



## THE JUGGLER

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Every night, Amalia Reyna prayed to Saint Julian to make her reborn. As whom or what, she didn't know, so that was part of her prayer: Dear Saint Julian in Heaven, make me . . . Then her thoughts would trail off.

She'd found the candle at the corner store one day when they were out of Virgenes de Guadalupe. She lived in a group home called Julian House, on Julian Avenue, so he was an inherently intriguing saint, even if he lacked La Virgen's style. He was ghost-pale, like they all were, with a cape and tights and a sword. He wore a pinkish sarong over his tights, and his free hand perched on his hip in a way that made him look kind of gay. When Amalia turned the candle around, she read that he was the patron saint of circus workers, clowns, boatmen, innkeepers, wandering musicians, murderers, travelers, shepherds, childless people, pilgrims, jugglers, and hospitallers. She didn't know what a hospitaller was, but she decided that Julian would be her patron saint too, since he seemed rather inclusive.

For the past few nights, her prayer had been more specific than usual: Dear Saint Julian in Heaven, help me juggle really good so I can join that circus next door and get outta here. She remembered the carnival that had blossomed in an empty lot one night last summer, a place of ringing bells and flashing lights and hot sugary smells. Her now-ex-boyfriend Jesús had won her a giant octopus stuffed with something that crinkled when she hugged it. Then he'd won a teddy bear holding a heart and given it to another girl, so she'd had to kick that girl's ass.

In early spring, the circus lady had moved into the top half of the house next door. She wasn't the first white person to live on Julian Avenue or even the second. Julian Avenue was one and a half miles from Amalia's mother's house, but there were no white people on Avenue 43. The circus lady was as pale as Saint Julian, with big tetas and hair a bright, unnatural red that Amalia would love to try herself. Right now Amalia had fried burgundy waves.

The circus lady had been hanging by her knees from the railing of her front balcony when Amalia had gotten home from school Monday afternoon. It had been a long, traffic-stunted cab ride from Hancock Park, the driver complaining the whole way that DCFS didn't pay him enough to drive her ass to a special school every day through this hell—she damn well better be doing all her homework. In fact, Amalia was.

The circus lady dismounted and watched them from her balcony. Amalia watched her from the oil-stained driveway of the group home. The circus lady bounded down the steps like the boldest of the feral cats that hung around Julian House.

“Do you live there?” The circus lady pointed to the big, Victorian house. It was painted the same yellow-green as the hills that cradled Highland Park. There was a half-dead vegetable garden and a basketball hoop. It was pretty if you didn’t look too closely. If you did, it was institutional.

“Yeah.” “What is it, exactly? I’ve been wondering. I’m Ginger, by the way.”

“It’s a group home. For, like, kids who parents treat them bad or who on probation. Nice to meet you, Ginger. My name is Amalia.” She wasn’t afraid of adults. They usually liked her.

“Pretty name.” Ginger seemed unfazed by the group-home thing. That was good. Amalia didn’t like to be treated like an orphan. “Hang on, I want to give you something.”

She scaled the stairs to her house again, then returned with a bright pink flier. Amalia waited. She knew Mary Jo, the house manager, would be watching from the window by now, wondering what sort of trouble Amalia was getting into.

“I direct this grassroots political circus troupe that focuses on community engagement,” she explained. “We just moved to L.A., and we’re having auditions.”

Amalia took the flyer and read out loud: “Do you juggle like a’ . . . what this word?”

“Jezebel. She’s sort of a slut from the Bible. But it doesn’t really mean anything in this context. I just liked the sound of it.”

Amalia liked that Ginger had said slut in front of her, but had not called her one. “Whadchu want me to do with this?” she asked.

“Just put it up in the . . . group home. If you’re allowed to—I mean, maybe there are rules about posting stuff, like at Starbucks. And audition if you want to. We want to get some young people involved. Do you have any performance background?”

Get some young people involved. Now she sounded like the woman who’d given Amalia’s class a free tour of the opera, or the guy from Heal the Bay who’d seemed convinced that picking up trash on the beach would make them feel better about themselves. But Ginger was wearing leggings and a tank top the color of the flier. She had big white sunglasses on top her traffic cone hair, and she’d said slut. She might be different.

And so Amalia had begun to imagine herself in a circus. Something lithe and free. A creature who traveled from ocean to ocean instead of from Julian Avenue to Avenue 43. These reveries were always sneaking up on her. Her English teacher called it daydreaming, but Amalia was looking for a key to her fate, and the process was as lovely and mystical as a math problem. She was getting a B- in English and an A in Algebra 2. If rebirth were around the corner, the present lost its power.

“Yeah,” she told Ginger. “I juggle a little bit.”

That was Monday. She’d had five days to learn to juggle. Apples, oranges, a nubby hacky sack stolen from her hippie housemate. A counselor at the day program had helped. She could now reliably keep three balls (or whatever) in the air, but she knew four would be better. She wished she could at least toss them higher—the third was never thrown so much as passed from right hand to left, like some quick, illegal exchange.

“Whadchu think?” she asked Nicky, who had been her roommate for eight of the nine months she’d lived at Julian House. Decades, in group-home time.

“It’s cool, but I’d want to be the lady on the horse. With, like, the little outfit?” Nicky sat cross-legged on her twin bed, her big stomach resting on her thighs. She was wearing a T-shirt with the word Princess stretched tight across her chest.

“Nicky. Where I’m a get a horse? Mary Jo only let me take this apple ’cause it bruised and nasty. And no offense or nothing, but you ride a horse, he be like, Ow, my back! My back!” She limped around the room to illustrate her point. Nicky giggled amiably.

It was Saturday morning. They’d finished their chores just before it had gotten hot, spraying all the scratched moldings and furniture with so much Pledge you’d think they were taggers. Sometimes Amalia wished Julian House didn’t look quite so much like her mom’s place: polished and poor. She craved the kind of clutter you could hide treasure in.

She was already dressed for the audition in her favorite cargo sweats, new Pumas from the Garment District, and a tank top that she hoped looked kind of like Ginger’s but not in an obvious way. She’d painted long black lines on her upper eyelids, which made her eyes even more feline. Her Avenues homies, the ones she was trying to stay away from now that she went to a special school and got good grades, had always called her Cat Eyes. Her eyes were light brown, flecked with green and gold, and they turned up at the corners. They were her best feature, not just because they made even her science teacher nervous and deferential, but because, when she looked in the mirror, they promised her that she was not of this world.

Mary Jo knocked hard on the door frame. It was stupid, because the door was always open. House rules. But the staff was full of fake gestures of respect.

“Amalia. Your social worker’s here. Come on down.” “It’s Saturday,” Amalia protested.

“So? Maybe he has class during the week, I don’t know.” Mary Jo had a deep voice from years of smoking, although she’d quit. She wore her jeans low and her hair in cornrows. Everyone said she was a dyke, except for those who were positive she was hooking up with the guy who delivered crates of yellow cheese and soft white bread.

“I have an audition in twenty minutes!” said Amalia.

“Well, your audition will have to wait, Ms. So-and-So.” Mary Jo had a profound lack of curiosity about the girls, but ultimately, she seemed to know everything already.

A white guy Amalia had never seen before was waiting for her in Mary Jo's office. "What happen to Kara?" Amalia asked. "She had to go back to school in Massachusetts. I'm Michael." "You my new social worker? You look like the Jonas Brothers."

"All of them?" He raised his eyebrows and smiled a Jonas Brothers smile. "Yeah."

It might be fun to have a cute social worker. Amalia juggled people too: mother, siblings, social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist, wrap-around, house manager, housemates, teachers, classmates, and, though she kept trying to give them up, her Avenues homies. She had a different costume for each, a different endearing and genuine attitude. She gave herself fully, searching for how each might save her.

Michael opened a leather folder that contained a yellow notepad and a printout of her files, or at least an excerpt. It would take a lot of paper to print all 15 years of her life.

"So, let's see, you've been visiting your mother every other weekend for the past . . . six months, it looks like. How's that going?"

"It's good."

"You and your mom are getting along?"

"Yeah, we try and respect each other. She know not to lay hands on me no more, and I don't lay hands on her neither."

"Good, good." He would stay here, in Mary Jo's swiveling office chair, until he had proof he was doing a good job. Amalia could feel him wanting this from her, and because it was what she was good at—feeling the magnetism of want and responding—she gave it to him.

"And her boyfriend? He don't come around no more either. She kick him out."

"Right, I was going to ask you about that. About Eddy Beltrán. The man you attacked after he . . ."

Amalia knew he was only pretending to search the files for what El Cabrón had done. "After he keep on raping me." She'd learned to say the words with chin up, eyes straight ahead. She could look straight through El Cabrón, and she could look through social workers too. "I stab him with a knife. Just in the leg, he ain't hurt too bad. I know violence is not the answer. That what my therapist say. It probably say all that in those papers."

"It does," said Michael, "but I want to hear it from you too. Did your mother tell you that she actually filed a restraining order against Mr. Beltrán?"

The last time Amalia had been home, she'd babysat her little brother and sister so her mom could see a new guy, someone she'd met at the laundromat. She'd assured Amalia this one was nice, not like El Cabrón, but Amalia had hidden her older brother's knife beneath her pillow just in case. Nothing had happened. She'd stayed awake watching TV, listening to her sister's heavy breath beside her, and sliding the knife across her inner thigh. She still had a tic-tac-toe board of thin red lines beneath her sweats.

“Um, yeah, I think she told me that.” “That’s great news,” said Michael. “Do you know why?” Amalia shook her head. “It’s great news because—I don’t want to get ahead of myself, but your mom has completed her parenting classes, and the home visits are going well, and you’ve been doing well in school and not getting in trouble. You have a court date scheduled for September 19. If things keep going the way they’ve been going, the judge might say you can go home.”

This was the part where she was supposed to squeal like a fool, maybe dance around the office, maybe even hug him. What she was thinking was, September a long way away. She might be with the circus in New York or Paris by then. Her mom might be back with El Cabrón or married to the laundromat guy. Four months. She’d had her whole relationship with Jesús in that length of time. Her heart was thrown in the air like an apple, then dropped with a fleshy thud.

“It will be your choice, of course,” said Michael, as if things often were.

“Thank you,” said Amalia. She squinted at the clock in the corner of Mary Jo’s computer monitor behind Michael’s head. “I don’t wanna be rude or nothing, but are we all done? I was gonna take my community pass at 11.”

The audition had already started when she arrived. A handwritten sign directed her to the backyard. Rows of folding chairs were set up on the cement patio, turning the grass into a stage. A skinny black girl with two long, messy braids beckoned Amalia over to a table with a clipboard on it. The day was hot, and beads of sweat formed between Amalia’s hand and the pen. In large round letters, she filled in the blanks, and only later did she wish she had a cell phone. She’d listed Mary Jo’s office number, which always went to voicemail or one of the assistant house managers, some of whom only pretended to write down messages. But unlike when teachers or cops called, this time Amalia wanted to be reachable.

She sat cross-legged in a folding chair and watched her competition perform. They all seemed to be visiting Highland Park from another world. They had green and purple hair. They carried hula hoops and sticks they set on fire. They wore fluttery rags that made Amalia think of fairytales. In the margins of the yard, they unfolded their long limbs like exotic insects, stretching legs above their heads, bending themselves backward into U shapes.

They were almost all white, and they were all older than Amalia. It was chin up, eyes forward time.

“Amalia Reyna, you’re next.” Ginger gave her a hey, neighbor grin that made her chest feel warm.

Amalia looked at the rows of fairytale faces. She wished she had something real to juggle. Already a guy had juggled bowling pins, each cartwheeling in the air before he caught it effortlessly. He’d taken a bow, holding three pins in each hand like a bouquet.

“Um, I’m a juggler also,” she told her audience. They all saw she was a kid and nodded encouragingly.

Chin up. Eyes on her apple, her orange, Lisbette’s hacky sack. Soon they were looping from hand to hand in steady rhythm. This, she told Saint Julian, whom she rarely prayed to during the day, this what I’m talking about.

She wanted to want to go home. But at her mother's house there was no room to want things. True, her mom and siblings were her people in a way that Mary Jo and Nicky would never be. But at home she had to watch her back, and Lauren's and Johnnie's too. Every time she did homework, she had to explain to her homies why she couldn't kick it with them, explain to her mom why she couldn't help her sell soup on the corner. At Julian House, she had the luxury of groaning loudly with the other girls when the house managers made them sit down and do homework for an hour and a half before TV time.

The apple, the orange, the hacky sack.

She didn't know how to catch everything in a lovely bouquet. She'd never stopped juggling by choice, only as a result of failure. Maybe if she stood here long enough, she'd learn. Saint Julian would help her, seeing what she was meant to be. Had she been juggling for minutes? Hours?

But it wasn't Saint Julian who intervened, it was Webb Wellington, though she wouldn't learn his name until later.

When she first saw him, he wasn't so much a him as an it, a creature from a late-night movie in a baseball cap. Every inch of his skin was cracked. Hard white plates broken up by red crevices. His skin reminded her of stretches of the desert she'd passed through a long time ago, bouncing on her mom's sweaty back. As he approached the sign-in table, she realized that her love of zombies did not extend to real life. The apple, the orange, and the hacky sack fell to the ground.

Everyone was as distracted as she was, but Ginger managed to thank her for her performance. The seat Amalia returned to was only two chairs away from the one the zombie had chosen, and those two had mysteriously cleared out, giving her an unobstructed view.

In Oaxaca City, where Amalia had spent the first six years of her life, there had been a boy whose arm and neck had been burned, along with a half-moon of his face. He had begged outside the basilica, his good brown eye following Amalia and other children close to his age. The eye seemed to ask why their fate was to hold their parents' hands and shop at the zócalo and light candles inside the church, and his was to be here in the hot sun like the fire that had burned him.

Ginger called Webb Wellington to the grass stage, and it was only then that Amalia noticed he was carrying a guitar.

"Sorry I'm late," he said in a perfectly normal voice. "I drove up from San Diego. Traffic was awful. Anyway, I'm the freak you guys were looking for in your ad, I hope. I'm going to sing a couple of songs I wrote."

His guitar squeaked as he tuned it. Then he began singing, in a better than normal voice, a song about being in love with a girl at his office. In America, zombies worked in offices. It was pretty good, Amalia decided, like a song that would play on that station her English teacher listened to.

The rest of the performers were studying Webb the way the girls at Julian House scrutinized newcomers, making guesses about his life, trying to figure out if he would be a threat to them. A few people had very determined smiles on their faces.

Ginger, though, was leaning against the side of the house, one leg folded beneath her like a flamingo. She wore a polka dot sundress and a half-smile. When she flipped her hair from one muscular shoulder to the other, Amalia recognized the gesture, the pose. It was how she'd waited for Jesús outside his apartment building, arranging herself so that she'd be the first thing he saw when he returned from whatever Avenues mission he was on that night.

Ginger liked Webb, Amalia realized. Or at least she wasn't scared of him. Maybe the circus was a place where you didn't have to be just one thing. Saint Julian would watch over all the selves she juggled, and maybe Ginger would look at her as something other than a stack of records in a manila folder, and maybe Webb would be the freak so she wouldn't have to.

Webb was the last person to audition, which was good, because who could have followed him? Ginger thanked everyone for their time and said she would call about callbacks.

"I keep forgetting this is L.A. You guys know the drill."

The crowd thinned, but Amalia hung around because she had 39 minutes left before she had to be back at the group home, and she didn't have any money, so she couldn't buy anything at the store or even take the Gold Line anywhere.

Ginger said, "Amalia, hey, great job today. How long have you been juggling?" "Almost a week now."

"Seriously? You learned all that in a week?" Adults were always surprised that she was good at things. But the truth was, she was good at lots of things: math, poetry, card games, making quesadillas, navigating bus schedules, breaking up fights, starting fights.

"I could get better," Amalia said. "That guy with the bowling pins was really good. But he probably been doing that since he was my age."

"You might be right. Some of these people are self-taught, but a ton of them took lessons at all kinds of expensive places. It takes a lot of training to look bohemian."

"What's pojimian?" "Like being a free spirit, sort of. Doing your own thing."

"Oh. I'm pretty pojimian then. I always be getting in trouble for doing my own thing," Amalia laughed.

Ginger nibbled on the tip of an orange fingernail, considering something. "Amalia, would you like to be our circus troupe's intern? Would the group home allow you to do something like that?"

"Whadchu mean, be a intern?" On TV, interns were young, pretty doctors, but that didn't make any sense in this context.

"Help out with different things, just odds and ends. And study what we do here. Like an apprenticeship. You'd be in the shows too, I just don't know in what capacity yet."

Amalia knew this meant her juggling act had not been as impressive as she'd hoped. But it also meant more

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community passes. (She was already imagining herself repeating Ginger's words to Mary Jo: like a apprenticeship.) It meant backbends and bowling pins. It meant a whole new vocabulary that would make her mysterious and interesting to the other girls. It might mean Saturdays spent neither at the group home nor at her mother's house but among lemon trees and dancers. And might and maybe were enough.

"Hell, yeah," she told Ginger. Then, in what she imagined was a more professional voice, one suited to a young doctor, she said, "Thank you very much for the opportunity."



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