

## Letting Go

In my dreams, I see my hands open, I watch as Nikolina's eyes flash at me, I feel the old terror as she falls. She points her toes until the second before she smacks against the sawdust below.

Awake, I realize that I have let go once again, my sheets drenched in sweat and urine and probably the dregs from the beer bottle I clutched in my left hand until sleep found me.

Yes, yes, you will find me, Constantin the Clown, forever with drink in my hand. Unless the makeup is on, of course. Never smoke or drink when white face is on.

I still live here, in motherland Romania. We are not a country known for sense of humor. The circus I have been traveling with for decades, it does its best to wrench smiles from this hardy folk, but it is work, let me tell you. Me, I would rather be back in my old times, serious about my future, working so hard every day that my hands are frozen into claws.

She, Nikolina, would meet me so early in the day that we would whisper for fear of waking the sun. We worked silently, sailing through the air from our perches, flipping to catch each other time and again, who knows how many times our dry palms clasped one another. Then we would smile, whisper to each other how to make it better, insert a delayed catch here, a mid-air somersault there, until we were weak with the thrill and the strain of the morning.

And then we would drink. Just coffee, but oh, the coffee in Romania, let me tell you. It carries the earth in a thick punch to your whole being, sends electric currents all the way through to your fingertips. We lived on the rush of caffeine and the danger of flying.

Nikolina, she hurt my face, for at day's end, I would realize that from before our friend the sun arose until long after its bedtime, a genuine smile had been there on my face. I loved looking at her, drinking her in like our thick coffee.

Nikolina had hair that felt as if you had been husking corn, saving those golden silk threads, one on top of another, until you held a thick pelt of them. A rare sight, this mane of gold in a country of dark struggle. Sometimes, when our practice was done and we were saying goodnight, I would take her yellow ponytail and squeeze it, just to feel its lovely weight. And her eyes, Nikolina's eyes were alive and bright, like stars shining through.

So curious was I. I wanted to know everything about her. So much did we talk, that I thought, naively, I was beginning to know it all.

Before the show on that day, I caught sight of her. The heat of unquestioned rage filled my chest as I watched her fling her arms, deceptively delicate arms with long, strong muscles, around the neck of a man I had never laid eyes upon, not in the whole year I had known Nikolina. They laughed together as I shrunk back into the shadows behind my favorite elephant friend, Bruela.

I was horrified but strangely, oh, how do you say it, lusty, moved to desire, as I watched her laughing up into his handsome face. He picked her up once, twice, then twirled her. It was as if they had rehearsed this, this private dance, with both of their heads thrown back in joy.

Finally, I turned and fled to my trailer. The trailer, I shared it with other men in the circus, horseback riders, gymnasts, and aerial workers like myself. Marius was there that day, smoking and scribbling in his journal. Like me, Marius had at one time tried to be an Olympian, and like me, he had failed. Injury or addiction or mediocrity had afflicted many of our other trailer mates.

I sat that night with sullen anger, ignoring Marius. Someone opened the trailer's door to shout the ten-minute heads-up, and I stood to warm up. I shook my arms, rotated my head, trying, trying to forget the happiness on Nikolina's face as she held onto that man.

Impossible, for her, Nikolina, to have an important man in her life without me knowing about him. We spent our days together practicing, our nights together performing. We had our meals together. We talked, talked about everything under God's thumb.

Or so I had thought.

This is the price, I said to my silly self that evening, staring at myself in the make-up mirror. This is the price for not having been, how do you say, more lusty, with her, for not showing her how I wanted her always. All ways. This is the price for being the gentleman, for waiting until she, Nikolina, came of legal age, decent age, to bed.

I had seen trapeze artists make mistakes before; I knew distraction was the biggest enemy while flying. I shook my head, took a last look in the mirror, and went to our meeting place before the show, on the ground, underneath my perch.

She was different somehow. She was full of excitement, buzzing with energy, but those things, those were not new. No, what was different was her focus. She kept straining her neck to see around me and into the audience. Like that girl at the school dance who is waiting to talk to the special boy and is just doing her time with you until he arrives. She kissed me as

always, a childlike peck on my cheek, and we did our magic handshake, slapping palms, clasping wrists.

I wanted to take her face in my hands and put my lips onto hers. Firmly, so she would know, at last, the depth of my feelings for her. My heart, my God, it was pounding so loudly I thought she might be able to hear it over the chattering of the growing crowd.

This day, though, I struggled. I so adored Nikolina that I feared asking for the truth, feared letting her know that I felt rage and confusion upon seeing her with that other man. I leaned down to her before we parted for our respective perches and hoped my breath was not smoky. For an instant our eyes met, and I felt that jolt of connection.

I reached for honesty but the best I could do was this truth: “I saw you with him,” I said, my mouth dry and my heart ready to break.

For a moment her brow furrowed, and then her whole countenance lit up as she tilted her chin to one side and let her laughter fly.

“Oh, my funny Constantin,” she said, squeezing my hands. “That man in the audience? He is my big brother, Christian! He is here in Turda for business, just by happenstance, and saw our sign—”

Then she stopped, as if she finally realized the weight of this moment, that maybe I only was asking after this Christian man in the audience because maybe I had more feelings for her than I had mentioned. That maybe I wanted more than to be her flying partner in this silly circus.

“Oh, Constantin.” She waved at the showrunner in answer to his plea for us to get in our places, but then squeezed again on my fingers. “You know, we are such special partners, yes?”

I nodded, desperately wishing for a drink to take this dryness from my lips.

“And I love working with you! We are so good together, this way.” Here she bit her own lip, and I knew. If you pay attention with your eyes, you don’t really need to hear another’s honesty; you can see it, in all its sadness, there in the other’s eyes.

I let her go, giving her as strong a smile as I could muster. The show was starting, and she still needed to run all the way around the back of tent.

It was right away, the very first catch. Her taut tiny body released from the perch pole, and I watched with familiar admiration as it swung like a pendulum through the air. I launched, even then knowing I had a problem with my palms, usually dry but now damp with nerves. I reached for her, thinking I should go for her wrists, but of course she was intent on my open hands instead.

It had happened before, and we had always recovered.

This time, no. I felt her fingers slip, watched her terror as I let her go, watched her grapple with empty air. Memorized her pointed toes.

Instant was her death, my Nikolina. The man, the brother, Christian, was the first to reach her. His silent screams were locked inside his gaping mouth as he hugged her.

Now, I am Constantin, Circus Clown Number Three.

Now I drink, but not coffee.

Now I just dream of letting go.