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THE GERMANY STORY



BY STRANGE WONDERFUL CREATURE

ABOUT ME

[I'm a multi-faceted performance artist from Toronto, Canada.](#) I'm a circus artist, I specialize in contortion, sometimes I fall down for money (cough stunt double cough). I'm trans nonbinary, and talk a lot about gender in ways that sometimes helps people, or sometimes makes them really angry online (either way, 90% of the time I answer kindly. 10% of the time, for the second category, I might get a little salty). Really, I'm just a pearly, calcified structure operating an optimized meat-mech suit that I've modified to make every moment of my life happier, shinier, and more meaningful. Isn't that what we all want?

If you've been with me from the beginning, you might have started out reading my travel writings from [my contortion pilgrimage to Mongolia](#). Since then, my blog outgrew my little personal website and I started my [Patreon](#), and it hosts my circus writing projects (non-fiction & fiction - like [Writing the Circus](#), and upcoming photo books, essays, and short stories). Most recently, I started a special stream of my mailing list just for my 'stories from the road' [if you're already on my main list, but want to hop on this special **side of the mailing list for whenever** the pandemic lifts and circus adventures can happen again, [this sign-up](#) will take you there].

PREFACE

The following pages hold the collected writings of a contract that I had earlier this year, in Summer 2020. I was invited to perform my innovative solo contortion act – *VACUUM* – on *Supertalent*, a German TV show that follows a typical 'talent show' format. I decided to document the process through a stream of story installations to a special part of my mailing list – basically, longform live-tweeting.

I've preserved the pacing and separations in this story that the original e-mails created, along with some images from that adventure. That means that it's not a polished work of literary art - nor is it meant to be - so please be forgiving of formatting or grammatical inconsistencies.

If you're interested in reading more about *VACUUM*, there's a lot of **free, public** posts on my Patreon that documented the creation and research phase of this project. You can [find that here](#).

AUGUST 25TH, 2020: THE HEART OF A VACUUM

The final hours are elapsing until I walk onto that Boeing Dreamliner with Miranda (my amazing tech! she keeps me alive & makes the act the carefully choreographed air-pressure-ballet that it is – those vacuums don't run themselves, folks). I'm masked, gloved, and hand-sanitizer'ed to the gills. I've got some final thoughts to share with you while I leave you to fly 6 hours into the future.

It warms my heart to be able to tell you, my merry band of strange and wonderful creatures, a little more about why this project came into being. It helps me ask some questions that I find particularly fascinating in relation to the body, and to the ways that we interact with the world.

I shared with you folks a few days ago that one of the philosophical underpinnings of the act is exploring what the line is between *stunts* and *circus*; about the element of visible risk in relation to creating the experience of 'spectacle'. But it's also an act that I've used to explore three other concepts near and dear to my aforementioned artist's heart:

- *What is the boundary between what we find beautiful and what we find grotesque?*
- *In what ways can an apparatus obscure gender?*
- *What happens when you juxtapose a circus discipline often fetishized in the West (contortion) with a fetish object (a vac-tower), with a choreography devoid of any sexualization?*
- *In what ways can the slow, 'moving image' style choreography of traditional Mongolian contortion (which is falling out of style for short-attention-span Western audiences) be adapted to contemporary expressions?*

There's a couple short rehearsal clips that I uploaded to TikTok last week – they've both gone over 1,000,000 views (TikTok is a weird place.) Unfortunately, the feedback on those videos is fairly limited to "I saw something like that on p***h***", or "I saw a girl die in one of these", or –

weirdly – thinking that me hinting at an upcoming "show" must mean either a new season of *Stranger Things* or *American Horror Story* (errrr . . . no.)

I don't expect much more than that from TikTok, and the comment threads are something of a science experiment themselves in relation to that third concept I listed above (something I will likely explore in a longer form in the nearish future?) – but it still feels good that there a couple hundred of you out there who I can at least shout out those bullet points to. To be able to share the many beautiful facets of the act beyond holy s*** that is TERRIFYING / COOL, or the 'oxygen has left the chat's and 'my claustrophobia says "NO"'.

Contortion bodies that we interpret as female are often sexualized. At best, perhaps they are 'elegant' or 'graceful' (nothing wrong with those descriptors, but they're still within a firm category); contortion bodies interpreted as male are often seen as grotesque (or, occasionally, humorous -- as is often the case with frontbending acts). What happens when it is more difficult to ascertain the gender of the artist inside the apparatus? Is the act 'sexy'? Is it beautiful? Is it horrifying? What happens at the intersection of some or all of those things?

(The internet is pretty confused on this front. I am delighted.)

The heart of *VACUUM* is a many-chambered thing. All mammals have hearts with a mere 4 chambers, so it definitely has more chambers than a human heart. But probably less chambers than Benedict-Cumberbatch-as-Sherlock-Holmes mind palace. (I'll let you know when I figure it out.) When you watch bits and pieces of it again with those above bullet points in mind, does anything new, different, dark, shiny, confusing, curious start swimming about in your head? (If you need a memory jog, I've included that little YouTube teaser of it below. Good lord, this thing jumped up to 720K views...?! What is happening?! ***EDITOR'S NOTE: **1.78 million at the time of this collection, December 2020!**). [VACUUM – Innovative Solo Contortion – Ess Hödlmoser \(Strange Wonderful Creature\)](#).

Stay strange & wonderful until I'm back at sea level, my lovelies –ess

AUGUST 27TH, 2020: THE BOOR IN THE BOARDING LOUNGE

"Are we gonna have a problem?" the man projected through his mask, watery blue eyes widening in challenge as he leaned towards me aggressively. A small flicker of irritation bloomed in me immediately at the space violation.

His consonants were swallowed up by a slight UK accent, I noted – somewhere from Northern England?

Context: It was 8:35am in the Schipol Airport boarding lounge. We'd landed from our Toronto --> Amsterdam flight about an hour before, and had 2 hours still to go until our flight to Hamburg boarded. The man had come around from my right side moments before, arms outstretched in the universal sign for "*what the hell*" as he paused between my seat at the end of the row of boarding lounge chairs, and Miranda. She was napping on the floor, out of the way of foot traffic, a metre or so from my seat.

My headphones still on, I snuck a look upward at him as he shook his head at my companion's sleeping form, muttering something I couldn't quite catch.

I prickled more. *It's so early for this.*

He stomped over a few seats to my left and sat down with a heavy *thwump*, took one more long look at Miranda, and shook his head some more.

I turned my head to look at him while he glowered at Miranda.

Don't do anything else, I warned him silently – and returned to my writing.

The man turned his attention back to me.

Eyes on my screen, I could see in my peripheral vision that he was now staring unblinkingly at me.

I didn't like that very much. I'd been awake for coming up on 20 hours.

Imprudently, I turned to look back at him.

This was the point at which he returned my gaze with the charming opening line I shared with you above: *Are we gonna have a problem?*

"No," I responded evenly, not backing down from the eye contact.

I was in no mood to suffer fools. Certainly not from some puffy-faced jerk with fuzzy poorly done tattoos squiggling out from under the cuff of his rolled-up white joggers and faded t-shirt. With the addition of his nose poking out above his mask and a reddish excuse for a beard clinging to his jaw, he looked precisely like the kind of man you'd imagine picking a fight with a couple other passengers in a boarding lounge at an ungodly early hour.

I continued: "Just noticed that *you* seemed to be taking an issue with my friend here catching up on some sleep on the floor while we wait for our next flight. Just making sure that we're all good here, and – looks like we're fine." I turn back to my laptop with what I hope he will take as the period to the end of this interaction.

"OH," he said loudly, turning in his seat to fully square up with me. *Shit.*

"Your friend is trying to sleep, huh?" he mimicked childishly, and proceeded to stomp his feet flatly and loudly on the tile floor, a couple feet away from Miranda's head. *Seriously?! Miranda started to stir (it takes a lot to wake her up). Asshole,* I thought.

The scattered passengers around the rest of the boarding lounge looked over nervously at his raised voice.

There wasn't an airline or airport employee to be seen.

At that moment, I looked down briefly to gather my thoughts – and spotted the open tallboy of Heineken clutched in his ham-like fist.

What the –?! Who sold this guy a beer before 9 in the morning? The next thing I saw was the loonie-sized circle of foamy, clear fluid on the seat next to me, between Miranda's purse and phone that I was watching. It hadn't been there a moment before.

"Did you – *spit?* On my friend's seat?" I say, my brain adding up the behaviour of the last minute to reach this conclusion with zero filter.

"WHOA, WHOA, WHOA," the troll said, gesturing with his beer can. "It was just my *beer*. Now you – that is – a SERIOUS thing to say right now, with COVID –". His mask crawled lower and lower down his face as he worked up his head of steam.

I took another slow breath through my nose to keep my voice even: "Ah. Alright then. Thanks for clearing that up."

"No, you APOLOGIZE. You can't go around *saying* that stuff."

Miranda was fully awake now, eyes blinking blearily at this odd awakening.

"I'm not apologizing to you," I say calmly. "I asked you a question. You answered it. There's no offense to find there."

"What are you - AMERICAN?" he sneered.

My lip curled under my mask.

"No," Miranda and I said simultaneously, flatly unimpressed.

"Apologize," he demanded again.

"My dude –" Miranda started, eyes narrowing over *her* mask. She was drowned out by more waves of indignant blustering.

He's drunk, I tried to repeat to myself as a calming mantra.

I was feeling intensely heated towards the mouth breathing hobgoblin hellbent on intimidating us.

I can only assume it was some bid to satisfy his overblown tiny man syndrome.

And maybe the breakfast beer.

In the midst of weighing the likelihood of this man getting physically in my space if I continued to interact with him (or what he'd do if I proceeded to ignore him), a voice cut through his bluster

—

"Oh HEY! There you guys are! I couldn't see you!"

A young woman with a brightly flower-printed homemade mask and a hot pink backpack was marching towards us.

"Hey," Miranda answered smoothly, immediately.

"Oh –" she said, looking at our row of chairs. "There's probably not a seat for me here if we want to stay distanced, come on over to this side of the lounge."

"Sounds great," I said. "We were wondering when we'd find you!"

I packed up my belongings with deliberate slowness in a final *f*** you* to this prick, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of thinking he'd scared us off with his ill-mannered behaviour.

Our hawk-eyed rescuer – *Riley*, she introduced herself as – led us away to a small pocket of less-occupied space in the concerningly packed boarding lounge (everyone *was* wearing masks, though). Turned out she was a university student in Bremen, flying back from Seattle. She was an international politics major. She'd lived on a houseboat since she was 6 years old; she found the dormitory accommodations of her tiny university residence quite spacious, she told us.

"Make sure you go to the teahouse in the Schnoor district," she told us excitedly. "It's the old district – like, *medieval* old. The teahouse is cute as hell. Looks straight out of Diagon Alley in Harry Potter."

Thankfully, it turned out that the troll wasn't going to Hamburg. I pity Luxembourg (the next flight on that boarding lounge's charts) for having to deal with him.

I've never wanted to punch someone so badly before nine in the morning.

First time for everything though, right?

More tales of drunken men to come –

Stay strange & wonderful until then.

ess

AUGUST 28TH, 2020:

BREMEN & BLITZED BATHROOM BREAK-INS - PART 1

"ESS, GET UP. GET UP NOW."

These are not words my exhaustion-soaked brain processed quickly at 2am. We'd finally gotten settled into our hotel room sometime around 8pm, fallen asleep at 10pm.

"What? Why ..." I mumbled blearily, half sitting-up in bed. My body shivered with exhaustion.

"There's someone in this room."

"Now?" I asked dumbly, with none of the urgency demanded by the situation.

"Yes, *NOW*," Miranda hissed.

What the . . . "Where –" and then I saw the light from the bathroom spilling widely into the entrance hallway.

"There was a man in the f***ing bathroom," she said, eyes wide.

Oh shit.

"Was?" I repeat, trying to shake off my foggiess.

Adrenaline began overriding the exhaustion. Miranda had leapt across the room, was barricading the door with her body: "*Come help me!*"

I didn't hear anything, except a weird snuffling coming from the hallway. I looked around. What the hell was there in the room to use defensively? Nothing. Useless. Water was spreading across the floor of the hallway.

"Help me block the door!" she said again. "He's still trying to get in."

I swore, adding my weight and bracing off the frame of the bathroom door right behind us.
"What the f*** . . . did he break in?"

Miranda shrugged, eyes still wide. *"I heard an extra -click- when I slammed the door,"* Miranda whispered. *"Stupid door."*

"But it was locked!"

"It was, like, a millimetre of -click-." There was no eye-hole to peer out into the hallway on the door of this hotel room. No security chain. Not even an obvious deadbolt to throw. The internal lock consisted of a small, black plastic button that slid to the right to indicate it was locked.

"Jesus," I swore. *"What the . . . he was in the bathroom?"*

"He was in the bathroom, dude. This big tall guy. Call the front desk!"

BREMEN & BLITZED BATHROOM BREAK-INS - PART 2

"Got the door?"

"Yeah."

I rushed back into the room, to the little office table that the standard hotel coffee maker sat on –

"THERE IS NO PHONE IN THIS ROOM," I whisper-shouted. *Wait – duh.* I grabbed my iPhone and grabbed the number of the hotel on Google Maps. I rushed back, handed Miranda the phone. *"Talk to them, I've got the door."*

She stepped back a couple metres. I could hear a weird shuffling sound outside on the carpet, like someone shifting their weight. There was heavy breathing. *What the actual –*

"Hello, yes? There's a man trying to get into our room. Can you please come up?" Miranda said.

"Okay, I will come up," said an inappropriately calm voice in German-tinged English on the other end of the line.

I look over to the bathroom again. There's a growing pool of water making its way out into the hall. *Please don't be pee, please don't be pee . . .*

I reach around the corner and throw a used towel on top of the creeping puddle.

It's just water.

Phew. I throw a couple more on top of the mini-lake in the main part of the bathroom.

What was he doing? Taking a bath in the sink like a bird?

The breathing has become deeper, slower. If I had to guess, I would say that it almost sounds almost like someone passed o–

"Hallo?" comes a loud voice from the hallway.

Our knight has arrived.

"HALLO?" the voice says, louder. Miranda and I look at each other. We crack the door open.

Sure enough, there is a man belly-down on the striped hotel hallway carpet, head turned to the side and resting up upturned palms as a makeshift pillow. The tips of his short red mohawk are mashed up against the doorframe. The hotel employee looks like Santa Claus.

"Aufwachen!" Santa says. "Hallo! Du musst aufstehen!" He turns to us. "Do you know him?" he asks.

"No," we say simultaneously, staring down at his prone form.

Santa shakes the man's shoulder more firmly. "HEY! Get up! Ach, he is drunk ..."

The man's eyes open blearily, then drift heavily shut again.

"Hey buddy, wrong room - " I say loudly.

The eyes open a crack again, and then snap wide.

He looks down at the carpet with no small amount of confusion, tries to slump himself up onto one arm, his mussed button-up missing its buttons and hanging agape.

He looks up at me, looks over to Miranda.

Back over to German Santa.

"Hallo! You are at the wrong room! Are you a guest?"

The drunk sits all the way up, sharing a loose, wide smile with us. It errs on the side of amusement more than embarrassment. We do not smile back.

"Yeah... [*indecipherable*] ..."

"Which room?"

"*Th...three!*" the drunk says, holding up the incorrect number of fingers. He chooses that moment to try to rifle through the pockets of his jeans (presumably for his room card) and loses his balance.

We slowly start to close the door. "Yeah, ok! I'll take care of it!" German Santa says.

We close the door the rest of the way.

Look at each other.

Simultaneously give an extra *heave-ho* to the door until we hear a microscopic *click*

Mop up the rest of the small lake in the bathroom with our remaining towels, throw those in the shower. Pad back to our beds.

I want sleep to come quickly, but it doesn't.

AUGUST 29TH, 2020: CALM BEFORE THE STORM

The small medieval town of Bremen is brimming with history. It bubbles up and spills out over the quaint cobblestones that pave many of the streets in and around the town square.

There's a *Brothers' Grimm* fairytale named after it. It's home to several UNESCO world heritage sites, including a Rathaus (town hall) built in the 1400s, with an 'updated' facade from the 1600s. You know, contemporary architecture.



One of the most imposing historical artifacts scattered casually around the city is the 'Bremen Roland' – a 5.5m tall statue of a sword-and-shield bearing paladin standing guard over the city in the centre of the town square. There's a legend that if the Roland ever falls, so will the city; consequently, there's *another* legend that there's a "back-up" Roland housed in the basement of the Rathaus.

Street buskers fill the square with music, with giant bubbles, with human statue acts.

There's open-air patios full of people enjoying their pint of golden beer at 11:30am.

Masks are a far less common sight here than back home in Toronto.

Last night, there were no drunk men trying to break into our hotel room - but we *were* woken up every hour, on the hour, from 11pm to 4am by drunken revellers outside the hotel.

Miranda and I wander around the city in a combination of jetlag-haze and exhaustion-adrenaline. As we make our way through narrow, winding streets lined with quaint cafés and curio shops, my mind wanders, too.

This is the first time that I'll have been able to share this act outside of the debut it had in Toronto, in February.

Sure, it's gonna absolutely bonkers levels of viewing on YouTube, but that's not the same as live performance.

I hope that they like it.

No, they're gonna love it.

They'll never have seen anything like this act before.

Like, actually – never been done before.

It's unique.

I glow a little just thinking about it.

But am I ready? More anxious thoughts creep in.

What if I get stuck in a weird shape?

It doesn't happen often in rehearsal but it still ... occasionally ... happens ...

– No.

I push these ones out of my mind;

I didn't rehearse with Miranda every day for the last 2 weeks polishing and visualizing and tweaking and perfecting for these 3 minutes on stage to go anything less than perfectly. We've got this nailed down.

And then the thoughts I've been burying repeatedly in the back of my mind roll up again, tiredness making it easier for them to resurface:

How are they going to refer to you?

What if they misgender you on European television?

What do you do if they don't know what to do with a trans artist?

In April of this year I had top surgery.

The call for this contract came one month after my surgery.

The timeline was tight to be recovered in time – but it wasn't impossible.

I said yes (obviously).

I spent the first months of quarantine in a CBD and percocet haze, being a diligent patient and prioritizing my healing before I prioritized rehabbing my range of motion and flexibility. I was confident going into the surgery that having my full range of motion afterwards would be possible, but physically going about reclaiming that mobility was a different task.

I was focused. I followed my surgical guidelines. I did my physio religiously.

I suffered gladly through painful sessions of Jen Crane grinding through my scar tissue with aggressive manual therapy.

I busted my ass reminding my spine how to work with the rest of the muscles in my body in order to achieve the level of flexibility needed to perform contortion, to perform *VACUUM*.

My mental health was better than it had ever been; better than I ever hoped it could be.

There was a level of somatic peace that existed in me that I didn't know was possible.

I started talking about trans identity, and transitioning, and gender performance, more and more in my online spaces. I started answering messages from teenagers reaching out to me, desperate to find any kind of adult who seemed healthy, who looked like, and talked about, the things they were confused about still, or scared to share with the world.

I also received some death threats from strangers on the internet at the same time; the milder interactions were threatening, or violent, or dismissive.

I was told that I was mentally ill and needed psychiatric help, not a surgeon.

They'd inform me that I'd mutilated myself.

Insist that I'd never be anything except a girl.

I took all of this hatred and spun it back out into salty jokes, into meaningful conversations, into positive discussions – while I healed.

There's a quiet and simple confidence that exists inside of me, post-surgery, that makes these conversations possible to sustain, to survive.

There was – and honestly still is – levels of internalized transphobia and dissociation that made it difficult to see and accept the path that I needed to take for myself. But I finally did. I wish I had sooner.

But -

There's just a whole different level of nerve-wracking doubt around going to a country where you

1. don't speak the language (beyond a few phrases that'll get you by in a coffee shop),
2. where the language is gendered, and
3. where you're going to be half naked on television.

I can handle critique or dislike of my artistic work; but at this point in my career, my body is inseparable from that work.

I put on a brave face and deal with even the most obnoxious or aggressive of comments as gracefully as I can.

The fact remains that critiques of my work – of my body – that are violent and hateful add up to internal dialogues that are anything but productive.

Above all things with this contract, I fear this the most.

Not injury.

Not messing up my act.

But facing the level of vitriol I deal with online . . . in person.

With some HD cameras trained on my face.

There is absolutely a limit to the amount of ignorance one can take beating down their door on a given day.

This is something that I don't know how I will handle, if I have to ...

You're not going to have to, I interrupt myself.

Miranda and I have walked a giant loop around the heart of the city.

We're nearly back to the hotel. It's time to eat some food, stretch, and get a good night's rest before the big day tomorrow.

I shake my head, chasing unhelpful thoughts away more thoroughly:

You've already pushed down all the doubt that your body wouldn't – couldn't – remember how to do the incredible things it does after being so immobile for three months, right? And – here we are. In Bremen. On the eve of the contract. You did it . You've got this.

And - anxious ruminations aside - it's worth noting that these kinds of productions always want a backstory, and in this case, my recent top surgery was one that they seemed particularly interested in.

I didn't mind sharing some personal photos with them of the weeks that followed that surgery, back in April.

The producer I was in contact with through email prior to coming here responded reassuringly to my emphatic requests that my legal name not be used *anywhere* in the course of this contract other than my flight information and my cheque.

Small little moments that can raise tiny red flags have been traversed without incident already.

Conversations have been had about trans stuff, I tell myself firmly.

You've done what you can. You'll just have to handle whatever comes your way, good or bad.

Anxiety isn't a good use of your energy right now, anyways.

Focus on the act.

MORGEN - PART 1

It's 9.10am and Miranda and I are hauling the giant, heavy snowboard bag (the vac tower) and a giant, oversized suitcase (the vacuums, cords, tubing, backup latex sleeve,

and sound-muffling boxes) over bumpy side streets towards the Bremen Metropolitan Theatre.



I was fairly pleased with myself for being clever enough to think up a circus act in which the apparatus itself can fit tidily into a pre-made bag - *with wheels, no less!* But what had rolled effortlessly across the polished floors of Pearson International Airport was now struggling over the hundred-years-old cobblestones. My teeth rattled in their sockets as I swore and hauled the unruly thing one block after another.

Finally, the theatre comes into view: a big, beautiful building - only thirty years old or so. It's one of the most modern theatre houses in Germany, and the elegant, swooping glass overhang of its main entrance announces it as such. One other young man sits outside the locked doors of the theatre – a street busker from the south of Germany. It's 9.24am.

"Not open yet?" we ask.

He responded with a wink: 'This is Germany; the doors will open at exactly 9.30am'.

That checks out, I think.

There are two shows happening today and we're performing in the evening one. At 8.30pm last night my phone rang with a production assistant asking us to come by early for a little electrical test.

Miranda and I were pleased with this development, despite the insultingly early wake-up time she and I had to muster up to do so: if one of our vacuums was gonna blow a circuit or something, far better that it happen *early* (when there's still a chance to run to a hardware store and grab a backup, and/or for them to reset whatever circuits might have to be reset) than an hour before the show itself.

A few other small clusters of performers slowly join us in front of the theatre, smoking cigarettes or sipping coffees; presumably, these folks are all in the afternoon show. I'm tired, and I'm craving a coffee too, but it's hard to be grumpy when the morning light is golden and warm on our faces, the streets are still and quiet, and there's a light breeze gently moving through.

It's going to be a beautiful day.

The doors open at 9.34am (*Ha!*) and the slow march of bureaucracy begins.

We file inside the theatre painfully slowly, social distancing rules and the single elevator in the lobby joining forces to make the entire affair happen at a snail's pace. Up to the second floor, out into another hallway, and through a set of wide double doors into the upper lobby of the theatre. We're shuffled into the rest of the morning crowd – doesn't matter that we're not on until 7pm tonight.

They want our COVID paperwork, they want our passports, and they want our contracts . . .

All of which are sitting safely back in our hotel room.

"Sorry, we're just here for a quick electrical test we were told – we didn't bring our paperwork. We can just ... bring it when we come back for this evening's show?"

The two women staffing the sign-in desk make apologetic expressions. "Well, we'll just need you to do the paperwork here, again." They hand us fresh, blank sets of the required paperwork.

I grumble in my head as I accept the pages, lamenting the ink and paper I wasted on my attempts to be prepared back home. I dredge up photos of our passports on my phone in lieu of the real thing (also safely back in the hotel room), hand back the stack of papers, and a tall blonde PA appears at our backs to escort us down to the backstage area (to be fair, every PA in sight is tall and blonde).

Plush, scarlet carpet muffles the *thump-thump-thump* of the snowboard bag being hauled down five gently sloping flights of stairs.

"Watch your step," the PA warns us, and shoves a large steel door open.

Rolling waves of lush red seating.

Glittering white house lights.

The mirror-polished black sheen of the stage.

We're here.

MORGEN - PART 2

The theatre is a beehive of activity. Everyone wears black (of course), everyone has a headset, lighting rigs are being flown, equipment is being wheeled about, humans with clipboards are pointing at various corners of the room looking important while underlings scurry about.

Doing as the locals do, Miranda and I beeline for the back wall – across the stage and behind an absolutely *massive* wall of LED screens. I look to the left – there's a small little 'video village' (a cluster of monitors where important people sit and watch all the different camera angles as the show is live), and then a back storage area full to the rafters with other peoples' gear and equipment.

"*Always find a rigger!*" is something my friend Shack says – a stunt rigger himself (no bias there, obviously). His words rise up in my head as I spot a guy wearing a t-shirt with the logo of a flaming, falling man – and the edges of a website address with the words *stunt* in it.

"Excuse me! *Entschuldigung! Bitte!*" I call madly, power walking towards this unsuspecting man.

He turns around and I see kind eyes above the blue of his surgical mask. He looks *just* like a stunt coordinator from Toronto named 'Jagersky' – one of the nicest men in the business – and I instantly take a liking to this German doppelgänger.

"Is it okay if we take over this part of the wall here?" I ask, gesturing to a small section of unoccupied space immediately behind the LED screens, to the side of the massive, sliding loading bay door.

"Absolutely," he says, and hops up to slide a couple tables and pieces of equipment to the left and right to make more room for us. The speed at which he moves reminds me instantly of how stunt guys are with on-set etiquette at home: quick to jump up and help. "I'm Peter, by the way," he says. "What do you need to set up?"

"Thank you," I say gratefully. Miranda and I take turns bouncing off one another, explaining as clearly as we can that the piece of equipment we've hauled with us from Canada is ridiculously delicate: no sharp corners, no metal on clothing, no rings, no leaning things on it . . . we rattle off a long list. Peter nods his head along and disappears back into the gloom of backstage.

Miranda and I go about assembling the tower, slowly, carefully.

There are rough, sharp corners *everywhere* in this backstage and a low buzz of nervousness settles in at the back of my skull.

[We're going to have to stand guard with the bloody tower all day, I think. There's no way I'm leaving this thing unattended!]

Peter appears to our right out of nowhere again, hauling giant foam mats for us to set the equipment on.

"So it doesn't tear," he says.

Always find a rigger!

We have the tower set up by 10.45am.

We spy a call sheet with the order of performers and we're . . .

Dead last.

Only . . . 10 hours to kill, now.

"Well that's not so bad," Miranda says. "I have to run back to the hotel to grab some stuff; you can nap; this'll be fine."

Ohhh, it would have been nice if it had actually gone that way . . .

NACHMITTAG - THE RUNAROUND

Another giant, blonde Teutonic PA swoops in and spirits me away. "For some interviews," she says.

For the next *six* hours, I'm bounced around from camera crew to camera crew:

First I'm hustled into a dark corner set with SFX fog and a shelf full of various props.

"*Do something cool!*" the obviously-overworked camera man says.

"What is this for?" I ask.

"It's the *beauty shots*."

"Beauty shots?"

"Yeah, you know, you do something ... fun." He gestures vaguely to the wall of props.
I bend over backwards to eyeball the camera upside down and throw a handstand or two.



They seem satisfied.
Then I'm outside, doing crocs and handstands in park
~casually~ for their B-roll:

Film is never natural.
A small German child wipes out on his bike while staring open-mouthed at one of my tricks and starts wailing.
"Okay, that's enough," says the female AD with this particular camera crew, smiling through gritted teeth as the kids screams continue unabated.

I'm shuttled back inside. "Can I go downstairs to the tower?" I ask.

"No, we need you for more interviews."

"Okay."

Another hour passes.

"Hey, I need to head down to the tower, my tech needs to run back to the hotel to grab some things. We didn't think we were going to be kept here from 9am, you folks had initially told us early afternoon for our call time . . . "

"Okay we're just going to film something with you real quick."

I wait for another hour.

I'm not one to be difficult on set, but it seems like I'm hitting a wall in between what the production assistant's are juggling with their ever-shifting schedule, and what *I* need to do to be ready for the show this evening.

"Okay, if you're not filming with me, I'm going to go downstairs," I say firmly, and perhaps somewhat testily (we were told there was lunch somewhere, but we never got it).

"No, no! We need to do the interview with you . . ."

"You can call me up from backstage when you're ready."

"No, no, just wait –"

The frenzied-looking PA darts off to another group of black-t-shirted, headset-wearing PAs and there are lots of radio calls in quiet German.

Finally –

"Okay, you can come in now."

I'm brought into the large, staged waiting room.

There are several vanity-style beauty mirrors set up, small clusters of chairs, a ballet bar and a mirror at the back corner, and heavy red velvet curtains around the perimeter of the room. Nobody actually warms up or spends time here. It's just for show. There are two or three other groups doing interviews at the same time.

My interviewer and camera-man start up with my questions just as the group next to us starts projecting so loudly that we're forced to stop several times mid-answer and start over again (usually in the midst of a somewhat serious answer).

I'm struggling to stay focused.

They want to ask me about my brain injury.

About the act (obviously).

About transitioning & gender identity things.

I answer everything as confidently and clearly as I can.

There's a weird tension that I'm feeling, and it's growing.

On *France's Got Talent*, this part of things somehow didn't feel . . . invasive. Or . . . impersonal. Maybe it's because my French is better than my German. Maybe it's because my duo partner Troy James was with me in France and I'm alone here in Germany.



Whatever it is, I'm spilling my guts to the interviewers (because that's what you're supposed to do on these shows. I'm well aware of what 'makes good television', whether it comes off insincerely on the part of the production or not; and I've been hired to do a good job, which means being entertaining. It's essentially visual clickbait).

But I don't feel very good about it as I do it. I feel distrustful that this information is going to be used the way I'd like it to be used. Too late now. I ignore my gut feeling and push on with the day.

Only a few hours to go, now.

Finally, it seems like they're finished with the behind-the-scenes recordings.

"Is that it for interviews for the day?" I ask the PA who's been shepherding me from room to room.

"Yes," she says.

"Okay cool. I just want to make sure that you guys have everything you need before I'm backstage and preparing for the show ..."

"No, no, that's it."

"Alright. You're *really* sure?"

"Yes."

"Because once 7pm rolls around I need to be focusing on my act."

"It's fine. I'll take you back downstairs now."



NACHMITTAG -

OUT OF TIME, OR, THE CURSE OF CANADIAN POLITENESS

I've choked down a banana and a protein bar in the absence of any full meals.



There's a refreshment stand in a back corner of the greenrooms sneaking away from the main backstage area. Ever-so-slightly carbonated apple juice seems to be the libation of choice, which I can confidently say is a beverage I have never before had in my life. I can't decide if it's amazing or bizarre.

We've watched the rest of the acts for the evening show complete their techs and stage rehearsals - speaking with the stage manager or the safety officer or a lighting technician. We're last on the callsheet, so I figure we'll be last to do our rehearsal.

But as the clock ticks ever-onwards and 6pm rolls around, I start to get nervous. The show starts in one hour.

Just as I've resolved to go flag down a PA to inquire about our tech run, one appears out of the backstage gloom.

She's wearing a pained expression.

Apologetically, she says: "I'm so sorry, but, we will not be having time to do your rehearsal before the show . . ."

"*What?!*" Mirand and I exclaim simultaneously.

"What do you mean?" I say.

"*We need a tech run,*" Miranda says flatly.

"Ahh, you know, we've run out of time ..." She makes noises about unionized lunch breaks and certain acts taking longer than others.

I interrupt her. "I'm sorry," I apologize Canadianly right back, "but no. We've been here for hours and hours, waiting for our turn on stage. It's not our fault if time wasn't managed properly for other acts, we have the right to have our act tech'd properly too."

Her eyebrows draw inwards and upwards as she hugs her clipboard tighter to her chest. "I'm sorry, there's just no time."

"This is a safety issue," Miranda says. "If we haven't done the tech run, how do your stage techs know when to open the curtain? Or how this apparatus should be lit? It has to be lit in a certain way so that *I'm* not seen by the audience, which ruins the visual if it happens."

You're representing your country. Be polite. Be courteous, I think, wanting to rage loudly.

"I start the act at full suction," I say, trying to explain further. I keep my voice even and my face calm. "It's a safety issue if your technician doesn't open this curtain on time and I'm there with no

air for too long. My technician will have to reintroduce air to the volume and the entire act will be off. We need our rehearsal."

She hesitates. I've said the magic S-word.

"Well . . . you do not have to do your act if you feel it is not safe!" she says.

I can't.

"No," I say as evenly as I can. "I did not come across the Atlantic ocean during a global pandemic only to *not* perform the act I have worked hard to prepare for your production because your team is not prepared to give us the bare minimum for a stage rehearsal!"

"Look," I say, softening, trying to meet her halfway. *You can't get blood from a stone.* "Even if we can *speak* to the stage manager and lighting and sound directors - just a conversation - that's better than *nothing*."

"Let me ... see if I can go ... find someone ..." she says with some relief.

She scurries away.

I hate being that person.

But is that what it takes to get what you need?

We were polite and played along all day . . . only to be shuffled to the bottom of the deck of cards.

I keep fighting with myself as my stomach drops. Miranda and I quietly discuss emergency options for what we'll do if the technicians let us down as we wait to see if anyone will come to speak with us after all . . .

Just stay calm, I tell myself. Whatever this ends up being you're going to do your best.

ABEND - THE S-WORD

Because I've said the S-word ('safety' issue), the tall, stern-looking German Safety Coordinator on set marches over within 15 minutes of the PA scurrying away.



"Hello," he says. "I have been informed that there is a safety issue. When we spoke earlier today you said that there were no issues . . ."

I look him squarely in the eye. "That *was* the case. Before we were informed that our tech rehearsal was cancelled, that is. Earlier today we were under the impression that we would be

given the same amount of rehearsal time on stage as all your other acts in order to be adequately prepared to do this act; now we've been told there's no tech rehearsal, so we have no assurance that the rest of the production team here will know the cues that make this act safe."

"Ah, I see," says Mr. Safety Coordinator. "Well, you do not *have* to do the act if you do not feel safe..."

This again!

"Sir," I say as politely as I can muster. "The act is fine. One of your PAs mentioned that we might be able to speak to the heads of department instead, since there's no longer time to give us a run-through on stage..."

"Yes, this is within your right to ask for," the safety coordinator says plainly. "We will make the meeting."

Within 5 minutes, the lighting director, soundbooth technician, and stage manager walk up.

Miranda and I start running them through the details of the act as clearly as possible.

The curtain needs to open at this moment; look for Miranda to give you this hand signal.

You will know to look for Miranda's signal at the beginning? Yes? Okay.

You can't open the curtain late. I have no air inside the apparatus at the beginning.

Have you lit something like this before?

The latex is semi-transparent, and more so when it's at full suction. It needs to be lit from this kind of angle so that we don't see my technician behind the tower. If we see her, the illusion is ruined.

The curtain has to close at this time; it might not look like an obvious conclusion to the choreography, because I'm inside the tower the whole time.

I'm going to be holding this handstand until you close the curtain. Please don't forget to close the curtain on time ...

Can you say it back to me, what shape you're looking for in order to know when to close the curtain?

The vacuums are running in the background on and off through the act. Are there monitors at the front of the stage for us to be able to hear the sound?

The track has a wide volume range; it starts SUPER quiet, but we need to hear it. You'll have to modulate it by the 2 minute mark, because by that point it gets really loud ... Will we be able to hear it on stage properly?

What angle is the camera team shooting from? I see they have some techno-cranes ... the act is built to the front. Can we please make sure that they don't shoot this from the top or the sides? All of the tricks 'sell' to the front. If they choose a high side angle or something it's going to look like garbage.

We get nods all around.

I heave a sigh and thank all of them for making time to come speak with us.

"*Nothing to do now but hope for the best,*" I mutter to Miranda once we're by ourselves again.

It's 6:45pm now; the show is starting in 15 minutes.

It's time to start warming up slowly. I cue up a Headspace meditation first and settle in to some slow, deep breaths.

"Hey!" comes the peppy voice of another production assistant. I open an eye and look up at her. "So we just need to grab you for a couple more interviews!" she says cheerfully.

"I – " my ears are ringing slightly. *You're stressed. Chill out. This is how these things go. Don't get worked up. Just politely say – "No."*

Her smile shrinks by a couple molars. "Uh - but - well, we need - "

"No," I repeat calmly.

The film industry professional in me knows that this woman - along with every other PA here - is under a lot of pressure, and beholden to a lot of different factors that she has zero control over ... but the film industry professional in me also knows that if I don't draw a line I'm going to keep being nibbled to death until the day is over. Everyone thinks their own agenda is the most

important thing; and a small part of me is dying at not being obedient and willing, but the larger part of me knows that I'm the only one responsible for making sure that I'm able to perform my act the way I want it showcased on European television.

"I'm very sorry," I continue. "I don't mean to make your life difficult, but I explicitly stated that I need this time to warm up. I clarified earlier in the day that your team was done with me for interviews; I need to be very mentally focused and physically warmed up for this act and I need *all* of this remaining time to do so."

She's wringing her hands.

I sigh internally and give a little. "What is it exactly that you're missing and need to shoot?"

"Well we shoot all the contestants in this little special backstage area, right before they go on..."

"You mean a different special backstage area than the one I was doing tricks in before, upstairs?"

"Yes, this one is just to the side of the stage."

"Tell you what," I say. "I'll continue my final few warm-up drills in your special backstage area when I'm on deck/standing by to go onstage, as the act before me begins. You can get whatever footage you want of me there, but I can't be answering interview questions. I need to be focusing."

"Okay," she says, placated, and walks away.

Ninety minutes to go.

ABEND - IT'S CURTAINS

Act after act takes the stage in fantastical blurs of colours, costumes, lights, and sound. In between splits and handstand reps, I poke my head around one of the backstage corners to sneak glimpses of the monitors set up there.

A drag queen troupe has a costume malfunction.

A master hairdresser is displaying rows and rows of fantastical wigs braided into structural masterpieces.

A comedian is getting a stern-looking review from the judges.

I ask one of the German crew members sitting in front of the monitors what the judges are saying.

"They're saying he's not so funny."

"Oh dear."

"Ah, it's hard," he says with a shrug. "What's funny in England is maybe not so funny to Germans, or maybe not funny elsewhere but funny in Germany ... comedy is hard."

Makes sense.

There are a few other acrobatic acts in the program: tumbling and aerial solos and duos, partner balancing, the works.

I'm feeling warm and supple.

The tower is ready to go and the techs know how to move it properly. Miranda will supervise that part, too.

We're moments away.

I bundle up a second backwarmer around my midsection, throw my hoodie on overtop, and diligently head over to the designated 'special' backstage area where the PA asked me to be 'on deck' for my act. I part the red curtain sectioning off that area from the rest of the backstage and walk into a small area with lights, mirrors, cameramen, and more headset-wearing crew members.



I nod hello and slowly curl over backwards from standing into a bridge, then down to cheststand. I stretch one leg after the other along the scratchy red carpet that they've laid over the concrete, breathing softly through my nose. I'm distantly aware of the cameraman walking around, probably shooting a few different angles.

"Can we see you in costume?" the woman next to the cameraman whispers loudly.

"Uhhh, yes...?" I reply. "But ... it's literally skin tone briefs. I'm going to look naked. You don't see it inside the apparatus."

"Oh," she says, smiling nervously. "Nevermind."

I can hear that the music for the act before me has ended. The judges are speaking to the performers in a mix of English and German. Smatterings of applause punctuate questions and responses for about 5 more minutes and then -

"Okay, time to go!"

The curtain closes, signalling the crew members to start bringing out my tower and setting it on the stage.

I shed my layers, leaving them in a neat pile off to the side of the backstage holding area.

I try not to think about being mostly naked in front of these crew members, which is now a beehive of activity as people run wires to the vacuums, tape hoses into place, straighten the padding under the tower, and more. My surgery was only 4 months ago. I've been living in a quarantine bubble in my apartment the whole time. Yes, I've shared plenty of dumb IG stories where I'm shirtless, but there's something that feels *very* different about doing so in 'public' for the first time.

A sneaky voice at the back of my head tries to ask me if they think I'm just a girl choosing not to wear a top, but I shove it to the back of my mind, hold my head up high and draw my shoulders back, and stride out onto the stage. *It's my time now. Focus.*

Miranda looks up from where she's finalizing the tape seal around the vacuum hose where it attaches to the tower.

"All good?" she asks me.

"All good," I say firmly.

"Ready?"

"Yup."

She holds open the small opening at the bottom of the tower and I slither in, army-crawl style. My world shrinks.

The non-suctioned panels of the tower hang loosely, soaking in the lights high above and taking on a yellow opaqueness. I can't see what anyone is doing outside, but I can feel Miranda starting to seal the gasket of the tower.

I stand there, taking a few slow, deep breaths. I run through the choreography in my mind quickly one more time.

Don't fall over, don't fall over, don't fall over, has been the background fear for the majority of this experience.

If I was to fall forward or backwards out of a trick while inside the tower, I would topple the entire structure to the ground with a destructive and inglorious *BANG*.

It hasn't happened.

Ever.

But, you know how brains work . . .

It hasn't happened before, it's not going to happen now, I tell the fear firmly. Then, to Miranda; "Are we close?"



"Yup," she says, raising her voice so I can hear her through the muffling latex. "Moments away. Ready for suction?"

"Ready!"

VRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR!!!!!!!

Miranda has switched the vacuums on.

No more talking, now.

If anything goes wrong, I'll have to shake the tower as obviously as I can with my body to try to communicate that I need air, or that I need out.

The walls slowly start closing in, taking on tension as they balloon inwards towards me.

I triple check my position in the tower - *not too far forwards, gotta make sure that back leg stays hidden* - lift up one knee, and drop my head down to rest on it. I'm in position.

There's less and less air in the volume. I've got the emergency breathing tube clamped firmly between my teeth. I don't want to use it unless I *absolutely* have to, and even then I want to try to use it only to breathe *in*. It's far too long for a standard vacuum-tower tube; if I were to use it exclusively for breathing, carbon dioxide would build up in the tube and I'd essentially be re-breathing my own exhale until there was no oxygen left and I blacked out. Definitely for emergencies only.

The latex starts to press in against my skin.

I lose sight of my lower body. Just a small pocket of air around my face now.

Please, PLEASE let them get the cues right...

I hear the vacuums change to the slightly higher pitch that tells me they're labouring to draw the last few gulps of air out of the volume. Just like I've done in countless practices before, I take a long, calm inhale around the tube, equalize my ears, close my eyes, and wait for the *squishhhh*.

The latex closes in firmly around me.

I'm fully immobilized.

My position is good.

Tick ... tick ... tick ...

The suction is holding.

I strain to hear the music starting, those first low heartbeats at the beginning of my track.

Tick ... tick ... tick ...

Is that them? I wonder, the seconds stretching out longer and longer.

I don't hear the curtains opening; can't sense a change in the quality of the light around me.

Is it because nothing is happening? Or is it just the tower?

Are we starting?

Tick ... tick ... tick ...

I stay very still, conserving my oxygen.

Miranda will call it if she thinks things are at the point of being dangerous -

My trust is placed entirely in her judgment call.

Tick ... tick ... tick ...

It's been too long.

It should have started by now.

Something is wrong.

SHOWTIME - LIKE A PROFESSIONAL

You've never been at full suction this long, a faint voice at the

back of my mind tells me. *That is not helpful information right now, I chide myself. Focus.*

Tick. Tick. Tick.

I can't hear. I can't see. I don't know if the act has started. All my faith is in Miranda to make the calls that need to be made.

Then –

Release.

Tiny pockets of air start creeping back into the volume. Miranda's cut the vacuums.

I guess we're starting, I think with a mixture of relief and determination.

I have to wait until there's *juuust* enough air in the volume to suddenly turn my hands around for a mini 'jump-scare': *boom!*

I hear the audience scream and applaud.

OKAY WE'RE ROLLING.

I'm waiting just a little longer for the latex to pull away from my skin so that I can collapse to the bottom of the tower and begin the rest of the choreo. I always think of this moment as being born, in whatever weird sci-fi world I imagine myself in in the context of actually *performing* the act. Lots of people say that the opening image of the act looks like a fetus *in utero*. Others say that, and the breathing tube, gives them *Matrix* vibes. Sometimes I get *Blade Runner 2049* references (those are some of my favourite). Whatever it is, I am an inanimate object becoming animate. I love this moment of promise.

But --

Wait --

The latex begins to close tightly around me again. *What!?*

Then ... finally ... I hear the soundtrack start.

Oh you're kidding me.

It wasn't that I could hear it over the vacuums; it was that they hadn't started playing it at all.

This whole time, there WASN'T music.

And that means – that means that Miranda 'pulled the plug' on the opening image because they hadn't opened the curtains.

*For f***s sakes...* Everything we had worried about (and made an emergency plan for) came true.

I forced myself back into the moment; now I had to sell the movement I had initiated. The surprise/reveal moment of the act was ruined, but that didn't mean that I couldn't just stop moving. I kept slowly working the latex with my hands, praying that the camera op was at least cutting to a close shot for this; it was going to be another 10 full seconds before the volume fully suctioned - *there*, I thought, frozen like a bug in amber once again - and then another 15 seconds for there to be enough release that I could drop down like I had previously been ready to do.



Gonna have to really push for these transitions, I realized grimly. The music marched onwards.

I collapsed to the floor, sliding a hand up desperately on the front of the tower. *Bang bang bang! Let me out!* The latex choked tight around my crumpled form again. A moment of paralysis. And then space again.

I wait until there's enough air in the volume to make my form murky to the audience and begin the slow, precise pivot that I worked through with Roberto Campanella during rehearsals: the hip shifts back *first*, otherwise my movement shows too clearly to the audience; use your legs, use your abs, move back in the volume; leave your hand on the front panel, lead with the wrist, wind your way across the latex to hold focus while you place your feet; more quads more quads more quads, hang on to your abs -- *okay*.

I'm in profile in the tower, right hand slowly drawing the tube up, up, up with gently trailing fingers. My left hand slides down, quietly bracing against the front leg: it creates a tighter looking teardrop when the latex pulls in tight, resisting the 'flattening' effect that the tower makes. It also makes it physically possible to simply hold that deep of a backbend, standing, in

the tower without pinching off blood flow or nerves (yikes). I arch my head back, executing a subtle shift forward and backward to resist the friction of the latex and make sure that my neck is in as much extension as possible.

The tower is tricky. You *feel* like you're in as deep a position as you can create with your own muscles, but then the latex closes in and squeezes you *out* of the shape slightly. I have to *overreach* the shape, and then trust that I've placed myself in the right position – one that I can maintain (blood pressure and oxygen wise...) for the 5 or 6 second hold at full suction.

Keep the energy in your hands, I heard Roberto's voice in my head.

At the moment *just* before I'm fully immobilized, I jerkily *clench* the tube in my fist.

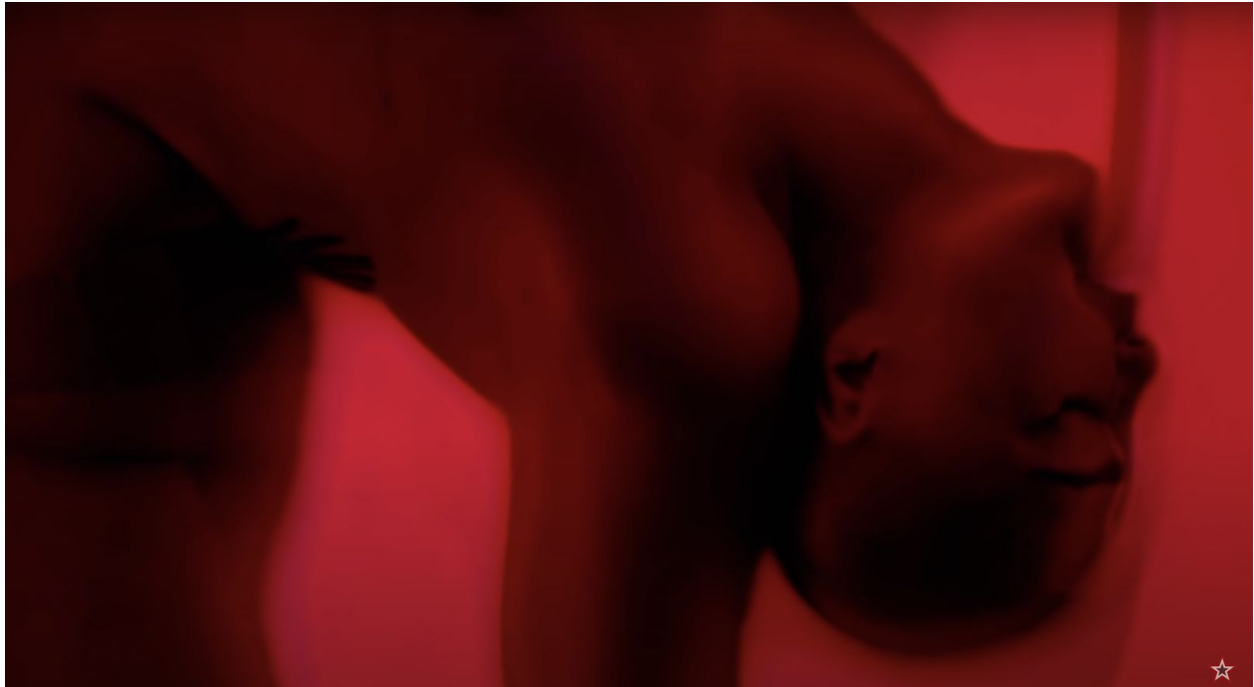
People don't tend to like that moment because it looks like someone attempting to de-intubate themselves.

Which is precisely why I love it.

Good good good, I think to myself. *Almost there. You're almost there. Last trick. Here we go. Nail it.*

SHOWTIME - FINISHING STRONG

The air releases back into the tower. I roll away from the front panel, trying to leave a hand on the front to draw focus one last time as I reposition my feet to the back of the tower and prepare for the handstand entry.



This is the trickiest one of all:

As I mentioned before, the tower frame itself might *look* sturdy, but it is simply light PVC tubing.

Easy to knock over.

The footprint of the tower is small, and I'm 5'9" with long gangly legs:

I have to maneuver them up, around, behind and over my own head for the contortion handstand entry without kicking any of the panels, moving too suddenly, or losing my balance within the volume. There's no option of bailing on an entry inside the tower. I have to be solid.

The timing is crucial:

I have to wait until there's enough air back in the volume that I can move my legs without getting stuck on the inside of the tower. Move too soon, and it's obvious what I'm doing, it's ugly, and it looks like the mistake that it is. But the more air there is in the tower, the less force there is holding the PVC tubes inwards against themselves. There's room for me to move, but it's rocky and clattery as all hell.

I have to be *in full position* as Miranda fires the vacuums to take the air out of the space, which means holding a deep, deep contortion handstand for far longer than any of the other backbends in the act. As the tower begins to suction down on me, there is no margin of error: I can't reposition my legs if they're not far enough down. It's incredibly easy to *think* that I've hit my position correctly only to realize when it's far too late that the tower is about to hold me in a handstand that looks like some weak amateur version of what I can actually do, with my feet somewhere around the top of my head.

The placement is crucial:

If I screw up and try the handstand too far forward in the volume, two things happen: one, I pull the tower off balance and then Miranda is in for a very stressful ride attempting to counterbalance the entire structure subtly from the back; two, the way that the latex panels close in around my body make for an unattractive visual. Way too crotch-y. Literally the last thing that I want on this recorded show.

If I pick the right spot, the balance holds and I create a beautifully weird visual where my head floats in space between my ankles or shins.

I reposition my hands as far back as I can manage; I need room for my legs to go up and over my head, for my feet to stay in front of my face.

In other words, every aspect of this final trick has to be perfect.

No pressure.

I lightly tag a foot on top of the upper horizontal bar at the rear of the tower.

Take a breath. And begin the entry.

Breathe.

Slow.

Steady.

I press my fingers wide, driving them down to feel the ground as best I can as the bottom panel of latex begins to push harder and harder up against my palms. It's like trying to balance on a balloon that is slowly inflating up against your hands, and the part that it pushes up against the

most is the *inside* edge of my hands. Small detail, but important: the inside edges of my palms peeling up and away from the ground makes my elbows want to buckle and makes my shoulders want to slink away into internal rotation. Both of these things are a recipe for falling forward (not an option), and/or fucking up my wrists (also not an option). I grind my teeth against the breathing tube clamped between my molars and aggressively commit to keeping my shoulders locked into external rotation.

One foot forward.

Two feet forward.

Posture up with *serratus anterior*: puff up! I tell myself.

Squeeeeeze into the deeper backbend.

Roberto's cues are echoing in my head again:

"Keep your feet alive!" "Look side to side; like they're not part of your body and you're observing their movement."

I flex my toes wide, curling and flexing my ankles, imagining them like jellyfish floating down through the volume to rest in front of my face.

The movement trick only works if there's enough tension in the latex that they can push and press against the material.

Of course, once there's a hair's breadth too much tension, my feet are just stuck. In whatever position they made it to.

Go go go go go, I'm willing them in my mind. *Don't get stuck, don't get stuck, don't get stuck.*

Please be a deep shape, please be a deep shape, I'm begging the tower, anticipating full immobilization any moment now -

I retract my neck slightly, pull my skull up higher with my upper back muscles, steal an inch more 'up' with my face in order to be staring out directly at the audience as best I can.

I can feel the *squish* in my back that tells me that the handstand is as bendy as I'm gonna get it.

PERFECT.

It's good. *It's good!!!* I'm shouting triumphantly on the inside. I've nailed the shape --

YESSSSSSS.

SHOWTIME - GRACE & ELEGANCE

My arms are starting to shake, but the shape is perfect.

This is the best I could have hoped for.



The first 75% of when the audience can see my face during any tricks or poses inside the tower is all angles and cheekbones and Circus-Performer-Effortless-Model-Face™. . . but then full suction hits and you're looking at a gargoyle.

The audience is watching my face get slowly distorted by the tightening latex; mashing my nose flat, crushing my cheekbones, drawing my mouth wide, twisting my brows. This is one of my favourite parts of the act: the shapes themselves have to be *perfect*. And repeatable. But the element of my face is constantly a wild card because of the way that the latex pulls tight.

I never know *which* gargoyle is going to show up . . . and that's half the fun.

Graceful. Disturbing.

Predictable. Unpredictable.

Beautiful. Gross.

The final few bars of my soundtrack are pulsing out across the theatre.

The heartbeat slows; the breath rattles.

The audience is quiet.

My arms start to shake.

It's a long handstand to hold, at a significant level of backbend, with the forces of the latex sleeve pushing on me in all sorts of unideal ways.

CLOSE THE CURTAIN, I scream telepathically at the stage crew.

Stay in character.

Keep looking around.

Flex your feet.

Send that energy out through the latex.

Hang on.

My arms are starting to move into full shudder-mode.

I can't get out of the handstand until the lights are out; until the curtain is closed.

Miranda has cut the suction, so air is slowlyyyy slowlyyyy leaking back into the volume. Softening the edges of the shape. Allowing my face to gently start rearranging back into something more human-looking.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick.

Silence in the theatre.

And then --

The lights begin to dim.

Thank. God. I think.

I'm not out of the woods yet, though.

The latex is holding me in position still.

My feet are moving into full pins-and-needles mode; I've been in too deep a backbend with too much force tiring out the muscles that hold me safely in position, for too long. I'm starting to worry that I'm not going to have the strength to exit backwards from the handstand -- which is the only pathway available inside the small footprint of the tower.

Come on, come on...!

I hear the *shhhhhhhhk!* of the curtains closing.

The house lights come on backstage.

COME ON, COME ON ...!

I struggle for once last push of muscular control as the air slowly seeps back into the volume. Miranda is busily undoing the gasket that holds the tower sealed shut. *Just a few more seconds.* I'm trying as hard as I can to find some re-engagement in my core muscles that have been held in a lengthened position for long, long seconds. *Please don't fall forward please don't fall forward please don't fall forward....* I beg myself.

WHOOOOOOOSH -

The tension of the latex panels drops dramatically as Miranda gets the tower open. *STAY -- UP --* I yell at myself internally. My body badly wants to tip forwards. I manage to haul one leg back behind me, exhausted, looking for any PVC tubes that might support even a few pounds of weight while I maneuver the rest of the way out.

Nothing. My foot isn't finding anything. Instead, my shin finds the back panel of latex. Sticky with sweat and humid from the time in the tower with no air exchange, my whole lower leg just -- *sticks.*

Ahhh shit, I think, imagining all the ways that this amount of body weight is stressing the integrity of the latex.

Don't tear the thousand dollar balloon, don't tear the thousand dollar balloon ...

"Spot," I call out to Miranda, who quickly throws her body weight into bracing the tower.

I gracelessly collapse to the bottom of the volume, every bit of exposed skin acting like sticky fly paper and getting stuck in all the places I wish it wouldn't on the way down.

W/hatever. I can be an awkward baby giraffe now. No one is filming / watching anymore.

"Uhhh ... you alright, dude?" Miranda calls out.

"Yup," I chuckle. She holds the small opening at the bottom of the tower open a little wider to make it easier for me to army-crawl out (without fail, *every time* I do this, all I can think of is the rhino scene from Ace Ventura. Yeah, I'm mature).

I emerge blinking into the bright lights of backstage.

I can already see a stage hand motioning for me to hurry up and get to the front to proceed with the judging. Miranda shoves the red pants we'd stashed behind the tower for exactly this moment into my arms and I start tying them on with shaking hands. No fine motor control left. Completely fried.

"I think it went ok?" I said in a rushed whisper as fingers fumbled dumbly with the strings of the pants.

"Yeah, no, I think that went about as well as it could," Miranda whisper-hissed back.

"What the fuck happened with the ...?"

"I was fucking *trying*. Waving my arms like crazy. No one would open the curtain."

"Bloody hell."

"Yeah."

"Well, good call. Nothing else to do about it..."

"Thanks. Yeah. Ready?"

I take a quick deep breath, standing up tall. "Yes."

Stand up tall, stand up proud, raise your chin, don't hold your breath, fix your face, don't round your shoulders --

I walk around the edge of the tower, nodding curtly to the AD as I move confidently towards the front of the stage.

The curtains are about to open again.

THE JUDGING - PART 1



My heart is still racing from the exertion of the act as I stand centre stage, the bright white lights shining into my eyes so that the back half of the auditorium isn't visible.

The four judges seated in front of me, however, are crystal clear. There's a man in a beautiful, sharply tailored silver suit on the left; a baby-faced, pudgy younger man to his right, a blonde woman with a lot of silicone and filler everywhere imaginable next to him, and finally, on the right, a man who looks like the German mash-up between Gordon Ramsey and Simon Cowell.

All of them have giant "X"s on the front of the little desks they're seated behind. That's the format of these shows: 3 'yes's, and you move on to the next round. 3 "X"s, you're out. Over the

course of the afternoon I'd seen comedy and dance acts being buzzed off completely, or voted 3 or 4 "X"s for being poorly conceived or poorly prepared and under-rehearsed. To be completely honest, I'd been so focused on getting physically prepared for this act and going through the hoops of just *getting* here in the middle of a global pandemic that I'd forgotten entirely that this is a show where people vote on whether your art is 'good' or not.

This hasn't happened with any circus-oriented acts so far (and how could it? The skill and effort is so clearly visible in circus acts). My backstage stunt rigger friend told me that there's been 4 or more pole acts in the last 4 days of judging, and plenty of duo aerial acts. I was feeling more excited and confident that my act would absolutely be something they'd never seen before.

Surely, it'll at least shake off the monotony / repetition of the last 4 days. This should make them sit up in their seats, I'd thought.

The applause is slow to start, and moderate.

I bow slightly, already uncertainty building in the back of my mind. I try to read the facial expressions of the judges; for the most part they're a mixture of blankness or mild frowning (*which could be good or bad...*). The older judge –*German Simon Cowell*, my 2000s-pop-culture-conditioned brain supplies– sits on the far right. He goes first:

"Can you introduce yourself?" he asks.

I do so.

"And you're from where?"

"Toronto, Canada."

"And do you prefer English or German?"

"English, please. My German isn't good enough yet, I'm sorry."

"Your last name, it's ...?"

"Austrian, sir." There's a smattering of applause in the house (I mean ... thanks, dad? I guess?)

He makes a neutral sound. There is a pregnant pause as he stares intently at his papers, where all the information about the artists and acts are listed for them. He looks back up at me. The slightest hint of a smirk tugs at the edge of his thin mouth, sitting like a jagged line cutting through the rocky, over-tanned features of his lined face. When he speaks, his too-white teeth seem too large in his mouth. that sits like a jagged line through the craggy tanned structure of his face.

“Ess...” he says slowly.

(Keep your shoulders back. Breathe slowly. Relax your face.) I wait for the rest.

“Ess,” he says again, frowning more and looking back down at his sheet again. A bad feeling washes over me. “Is that your real name?”

“That’s my name, sir.”

The smirk pulls up the edge of his mouth a little more. “And what are you supposed to be—” for the briefest of moments before he finishes the sentence, my brain starts formulating all the possible answers that might naturally follow from the start of a question like that: is he gonna ask what kind of circus artist I am? About if this is a character or a monster? If it’s . . .

THE JUDGING - PART 2

“What are you supposed to be? A man or a woman?” he finishes.

SLAM. My stomach drops like a stone all the way to the floor.

No. WHY. Confusion. It’s gotta be on his sheet. He knows. I asked them to tell th— They said they told everyo— Wait if they told everyone then is he just—? No, they wouldn’t do th— Would they do th—? Maybe it’s a language thing. No that doesn’t make sense. His English is perfectly fine. SAY SOMETHING.

I look down at the floor for a brief moment to compose my face and will the blood to stop rushing into my cheeks. My adrenaline is spiking my heartbeat. *Not helping, body*, I think.

I clear my throat lightly. "I'm trans nonbinary." I force myself to say it slowly and evenly. I feel hot. "I'm aware of the linguistic differences between German and English regarding neutral language for talking about a single person – I mean, I know the grammar can make it tricky. So, I use 'they/them' in English. If that's not an option, then I suppose 'he' makes more sense than 'she'."

I make eye contact with the other 3 judges as I say it. The blonde looks vacant. The chubby guy to her right looks aggressively bored, slouching in his seat and staring unblinkingly at me. The man in the silver suit to his left is nearly squirming in his seat. Is that embarrassment I'm seeing on his face?

German Simon Cowell looks at me like I owe him more of an answer. I hold his gaze with a pleasant, neutral expression on my face masking the turmoil inside me. He looks down at his papers again and I catch the slightest flick of an eyebrow raise as he hides his widening smirk. *Did he just – ?! Shit. He– Wow. Okay. He ... knows. He knew. Why did he ask me then? Did he do that to just...?*

I'm grateful for Miranda standing at my back. I'm glad I'm not standing on this god damn stage alone right now. There's a silence that teeters on the brink of becoming awkward when the judge on the far left, dressed in the sharp silver suit, speaks up. I rapidly read his facial expression, his body language. *Bright. Neutral. Open. Please be okay.* Silver Suit asks his question in English first, then translates the question into German right away for the crowd. He seems to be somewhat at a loss for what he just watched, and wants me to explain the act a little.

Thank god. Relief washes over me. Just talk about your act. Make it about the act. Thank you.

"I'm interested in the moments and places where things that are beautiful cross over into things that are grotesque, and vice versa. That curiosity is one of the things that informed creating this act. Contortion can be disturbing to some people and beautiful to others. It's truly in the eye of the beholder. This act presents both of these visual aesthetics in cycles. One blends into the other. People respond strongly to this act: they either find it horrifying and want to turn away, or

they're fascinated. There is something deeply engaging about the places *in between* the states and ideas that we find familiar."

He looks at me with something akin to stunned confusion still. He remains collected, though, and presses on: "I see ... But-", he shakes his head a little. "*Why* would you do something so dangerous? It is horrific to watch."

I take a breath. I was expecting this one: "I also work in the film and television industry as a stunt performer. I'm interested in how our perception of risk increases or reduces the sense of 'spectacle'. In stunts, my job is to perform risky things in a way that reduces that risk as much as possible: through specialized training, through movie magic, through careful safety planning. In circus, the risk inherent in the acts that we love to watch are always there, too - but we don't think of it consciously. There was an enormous amount of research, preparation, and training that went into this act to create something that is safely repeatable while still having the impact that it has. My training was highly specialized in many in order to do this safely. Not everyone could do it."

"But *why* would you do that? What's the point?"

(*Come on, guy ... throw me a bone.*) I thought I'd answered him in a fairly bombproof way, but he was getting hung up on the 'danger' part. So I tried again: "I've heard many times before that contortion is 'the boring act' in a circus or cabaret. The tower immediately introduces a clear sense of risk to the viewer. It forces spectacle back to the forefront. Spectacle is why we are entertained. There is no show without spectacle. And there are few spectacles that exist without risk - whether you are consciously aware of that or not. When there is no sense of potential risk to the performer, many of us lose interest quickly. Short attention spans."

"You look sort of like an alien inside!" the female judge interrupts. "I didn't know what I was looking at at first."

I turn my body towards her slightly. "That's another important part of the act," I begin, wanting to take advantage of the opening (*since they're not going to ask, apparently*, I mutter in the back of my head).

But the female judge interrupts again: "No! It's too scary! There's no need to do something this dangerous."

*Oh for f*cks sakes ... You just watched two acrobats perform a perch duet where the flyer slides headfirst down the pole balanced precariously on her partner's shoulder. You just watched a virtual audition of an acrobat doing backflips off an ELEPHANT. Were you even listening- ?*

"Nothing about what I performed for you on this stage tonight is in a different category of risk than the other circus acts you've watched," I say instead of all the things I am thinking.

She starts giggling nervously over me. "No! Ich habe angst."

I know what that one means. (*Good, I think coldly, you utterly ridiculous woman.*)

I open my mouth to keep the conversation moving on from this weird moment when German Simon Cowell jumps back in, laughing with her even louder. They switch to rapid German as they continue bouncing increasingly raucous laughter off each other.

I'm trying to follow and failing - but it's not a kind laughter.

I can't fool myself any longer: I'm angry and stunned at the same time.

THE JUDGING - PART 3

I hope my ears aren't as red as they feel, I think. You're representing Canada. You're representing Canada. You're representing Canada. Be polite, be polite, be polite. I stand there with my face as blank as possible and wait for them to stop acting like children.

They've moved on to miming out something that's clearly quite comical to them, and related to what I had just performed for them. Silver Suit looks properly pained now at his colleagues behaviour. *Good.*

German Simon Cowell wipes a tear from an eye and turns back to me, creepy chiclet teeth on full display now like a predatory little jack-in-the-box. His voice deepens again, all business, and says in English, “I don’t know why— this doesn’t belong on a show like this.”

What?

He fixes me in his squinty, icy eyes and flatly says, “This is a *family* show.”

I triple blink before I can catch myself and then get my facial expressions back under control. *Was that another...? No. He couldn’t have —*

But now his face is darker. I take a scan of the two middle judges: the blonde is pursing her overfilled lips; the chubby comedian is looking at me with something close to disgust on his face. German Simon Cowell is still talking: “I would never allow my kids to watch this. They’d come running into my room at night screaming about nightmares,” he finishes with a laugh.

It’s clear there’s not going to be any discussion of anything of value: like how there’s no one else performing this in the world, like how they just watched something that takes an objectively demanding level of technique, skill, and focus. I’m just a target. I suddenly remember that I have to wait for them to actually judge me with their stupid buzzer buttons, not just try to humiliate me.

Get me off this stage. Please don't put me through to the next stage. I never want to see any of you again.

I’m finally put out of my misery.

Silver Suit: “I will be honest. I don’t entirely ... ‘get it’. But it *is* intriguing. I would see what you do with it next, given the chance.” He hits a button and the front of his desk flashes up green. I fix a small smile on my face and give him a polite bow of thanks.

German Simon Cowell is next. “I can’t put you through. I had a bad feeling watching it, because it really felt like a nightmare come to life.” BUZZ. A big red ‘X’ appears. *Good*.

The blonde goes. Another stupid, high-pitched titter precedes her comment: “Ooh – no, I can’t! I think you would just scare me again next time!” BUZZ. Another big red ‘X’. *Excellent*.

The three judges who have spoken all look to their remaining colleague, who has stayed silent. He’s just been snake-eyeing me while the other three gave their judgements, slouching back in his chair, legs sprawling, leaning heavily on one elbow and smushing his doughy face into one hand. There is a loaded, unpleasant pause – and then it’s like he remembers that I’m a real, live person standing in front of him that he’s staring at with displeasure.

He takes a breath, summons the energy to sit up slightly in his seat, and with a small dismissive hand wave simply says, “No.” BUZZ.

“Thank you for your time,” I say with the bare minimum of polite tone in my voice to the judges. “Thank you,” I say again, addressing the audience with one more bow. *Jerks*. I turn back over my shoulder, make eye contact with Miranda who – like a damn pro – is keeping her face equally neutral.

I make myself hold my chin high and take deep even breaths to keep myself from power-striding off that stage.

THE JUDGING - PART 4

My head is spinning. I let the storm clouds take over my face once I'm out of sight of the judges and audience in the wings. My fists have balled up and my chest feels like it wants to explode.

Immediately a camera is shoved in my face. A woman is standing there next to the camera man with a microphone. I look quickly around at the 3 or 4 other crew members / stage hands standing there, and they’re not making eye contact. The interviewer is trying to flag me down: “How was it! What do you have to say?”

Fuck. I forgot about this part. They're always there waiting in the wings after you perform to get a sound bite. God damn it.

I stand there, rooted to the ground. I'm opening my mouth and willing sounds to come out but there's nothing happening.

The interviewer's smile starts to strain at the edges, her peppy TV personality mode giving way to the uneasiness written across her face. What is that expression? Awkward? Embarrassed? ...

YOU HAVE TO SAY SOMETHING. BE GRACIOUS. DON'T SAY WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY.

I'm still staring at the ground, trying to start sentence after sentence.

I finally look up at her and her camera op, all pretence of easy-going compliance gone. "I'm extremely disappointed with the conduct of your judges," is what comes out of me, finally. Part of me is horrified that I've said this where it'll be recorded forever, even as the beast in my chest roars its simultaneous approval. I shake my head and walk away.

A tiny PA scurries up beside me. "Wait! You have your exit interview!"

I refuse to break my stride and growl, "Absolutely not."

"But –"

I stop suddenly, pulling myself up to my full height and fixing her with a flat stare, waiting for her to have the good graces to look embarrassed.

You people have used me enough today. "Exactly," I say, and continue on my way. Miranda keeps pace with me.

"You good, dude?" she says quietly under her breath.

"I just – I – let's get the fuck out of here."

“Good call. Fuck this noise.”

“Was– was that... am I crazy or was that as bad as I ...?”

“No dude. It’s exactly as bad as you think.”

“You think he actually meant ...? It’s not just me?”

“Not from where I was standing,” she said darkly.

There was a leaden comfort in having had a witness to that raging dumpster fire.

An insurance policy against the second-guessing and self-gaslighting already trying to set in.

The house lights come on. The show is done. I pull on my warm layers and Miranda and I set to methodically taking apart the tower piece by piece.

The uprights come down; the latex carefully taken off and folded; the top and bottom squares broken down.

It all goes back in the ski bag. We gather up our minibands, our physio balls, our water bottles. It’s 11pm.

I drag the bags out to the loading dock at the back of the stage while we wait for our shuttle driver to pull up and take us back to the hotel.

It’s quiet. The air is cool. The sky is deep and dark. One of the crew members I had spoken with earlier in the day wanders out onto the far side of the dock and lights up a cigarette. She takes a slow drag and lets the smoke out in a long, steady sigh. She turns to me.

“I’m sorry about what happened,” she says simply.

I look over at her, quiet for a moment. “Yeah,” I say finally. “Thanks. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“They didn’t need to be so rude. They kind of do that on purpose, these shows . . .” she trails off.

“Yeah. I know how these shows go. I don’t really care all that much about the judging itself. But the judges ... were ... a surprise.”

She shook her head. “It’s embarrassing. They’re ... well. Yeah. I thought your act was amazing.”

“Thanks.”

We wait in silence until a large black van pulls up: our ride back to the hotel. She flicks her butt out into the parking lot, a fading red ember disappearing onto darkened concrete. I haul the tower bag into the back of the vehicle and climb in with Miranda as she turns and goes back inside the studio.

I can’t wait to go home.

