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# Trying Hard

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# Trying Hard

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Barbara Chipman

## One

I was trying to execute a step something like a cake walk on a wire that was stretched, for a start, three feet off the ground, and I was holding my pink parasol with its pink tassels ever so pertly. You were sitting cross-legged on the sidelines, telling me what I was doing wrong and that you were sure I wasn't trying hard enough.

"Have a little patience," I cried to myself, rather than out loud to you, for it was my nature to be silent and somewhat aloof under pressure. These psychological tags could explain why I threw my head back and stared at the sky as you scolded me. They were not the cause of the joy I felt at seeing the dark undersides of the clouds in dramatic contrast to the brilliance of the light blue beyond, but they were connected with my loss of balance and inevitable fall into a field of wildly blooming daisies. I was not hurt one bit, and was laughing and wiggling my toes in the shiny black slippers you had ordered for me specially, when your dark, flushed face appeared over me in place of the sun.

"You'll never succeed," were your first words, "if you don't pay attention which is premised, as you know, on taking yourself seriously." Then you helped me up and removed a daisy from my tangled hair and continued: "And if *you* don't take yourself seriously, no one else can or would want to." Then you handed me my parasol.

I thought of all the other things I'd rather be doing than practicing tight rope walking and, feeling like a delinquent, climbed up on the wire again. This time I did not look at the clouds, but rather I concentrated on my feet.

"Don't look down, either," you yelled. "Look straight ahead. That's better. Now, two steps forward, one backward. Easy! Steady!"

A dear little breeze fluttered the tassels on my parasol and out of the corner of my eye I watched their happy dance. I started to shift my eyes back to where they belonged, when I saw a tiny yellow bird. It flew so close that

I could hear its wings beat and I thought for a second it wanted to make a nest in my parasol. But no, it turned and spilled itself upwards into my lovely sky. My heart lifted at the sight—and so did my head.

Sprawled like a rag doll in the daisies, I was unable to avoid your glare as you stood over me, pushing your hat back on your head and throwing up your arms so that you looked like a scarecrow. I got up, unaided, and heard your forceful words tell me that I must concentrate on the thing directly in front of me. You asked me if I heard you and I nodded, noting a small green stain on my left slipper which I wiped off in a jiffy.

“Anything you try to do, no matter how small, is a serious matter,” you told me, emphasizing your words by smacking your fist into the palm of your hand.

“But I am trying,” I whined. I picked up my parasol and climbed back on the wire, trying my best to absorb your declarations.

“Obviously not hard enough. All right. Again. Left foot, right. Slide your feet along the wire as if it was part of you. That’s it. One two, one, two. Now back. Hold your head up straight!”

I started to improve.

My third fall was not my fault either.

A butterfly at my right elbow captured my soul with its heartbreaking colors and took the starch out of the muscles in my legs.

I was about finished fashioning a daisy chain and was thinking that trying hard was not all there was to the game and, at the same time, trying to get such a rebellious thought out of my head, when I saw you packing up the tight rope equipment in your truck. By the time I had twisted the last daisy onto the chain and had put the garland around my neck, you drove off at such a clip that the dust from your wheels diminished the sunshine around me for a full five minutes.

When the dust settled, I jumped up and promised myself that, no matter what, I would try harder and by doing so justify my existence.

## Two

The wind was whipping about in such a frenzy I thought it would pull our hair out. I was feeling awkward, but your enthusiasm as a teacher had come back with the force of the wind itself. The huge red, yellow and blue box kite you had made all by yourself was pulling on the heavy string like a hooked sky fish and I was holding onto the wooden handle with its reel and thumb lock with both hands and using most of my strength to do so. I could tell you were pleased with me as I was letting out the string and reeling it in precisely as you were instructing me to, and the kite was responding by climbing higher and higher into the sky.

I was beginning to feel sure of myself and to believe that trying hard, no matter how small the job, was the most exciting thing I had ever done, when such a spark of joy whizzed through me as a result of my feelings that I began to jerk the string as if I wanted the kite to celebrate with me by doing a jig.

“Stop that!” you shouted, too late. The kite did a loop the loop and immediately lost altitude despite the fact that you grabbed the handle from me and

began to reel the string in madly. The kite came down to earth, twirling slowly—it was a gorgeous sight—and landed sharply on one of its corners. It collapsed and trailed along the ground like a tropical bird with a broken wing.

I was given the usual lecture and the job of winding up the string neatly on the reel while you went stamping off to mend your crippled masterpiece. Coming nearer, I watched your careful, disciplined hands as they skillfully reset the broken poles and stretched the colorful cloth around them, tacking it firmly with your handy hammer. When the kite was whole again, I thought I had never seen such a magnificent creation—almost ceremonial in size—and that to fly it properly would be worth all the concentrated effort I could muster.

When I told you this, solemnly, you said I could have another chance.

This time, I controlled my exuberance and the kite did not go into any fatal gyrations. The wind had calmed down too, but was blowing steadily, and soon, under your guidance, I was handling the kite's voyage into space with aplomb. You stepped back to admire the scene and, just as you did that, I saw a seagull floating motionless, heading into the wind as if it, too, were on a string. I was so moved by the sight that one hand let go of the handle and reached out eagerly to grasp the seagull's invisible string. The kite, feeling the change in tension, responded just as eagerly to gravity's inexorable pull.

But I was saved. A sudden torrent of air reversed the kite's downward journey with such force that I awoke to the reality of the situation and put my wayward hand back on the handle and locked the reel.

I wondered why your shouts sounded faint, and then I realized I had been lifted into the air and was being carried off in the direction of the seagull and who knows where else. I looked down past my trailing feet and saw you running around in circles, waving and, I guess, shouting out directions. But I couldn't tell what they were because your voice was as faint as your figure.

It was lovely up in the sky. Simply lovely. Sailing over the world in such a peaceful manner was what I always wished I could do. I was the happy victim of an absolutely irreversible action and there was nothing to do but enjoy it. Soon I was so high that I was able to look down on the smooth back of the seagull. Other birds appeared, red and pink and orange and blue, enjoying, as I was, their free ride on the wind. At times they gathered around the kite and I felt we were all part of a colored fountain.

On we went, the kite, the birds and me. My hands and arms began to grow numb and, just as I was sure they no longer belonged to me, the string broke and I fell, landing on my feet, on the top of a mountain. I stood and watched the kite over my head going crazy with its freedom. Then, accompanied by the birds, it whirled away growing smaller until its colors disappeared and the entire group looked like a smudge in the sky. Probably going south for the winter, I mused, looking around me at the splendid view. Boulders, the size of freight cars, careened downwards from ledge to ledge through clouds and in the spaces between the clouds, I saw the land—flat, scored, green and infinitely desirable. Despite my precarious position (I could see no way to climb down), I sighed

in ecstasy at the complicated patterns beneath me and the clarity of the void above me.

With nothing pressing to do, I wandered around the top of the mountain admiring the cinquefoils, the goldenrod, the yellow and white adderstongues, avoiding the sticky flower stalks of the saxifrages and eating handfuls of wild blackberries. There were no daisies but that was all right. In no time at all I passed the day and watched the sun go down behind me while a three quarter moon rose to light my way to bed. I stretched out near a patch of minute star-faced purple flowers and stared up at the bright points of the other stars (just as minute) that were beginning to appear and would be my blanket for the night. I worried about what you were doing and I wondered where the kite and birds were, but I did not worry or wonder long. A delectable exhaustion filled me and caused my brain to slip a fraction. Branches and roots twisted around me, securing me so that I would not roll over the side of the mountain in my sleep. Vines curled down in a wealth of flowers, moon-sized, and made a perfumed canopy for my head. I looked at my arms in the moonlight and my skin was silver like a fish in shallow, sunlit water. I sighed into the shadows and the long wind came in gentle swirls, stretching along the rim of my glad heart's delirium. I did not see him sitting in the depths of my flower fragrance, but I clearly heard his voice before I felt the silence of his beautiful arm around my waist. He spoke of the enchanting ways of mountain life and, rejoicing, I said, yes, I would be his mountain lover and we drowned in the cool air that drifted over us, wrapped in the warmth of our unfragmented love.

Dawn had scarcely passed when I saw the beginning of what turned into your helicopter (at first I thought it was the kite returning) coming towards me in the lightly flushed sky.

Brimming with admiration at your flawless landing, I watched you jump down from your now silent machine and, detecting a mild look about you, I ran to you. You smiled, but just as I was about to reach you, I tripped on a branch that for a split second reminded me of an arm. You picked me up gently and looked long into my still sleepy eyes. Then you folded me in your arms and held me close and I knew that you knew I had not changed one bit.