

level, when alternatives are available to anyone with sufficient energy and imagination . . . Breathtakingly life-affirming.' *Sunday Times*

'It was Philippe Petit who connected the twin towers of the World Trade Center, in an act of beauty and ecstasy.' Werner Herzog

'Written with poetry, passion and far less self-indulgence than anyone has a right to expect . . . An almost unbearable ripping yarn, made all the more poignant by the events of 2001.' *Focus*

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'Most emphatically not another post-9/11 cash-in but an impressionistic memoir . . . Petit combines the story of his ascent with lost loves and dashed ideals; an entertaining, nostalgic read.' *i-D*

'Philippe Petit is an artist whose theater is the sky. In this absorbing book, he reveals himself to be equal parts Houdini, Nureyev, and Da Vinci.' Robin Williams

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'There is no one alive like Philippe Petit. So it comes as no surprise that he undertakes to do a literary act – that species of tightrope! – and succeeds. One of the trickiest tests of a memoir is to write well about a splendid feat when it is one's own. Cheers.' Norman Mailer

'An invaluable historical document . . . and a passionate account of a grand, shameless obsession.' *Times Literary Supplement*

TO REACH THE CLOUDS

MY HIGH-WIRE WALK BETWEEN THE TWIN TOWERS

PHILIPPE PETIT

ff

FABER & FABER

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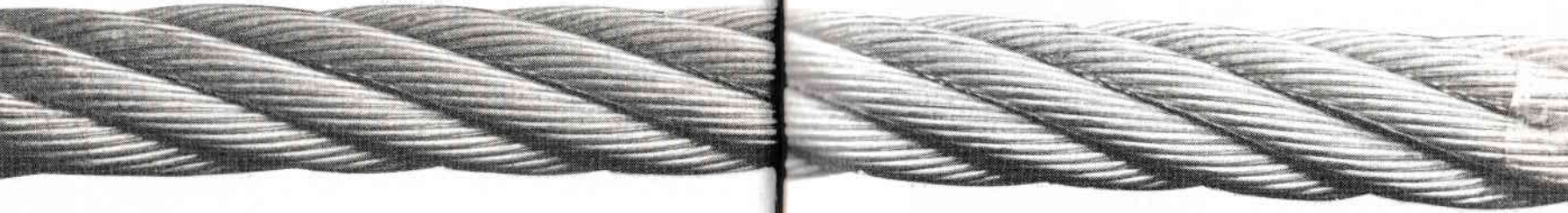
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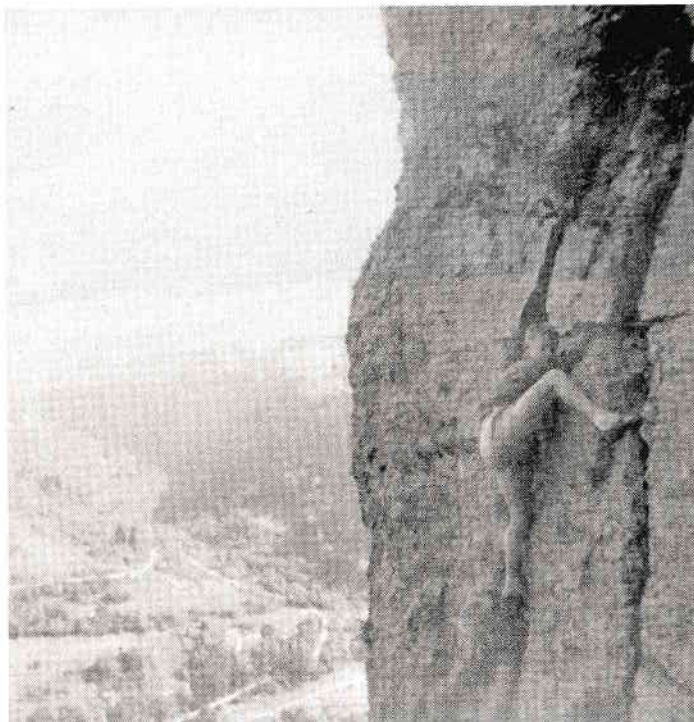
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LBRIS

We know
books

TO REACH THE CLOUDS





BEFORE

Rebel poet?

By four years old, disdain for my fellow man starts to show: I climb onto everything to distance myself. At age six, I announce, “When I grow up, I want to be a theatrical director!” Then I proceed to learn magic on my own.

During the next ten years, I study drawing, painting, sculpting, fencing, printing, carpentry, theater, and horseback riding, all with prestigious masters; I embrace focus, tenacity, respect for the tool, and passion.

The reaction of my parents to my unruly individuality is to legally emancipate me on my seventeenth birthday. Autodidact, I become a juggler and a tightrope walker.

By the time I turn eighteen, I’ve been expelled from five schools for practicing the art of the pickpocket on my teachers and the art of card manipulation under my desk. I refuse to take the basic exam to prove I can read, write, and count, and thereby jeopardize my chances of landing a job picking up garbage or operating a cash register. Instead, I leave home and become a wandering troubadour, a street-juggler without a permit who is arrested constantly . . . all over the world.

No one wishes to hire me, practitioner of an absurd arrogance; for a while I make sure it stays that way. It becomes essential to write, play chess, learn Russian and bullfighting, discover architecture and engineering, invent hiding places, erect tree houses, train at lock-picking—to indulge my gourmandise for knowledge while honing my perfectionism.

This course of events conduces me to imagine rigging a wire in

secret somewhere and performing on such an imposed stage, out of reach, in total disregard of the powers that be.

The adventure of the World Trade Center begins with the first appearance of such thoughts, in a dentist's waiting room in Paris. I am barely eighteen years old.

TOOTHACHE

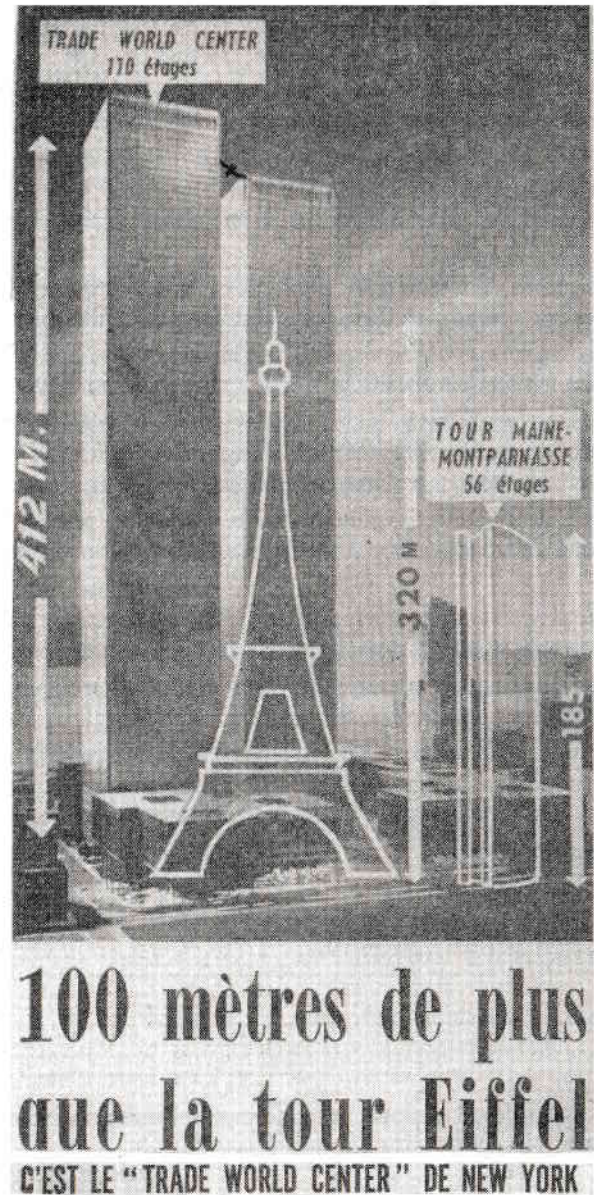
I am barely eighteen years old, free, rebellious, and untrusting. It's winter in Paris, 1968.

Pain from multiple cavities forces me to enter a dentist's waiting room. The air is stale, the ceiling low, the wallpaper hideous. A couple of naked forty-watt bulbs reveal half a dozen senior citizens, who greet my entrance with loathing and suspicion.

I grab a stack of outdated newspapers and flip the pages as noisily as possible. Suddenly, there is silence: I am staring at an illustration and reading over and over a short article about a fantastic building whose twin towers, 110 stories tall, will rise over New York City in a few years and "tickle the clouds."

Over the photograph of the architect's model, in a display of classic French chauvinism, an outline of the Eiffel Tower has been superimposed at the same scale, for comparison. On the side, the pitiful Tour Maine Montparnasse, unknown to the world yet Parisians' latest pride, stands less than half the size of the American project. With typical French egocentricity, a large heading proclaims, 100 METERS MORE THAN THE EIFFEL TOWER, while a subheading informs us erroneously, IT'S THE "TRADE WORLD CENTER" OF NEW YORK.

Although I have been practicing only a few months, I have already announced my intention to become high wire artist supreme, and wire walking has already become my obsessive, nearly fanatical new passion. So it is as a reflex that I take the pencil from behind



my ear to trace a line between the two rooftops—a wire, but no wirewalker.

I want this article. I need this article.

It is almost a crime in my country to deprive a professional antechamber of useless reading material, and almost certainly another to tear out a page.

I begin to stare with growing intensity at the cheap reproduction of *Les Nymphéas* hanging askew above the grandfather clock, as if a huge insect were strolling across the canvas. Soon, necks twisted, everyone joins me in staring at the painting. I let go of a giant “Aa-choo!” that gives me cover as I tear the page and shove it under my jacket, then hurriedly disappear.

The heist takes less than a second. It takes me a week to find another dentist, but the pain I suffer is nothing compared to the dream freshly acquired.

If this were a scene from my film, I would have the camera follow the clipping back to the young thief’s studio, show the document being pulled out from under his jacket—tight frame—and being filed inside a large red box dragged from under his bed. A close-up would reveal the box’s label in boldface Garamond: PROJECTS.

These files are not business ventures, but projects that ripen in the clouds. The secret desires of children who spend afternoons in treetops. Dreams.

And yet I will forget the clipping, for much of the next four years . . .

TO REACH THE CLOUDS

During the next few years, unbeknownst to me and thousands of miles away, something amazing, something unheard of, something colossal is happening.

First an architect had a vision. A preliminary model, eight feet high, was constructed; another dozen, at different scales, would follow. Little sketches gave way to drawings of great detail and dimension, thousands of them. In downtown Manhattan, thirteen city blocks would have to be cleared. Ground was broken.

Now imagine!

Hundreds of men, trusting only those childish cardboard-and-glue assemblies, guided only by those pitiful sheets of flammable paper marked with thin blue lines, hundreds of men are leading thousands of men, men with tools, men with machines, into stacking steel, concrete, aluminum, and glass in perfect balance and in total disregard of the commandment, “Thou shall not try to reach the clouds.”

The ants are building a skyscraper—a skyscraper with two arms, pointing at the gods.

The rest is noise, lots of noise. The cranes are slewing, luffing, and lifting 192,000 tons of steel. Each I-beam, each load-bearing column tree, each truss is numbered by hand before being slung and sent into the sky. And someone always knows precisely how and when to connect the pieces.

This goes on for three years.

And the twin towers rise.

NOTRE-DAME AND SYDNEY HARBOUR BRIDGE

Because I live on rue Laplace, the towers of the nearby cathedral watch me come and go every day. One afternoon they call to me.

I take a few measurements in secret, inspect areas not open to tourists, plan a nocturnal rigging, convince a few friends to become accomplices.

Paris is asleep.

My false key allows us to reach the top of the towers. One of my juggling balls, tied to a fishing line, is thrown across. We install the steel cable all night.

Paris is awake.

I promenade and daydream 250 feet in the air on this twenty-sixth of June, 1971—my first illegal aerial performance.

The romantic escapade ends up on front pages everywhere; the world salutes the valiant young poet. Except the French, who are not touched, not enthused. They do not need an encore.

Disgusted, I depart for Australia. In Sydney, I improvise another surprise, a walk between the northern pylons of the world's largest steel arch bridge, on the third of June, 1973.

Without these first clandestine walks, would I have reached inside the red box for a more formidable opponent?

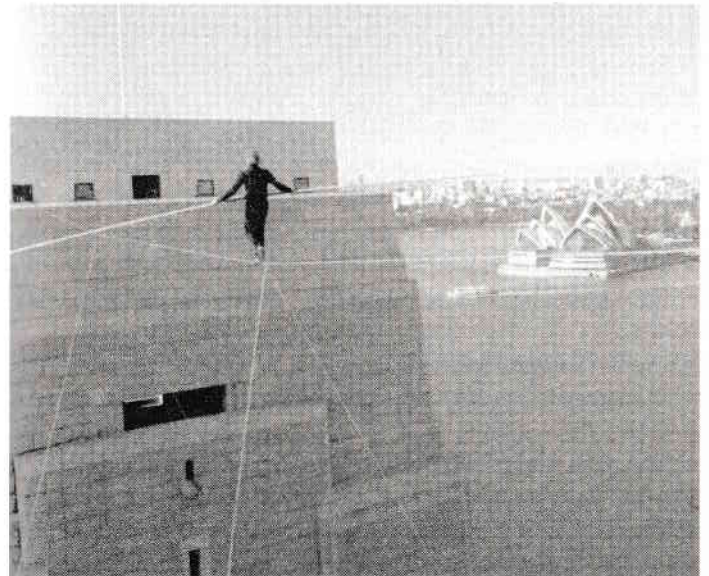
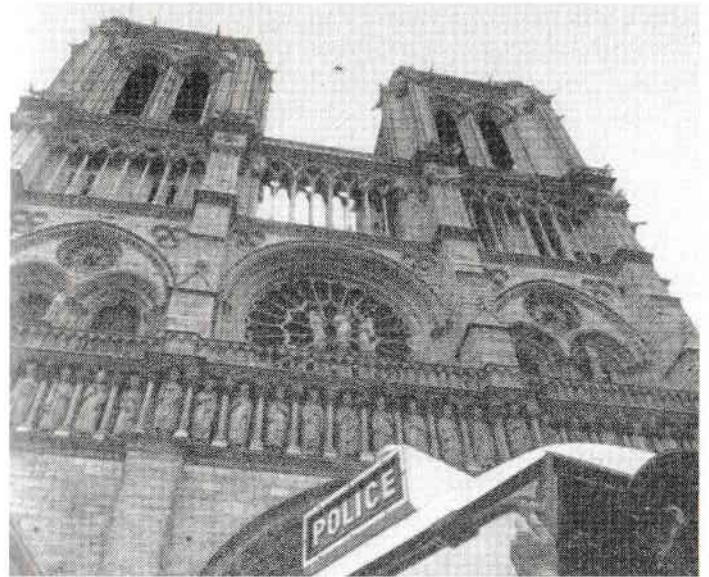
PARIS MATCH, 1972

Sometime between Notre-Dame and Sydney Harbour Bridge, an alarming article appears, tucked away in the back of a magazine. It tells of two pillars already towering above lower Manhattan. A full-page aerial shot portrays the towers as if they were already out of reach. I can hear the cranes bustling to complete the structure on schedule. I can smell the smoke, feel the incessant activity, the urgency . . .

The article is so disturbing that I throw it into the large red box labeled PROJECTS and try to forget about it.

I cannot.

The towers keep erupting in my conversations, my thoughts, my dreams.



How were they born without warning?
Why didn't I hear the town crier shouting the news on rue Laplace: "The towers are being built! The towers are being built!"

What if they are completed before I link them for eternity? I must keep an eye on them. Once they are officially opened, it may be impossible to take them by surprise.

Alarming, indeed.

"I'M GOING TO AMERICA!"

I'm tired of the French. The zeal of the Parisian police and the constant wet and cold have curtailed my street performances so drastically that I decide to try New York City. Am I being influenced by my new, first-time-in-Paris American girlfriends, adorable Jessica and her suave companion, Ann? After each of my juggling circles, they tell me, "No one does that in New York, they'll love you over there!" Or is it the offer Ann whispers as she heads back to the States, to share her East 96th Street apartment?

January 6, 1974, I pack my bags and go up to the roof to scream, "I'm going to America!"

I have locked up my room at rue Laplace and am almost downstairs when I suddenly run back up. From under the bed I pull out the red box and retrieve the skyscraper clippings. You never know . . .

Two hours later, I board the plane with my top hat on and my antique postal bag over my shoulder, pushing my unicycle.

It's even colder in New York.

Who cares? I'm delighted to be able to juggle under a new sky, in front of new people.

The first circle of chalk I draw on Manhattan asphalt is between Patience and Fortitude, the stone lions trying to pass for sphinxes on the front steps of the public library. And the first spectator to throw a buck into my hat is . . . Francis Brunn, the



greatest juggler of all time, my friend! "But I thought you were in Barcelona!" We hug, we laugh. We meet only by accident, by miracle.

Several other people in the crowd approach me. I remember the warm handshake of a muscular young man standing very straight, like a dancer: Jim Moore, mime-photographer. We promise to meet again.

I persuade Francis to stroll with me in the snow. We have so many stories to trade. I let him know I already adore this frightening metropolis, and I confess, "One day New York will be mine! I'll string a wire somewhere between the tallest buildings and I