

Running Away from the Circus

Esmeralda fastened her red feather headdress and checked her catlike eyeliner. She then did an over the shoulder mirror check of the back of her head-to-toe white glittery spandex jumpsuit. She shook her arms to untangle the two feet of white tassels extending below both arms. She felt like she should crow or cockadoodle doo. Instead she whispered to herself “I tawt I taw a puddy tat.” She laughed, her nose crinkly with the absurdity of what she was once again about to do.

She extended her arms and shook them again. She then headed for the staging area, looking at her image as she passed each mirror of the cramped dressing room. She looked like a sequined swan that had mated with a short Vegas showgirl. At least her butt looked good tonight.

Beseme el culo, the wrong underwear could be devastating in white spandex pants, she thought. Oh, my Sylvia could use some new shapewear undies, she thought, taking her position behind the aging circus performer.

“Ready girls,” Sylvia crooned. As the senior show woman and the lover of the “creative director” of the troupe, Sylvia led the girls in each night. Sylvia wore a white shimmering feather headdress notably taller than the other girls’ feathers. As gravity pulled body parts downward, her headdress seemed to grow taller and head skyward. Esmerada could swear that Sylvia’s headdress was an inch taller with each show.

Esmerada flashed to one of her visual survival modes and imagined Sylvia’s headdress bursting through the circus bigtop, while her bottom swung so low it scraped the ground. She viewed these little mental moments like

someone watching a quick promo for a new show or a brief infomercial. It was like she saw it on her own little remote TV screen, switching in and out of reality like someone switches channels. One does what one needs to do to survive, she thought, missing her cue, but quickly falling into step with the other girls.

The ladies, all in the same white spandex attire, only with different headdresses, then pranced and danced about in an awkward attempt to reenact a showgirl opening number. Holding their arms out, tassels dangling, they pointed their toes and tried to glide their feet in unison, holding their heads as erect as joint-less Barbie dolls. They were all lean and physically fit, but with the muscular legs of circus gymnasts, not the long, seemingly endless legs of show girls. Their stubby little legs wanted to break into double flips and triple twist cartwheels. They moved more

like overly trained pigeons than graceful swans. Esmeralda knew this; the others did not. They ended the parade of birds by gliding out, leaving the audience clapping hesitantly.

Esmeralda ran to make her fastest costume change. Two other girls helped her strip the white jumpsuit and quickly pull on a black one. She joined her sister, Rosa, by the opening curtain flap and awaited their entrance.

The Ringmaster took the spotlight in the center of the ring and announced the next act. “Originally from the Yucatan in Mexico, and now proud US citizens,” Roy Ortiz, in his sequined jacket and top hat, paused for the applause, and then yelled “The Vargas Family!”

Smoke rolled out into the center ring and The Vargas Family burst through the curtain to a dramatic drum roll and the sound of brooding music – the kind of music used

to build tension in an audience. Wearing black full-length leotards with white lined accents on the sleeves and bell bottom cuffs, the eight members of the troupe sprung into place. Bent kneed and ready like spandex covered black cats, they prepared for their first feat of the night.

In the ready for the first tumbling routine, Esmeralda braced herself and then sprung backwards from her cousins Cesar and Miguel's strong hands. A single back flip and she landed soundly in her brothers Jesus and Ariel's hands some 8 feet away. Applause... and then more bounding and audience "aws" as The Vargas Family built the suspense much like a Fourth of July fireworks show, ending with the finale of a triple twist, double flip two-person switch to thunderous applause.

They bounded out, taking bows and pointing their toes, waving and exiting the same way they came in. For Esmeralda it was another night in a two-show day. With only boredom and circus soap opera antics to mark her time, each day passed as slowly as the ticking of a clock, slowly tracking each second of each minute of each hour of each day. Some people dreamed of running away to join the circus, Esmeralda dreamed of running away.

In fact, she regularly channeled switched from reality to her imaginary runaway attempts. While helping to clean the costumes or pack up for the next move, she would imagine high-flying escapes. Sometimes she did a triple spiral twist right out the top of the tent into an awaiting fire red convertible driven by the man of her dreams. The man of her dreams was blond, tanned, white toothed and wore striped polo shirts, Levis and white Adidas with a light blue

stripe. He came to the San Bernadino, California, show and winked at her when she walked by in her bird costume and then met her eyes directly with his gorgeous baby blues just as she did a perfect landing of her triple twist, double flip two-person switch. Another wink and she was head over heels in love. From that time on he was part of each of her circus escape fantasies.

She usually channel switched to her favorite escape during weekly circus troupe meetings, while Hector the Horrible, the creative director, who came from Siberia, went on about safety precautions and the need for more “innovation to keep up with the competition.” His thick Russian accent, made it difficult to understand him, but it didn’t matter because she was channel switching the whole time – in and out of his rantings. The meetings were always full of tension as the troupe was mostly made up of

Russian and Mexican immigrants, some citizens and some with only green cards. The Russians were superior in every way. They walked in a superior fashion, looking down their noses at the Mexican families that for decades had been the core of the Circus Magnifico. The Mexicans knew the Russians were paid better and had the better trailers and dressing rooms. Hector saw to this and he made his preferences for his Russian countrymen obvious.

Sometimes he spoke only in Russian with no translation for the Spanish speaking families. This was a particularly good time for Esmeralda to click into survival mode and switch out.

The meetings usually lasted at least 45 minutes, allowing more time for Esmeralda to channel switch to her most elaborate escape fantasy. In this fantasy, she would trick one of the Sanchez brothers into a dressing closet,

lock him in and don his motorcycle helmet and jumpsuit. She then would take his place for the suicide ball entrance and do the routine perfectly, but when it was time to exit she would do a circle around the ring, pop a wheelie and ride out the front entrance of the tent to freedom. Her Adidas wearing dream guy was always waiting to hop on the back and ride off into the sunset. Unfortunately, she had a tendency to do motorcycle sounds while channel switching to this fantasy and reentered reality with Hector the Horrible staring at in a disapproving way.

At bedtime she also would try to fall asleep by imagining her escape. Of course, there was the standard cannonball one, where upon being shot out of the cannon, she landed in the fire red convertible and her Adidas guy kissed her and they drove away. There was also the one where the Adidas guy posed as a popcorn supply truck

driver and smuggled her out in the popcorn truck. Or the one where in the middle of the trapeze act her dream guy turns out to be the catcher complete with white Adidas and they do a bounce exit into the net, dismount in unison and run from the circus, jumping into the red convertible and spinning the tires while racing away. Or there was the escape in Curious George fashion, where she grabs a large bunch of circus balloons and is lifted skyward to an awaiting helium balloon complete with her Adidas wearing guy. They float happily off into the sunset.

Finally, there was the super exciting, ultra climatic -- riding the elephant right out of the tent, causing a collapse of the tent when the elephant hits the entry door poles.

Esmeralda then would ride the elephant into a full sized moving truck. She could never fully rationalize why she and her Adidas guy took the elephant with them, but it

seemed to make it a better ending. Plus it could be a win win with freedom for Ellie the Elephant, too.

Esmeralda realized that all her fantasies were totally unrealistic, but the mere thought of escape eased the monotony of her days. She understood that to some people it might seem glamorous to wear sequined costumes and to perform for “adoring” audiences while performing dangerous acrobatic feats. But honestly, sequins, glamour and acrobatic feats were all she had ever known. And the constant moving from one city to the next, always traveling, always in transition, was unsettling. “Mierda,” she was a Pisces and not the least bit cut out for this nomadic life. She needed stability and a place to call home and a library card.

Esmeralda had developed a nasty habit of reading when she was very young. She would have given anything

for an international American Express type library card – you know one that was good anywhere and you could just drop the book off at the next town and check out new ones as you traveled from city to city. In fact, that was another one of her fantasies.

No librarian in her right mind, however, would give a card to a transient, traveling, nomadic, spandex wearing circus performer. Think of the overdue fines. No she would never have a library card.

Was it too much to ask that she have an ordinary life – a library card, a little yellow house in an ordinary neighborhood, with an ordinary family and her Adidas wearing guy? No sequins, no spandex, no feathers or double flips, just ordinary everyday American life. That was all she wanted, well and a library card.

So, as they pulled into San Fernando, Calif., and set up camp outside the city, she decided this was the place to make her move. It had been a year since she saw her Adidas guy and it had been here. He would be back, she told herself, and she would be ready.

The first show of the first night her stomach was full of butterflies and not from doing backward somersaults and forward flips. No Adidas guy.

As the second show started and she got in line behind Sylvia, her optimism had plummeted. Her destiny was here, channel shifting and waiting to have to wear uplifting underwear with her spandex suit. No library card, no ordinary life, no Adidas guy.

The procession started and again she missed her cue, but quickly fell into line. Half way around the ring, she saw him in the first row. He was waving and they made eye

contact. She blinked to make sure it wasn't one of her daydreams and when she opened her eyes he winked.

She made it back behind the curtain with her heart pumping and made an immediate turn and walked back out, right past Hector the Horrible in his black suit and top hat. The audience started to mumble and Hector looked confused, nodding his head for her to go back behind the curtain. She ignored him with her feather headdress bobbing as she confidently walked over to Adidas guy. She took his hand and walked out of the circus tent, dragging him behind her. He seemed confused but followed.

“Where's your car?” she asked.

“Over there,” he said, pointing to the far end of the graveled lot.

No red convertible, she thought, as they walked up to his rusting gold Duster.

“Are you abducting me?” he asked, still confused.

“No, I’m running away with you,” she said, smiling and adjusting her feather headdress to get into his car. “You are single, right?”

“Yeah, totally,” he said, starting to like the idea of a spandex wearing circus girl running away with him.

“Great,” she said. “Let’s get out of here. Can you spin the tires and make some gravel fly.”

“Sure,” he said, beaming as he hit the gas and spun out, raining gravel down on all the cars parked nearby.

“Now, that’s how you make an exit,” Esmeralda said, cranking up the tunes and moving closer to her dream guy.

They headed down the road and he said, “Gosh, this might be hard to explain to my parents.”

“What do they do,” she said hitting buttons and channel shifting through the FM stations.

“Dad’s a dentist and my mom is a librarian,” he said looking apologetic.

“Perfect,” she said, taking off her headdress and patting him on the knee. “Why don’t you take me straight to the library and introduce me? I’m Esmeralda.”