

EMILE IN THE CIRCUS

"He looks sad ..." says Lily, "thin and forlorn ...".

"Yes, thin, forlorn, and sick, and he smells ..." says Looby.

"Yes, smells, worse than before, of something rotten," says Lily, "and to be left just ...".

"Just abandoned like this," says Looby, and they stand in the cold wind, circles of skin puckering and blueing like love bites where their tights have sprung holes.

Emile's small eyes are red and weeping a thick ooze. They look like they have seen everything and no longer care. He slumps against the post to which he is chained, his collar eating into the matted fur around his neck, his coat shredded and patchy like a toy bear that has been used too long. He no longer wears a muzzle, all fight and bite long gone.

Lily arches into a backbend, palms in the cold mud, and Looby somersaults over her, but Emile does not look up.

The same wind that nips at the twins' legs now flaps and shreds the canvas of the big tent. Inside the circus ring, the straw and sawdust have been reclaimed by damp earth. The trapeze bars are cold and slippery as they begin to practise.

This morning Lily and Looby woke entwined in each other's arms, as they do most days. Some nights though, one of them climbs to the narrow bunk above the stove while the other takes a companion into the big bed; to be deceived, perhaps, by the intimacy of the embrace he wakes to.

But there are no lovers now. The troupe has dwindled. The Ferruti brothers no longer bounce and tumble through the twins' bed, nor do village lads come peeking through the canvas, full of vague yearnings.

"We should ..." says Looby.

"Practise the double ..." says Lily.

"After we warm up ..." says Looby.

Just a year before, in white satin spangled with gold and amber, the twins had flown and twisted high above the heads of the nobility. But the twice daily shows have faded to one a week, and, like Lazar's pawned teeth, more red painted seats gape empty than are filled. And where there was silver there are now only a few coppers, barely enough to buy food. Yet each morning the twins ignore their empty stomachs, put on their practice costumes, from which the spangles and sequins have been torn and ripped, dip their hands in the resin box and climb the ladder to the apex of the tent where the crows roost.

It is Pavel, the strongman, who volunteers to cross the field each day in search of food. Bullet-headed, slabmeat Pavel, with his hairless body and delicate feet and slow smile and tattoos of writhing girls, carries the old carpet bag to market.

Times are hard. Women in bright headscarves offer embroidered cloths dredged from the bottom of dowry chests, but nobody is buying. Old men cough in front of worn hoe handles, a bunch of onions, an egg or two. But as Lazar says, no matter how thin the milk, some cream will always rise to the top, and here and there are merchants with fat sacks of grain and well-stocked tables.

Everyone loves a strongman. The men stand slack-faced as he lifts two, three, four sacks at once, and like to feel the muscles of his arms, and sometimes, finding for a moment a way to grow bigger themselves, press coppers into his palm. And the women imagine being embraced by a man who could snap them like a twig, and wonder if he is big all over or whether it is true what they say about small feet.

Yet despite his smile and his impromptu performances and his popularity, most days the carpet bag comes back filled only with sprouting potatoes and barley.

"There is nowhere else to go," says Lazar. "It's the same shit everywhere," and he spits through the gaps in his teeth. Lazar collects news and gossip from the Roma who flit through the camp at night.

"Perhaps a town ..." says Looby.

"Where there are more people ...".

"Anything must be ...".

"Better than here ...".

There is a sharp crack as Lazar slaps his hand flat on the table. Pavel blinks.

"Every damned where it is the same. Hunger. They only care for bread, not circuses. In the town there are just more wretches fighting over the scraps."

"And anyway we are stuck in this bog," he says after a pause.

They are sitting in Lazar's swaying caravan, smoke belching from the stove when the wind changes direction. Only Emile is not

there. Igor, pale and grey like a shadow, is fingering a quiet waltz on the accordion. Out front the gold-painted wagon shafts slope empty into the mud; the horses were sold long ago.

"You must do something ...".

"For Emile, he is ...".

"Not well," says Lily.

"Not well," says Looby.

Lazar the Ursari passes his hand over his eyes. Emile is the son of Valentina, his father's bear, snatched from the wild when young, defanged and declawed, trained to dance over hot coals. But Emile needed none of that. As youths, Lazar and Emile rolled and wrestled, the bear's rank breath and drool hot in Lazar's face. When Lazar's father died and Valentina was no more use, Lazar took her round the back of the tent and cut her throat. They ate bear stew for days. And the new act, man and bear wrestling in a roped ring with a referee, drew long applause from crowds who had only ever seen the pitiful shufflings of mutilated animals. But now Lazar stays in his caravan and Emile sits alone in the cold wind.

Lily and Looby lean towards Lazar.

"Maybe some better food ...".

"Or an animal doctor ...".

Lazar glances down at the four quivering half moons nestling in their corseted costumes, but Lily and Looby see that his eyes do not change and that they now have the same dead look as Emile's.

"I would give my right arm for a drink," he says.

The following night the crowd is smaller than ever. There is hardly a soul for miles around who has not yet seen the circus and nobody comes twice. It is not a good performance. Lazar's whip and voice have lost their snap, the twins play safe with single twists and Pavel drops the iron ball. There is faint laughter from the crowd.

They sit again in Lazar's caravan.

"It is finished my friends," says Lazar. "Everything has turned to shit, we're just too stupid to realise it. I will close the circus."

There is a long silence, then Pavel speaks. "I have been thinking that way too. My father used to say that everything has its end; we only need to recognise the moment and accept it. We must go our separate ways. I will find work in the docks, or on a farm - I have done it before. Igor can wander the villages - everyone needs music in their lives. The twins will be all right; they are young and pretty and they have each other. And Lazar has Emile and a silver tongue if he ever finds it again. We will fly away and leave the tent for the birds to nest in."

It is Igor the musician who suggests the farewell performance. "To make a proper ending," he says.

"We must invite everyone ..." says Lily.

"And show them what we can really do ..." says Looby.

"Our best ...".

"So that they never forget."

Lazar says nothing.

The next day, Pavel and Lily and Looby and Igor cross the field to market. Igor plays the accordion as the twins cartwheel through the square. People gather, wrapped in scarves, their breath smoking in the frosted air. Children run to call parents, brothers, sisters. Pavel, dressed in tiger skins, his meaty arms and legs red with cold, strides to the centre of the square banging a drum.

"Ladies and Gentlemen. Friends. You are invited to the very last, the final, the terminal performance of the world famous Circus Lazarus one week from tonight. Everybody is welcome. Free entry to all."

They rehearse as they have not done for months. Pavel lifts and grunts all day and pulls caravans with his teeth. Igor practises tunes in strange time signatures, his right hand flashing over the keys, his left making occult shapes on the buttons. He polishes the silver and black of his accordion till it flashes even in the dim winter light. Lily and Looby ban everyone from the tent while they work. Only Lazar sits morose in his wagon, and Emile slumps against his post - weaker now and leaving even his meagre meals untouched.

"We are worried ..." says Lily.

"About Lazar ...".

"And Emile ...".

"We need a ringmaster and ...".

"A bear, or it's ...".

"No good," says Looby.

But Pavel shows them the bottle of peach schnapps he has hidden in a wooden chest, under his tiger skins.

The circus once again is full of people and noise. Children flock in the aisles when the seats can take no more. Lazar, flushed and febrile, has been drinking for the last hour. He stands backstage, peering through the curtains at the crowd, dressed in a gold waistcoat and top hat.

The torches are lit. Igor sets a frenzied tune while Lily and Looby turn cartwheels and Lazar cracks his whip. Pavel invites members of the audience to strike him in the belly with a club and lifts a chair with his teeth. He throws the iron ball high and catches it on the back of his neck, then lifts a bar hung with great weights while Lily and Looby pose at either end and are raised into the air. Igor glides a sword down his throat and then a long metal flute that he plays by contracting the muscles of his stomach.

Lazar slips backstage. He has kept back some of the schnapps and now grasps Emile's jaw and pours it down his throat. Emile chokes and coughs and the alcohol drips off his muzzle hair but he has swallowed enough. The transformation is rapid. Though he can barely see through his inflamed eyes, when Lazar leads him into the ring Emile remembers the shouts of the crowd and he and Lazar wrestle and dance to the accordion. Lazar leaps in the air, slapping his shiny black knee boots and bellowing Romany cries while Emile shuffles and bangs a tambourine.

Then the ring is cleared. To the slow beat of the drum, Lily and Looby, perfect in white satin, hair pinned up to show their pale

necks, climb the ladder barefoot to the crow's nest high above the crowd.

Looby sets the first trapeze swinging a lazy arc across the tent. As it returns to where she stands it seems she just steps off the platform to drop like a stone - and the crowd gasp - but now they see that in passing, she has caught the bar with one hand, as though it is the most casual thing in the world. Two more sweeps and she pulls herself up to sit on the bar, then suddenly - again as if to plummet to the ground - she drops and is swinging upside down, hanging by her legs from the trapeze.

Now it is Lily's turn to swoop above the crowd, higher and higher, like a child on a swing, and then she lets go. For a moment she seems to hang motionless, then she turns ... and turns ... and turns - a triple backward somersault - and is caught in Looby's resin-tight grip. And all this while Emile is looking upward, blinking, an expression of total concentration on his face, as though what he sees thrills and amazes him. And when the twins have slid down the plaited ropes, back to the dull ground, Lily skips over and plants a kiss on his bedraggled muzzle and the bear hangs his head in seeming foolish delight.

Afterwards Lazar wants to celebrate, the alcohol still flowing in his blood. "That was a show," he says. "Dammit, we're a great circus. The triple somersault - I never thought I'd see it again," and he stands and makes a formal little bow to Lily and Looby and clicks his boot heels.

They sit a while longer in his caravan. Lazar wants to talk of past glories, but it is late and they are tired and there is nothing more to drink and slowly they drift away.

Out in the cold air, Lily and Looby go to see Emile. They find him lying on the ground, racked by spasms of shivering.

"We must ...".

"Take him to our wagon ...".

"And warm him up ...".

"Somehow ...".

With Pavel's help they drag the bear, stumbling half upright, across the cold ground and up the three steps of the caravan.

That night, with the curtains pulled across the window, Emile lies on the bed, and all around him, from cupboards and ceiling, hang satin costumes, and tights, and lengths of braided rope, smelling of perfume and female sweat. And Lily and Looby do what they have never done for another male; they lie either side of him under the great eiderdown, warming his body with their embrace, enveloped in his great bear stink.

But in the morning, when they wake, Emile's body is cold and stiff, and they close his poor eyes and weep a little.