

Guava Season

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The circus is coming to town and everyone wants to go - except her. The circus is coming and bringing back bad memories folded inside its canvas, stowed in its lurching trailers.

Mara hides in her kitchen, veiled in sweet steam from the jelly pan. The townspeople stroll down to see the convoy arriving on the cobbled last stretch of the road from Salvador. Little groups pass Mara's half-open door, excited chatter reaching in to her. They say the tickets are expensive. Still, they say, the show is like nothing you ever saw on this earth. But Mara doesn't want to go. She's too busy, she'll tell anyone who asks.

Last time a circus came to Lençois, she'd been wide-eyed, full of girlish dreams. The dusty glamour of marquees and sequinned performers made tantalizing contrasts with the domestic routine at her mother's guesthouse. The town was then in the first flush of its 'discovery' as eco-paradise, cavalcades of Land Rovers disgorging gaggles of pale, tie-dyed gringos. New cafes opened, menu boards painted in broken English. Her brother was among the locals who offered themselves as guides, leading the gringos on trails to table-mountains and swimming holes. Mara hung around the circus camp, porters unloading, erecting ropes and trunks, performers - glimpsed through canvas doorways - limbering up, laughing, smoking. Shy as a lamb then, she hid whenever someone looked her way, yet wished above all else to see inside those trailers, daydreaming long conversations in which circus folk welcomed her, took her into their confidence.

The pink stew of *jabuticaba* jam boils like a mud spring; Mara skims away pips with a ladle, lowers the heat, begins warming jars in the steam. Carlos comes in from the field, speckled with dust and kisses the back of her neck. She knows he won't go to see the circus, nor will he

mention it. "When you get through the *jabuticaba*, those top guava trees are laden." he says, loosening his bootlaces.

"Okay. I'll ask Henrique to pick them."

Carlos pours some coffee from the thermos and goes off to his paperwork.

"Some Americanos coming tomorrow, *querido*." She calls after him. "Would you meet them off the bus?" He shouts, okay.

She had met Jonas waiting for B&B guests at the bus stop. He'd come alone, after the main circus convoy, having caught Dengue fever and stayed in Salvador to recuperate. Her mother's guests, meat men from the north of Bahia, were late, so the *executivo* from Salvador arrived first. She lowered her head, instinctively, and saw in the very edge of her vision, the tall gringo with oyster blond hair climbing down. He wore strange leggings and leather sandals, carried a pack covered with button pins and cloth badges. He looked around for signs, someone to direct him. Mara was the only person in the street, so he walked towards her and asked, in heavily-accented Portuguese, for the way to the *Casa dos Bandeirantes* bar. When her mother's guests arrived, they all walked together to the square, where she pointed out the bar, blushing despite herself, then carried on home to her mother. Jonas, his name was - almost a Brazilian name - but he was German, tall and from near Frankfurt.

The next day, she'd gone to the circus camp, watching and waiting for over an hour, peering to see into the dark of the mess tent, the Big Top, side shows; lingering at the end of the field where the performers' trailers were parked. She stayed out for as long as she could - now her mother would need her back and her story of queues at the grocer would be unconvincing. Just then his voice called her name. On the far edge of the camp she saw him, half jogging towards her, hair flopping in the sun. She pretended she was just out walking, but neither of them could hide their smiles. He showed her inside the Big Top: all the nets and ropes and hoops looped back in a

brace against the canvas roof, the arena twinkling with lost sequins and stray popcorn. He asked her to meet him later that night. She could hardly speak.

Three times she washed her hair and finally it sat in soft curls. She smoothed lotion into her hands and put on the dress her mother had made for her. He told her she was *muito bonita* and the way he said it, she really felt beautiful. He bought ice cream and they walked around the square, then sat under the bus shelter. He told her the trapeze was just for now – he'd studied chemistry and planned to return to science after seeing a bit of adventure.

Mara doesn't smile so much lately. Her face has taken on a weary cast, like someone with liver trouble. When business clients summoned Carlos to São Paulo in the first years of their marriage, she used to stay up all night waiting for his return, terrified she'd never hear his key turn in the lock again. He always came back - no matter how late he had to travel, how bad the weather and the potholes on the long road up over the plain.

For the weeks that the German was in Lençóis, they saw each other every night. He let her watch the show from the tunnel where the performers entered the arena. She watched his thigh muscles thicken as he held himself upside down, pencil-straight, then snap and lengthen as he flipped down towards another acrobat on a swing. Outside, after the show, he poured strange tea from a flask. When they kissed, his mouth tasted of the spices from the tea. Once the circus moved on, he came back when he could, from various stops across the state and down the coast. On the last visit, he held her in a long, melancholy embrace, and looked into her eyes and said he could hardly bear to go. He would return to Germany for the end of the year only, to see his family. The circus was moving on to Argentina and he was tired of being on the road and the poor pay. But he'd be back, could hardly imagine staying two whole months without her. When I come back, he said, you must marry me. She felt a surge of heat in her face, a clenching in her throat and she knew they'd be together, however far away his travels would take him. Her mother hadn't liked it -

he was older than her and not a conventional type - she hadn't understood his work. But she kept quiet - gringos were bound to be better off than local boys, and besides she was working too hard, scrubbing rooms and making meals, to spend much time worrying.

She told a few people that she and Jonas were to marry; those few people told everyone else. Easter, he said, if not before, as it seemed too long to wait - an impossible time to be without her. She counted the days, aching for his return. She looked for him in the tour office and the bike rental shop. She smelled him still in her dresses, her shoes, her hair ribbons. She heard him still in the creak of her wardrobe door, the hum of the fridge, the swish of the curtains; she thought she heard his bare feet dancing on the floorboards. Her eyes hunted for him in her jewellery box, along the bookshelves, between the pages of a magazine, in the shadows of her mother's saints.

By Carnival, his scent was faint on the shirt she wore on their last day out. Pentecost passed. Then Santo Antônio - the marriage-maker's day. She waited in the queue at the church to eat a piece of the warm cake that gave hope of marriage to those who swallowed its sweet crumbs. When he didn't come she began to see what a fool she'd been and knew everyone was laughing. Towering stacks of shame rose around her as the German boy's silence stretched out, beyond Tiradentes, beyond the 7th of September day parades. The aching realisation that he would not be back bled like a tender scar, lodged in her, became part of her anatomy. In time, the yellow patches of grass where the tents had been grew green again and the circus posters peeled and faded. People pretended it hadn't happened, got on with their business. But she knew they remembered, every time they saw her. Though they smiled kindly and asked after her mother, she knew they pitied her, laughed at her girlish passion lived out around the town square, her earnest belief in the gringo acrobat.

Jabuticaba, acerola, mango, guava, jatobá. Lime-spiced marmalade. Stewed banana. She tries to hide from the circus people, filling her kitchen with steam and good smells, but the circus comes to find her. Carlos comes home looking a little sheepish. He takes a shower and she brews coffee. They sit at the table and he makes small talk about his sciatica, the garden. She thinks she'll wait for him to get to the point, but he takes too long.

"What is it, *marido*? What's getting to you?"

He mumbles and fishes some crumpled paper from his pocket, spreading it flat on the table.

"They need some help down there, with the cooking."

"Who...?" She knows already, before she reads the print revealed by his palm smoothing the poster. 'Required: experienced cook, to provide excellent home cooking for world-class artistes.'

"I've too much to do." She doesn't have many guests at this time of year, just the American couple, then no one until after All Souls. Carlos fixes her with his steady gaze. He takes her in his arms. "What's this about *querida*? Hnnh? Won't you bring them some jam, at least? Not that we need the money but...maybe it'll cheer you up."

"No, Carlos."

"It's up to you, sweetheart. But you love to cook: it always makes you feel better. What could be so bad about that?"

She walks down one day, when the streets are quiet, stepping among guy ropes; her chest tight. She peeks into the Big Top. In the gloom, so many lonely young performers, from China and Canada, from Germany even, perhaps; homesick, far from their people. Their muscles arched in elegant geometries each night under a canvas sky. By day, their spangles hung in trailers, the spotlights cold and grey like spent coals, empty rows where the shiny-eyed audience sat. She feels

for them, so skinny and vulnerable - just kids, longing for their families, for homely food. In the acrobats, she sees herself and Jonas, so young, so long ago.

She counts the days of their affair - 43 short, sighing days of winter - kindergarten stuff, measured against all the years with Carlos. A tiny, fledgling *amor*, though it felt bigger than the whole country and the Bay of All Saints. She understands how the acrobat could quickly become attached to her, a good cook, someone tutored from birth in the art of making people feel at home. She sees how he could've forged a deep bond that was, despite its intensity, easily severed when he left Lençois, remote place of baked sandstone plateaus, and returned to his leafy Europe.

Her cheeks glow in the reflection from her copper pan. As the mountain of guavas simmers to a rosy puddle, some heavy particles stirred through her memories boil away too, like peach stones, loosened from the flesh, rising to the surface. The lingering imprint of trapeze rope on young skin, of long ago days of loss and wondering, stitched through with stinging shame. They rise up, these silted fossils, and vaporise, like so much kitchen steam. And what's left is the solidity of what she's built with Carlos - like sandstone washed clean by the rain.