

The Juggler

Outside, they call me Bruno. Every hour, peeking out between the frayed daisy-patterned curtains of my showcase, I see them gather in clusters, spectators come to watch in swelling numbers. The penny arcade nearly empties, the merry-go-round revolves with merely a handful of riders and those who have been resting on the benches now rise to approach my window. Here and there, a young fellow pinches his girlfriend's behind, a child licks his dripping ice-cream, an old man gazes up at the clock waiting for the minute hand to strike the hour.

And on the hour, the curtains part and I appear in jester's motley to perform before them my bag of tricks.

Some of them are old-hat. But a mouth still opens in wonder – and not only a child's – as I make tumblers of milk disappear in paper cones or pull out a seemingly endless string of coloured shawls from a velvet-lined box that a moment before I have shown to be empty. There are some who, with curled lips, watch my fingers closely, believing that they know my secrets, but in my art, I give nothing away. Before their eyes, I cut lengths of cord into fragments and restore them into wholes and tear sheets of newspaper into smithereens and unfold them into the original pages with barely a crease. Out of dusting feathers do I produce white flapping pigeons and, opening my mouth, I swallow eggs which emerge from my sleeves. The children beyond the window

gasp with delight as, rapt, they watch, their ice-cream melting, their dark eyes wide, absorbing every movement, as though to blink were to lose a treasure. To them, I am Bruno, the magician, rapturous bringer of wonder.

But Bruno is also a jester, and a juggler as well.

And it is obvious from their smiles that the audience enjoys Bruno the jester. They delight in him, in me, as with a touch I press my scarlet bulbous nose and my dunce's cap rises to execute an aerial pirouette, and as at a tug at that rubicund knob, the capering cap returns to its place upon my balding wrinkled head. They laugh and above their laughter I distinctly hear the crude rollicking snicker of a young man close by as, bending over to pick up my accordion, the posterior seam of my pantaloons comes apart with a tearing wrench to reveal in all their patriotic glory red, white and blue polka dot bloomers over my rump. How they laugh now. And how exquisitely they continue to laugh, above all the children, as with knitting needle and twine, I spiral around the stage, chasing my tail to rectify the breach. I love their laughter and love it all the more when it grows more abandoned as now, one, two, three, I transform the jester into a one-man band and with eyebrows prancing and pupils meeting and diverging, I pedal a padded drumstick against a battered aluminium wash-tub, squeeze sibilant groans from a child's accordion and rattle clacking castanets, all the while playing out upon a mouth organ a medley comprising 'Three Blind Mice', 'Yes, We Have No Bananas' and 'I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts', to which they clap and whistle and to which a grey-haired moth-balled woman with whiskers adds her voice.

But it is Bruno the juggler who holds his audience most in thrall. For where magic and jesting are mere craft, in the throes of juggling lies his finest art. And it is through his art that the real Bruno, that Rudy, composite of flesh and feeling and memory steps out of his motley and enters his soul.

I warm up. A ball on the tip of a finger; my world set spinning, tossed upward, caught, still spinning, on my forefinger, as the other hand sets a second ball in motion, the two

gyrating dizzily in swift vertiginous whirls of white – a simple act, taught to me in the cradle by my philandering father, the great Rene Pianko, who left his wife before I turned three. With the balls still spinning and another ball, a third, poised immobile on the nape of my neck, I bend into an arabesque on point, a posture sustained in tribute to my mother, my beloved mother who, deserted, travelled with Wirth's Circus as dancer, acrobat and tight-rope walker until, noticing her wayward husband returned and watching her from the flaps of the tent, faltered high above the ground, slipped, and tumbled in the shortest second of her short life to a sudden thudding death.

Showing my teeth – in truth, my dentures – I smile at the audience. They, in turn, smile back. Expectantly. A little girl with plaits tugs at her father's sleeve and points at my scarlet nose which twitches in a simulated sneeze. Her sister gapes, catching flies. I wink at her. She flushes and her frozen posture melts, as does mine now giving way to a smooth pirouette after which I let the ball at my neck roll down the length of my thigh and calf, watch it bounce, once, twice, and then flip it upwards to my brow where it oscillates from temple to temple in metronomic motion. – Another of my father's acts, a little trick of my restless, itinerant, hot-blooded father to whom school was the stage and the circus and who, in the company of a succession of rouged and crimson-lipped mistresses, hauled me along a trail of such schools where a ball ranked above arithmetic, a hoop above reading and a mid-air somersault above paper and pen. His stinging flat palm was my most persuasive teacher and my cheeks knew often the wrath of the master who, when he drank, was as vicious and relentless as fire.

How well I knew the sting of my father's black anger! And how well did I learn, too, not only his feats, the staple of my schooling which took me with him to the Tivoli and Bullen's and Wirth's, but also the luxurious hedonistic enchantments that his burning mistresses offered when I came of age, when, as a youngster I felt the first hairs bristle on my chin and sensed

the inflamed turmoil of fantasy, desire and blatant lust throb within my veins. My father was a jealous man. And time came when he could no longer please his women and when, with me by their side, they passed their long painted fingers through my hair, mocked his impotence and reduced the great Rene Pianko to smallness, provoking a white rage which saw him one day seize a dagger from his set of juggler's knives and thrust it to the hilt between the heaving bobbing breasts of the last woman who was ever to laugh at him. He might have swung for the murder but he did not allow himself to be caught. Running from the room, he climbed the fire escape to the roof of the Victoria Hotel where we were staying at the time, slid down the slated surface towards the eaves and, in his last and most dramatic act of all, leapt off the spouting, executed an elegant triple somersault in mid-air, spread his arms like a swallow its wings and, emulating his ill-fated wife, my beloved mother, plunged down swiftly, gracefully and sublimely, meeting his death in totally theatrical style, in the matchless style of a master.

Beyond the window of my showcase, my audience applauds, even a toothless bristled old man who has placed his walking-stick between his knees to free for clapping his gnarled roughened leather-skinned hands.

But enough of balancing balls. Time for the hoops and the discs and for gentle cherubic Appolonia, so like my mother, who protects me always and from heaven watches as I take the rings we once shared and toss them up in swift succession, first three, then four, five, six, seven, describing swirling oval orbits of orange and white over my arms, behind my back and between my legs, while in my chest a dull pressure mounts and spreads to grip my fingers, my throat, my jaw. The pill I have taken before the performance has worn off and I must trust to my guardian angel Appolonia's watchfulness and, if she is nearby, to Juliana's solicitude.

Sweet Appolonia. Hopeful Juliana. – How young I was once. Once, they were knives that I – that we, Appolonia and I – tossed about so blithely, they were flaring torches describ-

ing splendid haloes of fire on the hushed darkened stage of the Tivoli before packed auditoriums in whose black eyes the very flames flickered and danced. How the audience applauded as her body, as brittle as a dandelion, supported mine in a one-hand to one-hand stand, how it sat on seats' edge with breath unmoving as, herself suspended by one leg from a swinging bar describing prodigious arcs, Appolonia held me by an iron ring clasped between her teeth. The Pianko team we were then, in harmony performing and, off-stage, in harmony living fifteen years of contentment, one regret alone nagging whenever thought turned to it – one regret, the barrenness which robbed us of children to whom to impart the best that lay in each of us. The heart was strong then, the hair black and abundant, the skin still smooth and unleathered. Both mine and Appolonia's. But stem the motion of time, halt the ravages of disease. A spinning ball, a hoop, a disc, these may be stopped; but time, disease, these are waters streaming on. My violent father loved many women; I loved one – angelic Appolonia whose glands swelled cruelly with disease, whose downy skin became flecked with dusky bruises, and who faded, faded a pale chrysanthemum, from life.

The hoops spin now, one about each arm, one about each forefinger, gyrating as if animated in contrary motion. Around one leg, another hoop turns, and from my mouth a stick balances yet another disc while a ball trembles on my brow. The pressure in my chest grows tighter; my fingers tingle as do my jaws and my lips; and a flush of heat, worse than yesterday's, spreads to the very crown of my head. Behind me, I hear the closing of a door and I know that Juliana has appeared, her eyes focussed dotingly upon me. – But I have not forgotten, I cannot forget, Appolonia by whose grave come Mondays, I sit, moist violets upon the windswept stone, and talk to her of my love and my loneliness, of my performances and the audiences, and of my conviction that soon we shall be reunited, knowing that from her place, in whatever level of heaven she may be, she is listening to my every word.

The pressure, the tingling, the heat notwithstanding, I go on, must go on. The public watches, expects. For them do I continue. For them do I stand now, inverted, with one hand upon a ball, spin a hoop about my other outstretched arm and set into motion yet another hoop on one leg while a disc rocks and teeters on my other foot.

I hear the people's applause. I see their inverted faces and behind them the merry-go-round, also upturned, revolving ever faster to the strains of an organ-ground carnival tune. The world around me trembles. A mist forms before my eyes and a rushing of sound fills my ears. The floor itself swims in all directions, a suffocating bitterness wells to my throat, and my chest, my head and my arms throb with a crushing agony past enduring, while two metres away, Juliana watches, biting her lips in hope and dread.

Was it yesterday that she came or already a week ago, wearing a green outfit that was tight about her breasts and hips? She brought me strawberries, the most expensive ones, touched my forehead, shoulders and cheeks, and said 'Rudy, believe me, I'm so alone.'

Her blue-grey eyes shone with pleading. Her lips quivered. Her palms were hot.

'Not enough,' I said, laughing, 'that you've become a widow once. You want to be a widow a second time as well.'

My clumsy attempt at humour appalled her.

'Rudy!' she said, then added, 'Why must you begrudge yourself the things that make others happy?'

My energy is sapped. I have neither inclination nor strength to begin again.

'Juliana, I'm too old for you,' I said. 'Look ahead. When I am seventy - if I don't die tomorrow - and burdened with illness, you will be a mere forty-five, still vigorous, attractive, but tied down.'

'I am not a schoolgirl anymore, Rudy. I have stopped looking to the future. There is only one reality. Today. Today. And again today.'

Her exquisite oval face, her blue-grey eyes, the gently

curved nose, the breasts tight under her outfit were all of one piece – appealing, ready to take, to give.

‘And maybe . . . maybe I am a schoolgirl after all,’ she said. ‘I love you, Rudy. So much I dare not let you go to waste.’

I stood by the window of my showcase, the last performance over, but the curtains open. Greyness had ceded to night’s blackness. I saw our reflections in the glass, Juliana’s behind mine, facing me.

‘There was a time,’ I said to her reflection, ‘when I might have answered, “Yes”. But now . . .’

I turned to her, approached her, took her hands, kissed her on the eyelids.

‘But now, it is you, Juliana, who will go to waste if you saddle yourself with me. You’re too fine a woman, young still. For you – I agree – there is only one reality. Today. For me, there are two, yesterday and tomorrow – yesterday which is memory; tomorrow which is death. And whatever is left of my todays belongs to the people – the old, the young, the children – out there.’

‘Rudy . . .’

Juliana tried to persuade. But, even while listening, I did not hear. Her words broke apart and dispersed, puffs of cloud into the void of boundless timeless space, her appeals, her promises, her professions of love dissipated unheeded into ether . . .

And so for the people out there, even as Juliana watches and waits and bites her lips, even as the gaping faces, the floor, the window and the merry-go-round swim in a delirious whirl, even as shrill ringing fills my ears and leaden mist my eyes, even as my heart is being crushed in a vice harrowed with anguish, even as, slowly, to the swelling applause of my swirling audience, the daisy-patterned curtains draw to a close upon Bruno dressed in jester’s motley, even then do I stand on one hand, poised on a teetering ball, and juggle, continuing to juggle in a frenzy of motion, juggling in racked exhilaration my very life through every precious today which – did my audience but know it, did Juliana but know it – may prove to be my last.