

# The Acrobat

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**T**wirly pink skirt, stick-on bindi, and an armful of bracelets that jangled if I moved even an inch: that was my costume. I was part of the Indian Bollywood team, one of four groups in a showcase that featured Asian cultures and dance. When I look back on it now I realize the appropriation of a white-looking girl with a fake jewel in the middle of her forehead, but the funny thing was, I was the only Asian person on my team. Half-Japanese—*bafu* as we call ourselves. Not an Indian in sight, except the choreographer. He never came to the shows.

The Chinese Acrobats were the second group. They were the real deal, flown in from China and hosted in apartments over the summer by the amusement park we worked at, and the language barrier was strong. Audiences still flocked to their shows though, especially to one sequence where the acrobats formed a human tower that some of them had to run, backflip, and jump over like it was nothing. I would've fallen on my face.

The Shaolin Monks were the third. That sounds awesomely martial artsy, and they were, but backstage they turned back into giggling teenagers who poked each other with the rubber-tipped ends of their spears. Despite not understanding a word they said, they were a blast to be around. And last were the Japanese Taiko drummers. Only one girl, Kasumi, was actually Japanese, so she and I got along well. The rest spoke English because they were Americans through and through. That meant you could usually find us Bollywood dancers nearby. When we weren't backstage we were either in the cafeteria, the 100-degree blaze outside, or in the resting area, commonly known to performers as the greenroom.

On one particularly hot day we were all crammed inside its not-green walls when another girl from the Taiko group, Dina, started talking to the acrobats. They were sprawled across the couches in their bright yellow unitards, and Dina was Chinese like them, so she was our unofficial translator. Lots of back-and-forth with the cultures, I know. It's hard to keep track. Did I mention

that most of my team was made up of Mexican Americans, plus me, who danced to Hindi music for a living?

Dina asked the acrobats about a rumor going around that one of them had a crush on someone. A Bollywood someone. My teammates assumed it was this girl Mayra. I don't know why, because she was a menace. She had this annoying habit of sickling her feet, which is when you point your toes wrong and look like a pigeon. Amateur.

"You're supposed to extend from your ankle," I'd tell her, "not just curl the end of your toes."

"I'm doing that," Mayra would say. But she wasn't.

Also, "Don't forget to take your jewelry off," I'd remind her before we went on stage.

She'd fiddle with her dolphin earrings. "I know." And then she didn't.

Turns out it was me the acrobat had a crush on, because of course he did, and I gobbled up the attention the second Dina let us know. My teammates and I couldn't help but goad her into telling us if the rumor was true, and Mayra wasn't on shift that day so we figured he'd fess up if he liked her. But Dina shook her head at our question.

"No," she said. She motioned her chin towards me as she sat cross-legged on a stretch mat. "It's you that he likes."

His name was Jianye. Jianye went red in the face as the other acrobats jumped around and slapped his back, and I covered my blushing face with a henna-painted hand. But really I was screaming on the inside. I wound my long hair tight around a fingertip until it swelled purple.

From then on Jianye brought me gifts. First it was a box of chocolate, and soon after a silver necklace that gave me a rash. I bought him a giant cupcake for his birthday, then kicked myself for not remembering that the acrobats followed a strict diet. I threw it away and had everyone sign a card instead.

Despite the fact that neither of us could really communicate, we still became a thing, a bona fide fling. You hear summer fling and you think of a sunset couple on the cover of a novel, but picture a dancer and an acrobat hunched in plastic chairs with no idea what to say, among musty garment bags and a rusty fan we sprayed water at for some relief from the heat.

Super romantic.

“You have something in your hair,” I told him once. His hair was thick, jet black, and stuck out in every direction no matter how much gel he used.

“Okay,” he said. He nodded at me with a closed smile, and the little leaf stayed within the hardened spikes of his hair.

I didn’t remove it.

He watched from the wings anytime I performed. I danced my little heart out until I jangled like Santa’s bells, and I was grateful I wasn’t the sweaty type who dripped and heaved after the songs ended. I’m pretty sure I threw out my back at some point, but I couldn’t keel over like some old lady so I just let the tears well up and prayed they wouldn’t ruin my perfect eyeliner.

On the last day I saw him, I turned down the carpool offer from my Bollywood team and got a ride with Kasumi to the closest store to the acrobats’ apartments: Walmart. By then it was nighttime, and Kasumi and I met the acrobats outside in our normal clothes, which for them was sweatpants, sandals, and a T-shirt. I was trying to be cute at all times of the day though, so I was freezing in my tiny jean shorts and a tank top that had a hole over one boob, but no one could see it with the same color bra underneath. That’s how you do it.

One of the acrobats handed me a coconut water passed down the line that his friends stood in. I didn’t like him. He was stubby, mean, and I could tell he thought I was an idiot. And it was the pulpy kind of coconut water that I hate.

“Thank you,” I said to him. I sipped it without taking a breath and set it aside like I was going to save it.

Jianye gave me his soft smile as the can clinked onto the cement. Gentle eyes, downturned. He had a baby face with a body like a tank. “Good?” he asked me.

“It’s good,” I said.

Fast forward to the acrobats asking me to buy them cigarettes, and to their competition of who made the best kung fu poses, imitations of what the Shaolin Monks did for their show. Wong won with his crane stance. I knew if I tried too, my jeans would rip right down the butt. I should’ve worn leggings.

But Jianye didn’t do any poses. He stayed beside me and took my hand, then led me behind the store where the streetlights buzzed far across the parking lot and flattened cardboard boxes were stacked in string. I couldn’t see him clearly in the dark without my glasses. Awkward kisses commenced. He kept leaning

in, and I had to arch away from him before my back cracked more than it already had.

“Sorry,” I said. I huffed a little laugh and held back a wince from my muscle flare-up.

He only said, “Okay,” and leaned in again.

But hands with phones appeared around the corner then as the acrobats snapped pictures of us, right before Kasumi yanked the boys away by the tags of their shirts. They’d probably make fun of Jianye with the pictures later. A shot of us kissing. A shot of us caught.

I rubbed my neck and turned back to him. “Oh, I got you something.” I pulled it out of my pocket. “I had this made for you.” I handed him a leather bracelet with my name engraved onto it. There was a poster for them at the amusement park from a gift stand that sold stuffed animals too.

Jianye ran his thumb over the engraving and said my name out loud.

“I’m glad it doesn’t say Mayra,” I said.

His head tilted. But he thanked me with “*Xiè xiè*” and held out his wrist.

I clipped it on for him. “You’re welcome.”

A short time after that, I left. Jianye grabbed my face through the open car window and kissed me again, and I couldn’t help but cry. We promised each other through some janky translation app that we’d stay in contact through the emails we exchanged.

“I love you,” I said to him. Mascara streaked down my cheeks.

“*Wō ài nǐ*,” he said, and I wailed even harder.

It was movie material. The acrobats waved as Kasumi and I drove off. I watched Jianye grow smaller and smaller in the side mirror, fading out of my life as quickly as he came. He never looked away.

A couple weeks after the showcase I got a message from him and ran my reply through the translator app before I sent it back. We did this over and over, reminisced about shared memories, but eventually the communication fizzled out. The next summer I was told that the acrobats would be back. I styled my new haircut out of my face and fluffed out the skirt of this season’s costume, a shimmery teal two-piece with sequins that could slice your fingers off. My makeup was immaculate. Nails, polished. Body, shaved. It was all a pain.

Familiar faces arrived. Every group gathered for our first dress rehearsal in front of the stage, and I sat with my nose raised high as I peered over at the mass of acrobats.

Jianye wasn't there.

I finally got up and asked them about him. They pointed me to their manager, who spoke a little English, and he told me that Jianye wasn't coming this year. So I rejoined my sparkly team and plopped into a chair, then slapped my bracelets quiet.

Mayra eyed me from across the table.

"What?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Nothing." Then she crossed her legs and played with her earrings. "I just think you should've given him that cupcake."

I ignored her and glared down at my feet.

Wondered what would've happened if I did.

I would've walked up to Jianye with the clean white box and said "Happy Birthday!" as I handed it to him. And I'd hope that just this once he'd forget his carrot and celery sticks to dig into the cake, and get frosting on his nose that I'd dab away with the confetti napkins I had ready. Alone together in the shaded pavilion behind the cafeteria, where only the breeze could enter.

But that's not how it'd happen.

We'd be in the greenroom, with everyone else but me and the acrobats asleep as they dozed over couches like a spell had been cast. Jianye would lay the box on his lap and open it as the acrobats peeked around him, and they'd become a wall of yellow before me as I gripped my skirt of pink. Me, a speck of the wrong color. Then he'd close the lid without taking a single bite to give me that same soft smile, the one that didn't show any of his teeth or meet his eyes, and all his friends' faces would turn towards me like one of the same mind.

"Okay," Jianye would say to me.

My heart would sink.

I'd tuck my hair behind my ears and accept the box back from him.

Then later, when no one was looking for me (because who would?), I'd sneak into the shaded pavilion and shove the dessert past my painted lips as crumbs sprinkled onto my costume. And I wouldn't bother to wipe them off, just relish eating more than a single granola bar for the day as I stared ahead at the rounded

*Confluence*

beige walls, and to finish, I'd smack on one last mouthful as I repeated Jianye's reply with a teary-eyed chuckle.

"Okay," I'd say.

Nothing would hear me but the dry, wavering breeze.

Okay.