

The Man From the Circus

by Kirsty Logan

1.

I stepped out for a cigarette halfway through the girl-on-the-pony show. I liked the idea of the girl-on-the-pony show, but the reality of it depressed me. I could see the gobs of glue holding on the horse's plume, and the girl had lipstick on her teeth.

It was all 'no smoking' here, even round the backs of the tents, so I had to go all the way to the main entrance. It was quiet there, the music and applause muffled through layers of canvas. The night smelled of popcorn and diesel fumes. A ticket collector lurked in the background, his booth lit with strings of Christmas lights. He probably hadn't seen anyone for hours; no-one would arrive at the circus this late.

I was down to my last cigarette. I patted all my pockets before remembering I'd left my lighter in my other jacket. I went to pluck the cigarette off my lip when a lighter flickered, spotlight-bright in the darkness. I know, right? It's like something off the Classic Movies channel. I leaned forward and lit my cigarette, closing my eyes so the smoke wouldn't burn.

'Thanks,' I mumbled around the filter. The lighter snapped shut, and I could see who had offered it. His features were uneven: his nose a little too flat, his eyes a little too small. He was TV ugly — imperfect, not the romantic lead, but still attractive.

I didn't say anything, just exhaled some smoke rings. I was playing it cool, my cigarette in one hand and the other tucked in my back pocket, my hips tilted towards him. His pickup routine was lame; but hey, I was seventeen.

'Would you like to go for a ride?' he said.

I flicked away the stub of my cigarette: it hit the gate and rebounded with a flicker like a Bonfire Night sparkler. He took that as a yes, and walked away from the gates.

The man from the circus whistled a tune as he tapped his fingers along the row of cars by the kerb. Maybe he thought that if he

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distracted me, I wouldn't notice that he was breaking into the car rather than unlocking it. I knew that shiny red Subaru well; I watched Willy Murdo polish it in his driveway every Sunday.

I couldn't stop staring at the man's earlobes. I know it's a weird thing to say; they were just so big, stretched out like doughnuts with wooden things in the holes.

He opened the passenger door and stood beside it. Did he want me to drive? He looked impatient; if he'd had car keys, he'd be jangling them. I opened my mouth to make an excuse, then realised he was holding the door for me. Another Classic Movies act. It made me wish I was wearing a fancy hat and very shiny shoes.

He pushed the driver's seat back as far as it would go, but his knees still barely fit under the steering wheel. He didn't look that tall out under the sky, but he looked huge folded inside the Subaru. He fiddled around under the steering wheel, then spun the wheel and roared into the night.

The town was pitch-black: no stars, no house lights. Everyone was inside the circus tents. The only lights were from the Subaru, directing us through the hills. I hoped none of the sheep had wandered into the road. I didn't want to die with only a sheep and a very tall man from the circus for company.

The silence stretched, longer and darker than the road ahead of us. I opened my mouth to tell him to watch out for sheep, but it sounded stupid even inside my head. I ran through other possibilities: what kind of music did he listen to, where was he from, what was the circus like? I could tell him about how bored I was at school, how much I secretly hated all my friends, the way my eyes itched every time I looked out at the mainland. I didn't want to say any of those things.

'Last week,' I said, 'on the radio, there was a competition. The DJ played a sound-bite of a car going over a cattle grid, and people had to phone in to guess which cattle grid it was. I didn't phone in, but I knew the answer.'

I waited for the man to tell me that in the circus there were no radio competitions, no DJs, no cattle grids. He didn't say anything. I watched him and he watched the road.

Looking back, he must have said something. There's no way I would have done what I did with man who had only said a few sentences. But I've played it over in my head, and the only words I remember hearing were my own.

'I need smokes,' I said.

The man from the circus nodded, and the road wasn't there anymore. I must have drifted off, because there was the petrol station, lit up like the Titanic in the middle of the night.

The man's long fingers touched everything in the garage. He couldn't just look with his eyes; he needed to touch things to get a sense of them. He touched the packets of crisps and magazines and bottles of windscreen cleaner. He flipped through the air fresheners — even though they were all the same — and placed one carefully on the counter.

'Twenty Lambert and Butler,' I said to the slack-eyed boy behind the counter. Maybe he was sour-faced because he had to miss the circus. I wanted to tell him that he hadn't missed much, but that wasn't really true.

The man from the circus pulled a note from his pocket and placed it carefully on the counter, then walked away. His long legs had carried him back to the car before the boy had even opened the cash register. I'd expected his money to be unusual somehow: folded into an origami swan, or scrawled with magic symbols. I scooped up the change, cigarettes and cardboard tree.

Back in the car, I held out my handful of coins. The man spread his hands.

'I have nowhere to keep that.'

I saw that his trousers were a smooth length of fabric — no pockets, no seams, not even the zip of a fly. Maybe they were special circus trousers, ones he could change by folding bits in and pulling

cords. I stuffed the coins in my pocket and handed him the Magic Tree.

'Do you always buy gifts for the people whose cars you steal?' I said, peeling the cellophane off my cigarettes.

'I never steal.' He smiled with one corner of his mouth, like it was caught on a fish hook. 'I borrow.'

He jiggled something under the steering wheel and the car lit up. He tied the Magic Tree to the rear-view mirror and flicked it with his fingernail. We watched it spin, the yellow cardboard bleached white in the floodlights. The man grinned as wide as a skull.

'Ready to go?' he said.

I looked at the world lit up by the garage's lights: the black fields, the black sky, the black hills. The car idled, the engine ticking like a horse pawing the ground.

'You must say,' he said. 'Say you want to go with me.'

I thought about the hush of the wind in the trees, the smell of the fishing boats, cattle grids on the radio. I thought about seeing more sheep than people. I thought about the eyes of the boy in the petrol station.

'I want to go.'

2

The harsh-sweet smell of fresh sawdust, the hot salt of roasting peanuts, the bitter reek of the horse's box. The raucous symphony of the musicians tuning up, the one-two-three of technicians testing microphones. Faces half-painted: a paper-white forehead and glitter-drenched hair above pale lips and blotchy cheeks. The air thick with shreds of marabou feathers, the chatter of the strangers, spotlights reflecting glitter.

And me, watching the world lit by the border of bulbs around my mirror.

This pre-performance is as familiar to me as Luka's face. It'll be an hour yet before I see him — like a superstitious bride, he hides

away so I don't see him until we're up there, tense and sparkling above the flimsy nets.

I was not the first girl Luka stole away, but I was the last. After me, he said he didn't need to try again. He'd found what he was looking for. So now, every night for ten years, I have thrown myself off a trapeze and trusted him to catch me. Every night, he has.

It's not that Luka didn't provide what he promised; after all, he hadn't promised anything. The circus has everything I'd dreamed of: sparkling under spotlights, flying across a stage on the applause of strangers, waking up in a different town every day. Of course, it's not always a new town: Britain just isn't that big. But none of the places I've visited have had cattle-grid competitions on the radio.

Painted and smiling, I balance on my trapeze. Luka is poised ten metres away, his muscles shining under the lights. The wooden circles in his earlobes twitch as his jaw clenches, unclenches, clenches.

The ringmaster, his moustache oiled to needle-sharp points, announces glory and wonder on the death-defying trapeze. I pull sawdusty air into my lungs and start to swing. As I build up my momentum, I smile down at the crowd stacked up in the tent. Blinded by the lights, all I see is a mass of teeth and eyes and restless limbs.

From the corner of my eye I see Luka, hanging from his knees, patting his hands together so the talc can absorb the sweat of his palms. I wait for the twitch of his thumbs that lets me know he's ready.

I curl my toes around the painted bar, spread my arms like wings, and let go.

For two seconds I'm weightless, as helpless as a newborn with its cord cut.

Then Luka's hands are on my wrists, calloused and hot, swinging me round. Below me the crowd gasps, claps, cheers. I count the seconds until he lets me go, until I will soar back to my own bar, until I will clamber to my feet and bow for the crowd.

I count, but he does not let go. His hands tighten on my wrists. I climb his arms and pull myself up onto his bar. He climbs up beside me and we wrap our toes around the bar. The crowd is silent, breathless, waiting to see what we will do next.

'Come with me,' Luka says into my ear.

I look down at our toes, lined up along the bar, miles above the mess of nets and shed glitter and eyes of the crowd. 'Where? There's nowhere to go.'

'Let's go away from this island. To the other side of the world. An adventure, just us.'

I clutch the rope with one hand and reach out with the other, my fingertips sliding round the shell of Luka's ear. He takes my hand in his and presses our palms together, like we're praying.

I look at the world below us: the restless crowd, the glare of lights, the motes of sawdust in the air.

'Say you want to go,' he says.

I think of babies and gardens and road-trips. I think of staying up late to watch a midnight movie. I think not of running away, but running towards.

Then I let go.

