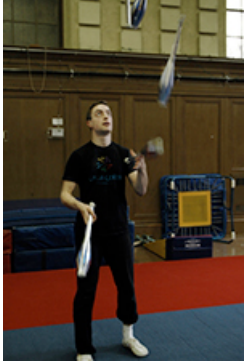


The Greatest Show on Earth
By Sandra Song

[Music: acautionarytale.mp3]



1.jpg

Narrator: The circus arts have always interested me. Ever since I was a little girl I have been fascinated by the bright lights, bold colors, and audacious performers, always wishing I had the skill to stand on my head or swallow swords.



2.jpg

Narrator: I finally got a chance to experience my life-long dream by visiting San Francisco's Circus Center, one of the most prestigious circus schools in the country.



3.jpg

Narrator: For over thirty years Circus Center has been training students to join Cirque du Soliel, form independent troupes, and perform with their own company, the renowned Pickle Family Circus.



4.jpg

Narrator: Molly Nicholas who works as the weekend receptionist at Circus Center, moved to the Bay Area from Illinois to study clowning at Circus Center.

Molly: San Francisco is an expensive city and living here and trying to train as much as possible and you know the Clown Conservatory is three days a week and it's hard to make a work schedule fit around that and paying tuition for that and all that stuff, it's really expensive, it's like a four year college.



5.jpg

Molly: It's definitely complicated and different from what I thought it was, I liked it because of the kind of physical performance aspect of it like the Marx brothers, particularly Harpo Marx, the silent one, Mr. Bean I feel has a lot of clowning aspects, it's a lot of very physical, just physical jokes and physical performances and things like that.



6.jpg

Molly: I would say that it's physical comedy.



7.jpg

Molly: I like movement, I come from a dance background and I like physical performance stuff but dance wasn't quite what I was looking for. I like dance very much but I also like connecting with the audience in a different way.



8.jpg

Narrator: However, there are some misconceptions about clowning that frustrate Molly sometimes.

Molly: Everyone always thinks that you're a birthday party clown, that you perform for children's birthday parties, and a lot of people do do that and there are a lot of classy clowns that do that but when you say clown that's the first thing everyone always thinks of.



9.jpg

Molly: The other thing is when people ask you what you do and you say a clown, they say "Oh yeah? Do something funny." Like right then, you know what I mean, cause it's like if you're a receptionist they're not going to be like "Oh yeah, type something or oh here, answer this phone." You know they don't have the same reaction, but if you're a clown, they all want to see something.



10.jpg

Molly: You try to be funny and there are certainly a lot of un-funny clowns and oftentimes it takes a long time to find out how you're funny and to find your funny way so you spend a lot of time not being funny, which feels kind of horrible.



11.jpg

Molly: I personally believe that everyone has a certain amount of funny and you definitely need to learn how to uncover it and like explore your own funny, but not everyone is naturally funny and just because you're naturally funny doesn't mean you're going to be a good clown either.



12.jpg

Molly: There are plenty of naturally funny people who it just doesn't work out on stage for some reason.



13.jpg

Molly: Clowning is a very powerful thing, in society and in the past. Like kings often had clowns or jesters and it was often, well people often think it was just to entertain the king but it was also like the clown could make fun of the king, he was the only person that could.



14.jpg

Molly: So it was a very powerful way of releasing tension that people made have had about the things the king was doing or you know things like that, like Jon Stewart kind of fills that role now but he doesn't have as much power as a jester did, but it's similar, it's pointing out the absurdities and that's a powerful role for people to have and that's a way to be artistic.



15.jpg

Narrator: Another person training for the circus professionally is nineteen-year-old Lauren Herley, an aerial artist and contortionist who also moved to San Francisco to study at Circus Center.

Lauren: I started as a gymnast when I was like 12 I took classes and when I was 14 I started competing as an all-around on all four events, but I grew up as a swimmer and a diver and taught myself how to tumble on the trampoline.



16.jpg

Lauren: My dad was an athlete so I always was really active and naturally flexible, then when I found gymnastics it was like for me I left swimming and left track and field and put everything into it. I wanted more from it, I wanted routines to last longer, I wanted to do more creativity, I wanted to do bigger things and so I went to a circus school and they were like "Yeah, this is possible you could go to a really high level." So it was in Seattle but the school there wasn't very high level so last year I came down after doing circus for

about 8 or 9 months and got accepted in the program.



17.jpg

Lauren: For me, when I was in high school, gymnastics was everything and it was sad cause I started late but I couldn't really do anything else in school. I struggled a lot but I worked my hardest and I tried to get good grades but everything in my family life, I had a big family, but I kept to myself and training, I was really serious.



18.jpg

Lauren: I had my focus and I never lost it and so before circus I was kind of lost in a way, I was just kind of like I love something so much but I don't know how to express it and I didn't know I had strengths and that there's something in me and then when I found circus and I came here I was just realized that all those feelings and those desires and why I was just so into gymnastics was because I think I was just really ready to become an artist but I just needed help and I didn't know what to do with my body and it was just like I had all these abilities, I just needed to figure it out, you know, and I wanted to do scary things, big things, and so then I came here.



19.jpg

Lauren: I've created rope acts and performed them and hopefully I'm creating a new one as well and I'm like in contact with Cirque du Soleil about some ropes and straps positions and it's my goal though to go to Montreal and train so I recently went for an audition there and the audition went really well.

20.jpg



Narrator: Many of the students at Circus Center share the same ambitions. Almost half of the students there have applied for positions at Cirque du Soleil, one of the world's most prestigious circuses.

Molly: It would be fun because they have spectacular productions and I like spectacle so I would like to be a part of that. I don't know how much it would be able to feed me as an artist because you don't get to do a lot of your own material necessarily and you know there are definite limitations to it.

21.jpg



Molly: You get paid for performing which is awesome, you get paid very very well, it's a very prestigious job and it would be awesome to have on your resume and you could get hired pretty much anywhere after that.

22.jpg



Molly: But you know there a lot of cons also, it's a big corporation and they're official and they're business people, it's not a fun collective and it's not a bunch of your friends getting together and putting on art that they really care about, it was originally but it's no longer that, so up's and downs.



23.jpg

Lauren: Yeah well it's always scary, you're always going to feel scared but when you're out there you just don't have time to think, you don't have time to be scared, you just go. And you know a lot of people ask me "Is it scary?" Well yeah it's scary but there's just no time to think and every time before I go up if I'm doing just like a front aerial or a layout full twist or I'm doing like a drop on the swinging trapeze or a release on a rope there's always this feeling like in your head or before you do it, before you go to perform, you get this feeling like "Oh my God, I could die." and you get scared, but when you're up there it's you and you just go and it works and you come down and you're like "That's why I do that."



24.jpg

Lauren: It's weird, it's just like you're in this little zone and you don't have time to think a lot of people ask me "What do you think before you do things and you don't think, you just go. It's been a little mixed.



25.jpg

Molly: I came from a regular four year college so I was expecting that sort of environment like for instance I was expecting a registrar and I deferred my acceptance into the Clown Conservatory for a year and they forgot that I was coming and I was just kind of surprised that that could happen at a school. And it was complicated because their executive director had just quit the year that I was going to come so there was a lot of turmoil happening and stuff.



26.jpg

Narrator: Everyone from trained professionals to recreational participants are welcome. Many people take classes at Circus Center on the side like Bas van Fraassen, a professor of analytic philosophy at San Francisco State University who has won numerous awards for his books and research. However, he sees many similarities between his day job and his hobby.



27.jpg

Bas: They're both very exciting, you never know what's going to happen when you get up there in front of a class or if you get up there and jump off a platform and you just hope that you do well. You know you just hope that you can keep your feet together, your arms together and you make the right movements and sometimes you're unhappy when you come down when you just didn't do it very well.



28.jpg

Bas: Same with the class, you know, you teach, you're sure to be prepared, you do the best you can and people ask you some questions and sometimes you're just stuck, you know sometimes it works well. It's like that.



29.jpg

Narrator: However, Bas decided to take a chance on flying trapeze.

Bas: There was a little sign in the store saying "We have a trapeze, you owe it to yourself to go out once in your life." So I went there, they just have a club, it's out in the meadow somewhere and I immediately got taken by it."



30.jpg

Narrator: It's obvious that circus schools are very different from what one would normally expect.

Molly: But in general the system is not the same as a regular school from where I came so things like that have sort of been surprising but the training's been really fun, the people are really fun and I feel very prepared to go do what I came here to learn how to do, which is what a school is supposed to do. So it's exciting, it's exciting to graduate and just be like "No, I can go be a clown now, I can go do that."