

Excerpt from Erin Morgenstern's

*The Night Circus*

*Fears of Illustrious Illusion*

The entrance is open, and a line of patrons files into the illusionist's tent. Bailey joins them.

Inside it is lit by a line of black iron sconces along the rounded wall and contains nothing but a ring of plain wooden chairs. There are only about twenty of them, in two staggered rows so that the view from each seat is comparable. Bailey chooses a seat in the inside row, across from the entrance.

The rest of the seats fill quickly, save for two: the one to his immediate left and another across the circle.

Bailey notices two things at once.

First, that he can no longer see where the entrance had been. The space where the audience had entered now appears to be solid wall, seamlessly blending with the rest of the tent.

Second, there is now a dark-haired woman in a black coat sitting to his left. He is certain that she was not there before the door disappeared.

Then his attention is removed from both these events as the empty chair across the circle bursts into flame.

The panic is instant. Those occupying the chairs closest to the flaming chair abandon their seats and rush for the door, only to find that there is no longer a door to be found, only a solid wall.

The flames grow steadily higher, straying close to the chair, licking around the wood, though it does not appear to be burning.

Bailey looks again at the woman to his left, and she winks at him before standing and walking to the center of the circle. Amidst the panic, she calmly unbuttons her coat and removes it, tossing it with a delicate gesture toward the burning chair.

What had been a heavy wool coat becomes a long piece of black silk that ripples like water over the chair. The flames vanish. Only a few lingering wisps of smoke remain, along with the sharp smell of charred wood that is slowly changing to the comforting scent of a fireplace, tinged with something like cinnamon or clove.

The woman, standing in the center of the circle of chairs, pulls back the black silk with a flourish, revealing a still-intact chair on which now perch several snow-white doves.

Another flourish, and the black silk folds and curves in on itself, becoming a black top hat. The woman places it on her head, topping off an ensemble that looks like a ball gown fashioned out of the night sky: black silk dotted with sparkling white crystals. She acknowledges her audience with a subtle bow.

The illusionist has made her entrance. A few people, including Bailey, manage to applaud, while those who had abandoned their seats return to them, looking both disturbed and curious.

The performance is continuous. The displays Bailey has difficulty thinking of as tricks meld one into the other. The doves vanish frequently, only to reappear on hats or under

chairs. There is also a black raven, far too large to have been cleverly concealed. It is only after the performance has gone on for some time that Bailey slowly realizes that because of the circle of chairs, the shape and closeness of the space, there is no room for mirrors or tricks of the light. Everything is immediate and palpable. She even transforms one audience member's pocket watch from metal to sand and back again. At one point all the chairs float some distance off the ground, and while the movement is steady and secure, Bailey's toes barely graze the floor and he clutches the sides of his chair nervously.

At the end of the act, the illusionist takes a bow with a pivoting turn, acknowledging the entire circle as the audience applauds. As she completes the rotation, she is no longer there. Only a few sparkling shimmers remain, echoes of the crystals in her gown.

The door reappears in the side of the tent and the small audience makes their way out. Bailey lags behind, glancing back as he leaves at the spot where the illusionist had been.

Outside, though it was not there before, is another raised platform, much like the one the contortionist stood on. But the figure on this platform does not move. Bailey almost thinks it is a statue, dressed in a white gown edged in matching fur that cascades beyond the platform to the ground. Her hair and skin, even her eyelashes, are an icy white.

But she moves. Very, very slowly. So slowly that Bailey cannot pinpoint exact motions, only slight changes. Soft flakes of iridescent snow float to the ground, falling from her like leaves from a tree.

Bailey walks around, looking at her from every angle.

Her eyes follow him, though the snow-flecked lashes do not blink.

There is a small silver plaque on the platform, partially obscured by the cascading gown.

It reads IN MEMORIAM, but it does not specify who it is for.

# The Fish

by Elizabeth Bishop

I caught a tremendous fish  
and held him beside the boat  
half out of water, with my hook  
fast in a corner of his mouth.  
He didn't fight.  
He hadn't fought at all.  
He hung a grunting weight,  
battered and venerable  
and homely. Here and there  
his brown skin hung in strips  
like ancient wallpaper,  
and its pattern of darker brown  
was like wallpaper:  
shapes like full-blown roses  
stained and lost through age.  
He was speckled with barnacles,  
fine rosettes of lime,  
and infested  
with tiny white sea-lice,  
and underneath two or three  
rags of green weed hung down.  
While his gills were breathing in  
the terrible oxygen  
—the frightening gills,  
fresh and crisp with blood,  
that can cut so badly—  
I thought of the coarse white flesh  
packed in like feathers,  
the big bones and the little bones,  
the dramatic reds and blacks  
of his shiny entrails,  
and the pink swim-bladder  
like a big peony.  
I looked into his eyes  
which were far larger than mine  
but shallower, and yellowed,  
the irises backed and packed  
with tarnished tinfoil  
seen through the lenses  
of old scratched isinglass.  
They shifted a little, but not  
to return my stare.  
—It was more like the tipping  
of an object toward the light.  
I admired his sullen face,  
the mechanism of his jaw,  
and then I saw  
that from his lower lip  
—if you could call it a lip—  
grim, wet, and weaponlike,  
hung five old pieces of fish-line,  
or four and a wire leader

with the swivel still attached,  
with all their five big hooks  
grown firmly in his mouth.  
A green line, frayed at the end  
where he broke it, two heavier lines,  
and a fine black thread  
still crimped from the strain and snap  
when it broke and he got away.  
Like medals with their ribbons  
frayed and wavering,  
a five-haired beard of wisdom  
trailing from his aching jaw.  
I stared and stared  
and victory filled up  
the little rented boat,  
from the pool of bilge  
where oil had spread a rainbow  
around the rusted engine  
to the bailer rusted orange,  
the sun-cracked thwarts,  
the oarlocks on their strings,  
the gunnels—until everything  
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!  
And I let the fish go.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Writers sometimes  
build tension through  
imagery. Write a scene  
in which imagery plays  
a central role.

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