

Maria ConollyAge 22; *Tightwire, Adagio, Risley*

I was already a good performer when I joined the company about a year and a half ago, but I know that working with these people has made me a great performer. It's not just that working with good people encourages me to lift my game, it's that these people have become my friends, and this work is so much easier when I do it with friends.

And some of them have become even more than friends to me. Lily and Luke both started out as just my performance partners, but Lily has become like a sister to me, and I fell very deeply in love with Luke. Tonight will be our first show since our wedding.

The Hen's Night

Lily was my Maid of Honour, so she organised the Hen's Night, but we talked about what she was setting up in advance, because I'm not big on surprises. She suggested that we organise the Hen's Night and the Buck's Night to be held at the same time, and to get everyone together late in the evening. I thought that was a really good idea not only because so many of my friends are Luke's friends too but also because I knew the real reason Lily wanted to do it. She was sweet on John, who was Luke's Best Man, and they'd have to organise it together. I gave her hell about that for weeks.

So we all met up at Lily's apartment about midnight, and partied on until 2 or 3 AM – I don't really remember how late it was, I was pretty wasted. I slept on Lily's roomie's bed – Lily promised that was okay – with my sister Barbara, and one other friend was still on the couch in the morning, but all the guys were gone, including Luke and John. I felt so sorry for Lily, 'cause I thought for sure Luke would end up in her room.

It wasn't until the wedding that I worked out what had gone wrong. John and Lily would barely look at each other, and John couldn't keep his eyes off Ellen. I was furious with Ellen, there's no way she didn't know about Lily and John.

John has been all doe-eyed about Ellen ever since then, and she definitely leads him on, but they certainly don't seem to be a couple.

Street Performance

A few months ago, word leaked out that the company was under some financial pressure, bad enough that cash flow issues caused some performers' pay to be delayed and for most of the admin staff to have been laid off. (Honestly, I don't know how Liz in the office copes without her part-timers.) As well as being the trigger for yet another argument amongst the aerialists, it inspired Luke to put some effort into researching the business side of circus.

He's come up with a scheme to help get the company through the hard times. It involves changing the way we approach shows, to allow us to focus on individual acts and shorter shows in order to reach a different market. He put a lot of effort into the idea, even spent some time during our honeymoon figuring out how to make it work. He's talking about doing more shows in smaller venues, malls, even street performance.

The big downside is that there would be less opportunity for our famous aerial acts, and even wire acts will be relatively limited compared to ground-based acts. Even so, we could have some of us split up into smaller troupes for the new opportunities, and still be able to come together to do the big shows.

Luke has talked with some of the other performers about the idea. Unfortunately, Jeremy may be trying to take control of the plan and take it places it wasn't meant to go. He's talking about groups splitting away permanently, and abandoning the big shows altogether.

The Letter

This was wrong of me, I know, but I did it anyway, and now I know. A few days ago, we got a piece of Caitlin's mail delivered to us at the hotel, mixed in with ours. The return address on the envelope told me it came from Cirque du Soleil. In our industry, anything to do with that massive international company is big news. The glue wasn't very well sealed, and I couldn't resist opening it.

The letter inside was from a personnel manager, giving written confirmation that he'd be coming to view the opening night of the new show. Obviously Caitlin has been talking to this guy about jumping ship to Cirque du Soleil. That show would be tonight.

I resealed the envelope with tape, marked it misdelivered, and put it in a mailbox. Caitlin will either have it now, or it'll arrive a little late, and she should still be none the wiser.

The Fall

After Matt's little row with Alice this morning, after the rehearsal, I really wanted to get away from the auditorium for a while. The whole deal is stressful enough – tight deadlines, opening night, looming bankruptcy – without partners arguing too. I didn't even take a shower in the change room, I just grabbed Luke and dragged him back to the hotel where we could shower together. We couldn't linger, though, because Lily and I had agreed to meet for some extra tightwire work. There were a few moves we had been a bit shaky on a while back, but better recently, so it was just supposed to be a confidence-builder. Lily needs all the extra confidence she can get at the moment.

So Luke and I headed out for a quick bite to eat, and then he walked me back to the theatre. He kissed me goodbye at the front entrance, and headed back towards the local shops to pick up some things we needed. I swung past the change rooms to get into my costume, and by the time I got to the stage Lily was already there checking the tension in the wire.

As we got into our act, I lost track of time, and pretty much everything else except Lily and the wire. It was only through the wire that I noticed the change, a sudden vibration as if a new tension had been applied. Moving only my eyes, I snuck a look around the auditorium. John was setting up his acrobalance equipment below. I should have thought of that, he always likes to get in an extra workout just before an opening night. Part of me wanted to call an end to our rehearsal, to spare Lily the discomfort of performing with John around, but she has to put it behind her.

A little after that, Susan came in too. That struck me as a little odd, because I had heard the clowns talking about rehearsing together this afternoon, and I wouldn't have thought that she would want to squeeze so much practice into one day with a performance tonight. Susan should have been taking some time to rest.

When Alice and Matt arrived too, John moved his equipment away from the centre of the stage. Between John's movements calling attention to him again and the heavy beat of Alice's footsteps on the stage floor, Lily's distraction was getting worse. "Lily," I breathed, and she met my eyes. I held her gaze, both of us immobile and perfectly balanced – it's so hard to achieve stillness on the wire – and then, just before I would have toppled – Lily could always hold a pose longer than me – I let us continue. No vibration reached my feet through the wire then.

Not until Alice screamed. I caught a flash of motion out of the corner of my eye, downwards, and there was a horrible crunch.

By the time we got down from the wire, Alice was already gone, and all we could do was look after Matt. I sent Lily to get a blanket, because there was no way we were going to be able to get him to do a proper warm-down, while I led him out away from the stage.

Other People

Alice Taylor (NPC)

To a large extent, Alice is Tina writ small. She was good at what she did, but I'm not sure she was so much better than Caitlin or Ellen that it was really a good idea for the owners to make such a big deal of bringing her into the troupe.

Bethany Summer

Beth has so much potential and she puts it to good use. While she's mostly an understudy for several acts she's been taking the time to work with Alice to learn some skills on the trapeze. I'm not sure if she's ready to take on a big role just yet but there's not denying she's talented.

Caitlin Chin

I've really never gotten along with Caitlin. She has always just struck me as cold, passionless. I guess that's what I didn't feel terribly guilty about tampering with her mail. At first glance, though, Lily seems very reserved too, and imagine how different things would have been if I hadn't given her a chance.

Caitlin and Matthew make out that they are having a relationship, but I don't buy it. Caitlin is so cool, and Matthew so passionate. Maybe it's just a sexual thing.

Daniel Higgs

He likes to pretend he's a marble statue but I've found that people with hard shells are usually just shielding their sensitive insides. Part of me thinks that he's sweet on Caitlin. That must be difficult for him now that she's seeing Matt.

Dominic Richards

I haven't really had time for the new clown, Dominic. Nigel seems to think he's coming along okay, but he wasn't with us long before the wedding and then Luke and I went on our honeymoon.

Ellen Telyanin

I used to really admire Ellen. She is a strong woman who took charge of her life

and made things happen the way she wanted them to. Even when her family's circus went under, she landed on her feet in a very competitive environment. She is intelligent, determined and socially savvy.

But being so, she had to know what was going on with John and Lily. It's one thing to make the most of your life and quite another to walk all over my friends while doing it.

Ethan Telyanin

Ethan is Ellen's twin brother. I used to think Luke and I were testament to the power that a personal relationship can bring to an act, but the twins make me second-guess that. Perhaps when Luke and I have been performing together another 15 years, we'll have the same rapport those two do.

Gwen Palmer

We all know now the story of how poor Gwen was attacked by a stalker in the women's dressing room after a show. I like to think that I'm a pretty strong, confident woman, but I'm not sure I'd be able to do much more than run crying to Luke if that happened to me. Gwen is very lucky that some of the others realised what was happening and stopped the man.

Hannah Riordan

I feel a little sorry for Hannah – it can't be easy being the odd one out, even in a company where odd isn't unusual. It's as if she has to study people to understand the world around and she just has trouble understanding motives that aren't right in front of her face. I try and talk to her now and again in the hope that she'll come out of her shell and be able to make a few friends.

Jeremy Telyanin

Jeremy is Ellen and Ethan's younger brother. He seems to be caught in a limbo halfway between acrobat and aerialist, something I'm sure won't win him points with the old family's elders if he doesn't "step up" soon. However, I think his act

brings something unique to our troupe. We haven't had a performer with strong tramp skills before, and from what I've seen Jeremy is a pretty good trainer. He's been responsible for a lot of Susan's training.

Jeremy and Luke aren't seeing eye-to-eye at the moment thanks to Jeremy's bastardisation of Luke's idea. If it comes to it, I know whose side I'll be standing on.

John Perrett

John can be so blind! Here's poor Lily all but throwing herself at him but all he can see is Ellen. It's just so frustrating to see him act as if Lily doesn't exist. But he'll have a rude awakening when Ellen turns him down again – she's made it clear that she's only interested in sleeping with fliers.

Lily Gardner

I love Lily, I really do, but I wish she'd learn to stand up and take what she wants. She could have had John if she'd just said something to him earlier.

Luke Conolly

I just love working with Luke – when I joined it was almost serendipity. We're two of the few acrobats in Australia, in fact the world, who have trained in Risley; that is foot juggling using a human person. It's not a minor act – it can be extremely dangerous and you have to have absolute faith in your partner especially if you're the one being juggled.

Matthew Mills

He's a lovely guy and I'm so glad he's got Caitlin. It was always a little gratifying to have him flirt with me even though I know he didn't mean anything by it. I can't imagine him hurting a fly.

Nigel Telyanin

He's such a good man, the father of this disparate little family. He's always there for everyone and I know he was helping Alice out with her worries lately – I used to see her sneak off to have little chats with him. I hope it brought her some peace but I can

see Alice's death has hurt him a lot. I guess it's like losing a daughter.

Ophelia Seymour

Ophelia's a nice enough person but she seems far more committed to the show than to most of the crew. She's slow to give people encouragement or praise but considering her role she has no right to criticise as much as she does.

Paul Morris

I worry about Paul – he's a decent clown but his heart's no longer in it and I know why. He's always clambering around in the rigging with his girlfriend Ceci. I guess he figures that if he can move to work in rigging he can spend more time with her.

Susan Michaels

There's something off about Susan. She's one of the newest performers, and I've noticed that she tends to avoid talking to me. She didn't come to my hen's night, and she seemed on edge at the wedding too. I don't know whether she just doesn't like me or whether it's something else, but either way, I'd prefer it if she were honest with me about it.