to step off the wire onto Canadian soil, hanging in an American museum dedicated to the Heroes of Niagara (Headcases of Niagara, Dad calls them, but he's always been a feet-firmly-on-solid-ground type).

Back in 1902, this photo was hanging on the wall of a restaurant at the Falls, and that's where Ennis Mullins first saw Alouette.

Ennis was born right here in Little Murragh but, being a sensible lad, he ran away at the first opportunity, determined to have some fun. I guess he knew that someday he'd have to come back and run his dad's farm, so he decided that first he'd go and find the maddest thing he could possibly do and get it out of his system. He ended up at Niagara, which seemed to attract ~~nutters~~ thrill-seekers, and there he heard about barrel riding.

Barrel riding involves sealing yourself inside a wooden barrel and being hurled into the river to be swept along and over the Falls. Probably to your death. Success rates were not encouraging.

Ennis decided to go for it, but on the morning of the stunt, maybe he was feeling nervous; maybe he wanted some sort of insurance policy. That's when he spotted the photograph of Alouette – it was on the wall of the restaurant where he was having breakfast. I have to admit, she looks incredible in that photograph; calm and triumphant, knowing she's beaten Niagara.

Ennis swore on a Bible that if he survived the Falls, he would find the girl in the picture and marry her.

This idea was madder than the barrel riding, if you ask me. But if Ennis thought that making that promise would ensure his survival, maybe he was right, because when they hauled his bashed and waterlogged barrel out of the river, he was only half-drowned. And as soon as the majority of his shattered bones had healed, he set out to find this complete stranger and ask her to marry him.

I guess I'm telling you this story because it's always helped me to be brave on the trapeze. It reminds me that the best way to tackle something scary is to have something even scarier lined up for tomorrow.

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"You're such a romantic, Birdie." I'm reading today's blog post on my phone as we cross the empty school playground, which everyone just calls "the yard". Birdie's wearing a blue polka-dot Lindy Hop dress, black-and-white brogues, and a Muppets backpack that

strictly doesn't go with the outfit at all, but I forgive her because she's ingeniously added a pair of scarlet trapeze tights to the look. Which is awesome, but doesn't make it easy for us to slip unnoticed into class twenty minutes late.

"How are our stats?" I whisper as Ms Hatch glares at us.

Birdie winces. "One page view."

"I'm not sure a blog was the best idea."

"Don't worry. I'll keep posting – someone has to see it, and then maybe they'll want to join."

"We should put up more posters."

"Everyone here already knows about the circus school. They could hardly miss us, could they?" she says.

This is true, since several of Franconis' performers (i.e. me, Birdie, our big sister, Wren, and little brother, Jay) can be seen juggling, doing somersaults or riding unicycles in the yard every day. Birdie and I juggle without realizing we're doing it; we just start tossing the contents of our pencil cases to each other while we talk.

Besides us, Franconis' also has the Juggulars (our Friday-night juggling club), a class of little kids called the Tots Acrobats, the Tuesday Night Acrobats (who meet on Thursdays) and a couple of solo performers. Two of the Juggulars are in Jay's class and one of the

Tuesday Night Acrobats is in Wren's, but all the other circus kids go to different schools.

The whole point of the blog is to recruit new members since we don't have enough performers to put on a big show at the end of the school year. And if it doesn't work, it won't just be the end of the year, it'll be the End of Everything. Mum and Dad can't afford to keep the place open with so few students.

The thing is, Franconis' is the *only* thing in my life besides high school. And my high school resembles a post-apocalyptic wasteland where only the morons have survived, so Franconis' is pretty important. The blog *has* to work. Because I can't even think about the circus school closing.

So I think about the show instead, which is what I do in most of my classes. My schoolbooks are full of scribbled notes like *Tots Acrobats + vertical trampoline = human catapult?*, diagrams of trapeze routines and sketches of show-posters. Miss Allen gives me extra marks if I make her laugh, but the other teachers complain about the waste of paper.

If we can pull it off, the show will go down in Little Murragh history. We'll have a circus ring and spotlights and everything choreographed to really cool music, and Birdie and I will be the headline act – performing our craziest trapeze stunts with no safety net ("No chance," Mum said) – and the posters will read:

FRANCONIS' CIRCUS PROUDLY PRESENTS:

THE FABULOUS ...
FANTASTIC ...
FAMOUS ...
FLYING FRANCONIS!

"Finchley Sullivan, are you paying attention?"

My real name brings me down to earth quicker than sweaty palms on a greased trapeze bar.

"Yeah, I definitely was, Ms Hatch." I nod reassuringly. She gives me a warning look and goes back to whatever it is she's doing on the whiteboard.

Well, you couldn't name a circus school "Sullivans'", could you? Even Ennis Mullins reinvented himself as Ennesto Franconi after he married Alouette. Eventually he became a flyer, but he started out as a freak show act because, since his Niagara barrel-riding adventure, he could pop his left shoulder in and out of its socket like a Lego man.