THE AMAZING BLONDIN

Many would not recognize Jean François Gravelet, but he was quite famous in the mid-1800s. Gravelet took the stage name "Charles Blondin" and became known as "The Amazing Blondin."

A natural acrobat from childhood, Jean grew up beneath the circus tents of Europe. When he was 35 years old, he traveled to the United States. In 1859, he found fame for being the first person to cross Niagara Falls on a tightrope. At first, most people believed his claim to be a hoax when he announced his plan to attempt it. They were shocked to find out his claim was true.

Blondin made several crossings. Each time, he introduced new variations:

He crossed on stilts.
He crossed in a gorilla suit.
He crossed with his manager on his back.
He cooked breakfast for himself halfway through his crossing.
He pushed a wheelbarrow across.

One time, he asked the crowds if they thought he could push a wheelbarrow across *blindfolded*. They cheered with delight as he traversed the chasm with ease despite his inability to see. He called back to the crowd, asking if they believed he could repeat the trek with the wheelbarrow piled high with potatoes. They roared with accolades as he ventured across without losing a single potato.

Finally, he asked the crowd if they believed he could carry a person across the falls in the wheelbarrow. They screamed their affirmation. Then he asked for a volunteer to get in the wheelbarrow. The crowd laughed and then grew uncomfortably silent when they realized Blondin was serious.

Out of the hushed crowd emerged an older woman. She agreed to go with him across the falls. Blondin helped her into the wheelbarrow and proceeded to carry her across the falls and back again. The crowd was spellbound, in awe of the old woman's willingness to put her life into Blondin's hands.

What they didn't know was she was Blondin's mother.