

Circus Melody

Can you hear the music? The slow melodic drum? The violins and piano? The notes becoming one? It always carries on the wind, an unrelenting sound. A tune that will transport you and follow you to the ground.

I was 10 when I first heard the music. I was sitting up in my bed re-reading 'Alice in Wonderland' even though I had been told to go to sleep hours earlier. It made its way through my window and seemed to curl around the room. The hypnotic notes lulled me, and I began to sway. I could feel it pulling me. It felt like it was an invitation. I was transfixed. I felt the music take control of me and I moved to get out of bed.

My book fell hard on the floor. The crash snapped me out of my trance and the music instantly silenced. I don't need to tell you about the telling-off I got for staying up past my bedtime. But I will say I started to sleepwalk after that night. Never very far and it only happened a couple of times but every time I heard that music in my dreams.

The next time I heard it properly I was 17. It was about 11 at night and I was at a party. I was never a massive fan of people, but it was fun and felt rebellious, so I ended up going. It was a party for a close friend of mine, and they were celebrating their 18th birthday so there were lots of drinks.

I was feeling the alcohol when I chose to step outside. There were lots of people and loud music so I felt it would be good to get a small amount of respite. Then there, above the din coming from the inside the house, was the music. It swayed its melodic tune as if daring me to join. The notes saturated my bones and my heart joined in on its tune. I swayed to the music, the pull getting stronger. Then I started to walk. Just one foot in front of the other letting the music guide me. I couldn't hear the party anymore. The music encompassed too much of me for any other sound to get through.

There was a hand on my shoulder, roughly turning me away. In that moment whatever tether the music had, snapped and it disappeared again. I took a second to realise where I was. One of the other people at the party had seen me wander off and wanted to make sure I was all right. It was a sweet thing to do but at the time I was angry. They had taken away the music. The music that felt like the missing piece of my soul. I shoved passed them and got another drink.

Over the next few years, the thought of that music haunted me. I would sometimes spend sleepless nights searching for the song. Once I even tried to re-create it. I was never talented at music, and it turned out horrendous.

Eventually, I forgot about it. That part of my soul still yearned for it but I decided that it had found me twice and surely it would come again in time.

It did.

The third time I heard it I was up late working on a project. Time had slipped away, and I was now working in the dark. As I typed I heard the soft notes of that familiar tune. I felt a sigh of relief as I began to feel whole again. It felt like an old wound had finally stopped aching. I let the music claim me. It felt pointless to fight what was already ingrained deep into my bones. So, I danced. I felt my body move of its own accord, twirling to the music. Soon I found myself on the street, the empty roads stretching out in front of me. The world was my dance floor.

Eventually, I realised the music was getting louder. I was getting closer to the source that had claimed my heart. I stopped dancing as the large circus tent came into view. It had stripes of purple, green and white that twisted around in an almost hypnotic way. I stepped inside.

I was the only one there, and somehow, I knew the show was for me. So, I took a seat in the first row. As soon as I had sat down the performance began. A tall man with black hair walked out and into a spotlight. His purple-tailed suit and top hat, which he waved constantly, told me he was the ringmaster. Without a word he bowed, looked me in the eye and winked. I was startled but he was gone before I could recover, and the first act started.

There were clowns and knife throwers, beast tamers and fire eaters. But above it, all was that music. Its slow and twisting melody wasn't what you would usually think of when it came to circus music, but it fit so well here. None of the acts spoke a word but they didn't need to. All I felt was joy and excitement as I watched them perform. I felt myself long to be up there performing in their midst, but I stayed seated and clapped.

The final act was the acrobats. This was the act I had looked forward to ever since setting my eyes on the tent. I loved watching them fly through the air when I was younger. And I always tried to watch the gymnastics when the Olympics came around. So, seeing them step out in their colourful outfits filled me with such immense childhood joy I could barely contain it.

The act started and I was hooked. They performed a routine on the ground to start but gradually used taller and taller equipment until I was staring up in awe. The twists and turns of their bodies were as hypnotic as the music and seemed to move in time. Eventually, they reached the highest point, the tightrope. This was always my favourite part. The way the acrobats could walk at such a height always scared me, but that fear was exhilarating and the relief, addictive.

My gaze did not waver as they set their first foot on that rope. They danced across it as if it was just a line on the floor. The moves were hypnotising, and I almost felt myself dancing with them.

Then they fell. One foot in just the wrong place and they came down. Fear gripped me as my eyes could look away. Then they stopped. Their body hanging perfectly in mid-air as if caught by something. Then I saw it. The

strings that were attached to their wrists and elbows. The strings slowly lifted the acrobat back onto the tightrope. The act continued, but now I saw the strings that tugged on the acrobat's joints. The strings that puppeted them, controlling their every move. I saw how jerky their movements were. And I saw the terror on their faces.

Suddenly I knew why I had been brought here. Why the music had chosen me. It wanted me to join the circus. And part of me still wanted to. But the pain on the faces of the acrobats, the strings that were tinted red with their blood convinced me enough that I could not stay.

I did not wait for the act to end, I just stood up and ran. I didn't know where I was or how far away the music had taken me. So, I sprinted out into the night and didn't stop.

At some point, I must have collapsed as I remember waking up under a bridge located near my house. I staggered back home and used the spare key hidden under the window to let myself in. Once inside I had a shower and checked my phone.

I had hundreds of missed calls and messages from friends and then family. They all asked why I wasn't picking up and what I was busy with. I checked the date. It had been a week. The circus had taken a week of my life.

Exhaustion finally took hold after I had messaged a couple of people back and I fell asleep.

I woke up a couple of hours later shaking in fear. It took me a moment to realise why but then I noticed it. The music was back. The pull was lighter, and I could resist it, but the music still sang in my ears.

The music hasn't stopped since, and my resolve is starting to wane. Maybe one day I will go back to the circus, and feel those strings pull through my flesh. But for now, I will resist as much as I can, as I see their agonised faces in my dreams.