

Thread

I hope you once saw our act. We twined our bodies together and passed through the eye of an enormous needle. It was a splendid twelve-foot needle mounted on a high silver ladder with an eye that was four feet wide. Two threaders, Mariposa and Antoine, stood on opposite ladders to guide us through. But we always had to twist. We studied two-ply thread. Hours with a magnifying glass. We recreated its properties.

During the act we wore soft clothes: Velour leotards that made us feel naked. Our faces were white and covered with silver stars. After the act we went to our trailer and ate cantaloupes, proscuitto, bread, cheese, whatever we wanted from the circus kitchen. Igaz read what he called chick magazines--big magazines with glossy covers, horoscopes, and fashion tips. I read Icelandic sagas: They were the only books I'd kept when I quit linguistics.

Later we made love in the built-on bed. Igaz stroked me carefully, one hand on a vertebrae, a finger on my nipple. Again the ignition between our skin. Once more we went through the needle.

We always delighted audiences. They were tense before we went through, and they clapped and cheered when we came out. But seven nights ago Carrogen was there. Carrogen is my ex-lover and the owner of the circus. He had just come back from Paris where La Belle Madeleine, who moved like a snake, didn't want to be a contortionist with his circus --or his lover. This put him in a bad

mood and the night he came back he sat in the last tier in the audience, wearing a bright red scarf. When Igaz and I stepped into the silver ring, Carrogen caught my eye and an arc of light passed between us. Igaz caught the arc.

He looked at you, he hissed.

He didn't look at me at all, I answered.

We climbed up the ladder and couldn't go through the needle. Antoine and Mariposa pulled and pulled and pulled. We remained two stubborn bodies and had to climb down the ladder. Massimo the clown saved the day by punishing us. He lifted us up to the tall Renaissance clock and bumped our heads against the minute hand. Then he threw water on our feet and chased us from the ring.

We blew it, Igaz whispered in my ear.

We didn't go to the dressing room but walked back to the trailer in our costumes. I sliced melon for prosciutto and asked Igaz if he wanted to share some brandy.

No, he said, beer's for me. He crouched on the tiny bed and put on a T-shirt. Then he sat at the table and opened a bottle.

So what was it like with you and Carrogen? Igaz said. His face was still covered with stars. When he leaned over to drink some disappeared in the ridge around his chin.

What do you mean?

You know what I mean.

It was like: Nothing. Not the way it is with us. You know that Carrogen liked men. There used to be two clowns besides Massimo--Hermes Papdoupalous and Claudio Ricatelli. He brought all three of them to bed twice.

Did you like them? said Igaz.

I did for a while and then I didn't. Anyway, it was only twice.

And what was it like without the clowns?

Just okay. I've told you.

Well Carrogen put his eye on you. And you fell out from the act. I saw you fall like a hat from a window. That happened to me once when I was twelve and I got breakaway in soccer. My father was in the crowd. He was the only one wearing a long coat and a hat with a brim. And he caught my eye and I slipped. It was the only time I ever got breakaway.

You told me that.

Well I'm telling you again.

We heard a thud outside our trailer.

Jesus Christ, said Igaz. He went outside and brought in a rattan hamper filled with white-skinned peaches and a note from Carrogen that said, *Remember that a circus should be a perfect Renaissance clock, with demons appearing on the half hours, sword-eaters, tumblers, clowns, fire-eaters, and ne'er-do-wells on the quarter, and divine interventions at noon and at midnight. Better luck next time.*

Igaz took a peach and ate it with a sucking sound. He doesn't wish me luck, he said. He never wanted me in the act.

His mouth was full of peach when he talked. I didn't look at it.

Don't think about it, I said. Everyone flubs in the circus. But not because someone put his eye on you.

A flub is a flub.

He spent a fortune over these peaches, Igaz said.

He didn't. He got them from the kitchen.

I took one. The smell was more pungent than the taste. Then I saw the pearls at the bottom of the hamper. They were draped over some peaches, deep grey with a diamond clasp, glinting like something at the bottom of the sea. I lifted them up and put them on.

What a bastard, said Igaz. He fished around in the hamper and pulled out a dark green wrapper. They're from that Hungarian jeweler with a name like mine. Igezni. The meaning of enchant.

Does every Hungarian name start with an ig?

What does it matter? They're a popular set of letters.

I looked in the mirror and saw the pearls around my neck. The grey was the color of the dust Marcus the Circus Master scatters on the ring. I felt beautiful and duplicitous. Igaz went to the corner where he keeps his weights and lifted one.

Look how I lifted this thing. Like a feather!

You look like a statue.

No way! I'm good blood.

I meant, I said, that you look close to the earth.

Igaz kept his body frozen and lifted more weights. I crawled into bed. I could see the cross from his father's grave smack on the wall in front of us. It was tarnished pewter with a wheat shaft stuck behind it.

I wish you wouldn't keep that there, I said. It's creepy.

You were born with a silver spoon around your mouth. You don't need traditions.

What do you mean?

I mean your old man taught history at Yale. I mean your house was like a library.

Igaz lifted more weights, then got into bed and stared at the cross until he fell asleep. When he began to snore, I felt the same claustrophobia I'd felt with Carrogen and the clowns when they began to decline to fuck in Latin. Igaz started to talk in his sleep. *What is the order of night?* He asked. And then, as if answering, he said Hungarian words I'd come to recognize. *Félnék*, shame-faced. *Vétek*, sin. They were lonely words, followed by a string of sentences I couldn't understand.

I went outside and sat on the wide trailer steps. In a few minutes Malo the Fire Eater came out from the trailer opposite mine. Then Olaf the Interchangeable Man appeared. We all sat on our separate steps, not talking. After about an hour, Olaf pantomimed sleep by clasping his hands to one side and put his head against them. We all went into our separate trailers.

When I woke up, Igaz was eating pudding stuffed with raisins and poppy seeds.

I made if for consoling myself, he said. I couldn't sleep so I went to the kitchen and talked to the baker. He hadn't heard what we couldn't do.

No one heard, I said. No one even remembers. Anyway, we should rehearse.

I got up and splashed cold water on my face. Igaz noticed the pearls.

You wore those all night, he said, leaning over and touching them. You wore them all night. Like those movie stars with diamonds of De Beers.

He touched the pearls and covered them with white pudding shot with black poppy seeds.

Look what you did, I said.

I was just touching of them, said Igaz.

Not of, I said. Just touching.

OK. Be fancy. Igaz watched while I wiped each pearl. I told him we should rehearse. We have to get back on the horse, I said.

Outside the air melted with summer heat. I tugged at Igaz, and we walked to the big tent where there were stilts and hoops and cables and swords and nets and banners that said *La Cirque d'Horlage* and the enormous Renaissance clock from which we all take bows.

What if Carrogen rigged that needle up so we can't go through it? said Igaz.

I'd wondered, too, and was already climbing the ladder so I could touch the huge metal eye. But Carrogen hadn't done a thing. I could see the whole tent through it.

Everything's the same, I said.

Not them pearls. They're real.

There was a red and gold quilt in the sawdust. We sat on it and I thought we might make love and didn't care if we were caught. Igaz and I had once made love in Carrogen's trailer when Carrogen and I were still living together. One of the clowns spied through the window and asked if we could be a threesome.

I touched Igaz's shoulders.

Our skin knows about the act, I said.

It doesn't, he said. And he brushed me off with a story about his father who had been a soccer player in Hungary and got an injury that fused one hand into kind of a claw. His mother thought this was a sign they should leave and the family came to America where his father became a baker and his mother did bookkeeping.

They were true in themselves, he said. *Igaz* means true in Hungarian.

He'd told me the story before, but I didn't mind, and I didn't tell him the correct phrase was true *to* themselves. Each time I heard the story, I could see his family in a warm, lit kitchen, sitting around a table: The calm breath of his mother. The bitter eyes of his father. The dutiful face of his sister. Igaz in his undershirt pretending to do math but really working the books for a high school casino. The family canned preserves, stuffed sausages, baked bread. Their lives were knit together like a fairy tale.

Let's get Mariposa and Antoine so we can practice, I said.

No, said Igaz. I want to go to church. The confessor can tell me if Carrogen gave you the eye.

What does he know?

Nothing. But he can tell what I imagined.

Wherever we go, Igaz finds churches. In the last city it was a small Ukrainian cathedral with a painted red door, a cerulean dome, brilliant stained glass. Inside women in kerchiefs were praying. I met a big-boned woman in jeans who said to me, *Isn't it awesome?*

Go, I said, if that's how you feel about it.

He left and I sat in the sawdust and looked at the clock, which was a duplicate of a famous clock in an Austrian village. The clock was Carrogen's idea. Everybody had to bow on different hours, even the cooks. Igaz and I bowed at six, a number I considered unlucky. The favorite clowns got seven, four, and nine. Olaf the Interchangeable Man bowed at every quarter hour. Rosie the Fire Eater got eight. The circus master bowed at noon. Carrogen bowed at midnight. I thought of how he liked to wind things, and wondered if the pearls were artificial, something he'd gotten at the flea market. I wondered if he'd invented the House of Igezni. But when I found its address in the phone book, I asked for a circus car and drove to the heart of the city. I'd been to this city twice before and remembered its wide boulevards and shops with arched windows. I wondered how long I'd stay with the circus and how many times I'd see this city again.

The House of Igezni had a chocolate-brown carpet. The jewels were in mahogany cases like bones in a museum. As soon as I walked in men and women in white shirts and dark slacks gathered around me.

How can we help? They said in slight accents, looking at the pearls.

I said I couldn't work the clasp and they swarmed around the back of my neck and unclasped the pearls. A bald man with a jeweler's glass came out. He had a shrewd and intelligent face.

There's nothing wrong with the clasp, he said. Do you know what *Igezni* means?

Yes. It means to enchant.

Well we enchant, but we don't deceive. Those came from the Cook Islands.

So they're real.

What do you want me to do? Bite them? You can only do that with gold. This is the House of Igezni. We don't sell anything fake.

While we talked, Carrogen knocked on the window. He was wearing his red scarf, even in the summer heat, and looked amused. I came out and we walked down the street in step. Our reflections shone in the buildings and I remembered Carrogen once saying, *We are a natural couple!* As if it was decreed. I was aware of his height and narrow shoulders. I also saw how he put his attention on me, unlike Igaz who gawked at women and garbage pails and shop windows and careened down the street.

Those pearls look good on you, said Carrogen.

I don't know why you bought them.

It was a whim. Like the automatic flutes. I want to do those again. He pulled out a green velvet notebook and jotted something down.

We went to a store that sold ices. It was marble and cool inside. I ordered lemon ice, Carrogen had a coffee granita. He threw back his scarf and I noticed

his red-gold mustache, his gold watch glittering on his wrist. We talked about adding pneumatic fountains, like the one we'd once seen in Russia that imitated ducks and geese. Carrogen said he was disappointed about his trip to Paris.

I gave that Madeleine a box of soap, but she didn't like them. She's stuffy, even if she's a brilliant cobra. They were hand milled and they came in a wooden box. They smelled like lavender. Maybe I'll get you some.

It's as though we'd slipped into an earlier time and could go back to our trailer and lie on the wrought-iron bed with white pillows. Carrogen took my hand.

About last night, he said. I'm afraid it didn't look very good.

You can't be thread on command.

It was Igaz. He's too big for the act. I saw him the minute he lost it.

I don't think so, Carrogen. I think he saw you look at me. You broke your way inside us.

I always look at you. What does he read, by the way? Those women's magazines.

What do *you* read? A few detective stories. Books about extravaganzas?

I know what he reads, said Carrogen. Those women's magazines. With the horoscopes and the gossip. He must be boring.

You're a meddler. You always were. Are you disappointed about Madeleine? Give these to her. Maybe she'll join the circus.

I took off the pearls and pushed them across the table.

No, said Carrogen, shoving the pearls back like a deck of cards. What Madeleine doesn't want, she doesn't get. Now come with me. The cooks need a new butcher block for the kitchen.

No, I said.

I put the pearls in my purse and left.

When I came back, the trailer was lit with candles. Igaz was with Rosie the Fire Eater, who was reading his fortune with Tarot cards. One of his parents' old Hungarian records was playing--gypsy music with fragile violins. When the music got wild, Igaz said it was the soul of Hungary and the violins were like branches waving in the wind. Rosie spoke softly and kept notes.

Oh my, she said. There are a lot of knights in this fortune.

What's that? said Igaz.

Serious matters, said Rosie. Or it could be about your father. And possibly good fortune. You can turn anything upside down.

While they talked I looked around the room. I didn't know how we lived, the two of us, with so much dead time in all that clutter. I took out *Nils Saga* and was pulled into a sense of something old, durable, and repeatable. Rosie left, I asked what the fortune was about, and Igaz said it was bleak, very bleak.

Besides, you were with Carrogen. Massimo told me.

I tried to give him the pearls. He wouldn't take them.

So you have them.

I suppose I do, I said.

I scraped some pudding out of the bowl. Poppy seeds crunched in my mouth.

What do you call this? I asked.

Püding, said Igaz, pronouncing the word in an odd way.

Püding, I said. Is that all?

What? You think everything is with a z or a t? Igaz turned up the music and lifted a weight.

We Hungarians are a sad people, he said. You can hear it of our music. We've never been in charge of our country. The trees are sad. The branches are sad.

I told him he was being sentimental. He said he was going to see the confessor. I said I thought he'd already been.

I went to the diner instead. I had pancakes that laid very heavy on my stomach. I must have known you were with him.

I wanted to find out if the pearls were real. I went to Igezni. I met him by accident.

You never dived. You worked on the docks.

I did dive. I dived in the sea. In a life different of this one.

From, I wanted to say. Not different *of*. Different *from*. But I knew he would say: Of. From. What does it matter? I know my life.

After he left, I ate another peach and looked at Rosie's notes from the fortune:

Arrival, approach, advances, proposition, demeanor, invitation, incitement, trickery, artifice, swindling, fraud--one good thing melding into something less good and reversing itself. I read more of Nils Saga and remembered going to Iceland with another man, riding a jeep over moonscapes, falling asleep past midnight when the sun was out. I wondered idly if I'd ever go again, then decided I wanted to go again. It began to get dark, then darker. I blew out the candles, turned on the light, picked up clothes and a spoon covered with pudding. Every moment I thought I would see Igaz's big face looming in the door. At last I put on my

leotard and walked to the makeup tent alone, holding my slippers. As soon as I opened the door, everyone looked at me.

Where's Igaz? asked Sid the makeup artist. He was lifting a handful of golden comets for Olaf in his incarnation as a deity.

Where's Igaz? The makeup artist asked again.

At church.

For what?

For praying.

I put white paint on my face and a silver tiara. The makeup artist sprinkled me with silver stars. And all at once people began to ask where Igaz was as if they'd never heard me say he was at church. The trapeze artist asked and the sword swallower asked and even Olaf asked. Soon his name was everywhere--*Igaz, Igaz, Igaz*--like bees swarming at the top of the tent. In the midst of the buzzing, the door opened. It was Carrogen. He walked to my makeup table and everyone was quiet and pretended to turn away and brush dust from their costumes. Carrogen leaned toward me. His red scarf fell from his dark blue suit and swept over the makeup table.

You'll go through the needle alone, he said.

I looked in the mirror. Carrogen's blue suit was in back of my tiara like night in a starry sky.

You're unfair, I said.

I run a business.

I came to the ring alone and was dazzled by the silver floor. Without Igaz it was slippery like stones at low tide. I climbed the ladder and saw a thin wire across the middle of the needle's eye. It was cut precisely in half.

You bastard, I thought, sending the thought to Carrogen. *You made it smaller without telling me*. I paused, then felt myself separate and realign.

Antoine eased me into the upper half of the eye. Mariposa held my feet. I twisted and turned and became a piece of two-ply thread, winding around myself as I went through. A current jolted inside of me. The crowd applauded. Massimo did cartwheels.

Backstage, Carrogen said I was splendid.

I don't want to talk to you, I said. And fuck your clock.

I slipped from his arms and walked off wearing my slippers. I could hear them tearing the asphalt. I liked the sound of the rip.

In the trailer, I found a note from Igaz.

I just don't think I can do it. I need your attention on me except it's on Carrogen. He's diverting of you. He wants you back. I told you we Hungarians have been confused with the Huns because we always shoot in retreat.

Everything was gone. Igaz's clothes. His weights. The record player. Even the magazines. I looked around the room. It seemed smaller for what it was missing. I put on the pearls and sat on the wide trailer steps. How big the night seemed. How ordinary for the likes of a circus.