

Catch me, I'm Falling

GM notes

The game runs best with two GMs, with one of the two preferably being female-presenting. Until a certain point during the introduction, one GM (the female-presenting GM) will pretend to be a player, taking the badge for Alice Taylor (hence the preference for female-presenting). The other GM will perform the introduction.

Equipment

A set of posters, printed on A4 pages (you can blow them up larger if you want, but some of the photos will become pixelated). Players should choose their characters by selecting from the posters (and generally it's best to take posters down once the character is chosen, or move them to separate display of chosen characters – do not put Alice Taylor's poster up; you can let players see it, but if anybody asks, she is "already chosen"; her posters exists to help her feel more like part of the troupe). Note that the words on the posters are important, as well as the pictures. Their personalities and plots are laid out in metaphor. Ophelia is not just juggling pins; when Ethan say "you don't want to make the wrong choice", it's his threat; etc.

At least three timers, capable of sounding an alarm after five minutes. (I use battery-powered shower timers.)

Sets of cards taken from an ordinary playing card deck, each set consisting of two hands, with each hand containing 1 (ace), 2, 3, 4, 5 and Joker. Suits are irrelevant. This means you can get one set of 12 cards out of a standard deck, and the other 40 cards must be set aside.

One printed photo of a couple (Alice and Luke) in bed, to be given to the player of Lily Gardner.

Name tags, printed from the appropriate document. These are sized for hanging convention badge holders, which are larger than the pin-on badges often given out at convention attendees. I prefer to rig mine so that there are copies hanging front and back on the player, double-sided so it doesn't matter if they flip around. That helps keep the badges visible from all angles.

Introduction

(This section covers what I try to say while introducing the game and trying to cover everything that people need to know to play. It's long in written form, but I think I get through it in about 20 minutes, including the questions that players inevitably interrupt to ask. And the interruptions are fine; the interactivity helps.)

(When setting up the space, I ensure that there is a wooden table or desk at the side of the space used for the intro. While I will move around during the intro, I will always come back to that table before describing the scene where Alice falls. Before the game, I test the sound quality of that table, and ensure that I've selected an appropriate one. When I thump on it with my fist, the sound should be reminiscent of a heartbeat. I usually have to sit on the table to get it to sound right.)

Folks, thank you for coming to play Catch Me, I'm Falling. I'm going to run you through an introduction so that you are familiar with how the game works, what the game is about, and who you are all playing. This will take 20 minutes or so, and I'll try to run through it as quickly as possible and let you get into the game itself, so please bear with me.

Catch Me, I'm Falling is a murder mystery set in a circus. There is a whodunit element to the game, and anyone who wishes can try to solve the mystery and work out who committed the crime. I promise you, the necessary clues are there, though they may not be easy to uncover. But also, it is a game about grief, and how your characters deal with what has happened, and above all, it is about trust.

This is the central theme of this game: trust. Because not only have you all lost somebody, but there is a murderer among you. So trust is the hardest thing to do, yet also the most important, and you will each have to decide for yourselves... Who will you trust?

Setting

So, the setting. First up, this game is set in the modern day. There are no sci-fi or fantasy elements to this game, at least not overtly.

You are the performing troupe of an independent circus. You perform in what is known as the Cirque Nouveau style – “new circus” – a style you might be familiar with through famous companies like Cirque du Soleil and Circus Oz. It is marked by a focus on feats of human skill, often incorporating storytelling through physical acting. Before you ask, you have no performing animals; animals generally do not appear in Cirque Nouveau. In case this has you wondering, none of you are expected to display the skills of your characters. We do not ask the jugglers to juggle, or the acrobats to do flips, and we have very deliberately chosen not to hang a trapeze from the ceiling.

You are a travelling troupe, although you usually do not perform in a tent; your style is well-suited to a variety of indoor performance spaces, though generally you do need a fairly large space. As a result, you are often living out of hotels.

Tonight is to be the opening performance of your new show, at a venue in the inner-southern suburbs of Melbourne. Due to this, most of you have been living in a hotel together for at least the last few days. A few characters do have homes beside the hotel, some of which are in Melbourne and some not; so any characters who are staying anywhere other than the hotel have that noted in their character sheets.

You represent all of the performers of your troupe, although there are other members of your company – riggers, technical staff, admin and other support staff. Those of significance are mentioned on character sheets, and non-performers will be portrayed by a GM if necessary.

The game does not cover the period of tonight's performance. Instead, it takes place in the hours before the performance. The start of play is at around 5pm game time, and play will run for a little more than 2 hours. Play will conclude at around the time that your characters will have to put on your costumes and make-up to prepare for the show. During this time, nothing is physically preventing you from leaving, but you can't go very far if you are going to be present to take part in the show. So, the play space generally represents the performance venue, including dressing rooms, vestibule, back offices and such, and, of course, the stage itself [indicate the area set aside for the stage] which is the one part of the venue for which we have set aside a particular physical space.

Given the time and place, it is reasonable for characters to be wearing either street clothes or their performance costumes, or even to change clothes during the game.

Please take a look at the character posters that we have put up around the room. [Point them out.] These are accurate physical representations of your characters. You can consider yourselves to look

like that – not necessarily wearing the costumes for tonight’s show, but costumes you have worn at some point. You are generally young, you are all incredibly fit, and yes, you are all *that hot*.

The Show

Now, there is a bit of a challenge set for your characters. As mentioned, you have a show to do tonight. You have available to you a number of copies of a handout describing your new show [show a copy of the program]. Please hand them around, and share them as required; we probably haven’t printed enough for you to have one each, but there should be enough for you to see them when you need to.

The programs lay out how the show is put together, and the structure of it is important. You see, as with many shows in the Cirque Nouveau style, your show tells a story, and there are roles in the story that have to be played in order for that story to be told. This is the story...

... of a pair of winged beings – angels, if you will, though they are never named such during the performance – creatures of the sky who revel in their flight. Two such beings – Angel 1 and Angel 2 in the program – are in love, flying together, though with others of their kind.

But there are others who envy the angels their flight. One such is the Sorcerer, who uses his magic to drag Angel 1 down from the sky and take her prisoner. He strips from her the power of flight, leaving her Earthbound.

The Sorcerer’s Minion, however, takes pity on Angel 1, and though he cannot restore her flight, he frees her.

And so Angel 1 sets out on a journey to find her way back to her lover in the sky. Along the way, she meets the Guide, a spirit of fire who leads her on, and creatures of the earth, some of whom themselves yearn to reach the sky. In the meantime, Angel 2 searches for his missing lover, encountering other creatures of the air.

Eventually, Angel 1 meets creatures who are able to either lift or throw her back into the sky, where Angel 2 catches her and restores her flight to her.

These adventures are represented by a variety of roles and acts. Each of the major roles must be filled, and previously the roles had been allocated. However, the performer allocated the part of Angel 1 – the lead role of the show – will not be taking the stage tonight. You will have to choose somebody else to take that part.

And like any well-constructed show, there is provision for a performer becoming unavailable. Over the course of any show’s run, you expect performers to become ill, or take leave for other reasons. So there is a system of understudies, and some of the acts are optional and can be added or removed depending on who is available. The program, as well as your character sheets, list who is capable of performing which parts. Note that no performer, no matter how skilled, can simply take on a role without having rehearsed it. There are only a few characters capable of performing as Angel 1, and if one of them takes on that part, then somebody else may be required to step up into a different part; and so your choice may require other choices to be made.

During the debrief, I will ask who will perform the various parts, and if not enough roles are filled, or too few acts are available, the show will be cancelled. And that decision, too, will have consequences for the troupe, as your budget is thin; cancellation may lead the company to be disbanded.

Rehearsals and Secrets

Now, there's something you can do over the course of the game to help you make these decisions. You can rehearse the acts. By doing so, you can evaluate your current ability, and the ability of others, to perform the available roles. Here is how that is going to work...

At any time, you may come to a GM and ask to rehearse an act. You will generally need a partner, as most of the acts require a pair. A few require more than just two, and the system will be modified a little to accommodate that.

The first thing that will happen is that the GM will hand you a timer. Each act takes five minutes to rehearse, so from the moment the GM starts the timer to when the alarm goes off, you will not be able to interact with any character other than your partner. This also gives us time to resolve the mechanics of the act without accidentally leaving you out of play for more or less time than you expect. If we run out of timers, it means the performance space is full, and you will have to wait until another rehearsal finishes before starting (and receiving a timer).

So, the mechanics of the rehearsal... Every performer adds a certain value to the rehearsal's base score. Generally it will be 2 for the primary artist or 1 for an understudy, but there are some exceptions to that pattern, and some combinations of performers will have an extra bonus. The players involved in the rehearsal will be told the base score. But that is not the full measure of how well you perform.

The rest of your score will come from what we call Trust. Now, remember that I said that the central theme of this game is trust? This is a way that that will show up. Normally, talent, dedication, practice, and the like would play a bigger part in this – and they're a factor today too – but on this day, of all days, it is trust that is hardest to come by. So that is what the mechanics represent.

Each performer will also be given a hand of cards. They are not random; each hand consists of six cards: 1 (or ace), 2, 3, 4, 5, and a joker. Each performer will look at their cards, and secretly choose one, and hand it to the GM. The GM will look at the cards, hand them back. The GM will tell you your base score, and also your total, which is found by adding the numbers on the cards. That total represents how well you have performed; the higher, the better.

But why wouldn't you simply choose the highest card? Better score that way, right? Well, it's because there's some additional meaning to the card you choose. You may only choose the 5 if you are displaying absolute trust in your partner. As a result, you may not choose the 5 if you are keeping any secret from your partner.

Now, there's a bit of leeway here. It doesn't mean you have to have told your partner everything you've ever known. We're only concerned about things relevant to them. However, if you know your partner would want to know, and you have chosen not to say, that counts.

Also, you may not choose the 4 (or 5) if you have any reason to suspect that your partner is keeping a secret from you.

If you have reason to believe that your partner has betrayed you, you may not choose the 3 (or higher).

You can always choose the 2. That represents a by-the-book performance; reasonable, but not outstanding.

You can also always choose the 1, but if you do, it means you are acting to protect yourself. Your primary concern is to complete the act safely, not to produce a good performance.

And then there is the joker. As you might guess, your joker will add 0 to the total performance score, but there's more to it than that. Choosing the joker represents an attempt to harm your partner during the rehearsal. Should a joker be played, the other character may be injured. The severity of the injury will depend partly on how dangerous the act is, but also on how high a card the other player has chosen. If you choose a high card, and your partner plays the joker, your character may even be killed. Choose wisely, and consider carefully who you can trust. After all, there is a murderer among you.

The GM may choose to ask you some questions – determining whether any issues between characters have been resolved, what secrets have been confessed, and so on. That will help the GM determine what limits apply. *The GM's judgement determines what cards you may use, not your own.* Our emotions are not entirely under our own control, and sometimes we can't trust as much as we think we should.

Furthermore, the GM will not tell you what your limit is. But what happens if you think you have a higher limit than you do, and choose too high a card? When that happens, the excess will be accounted for in the final score. However, we won't simply reduce your card number to the limit; we do that, and for every point by which you exceeded the limit, we'll take a point off the total *as well*. It's very hard to perform well – very hard to trust – when you don't even know how *you* feel.

Once we're done with that, the GM will announce the total to the performers, and to anybody viewing the rehearsal. Remember, though, that only the performers themselves will be told their base score.

This means, by the way, that the performers can usually work out what card the other picked. This is deliberate. Through your rehearsals, you can get a sense of how your partner is feeling. Some players may use rehearsals to try to determine whether their partner is keeping a secret. Some will use them to prove that they are not keeping secrets. This is a legitimate part of the game, and we encourage it. And yes, you may repeat your rehearsals, to try to get better scores... or for other reasons.

Okay, any questions?

Introductions¹

Right, so now it's time to do a round of introductions. I'd like you all to find the others who have badges with the same-colour borders as yourselves – your performance groups. Then form a big circle – staying near the others of your group, so you can see everyone else as I introduce you. Good, now you can see the 19 performers of your circus.

Now, I'm going to do this by performance group. These groups represent similar styles of training and acts, but they have also come to represent your place in the social structure of the troupe.

First up, we have the aerialists. The aerialists perform the most daring acts, those that take place high in the air. As a result of the apparent danger, these are the acts – and the artists – who cause audience's breath to catch in their throats. The aerialists draw the big crowds, they are the stars of your show, and as a result they are the most important performance group in the circus.

¹ It is not necessary to remember all of these intros exactly as written. These are just examples.

So, please allow me to introduce the aerialists.

- First, the headliner, tonight's big star, Alice Taylor.
- ... and her partner Matthew Mills.
- Then, coming to the circus from an old Russian circus family, the twins, Ethan and Ellen Telyanin!
- There are few so graceful as your specialist in the dance trapeze (and official understudy to the lead of tonight's show) Caitlin Chin.
- The man you call the Rock, for his endurance and strength – you've never known anyone to hold the Iron Cross as long as... Daniel Higgs!
- She's been away for a while (after that terrible trouble with the stalker – you've all heard about that) but now please welcome back to the silks, Gwen Palmer.

Now, we move on to the acrobats. These performers are the most physically adept of your troupe. A flip that an aerialist performs with a pendulum assist and a half-meter drop, these artists can do from a standing start on a level surface. These people have mad skills – skills that every performer needs, but they take those skills to a whole other level. And furthermore, the acrobats take on responsibility for ensuring the physical fitness of the entire troupe. As a result of these skills and the training regime that everybody here benefits from, the acrobats are certainly the most important performing group in the circus.

- Another member of the Telyanin family, little brother to the twins and a man of great talent in his own right, trampoline specialist Jeremy!
- Undoubtedly the troupe's most versatile performer... John Perrett.
- In a world of constant motion, the woman who has mastered stillness... Lily Gardner!
- They've taken a little time off *for their honeymoon!*... and now they're back, Risley performers Luke and Maria Connelly!
- Though still an acrobat (for now), she's known to have become Alice's protégé (and heir apparent)... Bethany Summer!

Finally, the clowns. Many think of clowns as just slapstick comedians, but clowning is far more than that. Clowning covers the physical storytelling aspect of your circus – not just comic relief, but drama. It's the skills of the clowns that pull your shows together into a coherent whole, and while other, showier acts may stick in the audience's memories, the subtle influence of the clowns is what puts those memories in place. As a result, though some may not realise it, the clowns are, indeed, the most important performing group of the circus.

- This man is a master of physical storytelling. He's been with this troupe from the start, he's become like a father to many of you, and he's literally an uncle to a few... Nigel Telyanin.
- Another founding member of the troupe, keeping all her pins in the air... Ophelia Seymour!
- Juggling's an activity often best shared, and this man is providing Ophelia with a fine partner... Paul Morris.²
- Everybody's odd little friend, fire-twirling Hannah Riordan!
- Now you see him, now you don't, your resident master of magic... Dominic Richards!

² If this sounds underwhelming, good. The character is too, and that's kind of his point.

- And finally, the newest performer of your troupe. Oh, but she's so, so talented. Susan Michaels.

The Fall

Now that we've met everybody we're just about ready to start play. Are there any last questions before I lead us into the game proper?

So, just before we start play, listen a little longer while I set the scene.

You weren't all there when it happened. Some of you saw it; some of you just heard the commotion; and some of you weren't anywhere nearby. But you all know the act. You're all performers, and you feel the rhythm of it in your bones. So you can all see it, at least in your mind's eye, when Alice [and here Alice should step out into the centre of the group; pause a moment to let her, if necessary] and Matthew [Alice should draw Matthew out to join her; Alice should move with the descriptions, a little motion to hint at the events; Matthew will generally do likewise, without needing a prompt] took to the stage, and climbed the rigging to the trapeze platforms for their last, late rehearsal. They step off in sync, take a few swings to gain the required momentum.

And to Alice – to all of you – when in the motion of the act, time isn't measured in seconds – for they stretch out before her like little eternities – but in heartbeats. She knows that once she releases the bar and flies, unfettered by gravity, that on her third heartbeat, it will end, with Matthew's strong hands grasping her wrists, pulling her back to safety. Alice... lets... go... She flips through the air, end over end, in a tight ball.

[With your fist, thump the table twice, almost letting it bounce, so that the sounds is like the double-thump of a beating heart.] THUMP-THUMP!

She straightens, and stretches, and her spin slows as she shifts mass away from her centre.

THUMP-THUMP!

She reaches for safety, for Matthew's hands to pull her back from the void...

THUMP-THUMP!

[pause, but for less time than the previous descriptions have taken; do not provide description]

THUMP-THUMP!

[Alice screams and collapses to the floor, ensuring that she does not touch Matthew's hands which are probably stretching out at this point. Allow a short moment of silence before continuing, but move on immediately if players actually try to act in response.]

The ambulance came then, and the police, and inspectors from health and safety. The police talked to every one of you. It took several hours. And eventually they took poor Alice away. [Help "Alice" to her feet, and hand her a GM badge. She should remove her "Alice Taylor" badge and hand it to you, and replace it with the new badge, thus letting the players know that she is a GM without having to interrupt the description.]

And then they returned the stage to you. An accident, they said. No reason to believe foul play. Workplace Health and Safety would be following up over the next few days, but right now, the venue

is yours again. In just over two hours, the audience will begin to drift in, and it will be time to put on costumes and make-up. Which leaves those of you who remain with two questions to answer...

How will your show go on?

And...

What really happened to Alice Taylor?

Game on.

Debrief

“That’s time, folks. Grab a seat, and form a circle, please.”

Some GMs and writers today prefer not to do a debrief, but the design of *Catch Me, I’m Falling* is such that I think it is necessary to have a debrief in order to get resolution on certain things. However, try not to just allow players to talk. Keep focus, and make sure you get the important questions asked.

My formula for running the debrief is not as tight as for the introduction, but I generally follow these steps:

- Ask if anybody believes they have identified the murder. Get them to point to their suspects. Ask whether anybody is sure enough to want to call the police about it, or otherwise act to expose them. (I prefer not to say who is right at this point.)
- Ask if the performers will attempt to perform their opening show tonight. (If they don’t, the troupe as it stands now will go into administration, as a result of the debt incurred by having to issue refunds for tickets. But players may decide that is the right choice anyway.) If they intend to perform, run down the program and ask who will perform each named role, which of the optional act will be included, and who will perform them. Make sure everyone agrees!
- Get a brief summary from each player what their secret or plot was, and how they resolved it. Do not allow this to turn into an anecdote about everything they did during the game!
- Generally, you want to finish with Ethan Telyanin, the murderer. However, it is okay to reveal the murderer early if that’s how things play out (generally if everybody is already fully aware of whodunit, because sometimes everything has been laid out during the game, or Ethan has even confessed!)
- Finally, contextualise the murder. It is important to have the players understand that this is not the tale of a misguided person who deserves sympathy. This is a murder motivated by toxic masculinity, and nobody is to blame for what Ethan did but Ethan himself. (If players are disturbed by the concept of toxic masculinity – as some are – you can recount that this game most explicitly examines masculinity through the three characters of Ethan, Dominic, and Daniel Higgs; the three who respond to the attack on Bethany; Ethan who hurts the stalker for harming a person her almost regards as his property; Dominic who looks to comfort Bethany, but lacks the courage to tell her how he feels; and Daniel, who uses his strength to end violence. Daniel is very masculine, but eschews toxicity.)

Secrets

Alice Taylor: Recently torn between her loves for Ethan and Nigel. Chose Nigel, was pregnant to him, but was too intimidated to break it off with Ethan. Today, finally broke up with Ethan and told Beth

that she would be retiring at the end of this show's run. Previously attempted an affair with Luke, but got caught.

Bethany Summer: Chosen by Alice to be her replacement. She knows this.

Caitlin Chin: Has been negotiating with a recruiter from Cirque du Soleil, who has questioned whether she has the drive he is seeking. Pretends to be dating Matt to help him stay in the closet, but really he annoys her, and only pretends to date Matt because Daniel wants her to.

Daniel Higgs: Gay, and neither conceals nor promotes this. Dating Matt, but secretly resents having to keep the relationship secret.

Dominic Richards: Secretly infatuated with Gwen.

Ellen Telyanin: In a relationship with Gwen, but only because she has struck out with Daniel and Matt (and her brother Ethan isn't an option) – uses Gwen for sexual relief. Considers all other male performers beneath her, but is grooming John to become an aerialist, which would elevate him to being worthy of her attentions. Subtly blackmailing Luke over his affair with Alice, and lost her temper when she dumped Ethan, hence posting pictures of them in bed in the changing rooms to expose them (but getting most of the pictures back after Alice died, because too much sympathy for the tragically killed).

Ethan Telyanin: Murdered Alice after she dumped him. Anger management issues.

Gwen Palmer: Currently in a relationship with Ellen, due to her general distrust of men following an attack by a stalker.

Hannah Riordan: Socially inept but highly intelligent and perceptive.

Jeremy Telyanin: Trying to organise a break-away performance group focussing on non-aerial acts. In a relationship with Susan and does not know her age.

John Perrett: Was falling for Lily before Ellen distracted him. Negotiated with Ellen on Luke's behalf to keep Luke's affair with Alice a secret.

Lily Gardner: Uncertain in relationships following a traumatic past, Lily was falling for John before Ellen distracted him. Has a picture of Luke and Alice in bed. Maria's closest friend.

Luke Comolly: Attempted an affair with Alice on the night of his buck's party. Consummation prevented by Ellen taking a photograph. Married to Maria. Came up with the original idea of doing more, smaller shows (down to street performance.)

Maria Conolly: Lily's closest friend. Knows about Caitlin's recruiter, and that he will be in the audience tonight, and has prevented Caitlin from learning that.

Matthew Mills: Dropped Alice. Is gay, in the closet, and in a relationship with Daniel. Uses Caitlin as a beard.

Nigel Telyanin: Was secretly in a relationship with Alice. Knows that Ophelia is part-owner of the company. Knows about Susan's age.

Ophelia Seymour: Part owner of the company, and is concealing how bad the financial difficulties are. Knows about Susan's age.

Paul Morris: Dating a rigger, Cecilia, who has been arrested (for tampering with the crime scene, but he doesn't know that).

Susan Michaels: 15 years old, and in a relationship with Jeremy.

Relationships

Caitlin Chin/Matthew Mills: fake, a show to cover Matt's homosexuality.

Caitlin Chin/Daniel Higgs: platonic, but Caitlin probably could want more if Daniel weren't gay.

Daniel Higgs/Matthew Mills: secret.

Dominic Richards/Gwen Palmer: Unrequited and unnoticed infatuation by Dominic of Gwen. (Gwen may requite once she knows.)

Ellen Telyanin/Gwen Palmer: Just sex for Ellen, non-masculine comfort for Gwen.

Ellen Telyanin/John Perret: Ellen stringing John along, until he can become an aerialist.

Ethan Telyanin/Alice Taylor: secret.

Jeremy Telyanin/Susan Michaels: romantic but not yet sexual. Jeremy does not know that Susan is 15.

John Perrett/Lily Gardner: Both moving tentatively towards a relationship before Ellen intervened. Now John has largely forgotten it, and Lily is upset.

Luke Conolly/Alice Taylor: An attempt at an affair during Luke's buck's night, and never taken further after interrupted.

Luke Conolly/Maria Conolly: married.

Nigel Telyanin/Alice Taylor: secretly dating, sexual.

Paul Morris/Cecelia: dating.