

The Next to Last Time I Was Shot Out of a Cannon

By Etgar Keret

The next to last time I was shot out of a cannon was when Odelia left with the kid. I was working as a cage cleaner in the Romanian Circus, which was in town. I finished the lions' cages in half an hour, and also the bears' cages, but the elephants' cages were really a killer. My back hurt and the whole world smelled of shit. My life was ruined and the smell of shit fit perfectly. I needed a break, so I grabbed myself a corner outside the cage and rolled a cigarette. I didn't even wash my hands before doing it.

After a couple of drags, I heard a small, fake cough behind me. It was the circus manager. His name was Roman, and he won the circus in a card game. The old Romanian who owned the circus originally was holding three queens, but Roman had four of a kind. He told me the story the day he hired me. "Who needs luck," he said with a wink, "when you know how to cheat." I was sure Roman would make a scene because I took a break in the middle of work, but he didn't even look angry. "Tell me," he said, "you want to make an easy thousand?" I nodded and he went on, "I just saw Ishtevan, our human cannon ball, in his caravan. He's completely smashed. I couldn't wake him up and his show's supposed to start in fifteen minutes..." Roman's open hand drew the route of a cannon ball in the air, ending with his squat fingers banging against my forehead, "I give you a thousand in cash if you take his place."

"I was never shot out of a cannon," I said and took another drag of my cigarette. "Sure you were," Roman said, "when your ex left you, when your son told you he hates

you, when your fat cat ran away. Listen, to be a human cannon ball, you don't need to be flexible or fast or strong, just lonely and miserable as hell."

"I'm not lonely," I protested. "Really?" Roman laughed, "so tell me – never mind sex, when was the last time someone even smiled at you?"

Before the show, they dressed me in silver overalls. I asked an old clown with a giant red nose if I didn't need some instruction before they shot me. "The important thing," he mumbled, "is to relax your body. Or contract it, one or the other. I don't remember exactly. And you have to make sure the cannon is pointed straight ahead so it doesn't miss the target."

"And that's it?" I asked. Even in the silver overalls, I still stank of elephant shit. The circus manager came over and slapped me on the back. "Remember," he said, "after they shoot you at the target, you go straight back to the stage, smile and bow. And if, God forbid, something hurts or even if you break something, you have to keep it in, you have to hide it so the audience doesn't see."

The people in the audience looked really happy. They cheered for the clowns that pushed me into the mouth of the cannon, and a second before the fuse was lit, the fat clown with the flower that sprayed water asked me, "You're sure you want to do this? It's the last chance to change your mind." I nodded and he said, "You know that Ishtevan, the last human cannon ball, is in the hospital now with fourteen broken ribs?"

"He isn't," I said, "he's just a little drunk. He's sleeping in his caravan now."

"Whatever you say," the fat clown sighed, and struck the match.

Looking back, I have to admit that the angle of the cannon was too sharp. Instead of hitting the target, I flew upwards, made a hole in the top of the tent and continued flying

to the sky, way up high. I flew over the abandoned drive-in theater where Odelia and I once used to go to see movies. I flew over the playground where a few dog owners walked around with rustling plastic bags. Little Max was there too, playing ball, and when I flew over him, he looked up, smiled and waved hello. On Yarkon Street, behind the place where the American embassy keeps their dumpsters, I saw Tiger, my fat cat, trying to catch a pigeon. A few seconds later, when I landed in the water, the handful of people on the beach stood up and applauded for me, and when I came out of the water, a tall girl with a nose ring handed me her towel and smiled.

When I came back to the circus, my clothes were still wet and everything was dark. The tent was empty, and in the middle of it, near the cannon I was shot out of, Roman was counting the day's take. "You missed the target," he grumbled, "and you didn't come back to bow like we agreed. I'm deducting four hundred shekels for that." He handed me a few wrinkled bills, and when he saw I wasn't taking them, he gave me a tough East European look and said, "If I were you I'd take it."

"Forget the money, Roman," I said, and walked over to the mouth of the cannon, "Do a friend a favor and shoot me out again."

Translated by Sondra Silverston