

CAROLYN BLACK

## Trampoline Lessons

NEAR THE BOTTOM of the upcoming-activities sheet, someone has written the words *Flying Free: A forum for discussion and trampoline. Women only.* Ms. Tessier's hands pause at the typewriter, but only for a moment. Her typing is usually a continual flow of sound, tapping out messages like *Bus trip (with tour!) to the local zoo. Bag lunch recommended. Please arrive 15 minutes early for prompt departure at 11:00.*

Four days a week, Ms. Tessier sits in a small booth just inside the front doors of the community centre, her upswept hair frosted with hairspray. She types out flyers announcing upcoming activities and supplies event information over the phone or in person. Her voice is loud and decisive. Sometimes, if one of the walk-ins is particularly old, she will open her sliding glass window all the way and touch the individual's arm reassuringly.

While she types, she often thinks of herself as a hostess preparing invitations to a party. These invitations go out into the mailboxes of private homes and public libraries, where she imagines plump children poring over the activities, or librarians nodding, sagely approving the selections. Today, though, once she resumes typing, she experiences an entirely new sensation, one that might best be described as transmigratory. It happens as she types the words *Women only.* She feels herself moving high above her body and fragmenting, falling into the bodies of women in the community as they open their mailboxes and find her flyers. She feels she has been invited.

The gymnasium is at the back of the community centre. When Ms. Tessier reports there for her first class, she sees the leftovers of other activities—a few orange life jackets dribbled along the bleachers, blue gymnastic mats spread randomly across the floor. Stranded in the room's broad space, they look like victims of some awful devastation. A trampoline has been set up in the back corner, beside a tight circle of chairs. Several women cluster by the trampoline, shaking hands, murmuring, and laughing.

"Abby!" a woman with short, blond curls calls to Ms. Tessier.

This is Liina Williams, one of the regular instructors at the centre. She always addresses Ms. Tessier by her first name on the afternoons she strides past the information booth, on her way to teach courses like Japanese Sand Gardening and, more recently, Tantric Awareness for Couples. Ms. Tessier has not yet grown accustomed to the overly familiar address. Her ex-husband, one of the few other people to use her first name, never called her Abby, only Abigail.

As Liina moves forward to welcome Ms. Tessier, the other women nod and smile, a clump of hair and teeth. Liina extends both arms to grasp Ms. Tessier by the wrists and says, "I'm so glad you joined us."

After everyone has sat down in the circle of chairs, she explains that the trampoline is a tool for therapy. "It provides a space for you to learn new routines," she tells them. "We'll talk about breaking old ones in the workshops afterward." Then, she has them jump on the trampoline for a few seconds each, just to get used to its rhythm. The women who are not jumping stand around the trampoline in a circle, ready to catch anyone who might fall off.

Liina cautions them all to "focus" while they jump. "Keep concentrating on your middle, ladies. It's all about centre of gravity, and I can't repeat that enough."

Ms. Tessier jumps solemnly, straight up, straight down. To her, the trampoline seems spiteful, its black mesh gripping her feet comfortingly, but then growing suddenly taut, pushing them away. She wears pink ballet leotards with a black bodysuit. Her feet slip a bit on the mesh because of the leotard; the other women go barefoot. They wear brightly coloured spandex shorts, their middle-aged legs bulging out from the bottoms. Justine Harris, whom Ms. Tessier knows to be an active participant in centre activities, wears a red thong over her spandex, as well as a red spandex halter top. On the trampoline, she jumps confidently from corner

to corner and shouts, "Woo ... Wooooo!" She also claps her hands together when the other women jump.

The last woman to jump keeps landing dangerously close to the metal coils that hold the mesh to the stand. She came late to class, holding her mother's hand. Liina encourages her to stick to the middle of the trampoline.

After every woman climbs on and off the trampoline once, Liina directs them to the circle of chairs, and they sit.

"Because this is our first session, I'll start." Liina tells them she was married eleven years ago, but her husband insisted on knowing whether her breasts were "real." ("They aren't," she says defiantly.) She refused to admit this to him, and when he demanded to see a photograph of her younger self (without breasts), she packed four suitcases and left. As Liina tells this story, she seems to tunnel deep into her own body and to speak from far away. Her voice flares with disgust at some parts, and pride at others. She is moved, and moves the group. Ms. Tessier, sitting next to her, grows mesmerized by her rich, buttery voice and the attractive flush enlivening her cheeks. She tries to imitate the nodding encouragement of the other women, as well as their little coos and clucks.

Liina finishes talking and looks at her expectantly; she seems to be asking for some kind of confession. The truth is that Ms. Tessier grew up in suburbia, where the closest thing to tragedy was her father beheading a geranium with the lawn-mower cord and her mother yelling at him a bit. She has nothing to share or barter. As the women lean forward, she feels the same frustration that she did two years ago when her ex-husband said, "You held out on me"—a void within her opening and opening.

Suddenly, she hears herself saying, "There is one story my mother always tells, her recipe for happiness. Do you want to hear that?"

Liina nods.

"Okay. A man living in a village somewhere becomes terribly unhappy. He, his wife, and six children are all crammed into a little one-room hut. So he goes to the village wiseman and tells him the problem, and the wiseman says, 'Bring your goat into the house with you, and then come back in two weeks.'"

"This sounds like a joke." The woman who speaks holds one hand in front of her face, picking at her lip with plump fingers. The other women nod in agreement, with the relief of the defended.



"No, not at all. This is a real folk tale," Ms. Tessier says in a thin voice.

"I think we want a tale about Abby, not other folk or their goats." Liina addresses her in the third person, which makes her feel as if she's floating above her own hair. Ms. Tessier wants to ask how life became suddenly ridiculous, but such a question would implicate them all. Before she can say anything, Liina speaks sharply towards the trampoline.

"No, Nancy. It is not time. Get off, now."

Ms. Tessier turns to see the woman who came in with her mother climbing off the trampoline. After she sits down, Justine Harris begins talking about her sisters. Ms. Tessier's story has been dropped—not forgotten, but conveniently bypassed.

When Ms. Tessier's husband announced that he was leaving her for his ex-girlfriend, the news came as a confirmation rather than a surprise. She felt like a detective who had solved a case. She had always had an inkling of possible abandonment after hearing him, on their third date, describe himself and the ex-girlfriend as "star-crossed lovers." The autopsy following the break-up of their four-year marriage, when they sifted through reasons for its death, took only one weekend. This was when he accused her of holding out on him.

She thought the remark unfair, remembering a valentine she had made from gold paper. She said, "But I was the one who wanted to love you." The sentence sounded like something an actress might say on TV; her husband left shortly afterwards. And Ms. Tessier started working at the community centre.

At the end of their first class, the women change clothes and wash out sweaty armpits in the locker room attached to the gym. One woman complains about bikini rash. Justine Harris wanders around the room naked, and then says to no one in particular, "I shaved off my pubic hair last week. It itches like you wouldn't believe!" Ms. Tessier looks and sees a black rash of stubble below Justine's belly button. She is not disgusted by the image. She feels rather matter-of-fact about the human body—its need to grow hair, to shed parts of itself, to perspire. Its few indignities she ignores, such as the graceless hunch of the women's backs as they step out

of their shorts. To remove her own bodysuit, she pulls it below her hips and then sits on one of the wooden benches, where she can slide it neatly off both feet at once.

Liina helps close up the buttons on the back of her dress.

“So, how does your mother’s folk tale end?” she asks, sitting down on a bench in front of Ms. Tessier.

“If you do want to hear it, really ....” None of the other women is paying attention.

“Of course. Does the goat get to move in?”

“Yes, in fact, the man does bring the goat into his house. But this just makes the house even more crowded than before, and the goat stinks horribly.”

Liina laughs.

“Finally, the two weeks are up,” Ms. Tessier continues, more energetically, “and that is absolutely it for the man’s patience. He goes back to the wiseman and complains that although he’s kept the goat inside, he still feels miserable, even more miserable than before. And he asks the wiseman, ‘Where is this happiness you promised me?’”

She pauses for effect.

“So the wiseman says, ‘Now, take the goat out of the house.’”

Compassion radiating from her face, Liina stands and grasps Ms. Tessier’s shoulder. “Oh, Abby, what a sad way for your mother to think about happiness. Things could always be worse? And of course you’ve internalized it.” Then she smiles beatifically.

Although Ms. Tessier can see the logic of Liina’s reading, she is sure it falls short of the story’s significance. But she can’t properly find the words to express this, or bring herself to reject the benediction of Liina’s hand on her shoulder.

In the following weeks, Ms. Tessier says very little during the classes. The women address her formally, without meeting her eyes, mostly when they need to get past her. Even this, at least, is a slight acknowledgement of her presence among them, a token acceptance of her as part of the group. They bring things to class—things they have made in other courses at the centre, like shrunken, potted trees or clay vases. As these objects pass from hand to hand, they seem to emanate personality—representations, surely, of their makers’ creative and better selves. When Ms. Tessier holds them, she feels a deep longing.

She begins to decorate the information booth with her flyers, transforming its beige walls into a brightly coloured poster of the centre's activities.

In the booth, she is less sure of herself and more attuned to the fragility of her clients. With those who have hearing problems, she no longer speaks loudly through the glass, but emerges from her multicoloured shell and enunciates clearly near their faces.

Most everyone in the class is learning a backwards somersault. Ms. Tessier is still working on the frontwards somersault they learned two weeks ago. She can't bring herself to plunge her head towards the trampoline, even if it is only for the first uncomfortable moment before the spin takes her back up again.

Her attempts today remind her of when she was a child trying to do a headstand on the back lawn with her gentle, smiling father. This was after he complained of depression, and her mother told him all he needed was some exercise. So, father and daughter spent the day out on the lawn, learning to stand on their heads. She would throw her legs up into the air, fearful they would scissor over her head and cause her to land on her back. Instead, they never went high enough. With his own legs, her father demonstrated the meagre motion of her feet coming only slightly off the ground.

On the trampoline, too, her movements feel decisive but prove slight. She is making progress, however. By the end of last week's lesson, she managed to angle her airborne body halfway between horizontal and vertical—while still holding it perfectly straight—and turn once as if she were rolling down a hill. After she got off the trampoline, Liina gave her a celebratory hug.

Today, a plate of homemade cookies brought by one of the women sits on a chair by the trampoline, and Ms. Tessier watches light moving over the foil wrap as she tries to concentrate on plunging her head down. She pushes off hard on the next bounce, and her leotarded feet skid out from under her. She lands on her face and one arm.

"Gosh, ow," she says, embarrassed, and smiles weakly.

The women crowd more closely around the trampoline, excitement filling their faces. They say things like "That *must* have hurt" and "Let's get you off this death trap."



She feels dizzy, not from the fall—which hurt only slightly—but from the peculiar intensity of their pity. They stare at her sympathetically, while their attention seems focused on a spot just behind her shoulder. She tries a little humour.

“Those of us who’ve handled divorce can certainly take a little fall.”

Liina looks shocked and says, “You were married, Abby? You never said.”

“Oh, well, that was a long time ago.” Ms. Tessier slides off the trampoline.

The woman who accused her of telling a joke during the first class looks thoughtful. She walks over to the plate of cookies, unwraps it, and picks a cookie up. She chews it solemnly, like a communion wafer. Justine Harris, Liina, and then the other women, join her by the plate, talking like girls playing tea party.

“What’s that peppery spice in here?”

“Ginger? I don’t believe it.”

“Well, what a good idea.”

Liina approaches her in the locker room after class and says in an undertone, “Do come to my office. We really need to chat.”

Liina’s office is beside the locker room. Once used for storage or coats, it now has a plywood desk, on top of which sits a shallow wooden box with no lid. Inside the box, grains of sand surround a few carefully placed pebbles—a miniature sand garden.

Liina sits behind the desk in the room’s only chair; Ms. Tessier stands across from her.

“Look, Abby, I feel this situation is not working for you or the group. I think it would be best if you left, with a total refund, of course. You’re just not engaging with the experience, which makes the others uncomfortable.”

“But I am ‘engaging.’ I’m getting used to the trampoline. I managed that spin last week.”

Liina slowly combs a pinky-sized rake through the sand garden. Trails of curving lines flow out behind the tongs.

“I don’t think you really know what therapy is. I don’t think you understand what we’re all here for.”

“Well, I’m certainly trying. I’m certainly willing to do something differently. Just tell me what.”

“Nooo, Abby. I don’t think so.” She holds the word “no” like a suck candy in the savour of her mouth.

“Right. Okay then. Just fine.” Ms. Tessier is extending one hand and trying to hold the sides of her unzipped bag together, all at once. She looks down at the top of the sand garden as Liina grasps her hand consolingly. *Goodbye.*

Within the length of the box, Liina has combed rows and rows of jagged lines—a chorus of perfect waves rolling through sand.

Whenever Ms. Tessier experiences anger, it comes like a slow-moving avalanche. All through the next morning, she sits in her flyer-hung booth, unaware that she is angry. About yesterday’s incidents, she feels only a mild dismay that makes her ears buzz. At eleven o’clock, she is on a bus, acting as chaperone for the community centre’s monthly trip to the zoo. It is then, as she sits on a green vinyl seat beside an older man with a walker, that she feels the slight thaw, the shifting, and the beginning of a culminating fall.

After her husband left, she did not feel this sweeping rush of anger for days. Then one morning, sitting with her buttered toast and egg, the wrongness of things roared down on top of her, along with the awareness that she had been betrayed. She wanted to yell at the memory of her husband’s back as he walked down the driveway. There were so many things she had not thought to ask at the time, and was sorry she hadn’t, since just thinking them brought her some relief.

Now, her rage prevents her from noticing that the bus has pulled into the zoo’s broad parking lot. What she does notice eventually is that the voices around her have dropped to whispers. She sees that the bus has drawn up alongside the zoo’s main gates, which are closed. A crowd of people stand outside, peering through the bars. The whispering around her is the collective reading of a handwritten sign posted on the gate: *Due to animal escape, we are sorry to announce the zoo’s closure until further notice. We ask our patrons to be patient until the staff controls the situation.*

Everyone on the bus silently presses against the windows facing the zoo, like people on safari. Some grip their cameras. The people who line the gates hold their bodies stiffly; they look ready to spring back from the bars and run. Inside the zoo’s compound,



within one of the cages, a blue heron opens its wide wings and then closes them. The sound flutters down the zoo's empty stone walkways and out to the ears of the waiting people.

Then, down a pathway, a goat trots into view. A zoo attendant follows a few metres behind, holding a long pole with a hoop at one end. The goat is obviously driven by an awareness of its pursuer, for after it stops to nose in the grass or smell a garbage container, it jogs a few feet, head bobbing. Urine-coloured streaks stain the long hair under its belly. The attendant does not hurry, and wears an amused, benevolent expression. She even waves to the crowd. Finally, she herds the animal into a corner where two cages meet, and pushes the hoop over its head. The crowd applauds and laughs, while the attendant leads the goat away on the end of her pole.

Three more goats burst from the tunnel of the monkey house, with an attendant in lively pursuit. They split in different directions, bleating wildly. Two run to a sign in front of the birdcage and begin to chew its plastic covering. Their ears pull back and their eyes turn into tiny slits. As one chews, it drops some turds onto the path. The third goat turns to face the attendant, lowers its head, and pushes runty horns forward into the attendant's leg. The attendant swears loudly and clamps a hoop over its head. Everyone on the bus cheers, and the goats turn their heads to the sound, blinking and bleary-eyed.