

**Hannah Riordan**Age 21; **Fire-Twirling**, Tightwire

Everyone expects circus performers to be outgoing, flamboyant people. I think I'd rather disappoint a lot of people in the audience if they actually met me. I'm not really very good with people. I just don't *get* them, just don't see what people seem to think I should a lot of the time.

But I do see things, and figure a lot of stuff out, and there's something else I don't get... If I'm the clueless one, why can't anyone else see what is obvious to me? For example...

***The Stalker***

Gwen kept receiving gifts at her door. I thought she'd like them, they were always really nice. One day I brought her a bunch of roses that were sitting outside her door. They had a card, and I realised it was home-made, with a photo of Gwen on tissu on the front. I was about to read the card when Gwen answered the door, so I didn't get the chance. I'd have loved to receive such a thoughtful gift but Gwen tossed them on a table without even reading the card.

Then one night, after a performance, I saw a man backstage, someone I didn't know. It was late and almost everyone had left. Audience members aren't supposed to be around the change rooms unless they're family or friends. I thought maybe he was Gwen's boyfriend that Dominic kept telling us about. He was carrying flowers and a small camera was dangling from a strap around his wrist.

Something was wrong, and I needed to work out what.

Dominic had said that Gwen's boyfriend was a performer in another circus. He'd have known the rule about no photos during a performance – even without a flash it's distracting, so dangerous! So what about the card I had seen? I'd assumed it was taken under controlled conditions, not during a show, but if it wasn't...

I looked back at the man just as he reached to open the door to the women's changing area. It was hard to tell at that distance, but I was pretty sure the card was hand-made. That meant he had sent the gifts, and he wasn't Gwen's boyfriend. He wasn't supposed to be there.

As I looked up from the flowers I found myself looking into his eyes. I turned away quickly, but he knew I was looking at him, and he was a lot bigger than me. I walked away until I heard a door close behind me and then I ran, down the corridor to the men's changing room. I found Ethan, Dominic and Daniel there and told them what I'd seen – the man, that is, not the bit about the flowers and the cards.

Dominic ran very fast – I think he likes Gwen. Ethan just likes to hit things. And Daniel doesn't really like anyone except Matt and Caitlin but he came along too. I'm not sure Dominic noticed the man – he just sort of swept past him and covered Gwen like he was a blanket. Ethan started to hit the man; he's very good at hitting people. Daniel pulled him off in the end. I was already on the phone to 000 asking for an ambulance as well as the police.

***Financial Trouble***

The company has been in trouble financially for a while now. That was pretty obvious after the week I didn't get paid on time. None of the clowns did, and a few of the acrobats.

Luke came up with some ideas concerning how to deal with the cash flow problems – ideas for smaller shows, street performance, that sort of thing. It means scaling back on the aerial acts, which require a lot in the way of equipment, but we need more income, and it'd give those of us who don't need scaffolds more opportunities.

But this afternoon, Nigel told Paul, Dominic and me that Jeremy wants to take it a step further, to breaking away from the company entirely. He hopes to save money by getting rid

of the overhead of aerial equipment. Nigel thinks this could really divide the company, and he suggested that we clowns make a decision amongst ourselves and stick together on it. That's as far as that conversation got, though, before...

## **The Fall**

We had our very last rehearsal with the full group just this morning. I was on time, barely, except I forgot to put my shoes away, but I was still ready before Alice and Nigel. Everything seemed to go fairly well. I was happy with my performance, anyway.

Nigel had told some of us previously that he wanted to have another rehearsal this afternoon. One nice thing about being a clown is that the acts aren't so physically demanding; we can afford to rehearse closer to the show itself. So Dominic, Susan and I hung around together for a while, in the canteen, just chilling and talking and waiting to have lunch with Nigel. He and Ophelia had some things to do before then, admin stuff, and Paul went off to climb around in the rigging. He likes to meet his girlfriend Cecelia there.

Jeremy joined us after a while and when he sat down Susan said she wanted to do some training on her own. Then Nigel came and found us, and when he said that he wanted to go over some stuff with us, Jeremy said he'd leave us to it and left the canteen.

The first thing Nigel said after Jeremy left, though, was to ask if we had seen Matt. We hadn't, not since just after the rehearsal. Dominic asked if it was something important, and that's when Nigel told us that he'd talked to Alice about rehearsing with Matt again, and had persuaded her to do it. I asked if he had tried Matt's mobile, and Nigel said it was turned off.

That's when I did the obvious thing and pulled out my phone to call Caitlin instead. If they were together and didn't want to be disturbed, I knew she just wouldn't answer, but if she did answer, either she'd let me talk to Matt, or she'd have to give some excuse as to why I couldn't. I've long had suspicions about them, so I wanted to test this. Since I didn't want to have the conversation in front of Nigel and Dominic, I told them I'd go and fetch Paul, and made the call as I walked.

Caitlin did answer so I asked if Matt was with her. She said yes just before loud music started playing on her end. I knew that music, it was the clock at Melbourne Central, and when I checked my watch, sure enough it was 1:00pm. When we could talk again, Caitlin told me that Matt was in the toilet. Right, nice story, Caitlin; plausible but not verifiable, so I still can't be sure if she was lying. So, I asked Caitlin to pass on a message, and told her that Alice had agreed to the extra rehearsal that Matt wanted. She promised to tell him, then hung up.

By then, I was in the backstage area, and I soon found Paul and Cecelia. I told them Nigel was ready for us, and Paul and I headed back to the canteen together.

We did talk about clown-stuff, but not the clown-stuff that Jeremy would have expected. Nigel actually wanted to talk about Jeremy and Luke's proposals.

We really didn't get down to business before Matt turned up, though – all alone, I noted. When he saw Alice there, he stormed up to her and threatened to do the flying trapeze act with Caitlin if she didn't rehearse with him again this afternoon. Even I could feel the ice when she said, "Fine, let's go then."

Finally, we had a little peace and quiet, and were able to talk. We went over the pros and cons of the two plans again – nothing new there – then Nigel told us that he didn't want to push us into anything, but he thought it would be best if we clowns decided what to do as a group – a voting bloc, if you will.

We were still discussing that idea when we heard shouting from the performance area. The four of us rushed to the theatre, Bethany and Daniel too. (I hadn't noticed that Daniel had turned up until then.) That's when we found out that Alice had fallen.

## **Other People**

### **Alice Taylor (NPC)**

I never really had much to do with Alice. She was always so very busy, what with training for the big roles, mentoring Beth, and rushing off to meet people away from the company. She must have had a much broader social circle than most of us, to have so many social obligations elsewhere.

### **Bethany Summer**

Bethany has been training heavily with Alice and Matthew in recent months, despite not having any aerial parts in the new show or ever having done aerial work before. I'd heard Alice talking about how well Bethany has been doing with that, and having watched her, I agree, she is very good on the trapeze. I wonder why she never did any aerial work before Alice joined the troupe.

### **Caitlin Chin<sup>1</sup>**

I quite like Caitlin. She's very patient, so I don't have to worry so much about saying the wrong thing around her, and if I do she's more likely to just say something than get offended.

### **Daniel Higgs**

I used to think that Daniel was much like a glacier: seemingly immobile, but in truth able to push mountains aside. Also, cold.

But having spent more time with him recently, thanks to Gwen, I've realised that he just spends a lot of time sitting back and watching, much like I do. I don't think I'm cold, really, so maybe he isn't either.

### **Dominic Richards**

Dominic is one of the newest recruits to our circus, but he's fitted in really quickly. He gets along really well with Nigel and Paul, which means the four of us hang out together a lot.

Even I know he's attracted to Gwen. The way he immediately shielded her with his

body that horrible night was a dead giveaway. He doesn't seem to know what to do about it, though. I understand that, I never know what to do about guys I like either.

### **Ellen Telyanin**

I'd rather Gwen didn't make me deal with Ellen so much. Being around her always seems like being near the popular girls in high school. I never knew when the next bomb would drop back then, and waiting for it with Ellen makes me nervous.

### **Ethan Telyanin**

I wouldn't want to ever cross Ethan. I've seen him be violent, but I wouldn't have guessed that it was coming before I saw it. Gwen trusts him, though. Maybe he isn't so unpredictable to her.

Ethan is Ellen's twin brother.

### **Gwen Palmer**

Gwen has really changed since the night she was attacked. Before that, there was this huge gulf between us. She was pretty and popular and I was, well, not popular. I'd try to make friends with her, but she barely noticed me.

But these days, she talks to me a lot more when she's hanging out with me and Dominic, and even tries to include me in her group of friends with Daniel, Ellen and Ethan. All the attention she gives me makes me really uncomfortable, especially since I don't know why she's doing it.

### **Jeremy Telyanin**

Jeremy is Nigel's younger nephew, and Ellen and Ethan's brother. He's a lot more approachable than his siblings, and likes to hang out with us clowns. I don't think Susan likes him very much, though, because a lot of the time when Jeremy turns up, she runs off somewhere – usually to do some practice for our clowning, she says.

### **John Perrett**

John may be the most versatile performer in the show. It's pretty funny seeing him

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<sup>1</sup> See also Matthew Mills for information about both him and Caitlin Chin.

dressed in a woman's costume to fill in for a female performer, but with only a little make-up and under stage lights, it's really very hard to tell. He and Lily work really well together, too.

John was Best Man at Luke and Maria's wedding.

### **Lily Gardner**

I rather like Lily. I don't really know her that well, but it's nice that she usually only speaks when she has something to say. It means I don't have to figure out whether she means what she is saying.

Lily was Maid of Honour at Luke and Maria's wedding.

### **Luke Conolly**

Luke and Maria's relationship is a perfect example of what I have trouble with. I didn't even realise they were dating until they announced their engagement. I thought they were just partners and close friends, like John and Lily.

### **Maria Conolly**

Maria shook things up amongst the tumblers when she joined the company. The company hadn't done much with tightwire, and I hadn't even heard of risley, and then she came along and decided she wanted to do both, and just did. Now she has strong partnerships with both her husband Luke and with Lily. She's always takes time out to talk to me which seems strange since we don't have that much in common.

### **Matthew Mills**

Matthew wants everyone to think that he's dating Caitlin, but I don't think he is. I mean, even I can tell that he flirts with her, but he seems to flirt with everyone. (I think even me, though I'm not sure.)

What I've noticed, though, is that although Matt and Caitlin sometimes leave together, claiming to be going out alone, they never arrive together. It doesn't matter where or when I see them, they never walk in together.

When he's not flirting so ostentatiously even I notice, Matt's pretty serious about

his performance work. He's partnered both recent aerial female leads, Tina and Alice, and has been very committed to Bethany's training.

### **Nigel Telyanin**

We don't actually have formal job titles or ranks or anything like that, not beyond "performer", but everyone knows Nigel is the head clown. He's the most experienced performer in the company, and he really looks out for us clowns. Everybody else is always asking him for advice, too.

### **Ophelia Seymour**

Ophelia is somehow involved in the running of the company, despite just being a clown. She spends a lot of time helping the admin staff, compared to the other performers, anyway. Maybe she's just interested in the business side of things – she's older than most of the performers, so it makes sense that she'd want to be able to move into the management side of things before she can't perform any more – but I'm not sure it's just that.

Nigel trusts Ophelia, though. When our pay didn't come through, the rest of us clowns turned to Nigel to sort it out, but he sent Ophelia to deal with it.

### **Paul Morris**

Paul's a good friend, but his performance has been declining recently. It's obviously because he's spending more time learning about harnesses, lines and other equipment and apparatus than on his performance skills. I'm not very happy about that. I would really prefer that he be what he is and do it well until he can be something else instead. You can't be two different things at once and be good at both.

### **Susan Michaels**

Susan's very talented. Performance seems to come easier to her than to me, or a lot of the others. She's extremely flexible too but that's not surprising; most people have higher flexibility in their mid-teens. I guess she pretends to be older than she is so that people take her seriously.