

## Show

“He is good to set eyes on the unseen.”

“The elephants wait for me. He is not good.”

“It is good to be used for unveiling beauty.”

“You are not a show.”

“I am lessened for increase. I shall tell you how.”

“I have met you at this bar, as asked, and told you how he fairs. Release me.”

“You may not grasp what I say, but a story does not have to be understood to be heard.”

“No one is loved from afar.”

“Listen.”

“My animals call.”

“We live in worlds, not the earth.”

“The show goes on!” Oedi called to the eighty people in the audience, gripping a large ring. He wore a top hat with a bowtie and a regal robe, all white. Oedi whistled; his famous snow lion leaped through his hoop. The audience, pallid under the lights, applauded on cue. Oedi whistled; the lion rolled onto her back. He kissed her on the nose, ran his fingers through her mane, touched her down the paw. She loved Oedi with all her instincts.

Two clowns stumbled onto the stage: the audience laughed. Sophie and Eden wore painted frowns, teardrops, and oversized shoes. Oedi shouted instructions from the side. The men, women, and children laughed until the crying and frowning fools strutted off the stage.

“You were beautiful,” Oedi told the girls behind the curtain. “The audience liked you.”

The clowns frowned; he kissed them. Oedi loved Eden: wrapped like a present in skin, ligaments, marrow, lungs, and blood, she held within her all the secrets of the universe and the explanations for why he was alive.

“Will you walk with me?” Eden asked.

“The show goes on,” Oedi declined, the stupid and bulky elephant-trainer taking the stage. Eden left for her dressing room to wipe the frown off her face. Sophie stood back.

“We made mistakes,” Sophie said. “The audience clapped, knowing no better.”

“You will improve.”

“You said we were beautiful.”

“Passion is beautiful,” Oedi said.

“We made mistakes.”

“Passion struggles.”

“‘Beautiful,’ ‘passion’—words that stick even where they are not wanted. Tape to handling fingers.”

“Is it still snowing?” Oedi was captivated by what he believed no one else saw. He walked to the edge of the tent and lifted the flap. The white smoothed out the land. “Perfect.”

“What do you see?” Sophie waited to be told to follow.

“Stay,” Oedi said. “The cold will freeze the paint to your face.”

“Convenient.” Sophie touched her tear.

“The snow is beautiful, yes?” Oedi was stung by the chill. “I think it is beautiful.”

“What do you see?”

“Everything.”

“Where?”

“Look closer.”

“From here?”

“You may get sick.” Oedi closed the flap. “You have seen snow, yes? This is Russia.”

“I have never seen that snow.”

“I care too much about you. Does love hurt?”

“Can you tell me what you saw?”

“It wouldn’t be the same.”

“It never is.”

“The show goes on.” Oedi stepped toward the circus ring when there was sudden clapping.

“Is Eden near?”

“In her room.”

Oedi left the clown, and the farther he walked, the more Sophie’s small hands pushed against the walls of his mind as her painted face softened. Her eyes were blue and yet her voice high, the song of a bird that’s distant form darkened the sky. The bird was sad because the world was far beneath her; her song was beautiful and inspired because of the heights she climbed.

Out of Sophie’s sight, Oedi saw Eden’s door, reached out his hand, but stopped. He turned to return to the show.

“Did you want to see me?” Eden suddenly stepped out into the hall, her eyes violently blue, having heard his footsteps.

Oedi paused. “You removed your makeup.”

“It’s what I left to do.”

“It is better to bow in costume.”

“You could have stopped me.”

“Stay here.” Oedi stared at her, his teeth tightly clamped. “No one will notice.”

Oedi closed the door on Eden and rested his forehead on the wood. He whispered something about Michelangelo spilling hues on another carnation to make it Michelangelo's carnation, a phrase Oedi barely heard himself say, and left to find the sad and beautiful Sophie.

## II

After the final act, a story performed by Oedi, the audience forgot about the circus. The next time they attended, it would be new, Oedi hoped, wanting the circus always to be worth the people's frost-suffered money. Though a traveling circus, it had already become part of the four large rocks on the blue hillside, the clouds that hovered low to touch the serpentine chimney smoke—comfortingly familiar to the locals, children of unmoving generations.

As Oedi's family of oddities sat down for dinner over alcohol, broth, and bread, Sophia complained that they ate too late. She never learned from Eden how to avoid standing out; she lacked the discipline to be part of an audience. Thin, pale, brown-haired, dull-eyed, out of costume, it was unlikely the feet of a plainer girl collected dirt. She wore the ripped dress of a peasant's mother.

"We must use English sounding names," Oedi told her, dressed in his white bathrobe, seated at the head of the foldable table. "The Westerners cannot stand names they cannot pronounce. Their world revolves around them."

"'Oedi' is English?" Sophie sipped beer in the chair to his left.

"You don't know Westerners." Oedi patted her hand. "When last did you leave Moscow?"

Sophie wiped her lips. "You were never interested in my travels before."

"Foreign places always interest me," Oedi defended himself. "Alaska, Greenland—I can't think of all the places I've contemplated."

"You always acted like I shouldn't discuss trips."

“A trip to Paris gives you no authority to discuss Europe. You know little if you think you know much.”

“I don’t think I know much.”

“You *know* you know everything.” Oedi laughed and wondered, as he often did when they spoke, why he loved her.

“The elephant trainer keeps his name,” Sophie complained.

“‘Oleg’ is not my name,” the trainer corrected from down the table. “The lion-fool forced it upon me, for the Westerners know of the dead ‘Sunshine clown.’”

Oleg wasn’t wearing a shirt again, exposing his hairy muscles. His black tights rippled when he walked.

“Popov’s name lives on in you,” Oedi congratulated Oleg. “It would be too much on Westerners to bear the completely new. Russians must help them.”

“We disgrace ourselves.” Oleg pugnaciously slopped his soup up with bread. “We changed the name of our precious Russian Circus, whores for dimes. We are Nikulin’s Circus! ‘The Circus of Dreams’ is childish.”

“Nikulin is dead; Westerners are childish.”

“And yet we want them to come?”

“The stupid are rich.”

“We are whores.”

“Are whores poor?”

“Nikulin’s Circus never traveled, not in my day.”

“You cannot go back.” The thought pleased Oedi that Sophie might be impressed by his handling of Oleg. Sophie lifted her bowl and slurped broth from the bottom.

“We should have stayed on Tsvetnoi.”

“You must accept change.”

“We belonged there,” Oleg was adamant.

“We approached bankruptcy.”

“We have changed too much.”

“All change is too much change.”

“We are whores.”

“We are in business.” Oedi heard the snow flecking against the plastic tent.

“The circus was dignified.” Oleg nursed his drink. “I remember when there was dignity.”

“You imagine things,” Oedi said. “You are complaining. You are old.”

“We would have had a chance at home but traveling—only loss!” Oleg crushed his beer can.

“Snow and loss!”

“You did not say that when we left.”

“I suffered silently.” Oleg threw his can to the ground.

“You change what you believe to keep believing.”

“It will never work.”

“Will you be happy if you’re wrong?”

“I am wiser than you,” Oleg said. Like most people, Oleg was a man who changed the topic whenever the topic didn’t suit him.

“The old always imagine that they are wiser than the young.” Oedi licked his spoon.

“Wisdom is not gray hair.”

“My hair is white.”

“It is gray.”

“It has been white since the crash.”

“2021 aged us all.”

“And made you wise?” Oleg laughed. “The wise don’t only learn from error.”

“We suffered the collapse of oil together.” Oedi looked away.

“Wisdom doesn’t come from death, only regret.”

“The wise die well.”

“The dead are not wise; they are dead.”

No one at the table was dead, Oedi noticed. “Oleg...”

“It is Rummyantsev.”

“Oleg, the Wall fell decades ago, and the West alone is rich. They won the Cold War: the web of their debt trapped the world, and the destruction their collapse would cause is still too great for us to bear. For them, we must perform.”

“Where is our tent fixed to the ground?” Oleg asked. “Or do you not care to know, only travel West and hope?”

“There is money, there is an audience, and it is snowing: what else do we need to know? It is like home.”

“It is *not* home.”

“It is like it.” Oedi flicked a bread crumb off his finger. “Please, set your mind on other things, Oleg. Your mind is your misery.”

“What would you have me think about, lion-tamer?”

“Performing. Only performing.”

“Like good whores.”

“The oil rigs refused to adapt, and what of them?” Oedi asked. “The towers mark graves.”

“Have Dostoevsky and Gogol faded?”

“There will always be ghosts.”

“I’d rather be ghosts than whores.”

“Stay here then,” Oedi invited. “Haunt.”

“Would you have me die?”

“Would you have us?”

“I would not have you die,” Oleg said. “I would have you see what you have done.”

“Our prospering?”

“My circus cannot prosper,” Oleg said. “It is gone.”

The chair fell backward when Oleg stomped away from the table. He was old, grumpy, and only loved. To be young was to suffer the old who assumed the young needed them, Oedi thought.

“You treat him poorly,” Sophie said. “He is a good man, and you treat him poorly.”

“He is a good performer.”

“He is.”

Oedi looked at Sophie, and she seemed so sad and beautiful—eyes downcast, haloed by the aura of God’s mother—his heart burst with inspiration.

“Go speak to Oleg,” Eden said from down the table, materializing from the fog of performers like a carnation pushing up through snow-weighed dirt. Her boney hand was speckled sloppily with crumbs; her brown hair was uncombed. Her dress was her mother’s.

“I must feed the lion.” Oedi tore apart his bread, annoyed by Eden’s inappropriate involvement.

“You must talk to Oleg,” Sophie agreed. Oedi pushed up out of his chair and refrained from plodding angrily to the cages. He would not confirm what the clowns thought he felt.

Oedi held the key between his fingers and opened the lion cage: one key opened every lock in the circus. He poked himself in the center of his chest with the key when he was putting the keyring back on his belt, his eyes focused on the lion, then he reached out and ran his fingers through the snowy hair.



She did not trouble him.

“Oedi.”

Sophie had followed him. Oedi knew worry, guilt, or care would compel someone, and he was pleased it was her.

“Have you ever touched a lion?” Oedi asked. She walked up beside him.

“I thought she was a cat,” Eden said.

“Have you?” Oedi hid his surprise.

“We didn’t have cats when I was younger.” She grazed Oedi’s hand with her finger. Dry paint speckled her face that she carelessly failed to clear off.

“Come and touch,” Oedi said.

“I’d rather not.”

“She won’t bite you.”

“You don’t know what she will do,” Eden said.

“I won’t let her bite you.”

“Oh?”

“I said she wouldn’t bite you.”

“If I were the lion, I would bite me.”

“Then stay away. Stay where you are.”

“I will.”

“But surely you see in the lion’s eyes that there is nothing to fear,” Oedi said.

“I see nothing.”

“Nothing frightens you?”

“I’ve only looked out of eyes.”

“Eyes will tell you a lot about people.”

“Eyes will tell you what you want to know about people.”

“They are useful,” Oedi agreed. “Please, come and touch.”

“You told me to stay.”

“Fine, stay. The lion won’t miss you.”

“The cat doesn’t know me.”

“Then she will miss you.” Oedi looked from Eden into the white lion’s eyes, fierce and cold.

“Our souls are married.”

“You don’t strike me as a cat.”

“I’ve never hit you, not as a man or a beast.” Oedi acted hurt to elicit sympathy.

“You don’t strike me as anything in particular.”

“Come now, what do I strike you as?”

Eden didn’t answer.

“I wish I could give you your first kiss,” she said suddenly. Oedi never imagined Eden could be so forward.

“Don’t you think I’ve been kissed before?” Oedi asked.

Eden stayed away. “No.”

### III

Eden was a pale canvas on which an old man trudged through snow. The man was old and traveled since he was a child. His mother and father were dead; the old man was the last of a people no one remembered. He alone knew his language.

The man wandered into villages and called out; the villagers heard a wild animal. The villagers were made unique by the fact that they listened to a language that could be enjoyed nowhere else on earth. In response, the villagers hid, afraid.

“Why are you staring at me?” Eden asked. She was sitting at her dressing room table, preparing to entertain, painting her face white. Oedi’s eyes were lost, like a blind man, in the back of her head.

“I’m not,” Oedi answered. The more he encountered Eden, the less he saw the old man. The people who the old man made unique were far more than the people he met.

“You make me nervous.” Eden turned to Oedi.

“I do nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Why are you nervous?”

“Is there something I should do?”

“Please,” Oedi whispered, “no.”

Eden turned back around and continued to paint her face the color of the world the old man walked across. Houses appeared around the hillside; a shivering cow stuck its nose through the fence to smell the man’s worn garments. In the village streets, a banker in a wool coat, a butcher in an apron—everyone greeted the old man with their voices; he greeted them with nods. He had learned to only smile at those who looked like him. This was not the first village he had happened upon, though it was the first he tried to avoid hurting with silence.

“Would you like me—?”

“No,” Oedi answered, “I would not.”

In the village, a pale little girl happened upon the old man. The paintings of Michelangelo weren’t as perfect as she, but then she spoke. Sounds beat against the old man’s face, a winter gust brimming with sharp ice. The wind stopped, giving the old man a chance to speak, but when he remained silent, the wind began again, desiring voice. The man had encountered little creatures

before, those he frightened and those he protected. The wind stopped, then blew; stopped, then hurt.

“Speak.”

“What should I say?” Eden asked.

“Not you.”

The little girl finally stopped trying because she was sad. The wind went with the rejection, and the sad little girl stood with the old man on Eden’s naked back. The traveler only wanted to pass through.

“Do you like what you see?” Eden asked.

“I do.”

Eden turned to face him, her face nearly gone.

“I am not here.” Oedi waved his hand. Over Eden’s eyebrow, the old man resumed trudging. The snowy hill was not as difficult to overcome as was the memory of the little girl he hurt with silence. The man promised himself that his voice would have broken her worse. Eden turned away back to her mirror, and after marching from her eyebrow, over her cheek, and to her ear, the old man stopped to rest in a ravine. The rocks protected him from the wind, but not from the little girl. Her memory hurt because he did not unveil with words that he was what people could only understand as an animal.

“Should I sit here?” Eden asked.

“I can’t be alone without you.”

Eden closed her paints and faced the lion-tamer.

“There is nothing to cry about,” Eden the Clown said.

Oedi's story, the final act, was nearly finished. Before the inevitable applause and astonishment beholding the masterpiece Oedi could paint with his voice, Oedi told them what he saw, slowly and weakly, like a man trudging through snow, looking for something he could only see at a distance.

"Snow was the only place a man like him belonged," Oedi said. "He would have died outside the cruel elements. He was born to call out, aware no one would come, but knowing he must call and make those listening the only ones who heard his language. Only special people could believe a story like his, a story too sad not to be in the world."

#### IV

Flakes kissed a man's face. There was nowhere Oedi was going particularly, just away from the circus to a place where he could think about it.

"Oedi."

Oedi knew someone would follow him; he was pleased it had been the girl whose voice was so high and sad. "Beautiful, yes?"

"The snow?" Sophie asked.

"The story."

"I didn't know you wanted me to hear it."

"You were backstage with Eden?"

"As you wanted."

"You two are inseparable."

"Is that what you want?"

"You need each other." Oedi walked away from Sophie. The snow collected on their shoulders, gradually merging them with the land.

“I’ve been looking for the perfect way to apologize,” Sophie said. “I put it off a day, then a week, then a year—it was always going to be tomorrow.”

“What was, my dear?” Oedi glanced back but took another step forward, respecting the distance art needed to suspend.

“When the baby was born, I was so happy, and I wanted to say how happy I was, but I wanted to say it perfectly, and I waited, and waited, and waited until it was inexcusable to wait so long, and then wanted to apologize, but wanted to apologize perfectly, and so I waited and waited...”

She looked so beautiful from where Oedi stood. “We’ve all waited to say what time could not help us say better.”

“I wasn’t there. I didn’t want to be in a world where my husband died.”

Oedi had never felt so much love for Sophie.

“I was engaged to another man in a month,” Sophie said. “The love was too powerful and lasted too long. The man was too easily carried away and acted on his worst fears; he kept my mind away. I wanted to be led on and let down, on petals and feathers. I liked fantasizing about our future when I knew we would never be together. I didn’t care. I didn’t care that he hurt me and made me hate forgiveness. I wanted to learn how to live like him. He loved love. I loved. I wanted to put on dresses. His life was always busy; mine, still. I hated him for not changing me. I wanted him to take from me everything I had, to keep me from being alone. But he never made the absence of my husband disappear.”

Sophie was telling him what she saw, slowly and weakly, like a form plodding through snow, looking for someone always at a distance.

“I should have been there for Eden, not with men. We were little together. I was absent when Ukraine voted again to be part of Russia. During the revolution. I was absent. I didn’t speak to

her. I wanted the speaking to be perfect. Then my mother passed; my husband died. It felt unfair, inevitable, straightforward. Snow was falling and concealing everything like closing doors.”

“You don’t have to tell me this.” Oedi wanted his words to help Sophie feel comfortable enough to speak on. She was deeper than he thought.

“Eden was my friend, even after the wailing. I looked for somewhere to breathe and found her air. We always talked about running away. During the revolution, when the world warmed up, we joked about joining a circus. To laugh again. To not think again.”

“You came together,” Oedi said. “I remember.”

“A place where nothing was permanent, including the inevitable.” Sophie reached into the snow and lifted a handful; the globs abandoned her fingers, slipping. “Where we could find ourselves behind faces. We joined to fly. People are only found at circuses.”

“I can’t imagine how you feel,” Oedi said as he tried, “but I’m glad you came with Eden. My life is better because you are in it.”

“Eden was my friend, and she told me when her baby Grace was born. My husband was dead; I never congratulated her. After Eden’s baby died, we joined the circus. I’ve been looking for how to apologize for not saying a word,” Sophie whispered as tears ran down Oedi’s face. “I never spoke because I would have seen my husband talking about the child he wanted to have.”

Oedi pulled Sophie into his arms and kissed her, ending the fairytale. Many missed out on giving others glimmers of life, Oedi thought, worried about what others would think. Eden stood watching in the snow. She had come to make sure Oedi was safe.

## V

“Have you seen Eden?” Sophie took hold of Oedi’s arm.

“Everything is fine.” Oedi removed her hand with a light kiss on the fingers.

“We should look for her.”

“The trouble is only in your head.”

“They said she left when we were away.”

“They are wrong in what they say.”

Oedi knew Eden: she was a private person, a mystery. She was someone he could whip on accident or intentionally, and in the hospital, they would reunite, without explanation, not because there was no explanation, but because words would be its failure.

“We should look for her.” Sophie was adamant.

“We should stay where she knows we are.”

“You care about her, yes?”

“Being afraid isn’t being in love.”

“What if she ran away?”

“Everything you say is something you might believe.”

“What if...?”

“Sophie,” Oedi began with a squeeze of her hand, “be not carried away by your thoughts. Be here. If I lived my life in my head, would I spend my days anywhere at all?”

Sophie kissed Oedi’s fingers as Oedi turned his back on her, and Oedi’s thoughts turned to Eden. Why would she leave him? Oedi needed to feed his lion. There were many things that Oedi didn’t grasp, but he knew love when he seized it. Eden’s face was a locked vault, keyless, full of what could not be known: why life lived, why love loved. She contained love for Oedi, as deep within Oedi, past his heart, locked and safe, he held love for Eden.

“Nowhere, she’s nowhere.”

Oedi was startled by Sophie’s sudden reappearance.

“From where did you come?”

“Here,” she said. “I haven’t moved.”



“I told you that Eden is fine,” Oedi said. “Please, worry no more.”

“But where is she?” Sophie grabbed Oedi by the arm.

“She likely wonders the same about you,” Oedi claimed. “Perhaps it’s not you who can’t find her, but she who can’t find you?”

“What sense does that make?”

Oedi pulled himself free from Sophie’s hold and hurried to the other side of the tent to feed his lion. Sophie confused concern with care, fearing with loving. To say ‘I love you’ was to promise to say ‘I love you’ without end, every moment, every day, continually supplying evidence that the love was there, forever without fail. Regardless how tiring and annoying it became. ‘I love you; I love you; I love you.’ Searching for air. Weakening. ‘I love you; I love you.’ Falling to one’s knees. Fighting. Enduring. ‘I love you; I love you.’

Love was beautiful.

For Sophie to reach out and touch him—that wasn’t to say ‘I love you’—that was to say ‘I fear.’ She promised always to speak life when she looked at him and said ‘I love you’ with her eyes but broke that promise. She forgot that to love was to die, that death was beautiful. Oedi hurt. Though it wouldn’t be easy, he would forgive her, but first, he needed time.

Oedi found his snow lion lying on the floor of her cage. She was quiet, the cage was open, and there was something—an earring?—sparkling in blood.

## VI

“What was necessary for life was everywhere. The cage was open; the lion, unbound. Her earring threw off glimmers in blood like a mother her child from a burning tower, hopeful. After the old man broke her heart, the little girl journeyed out to find him. Though the horrid wind from her mouth hurt the old man, she stayed close after they reunited, and the man did not hurt her. Though she asked for words, for her sake, he offered nothing. The greater her sadness, the less she talked,

but the more she hugged his arm. He couldn't tell her that he didn't know how to fix her heart. Together, they found a circus but were separated along the way. The old man eventually found where she had gone—the lion's cage—the old man found why the snow was the only place for him.”

*Where do these stories come from?* the faces wondered, amazed by his imaginativeness. Oedi smiled. The stories were always about the same old man, yet never repetitive, as art was always on the same blank canvas, yet boundless.

“He was nowhere in the snow,” Oedi finished. The faces would clap, not understanding, because understanding was of what the world was too full. Silence. The audience left: yawns, chatter, jackets thrown over shoulders. Oedi found the meat cooler torn to pieces; he forgot to lock the cage. He never double-checked, having trained the lion himself. As he cleaned the mess, he found an earring Eden must have dropped when she bothered him the other night. She was still out on her self-granted vacation, and Sophie, not trusting Eden to take care of herself, was increasingly annoying.

Oedi walked out into the snow; it was falling lightly. His mother and father were dead; he was the only person who knew the stories he told. Others performed, certainly, but he was alone with his fantasies. Oedi looked ahead. Eden was out there, thinking about how much she wanted Oedi to be happy. It would be better if Eden's hand rested on the lion's cage.

“Have you seen Eden?”

Oedi sighed. The little Sophie was behind him, dressed like a clown.

“Will you ever see her?” The sadness grew in Sophie's voice. “Eden is not here.”

Better if Eden was thinking about Oedi and preserving his image of her, opening the cage.

“You are,” Oedi said.

Sophie's mouth opened slightly, but then she reached for Oedi's arm. “Do you mind?”

“Leave me!” He jerked his arm away. Sophie stumbled back.

She fell.

Through the snow, Oedi could hardly see.

Better if Eden reached to touch the lion.

Oedi heard something, but not something he could put it into words.

“Are you looking for Eden?”

Blood.

“Yes,” Oedi said, then walked on.