



TRAPEZE

Blue dripped from the ceiling like acrobats on a wire. Long legs of navy, powder, and midnight descended quickly, then stretched and twirled in midair, clinging to an invisible trapeze. Behind the aeronauts, a troupe of cornflower, teal, and inkwell skated down the lizard green wallpaper, destined for the pool already gathered atop the blood red carpet—a swirling mass of Van Gogh sky.

Yseult Colette Zéphyrine (Bastien) Starmount pressed her palms to the wall and let the color puddle between her fingers and cascade down her hands and around her wrists. Some of the paint splattered her shoes as it landed on the carpet and, for the first time in days, she smiled, grateful for the souvenir from the most marvelous show.

Once, when coming into the narrow hall of the musty building that held the tiny bookstore, she caught a glimpse of the tenant upstairs: a man as narrow as the hall, always freckled with blueberry, ocean, popsicle. After that first glimpse she forever imagined the stork-like creature perched in front of an easel, pondering, while his brush dripped his unused thoughts onto the floor until this narrow man who looked unfit for a snarl had created this tantrum of a circus

within her grasp. It was the only reason she came to the bookstore that was filled exclusively with political prose. And it was the only reason she ever bought a book she was certain never to read—payment for the accidental art she'd been allowed to witness.

She wiped her hands on her oversized tuxedo jacket and admired the rumpled beauty of the wrecked garment. It was the kind of productiveness that made her feel like her day had been worth it.

Her eyes were still wandering toward the drips when her body involuntarily—or by way of practice—moved toward a stuffed bookcase. It looked and smelled the same as ten others in the room: a blur of colors and decaying glue that reminded her of her favorite childhood board game or, if tempted by her most recent nightmare, a hungry mouth with jagged teeth, bursting with bits of its victims.

But having already watched the circus for several minutes, and having had her nose filled with dust and floorboard rot, she suddenly became less aroused by the idea of a story she hadn't heard. Already in her short life, she'd realized that there were really only a handful of tales that made any sense to her; most of those being the same story presented with slightly different characters, fictional or not. It was around this time of disillusionment when her father offered the only sentence that had ever been able to give her hope. *If everything's the same, Colette, you can't very well ruin it into extinction, can you?*

Thoughts of her father only dampened her already dark mood and, instead of submitting to one more faked affection, she gave up on the notion of buying a book and instead stole the simple pleasure the bindings had to offer by trailing her fingers along the smooth, sculpted leathers. It was the other thing her father had taught her. *Determine precisely what something has to offer you personally, Colette,*

and take only that. Hoarding is for people who don't know who they are. Sometimes the soft bumps on the underside of her fingertips stalled as they slid down the brittle spines, and caused just enough of a tug to raise a slight, absurdly urgent panic in her chest. Still, practice had enabled her to hold her nerves tight like a reign, controlling any distinguishable weakness. She abused the edges until she could no longer feel them, her skin numbed from the overload of friction. It was the first device she had learned on her own. To keep from wanting.

Somewhere during her experiment, she caught the scent of the outside and knew that someone else had come into her space. Then she felt the unmistakable sensation of cold drifting off a coat sleeve.

"Excusez-moi."

She turned her head slightly to smile politely, but not far enough to make eye contact.

An arm reached across her view and a thin volume the color of faded black ink was plucked from the shelf, and several books toppled onto their backs, sending bullets of sound through the tiny shop.

Thrust into chaos, a still moment circled her, as it became apparent that her space wasn't just being invaded, but watched. Using a small amount of her depleting reserves, she turned to leave but, in her flustered state, miscalculated, and the stranger's eyes were able to latch onto hers.

The moment was brief but, by the time she'd forced her gaze back onto the shelves, she was wholly self-conscious.

"Is it usually this cold in the summertime?" he asked. Beneath his French was a soft German accent. Beneath his gaze had been a charm she wasn't used to noticing in people right away.

Still, she didn't look at him. In fact, she stiffened—an involuntary reaction ignited by experience—but after the initial shock she began to feel something tugging at her and, eventually, her conscience forced a reply. “No,” she said finally, appeasing the ghost of her dead mother.

“How old are you?”

It would seem a strange second question to most. Not to Colette.

“Seventeen.”

His lack of an instant reply—one that she was used to—reflexively brought her eyes back to him, and his own gaze bent ever so slightly, signaling his skepticism. Unsure of what to do next, Colette took several steps away from him. If the man was averse to her polite excuses, she might as well not bother with manners. Under his prying stare, she studied the lettering on the spines before her. She twisted the hem of her jacket between her fingers. She wished he wasn't blocking the way to the exit.

“Good luck to you,” he offered at last and, though he tapped the bookcase, she immediately understood that it was not of books he was referring. “*Au revoir, mademoiselle.*”

Colette was relieved when she no longer felt the cold from outside, but then a different, more distinct bitterness settled around her, as the implications of the man's accent burrowed into her.

She stepped out of the bookstore and into an entirely different Paris. Across the street, her favorite café was completely overrun. The occasional sparkle from the copper tiles pressed into the white stone façade was the only indication of the eatery's once peaceful atmosphere. Though usually crowded with weary university students and lost tourists, the sidewalk tables were suddenly the props of a new type of patron. As waiters hurried to seat

enthusiastic guests, the German language flitted around like a rambunctious child, bouncing from this to that, unaware of the tension that rippled from every syllable. Every now and then she'd decipher a bit of mangled French, or a sharp bang on a table from an impatient customer, but mostly the noise turned out to be clean, unashamed merriment. It was not how Colette had expected it would be. But she knew the levity of their conversations had everything to do with the language being spoken.

At some point, without her noticing it, Colette made her way home.

The Starmount House was a sturdy, three-story structure in a neighborhood that was a constant temper tantrum of bicycle bells and curiosity-hunters just back from a burlesque. Shops that had been around for centuries were only a street away, squeezed between ever-expanding hotels and foreign embassies, deftly stubborn in their fortitude.

Her home formed a tight square with eight others, enclosing a large lawn and small playground on which the children of the owners had long been too old to play, and were the only residences in an area of the city that catered mostly to those looking for a night of anonymity. The houses varied in architectural style and size, though all were, in the words of the real estate listings that occasionally snuck into newspapers, superb. Once as gaudy as their original owners, the vanity of these homes had been, during the first German occupation, obscured with thick smears of gray paint—a gesture that, at the time, had been a patriotic attempt to keep envy at bay and allow the enemy to march by without much notice as to what it was obviously allowing to thrive. Aside from its occupants, the only remnants of the former theatrics that once defined the small burst of homes were the four, brightly colored

steps that led to each door, painted following the war after a friendly communist neighbor had found a stash of red paint in his basement. And what had once been a grand pronouncement of defiance and longevity, over time became merely a quirk; a vague cleverness that fell flat against the heightened artistic vulgarity of the neighborhood. In fact, The Red Steps was greatly overlooked by most who passed it, and consistently provoked a furrowed brow when given, as an address, to a cab driver.

This day, however, as she approached her home, Colette noticed two men lingering on her doorstep. Their knowledge—for one only stopped there if it was their destination—instantly concerned her, and she barely looked at them as she brushed by them to get inside. She had nearly closed them out when she heard a meek, “*Monsieur ...*”

She re-opened the door. “*Oui?*”

“We, uhm, we have something for you, if you would like to take it.” The man speaking appeared more nervous than she did annoyed, so she smiled, and took the bundle he offered politely.

“Those are flags, you see,” he told her, rubbing his forehead. “A French flag as well as a German flag. We are asking you and your neighbors to perhaps consider flying both, in show of support for our cooperating governments.” He cleared his throat. “If you look around Paris you will see that many of your fellow citizens...” He cleared his throat again and finally Colette realized it wasn’t nerves but, rather, a dislike of his message that was hindering his fluency.

The other man who had, until then, remained on the sidewalk, came up and patted his partner on the back. The newcomer looked confidently at her, which made her skin crawl. “If you look around Paris,” the second man continued with ease, “many of your fellow citizens are

already showing their willingness for cooperation—between the two countries, I mean.” He chuckled. “Not like ‘*You will cooperate...*’” For this last part, the man adopted a sinister German accent but, sensing her lack of amusement, immediately digressed. “We think the transition will be smoother if French citizens keep an open mind. That is, if they realize that the German influence is meant only to enhance the French lifestyle, not usurp it. We can all learn from each other, yes?”

Colette smiled. “*Oui. Merci.*” Then she closed the door.

The only disturbance that remained, then, in her vastly silent home, was the excessive thump of her heart, which amplified the drama of realizing that the dreamily dark house she’d left that morning had, in fact, been invaded after all. Large planks of light cut through the open curtains and occupied the living room as sturdily as soldiers, shearing the delicate balance of the flowery décor into something that reeked of French Futurism and may as well have been captioned “Resistance is Futile.”

Blinking away her disapproval, she dropped her keys into a bowl by the front door, dropped the flags onto the floor beside the table, and dropped herself onto the bottom stair of the grand, divisive staircase. Her throat was closed and she felt the first terrifying pricks of suffocation, but she’d caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror on the way down—her face hadn’t shown a thing—so she knew the situation could be amended.

Following a self-indulgent but necessary moment of recovery, she removed her tie, went into the kitchen and placed a kettle of water on the stove. She still had a full hour before her tutor arrived. With a teacup dangling from her fingers, Colette stopped at the door in the back of the kitchen. Hanging on a spike next to the door was a long

skirt, which she traded for her cropped trousers. With the hem pulled up and tucked into her waistband, she twisted the doorknob and stepped into the bright conservatory. It was hotter in here than the rest of the house, and her forehead instantly tickled with sweat. She left her shoes by the door, hopped a bit as she pulled off her blossomed stockings, unbuttoned her jacket and draped it over a tree branch. Then she took off her hat, unknotted her hair from its bun, and wove her way between a flowering pomegranate bush and dying, tangled grapevine, neither of which had any reasonable motive for being there.

At the back of the glass room her hand grasped a thick rope and tugged it sharply downward, which opened the windows in the roof. The wet heat seemed to whoosh upward in a sigh, and cooler air trickled down around her. The fine hair on her exposed thighs raised on end and, finally, she could breathe. As if suddenly awakened, her mind briefly jolted back to anger at the thought of the man's subtle suggestion at the bookstore. Tamping the thought, she focused her attention on the ache in her fingers still smashed inside the handle of the delicate cup. She set the teacup down on the potting table and sat on the cushioned bench by the windows. A book she had forgotten she was reading was laying a few feet beside her and was curling up at the pages, having been left in the damp for at least a week.

Faced with tangible destruction that mirrored her own internal decay, Colette extricated herself from her momentary relaxation, gathered several leaves from the tea plant sprawling along the edges of the windows, dropped them into the cup still waiting on the table, then returned to the kitchen with another distinct chill.

A commotion outside forced her to abandon her half-finished tea and skulk into the foyer, where she peeked out of the slightly open window. A car was pulled right up to the curb in front of her steps and two men were speaking in hushed German while a third retrieved two suitcases from the trunk and set them on the sidewalk. Her stomach twisted, but she waited by the door as calmly as she could for one of the men to approach. The knock that finally came sounded suspiciously like a falling guillotine blade.

She opened the door with a vague smile. One of the men wore a severe expression, black leather gloves, and had a small, leather-bound notebook with her name embossed in silver script, which he seemed to be merely holding while his companion adjusted his scarf. His companion was a rustle of cold air in a bookstore, and she did her best to avoid eye contact with the familiar man, even when he retrieved his notebook and held it as though he very much wanted her to notice it. As she let them in, her lungs deflated, and the man in the gloves spoke.

"Mademoiselle Sternberg," he began, "I am Heinrich Adler and you were expecting us, yes?" His German accent chafed against the tender French syllables.

Though she had managed to convince herself for a few hours that their arrival might never come, she nodded. She was too nervous to immediately realize he'd devolved her family name back to its Jewish roots. Her father had Americanized it just before moving to France. The third man came in and set a small suitcase by the stairs.

"Where are your things?" A gloved hand went around her arm, recapturing her attention. Heinrich Adler's grip wasn't especially tight or unkind, but injected her with a chill as sharp as knives. "Fraulein—" He corrected himself. "*Mademoiselle?*"