

Audio file

[2024-11-12 KST Kafka 13 First Sorrow v1.mp3](#)

Transcript

First sorrow. A trapeze artist – this art, practised high up in the lofty domes of the great variety theatres, is known to be one of the most difficult which any human may aspire – had, first out of the striving for perfection, later out of a habit that had in time become tyrannical, so arranged his life that for the whole period of each engagement he remained on the trapeze, day and night. Such very modest requirements as he had were catered for by a relief system of attendants who were posted below, and hauled everything needful up and down in specially made containers. This mode of life created no particular difficulty for the world about him; at most it was a minor irritant that during the remainder of each evening's programme, as was impossible to conceal, he remained where he was, and that even though he usually took care to keep still the occasional glance from a spectator would find its way up to him. But the management forgave him that because he was an extraordinary and irreplaceable artist. And of course it was appreciated that he did not live like this out of whimsy and that it was really the only way he had of keeping in constant practise and maintaining his art at its peak.

But it was healthy up there as well, and when in the summer months the side windows around the dome were all thrown open, and the sunshine and the fresh air made their presence powerfully felt in the dimness of the vault, it could be positively idyllic. Admittedly, his human contacts were rather reduced, only from time to time a fellow acrobat would climb up the rope ladder to him, and then the two of them would sit together on the trapeze, lean against the ropes on either side, and chat; or sometimes builders had some work to do on the roof and exchanged some banter with him through an open window; or a member of the fire department inspecting the emergency lighting in the upper circle would call out something respectful but not readily audible. Other than that, there was silence about him; only from time to time some stage hand who might have wandered into the empty theatre of an afternoon would look up thoughtfully into the almost impenetrable heights where the trapeze artist, who couldn't have known there was anyone watching, would either be resting or rehearsing.

So the trapeze artist might have been able to live quite happily, were it not for the inevitable travelling from place to place, which was irksome to him in the extreme. Of course his manager saw to it that the trapeze artist's sufferings were kept to a minimum: journeys within towns were effected in racing cars that were driven over the empty roads at

top speeds either at night or in the very early hours, but it was still all too slow for the trapeze artist's liking; in the case of rail travel, an entire train compartment was reserved where the trapeze artist, in a faintly undignified but still just about acceptable stand in for his customary environment, would spend the entire journey hanging in the luggage net; in the next town on their schedule, the trapeze was ready and in place long before the arrival of the trapeze artist and all the doors on the way to the auditorium were thrown open, all the corridors kept clear – but it remained the case that the best moments in his manager's life were those in which the trapeze artist was finally able to set his foot on the rope ladder and at long last and in a trice was hanging up on his trapeze once more.

Now, however many journeys the manager had successfully absolved, each further journey was difficult because, apart from anything else, they were clearly bad for the nerves of the trapeze artist.

And so there they were, travelling together again. The trapeze artist hanging in the luggage net dreaming, his manager leaning back in the window seat opposite, reading a book, when the trapeze artist softly addressed him. The manager was straight-away at his service. The trapeze artist said, biting his lips, that for his act instead of one as hitherto, he now wanted two trapezes for his performance, two trapezes facing each other. The manager agreed to this right away. But the trapeze artist, as though to demonstrate that the manager's agreement was every bit as meaningless as his opposition would have been, went on to insist that from now on he would never, under any circumstances, swing on only one trapeze. The very notion of that such thing might yet happen seemed to make him shudder. Once again, a little hesitantly and nervously, the manager gave his full agreement two trapezes were better than one, and the new layout would further have the effect of adding variety to the performance. And at that, the trapeze artist suddenly began to cry. Deeply alarmed, the manager jumped to his feet and asked what the matter was, and not receiving any reply, he got up on the seat and stroked the trapeze artist, and pressed his own face against his, so that it was wetted by the trapeze artist's tears. It took a lot of questions and many soothing words till the trapeze artists sobbingly came out with: "Just that one bar in my hands – how can I live like that!" Then it became a little easier for the manager to comfort the trapeze artist; he promised to get out at the very next station and wire the venue ahead about a second trapeze; he reproached himself for having left the trapeze artist to work on only one trapeze for such a long time, and he thanked him and praised him for drawing his attention to the shortcoming. And so the manager was gradually able to calm the trapeze artist and could return to his own corner. He still did not feel at ease, though, and in his anxiety, he kept stealing glances at the trapeze artist over the top of his book. Once such thoughts began to torment him, could they ever really cease? Were they not bound to get worse? Did they not finally cast in doubt his entire future career? And indeed, as the manager watched him in the apparently peaceful sleep to which his crying had given away, he thought he could make out the first lines beginning to etch themselves in the trapeze artist's smooth boyish brow.

