

Brendan Mathews

from *My Last Attempt to Explain to You What Happened with the Lion Tamer*

Looking back, I don't know what I was expecting — okay, I do, but I was smart enough to know that it wasn't going to happen without a bop on the head, a bad case of amnesia, and a tropical island where no one could remind you who you really were.

Then came that first night: your big debut.

I should have known something was up when the lion tamer strode out of the cage in better shape than usual. No stitches required. The applause from the local gillies wasn't exactly hearty, but it seemed a little more genuine. Then, as the lights cut out on him, a single spotlight lasered the ringmaster, who directed the crowd's attention to the uppermost reaches of the tent, where you were frozen in place, the trapeze in your hands. "Ladies and gentlemen! I present to you the aerialist, who dances on the highwire and works magic on the trapeze. The flying girl, the acrobat of the air. Thrill to her death-defying feats! Gape in amazement as she flirts with death, because folks — hold on to your hats — there's nothing between her and the floor but the force of gravity! That's right, she does it all without a net!" I'd swear the sides of the tent snapped like a ship's sail as the crowd, in one big gasp, sucked the free air out of the big top.

You soared. Head over heels — once, twice, a third time — a hundred feet above the floor. There wasn't a sound among the yokels who packed the bleachers, their necks craned upward, their eyes following the klieg lights. Every time your body snapped open like a switchblade, your sequined leotard burst into a thousand tiny flashbulbs. When you came out of a rotation, arms extended, there wasn't a single heart beating. You twirled and floated, riding on the fear and wonder of the crowd, and when you finally came to rest on the platform, they absolutely exploded.

Brendan Mathews

The applause lasted for hours, or so it seemed, but eventually the crowd grew peckish for some new treat. While their eyes were drawn to a family of Chinese acrobats, I waited near the bottom of the ladder to congratulate you — and if the opportunity arose, to pour my heart into your hands. I counted down the dwindling number of rungs (yes, the view was exquisite, and from the tips of my size 24 shoes to the top of my busted stovepipe hat I wanted you) but before your feet touched the floor, the lion tamer had you in his arms. He crushed you up against his chest — I'll admit it, the guy was ripped — and you buried your hands in his thick pile of hair. Then you kissed him.

You had never mentioned this over breakfast.

It was after that kiss that I started working on that new bit, the take-off on the lion-tamer's act, where I used Scottie terriers with tutus around their necks for lions. I'd fill my back pockets with kibble so the terriers would chase me in circles trying to tear the seat out of my pants, and by the end of the bit my clothes would be shredded, my tiny chair broken to pieces, and I'd have two or three dogs hanging on to my padded rear. I didn't know how the lion tamer would take it — just a joke, right, all in good fun — but after I saw him in a clinch with you, I didn't care.

That's not true. I cared. I wanted the laughter of the crowd to drown him: all the laughs that the crowd held back when he was in the cage would come pouring out when they saw me. Not just because the bit was funny, but because the crowd would see that I was goofing on him, and I'd get my laughs and the ones they were too polite or too scared to uncork on him. But it was just for laughs. Honestly. That's all I wanted.

The dog-tamer act was a big hit, but the joke was on me. I planned to go on with it right after the lion tamer's act. Bing-bang. Agony, then ecstatic laughter. The problem

Brendan Mathews

was, he was great that night; everything a lion tamer is supposed to be. Forceful. Authoritative. Daring. For once he lived up to the words of the ringmaster's nightly, and heretofore ironic, introduction: the Man with the Indomitable Will. He cracked his whip and thrust the chair and I couldn't tell who was more surprised, me or the lions. He shouted commands and the lions obeyed. Nothing too technically difficult — jumping through hoops, getting the lions to sit up on their hind legs — but he pulled it off without a hitch. He even finished by prying open a lion's mouth and sticking that big blond head of his between the cat's jaws. I thought for sure the lion was going to snatch his head like a grape from a vine, but the big cat didn't even twitch. If a lion can think, I know exactly what was on its mind: who *is* this guy? I kept asking myself the same question.

He finished to robust applause. I wouldn't say *thunderous*, but the crowd was impressed. And then it was my turn — me with a new costume modeled on his criss-cross sequined bandoliers, drooping into my baggy pants. The Scotties did their part, and the audience laughed in all the right places. Laughed a lot, actually. It was a great bit, but it had none of its intended punch. It was supposed to be two parts funny, mixed with one part catharsis, spiked with a shot of derision. A satire. Or a parody — one or the other. What do I know? I'm no clown-college clown, but that's what I was aiming for. But now that he had his act together, I was the only one worth laughing at. Which is my job — I'm the one they're supposed to be laughing at — but still.

My Last Attempt... was published in *Cincinnati Review*, *Port Magazine*, and *The Best American Short Stories 2010* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010)