

## Overs

Léon sat backstage in the big top of Cirque de Renon, half listening to the scattered claps and whistles of Paris's plastered nightcrawlers. He gazed at the bottle in his white gloved hands, contemplating his next act and what his life had come to. Spending his prime dwarfed by his father's legacy, he had used any connection, leverage, or halfhearted helping hands to dig his fingers into the acting world. The great Laurent Creaux, nominee for two European film awards, winner of an Olivier award for best actor in the drama category, knight of the the Order of the Legion of Honor for selflessly saving an out of control rowboat full of escaping orphans from being crushed in Grand'Maison Dam and widely regarded as *the* modern French gentleman (according to the tabloids anyway), watched his son slowly sink into obscurity without so much as a backwards glance over the shoulder of a custom tailored suit jacket. Not one string was pulled, not one piece of advice given. And now Léon was playing a drunken clown in a failing circus for a mostly uncaring audience. Could he go any lower?

Stage left - the curtains rippled as sequined Monique glided through the pinstripes towards Léon. The jingling of her arm rings roused him from thought.

"I can't do this drunk clown act anymore, it's degrading. I could do so much better, if Renon would just give me the chance!"

Monique gently laid her fingers on his shoulders, half pushing him towards the ring. "Move yourself, we've talked about this before. Renon is the ringmaster, not you, he knows what the audience wants."

“In your case, of course. Renon is right, you’re an amazing acrobat. But I’m an actor, my skills are being squandered here! I can bring so much more nuance to the role-”

“Mon amour, circus clowns don’t need nuance, they need to be entertaining. Now, we will talk about this later, but for now, please just pretend to be happy, okay? All clowns do this. You’ll do great! Now, Vas-y!” She gave Léon a quick push, and he found himself illuminated in the spotlight like an ant under a magnifying glass.

He screamed internally, quickly adopting a noticeable stagger as he slipped into his unwanted role. Monique had once told him that what he was doing was like theatre acting, just with a less sophisticated and sober audience. Besides, he wouldn’t always get the perfect role, that’s just part of being an actor. He looked back towards the curtains for her reassuring presence. Painted cat’s eyes beamed bouts of confidence towards him from between frayed red and white folds. She was right of course, Léon could endure this for a while longer. He sighs and turns towards the crowd.

“Ooh, we gotta reaal funny crowd tonight. Funny looking, I mean.” Léon pretended to stumble against the stands, eyeing up a semi conscious man with a pear shaped drinker’s nose. He honked it. “Thought I was supposed to be the only clown here tonight. Is your name also Coucou?”

A few guffaws ring out as Léon weaved away from The Nose and his obscene gestures. He made a show out of tornadoing part of his bottle of water and got a few more cheers. The lion lounging in the middle of the ring seemed to look at him with disappointment. In that moment, Léon felt that the lion was entitled to his opinion. But he’s got to put on a show.

“You think you’re better than me, you mangy shi-” Léon spotted a family of three sitting in the front row. “Housecat? You mangy housecat.” He gave a quick apologetic wave before doing a doubletake, and not only because a regular family were the last kind of people that should be attending Cirque de Renon. Sitting beside his young son with the posture of a yardstick sat the obvious head of the family. Something about him reminded Léon of his own father, beyond the expensive but tasteful clothes, or the silver streaks adorning his temples like laurels. Ah, the quietly judgemental gaze. The man crossed his arms across his tweed pea coat, returning Léon’s stare.

Léon tried to continue his regular performance, but try as he might, he could not get the doppelganger out of his head. What would he do if his father ever saw him here? The circus was just a stepping stone onto a more admirable career path, a little bit of flavor in his resume, but Léon thinks he would die on the spot if Laurent ever came here. Not that he ever would, it was probably beneath him.

The doppelganger continued to eye Léon from underneath a slightly cocked, manicured brow. Léon was tired of his pompous, three-michelin-star shit. He did a wobbly little twirl as he approached him.

“Are you enjoying the performance, *monsieur*?”

“I’ve seen better.”

*Have you now? What is a man of such refined tastes doing here then? It’s obvious his kid dragged him in, can’t he just play along?*

“Is that so?” Léon made a show of looking all around the raggamuffin ring with a dubious expression. “Better than this? I find that difficult to believe. Tell me, how do we fare against Cirque du Soleil?”

A few chuckles. The doppelganger scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Terribly.”

*He’s humorless too. Is he trying to tick all the boxes on the insufferable asshole test?*

“What do you do for a living, monsieur?”

“I am a theatre critic.”

*That checks out.*

“Oh, a critic. I can see you in that line of work. Are you reviewing circuses now? I get it, just a little hiccup in the ol’ career plans. Trust me, I’ve been there, I’ve only been here for . . . Oh, I don’t even wanna remember how long!”

*Seven. Years.* The audience roared with laughter.

The critic’s eyes analyzed Léon from beneath bemused lids. “I expect you’ll be here a while longer.” He sipped from his solo cup with a pinkie outstretched.

*Oh, you are pushing your luck, Count Connard.*

“What a funny man. Perhaps you’d like to replace me.”

The critic sputtered, spraying his drink all over the circus stands as he let out a howl of laughter.

“God no! Just how much did you drink?”

*So he can laugh after all.*

Léon was struck with divine inspiration.

“Let’s find out.”

The crowd was loving this. Léon took a huge gulp from his bottle, but he didn't swallow a drop. Savoring the moment, he bulged his eyes, making loud, overly exaggerated pre-puking sounds before spraying the astonished critic in his spit water. The crowd lost it while the critic made sputtering noises

as he tried to clean himself while trying to touch as little of Léon's spew with his hands as possible. Even his own wife was trying not to laugh at him. Léon gave her a cocky wink before taking his bows and sauntering out of the ring.

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"I'm sorry Léon, but you're fired."

"What! Renon, you can't do this to me! I gave you seven years!"

"And for seven years, you didn't spit on anyone in the audience, until now. I didn't think I would have to explain this to you, it's a health and safety violation."

Léon massaged his temples, looking at Renon's tired looking eyes through his interlocking fingers. He seemed so jovial when Léon first met him, strutting up and down the ring in a top hat that would make Abraham Lincoln feel insecure, wide grin full of teeth blinding the audience. But with years of financial stress from the circus's unstable income weighing on him, his face had become lined and gaunt. Léon steepled his fingers, trying to think of any kind of convincing argument.

"I'm sorry, I really am, but if that critic decides to write about what you did, we're done. The entire circus could be shut down. I just can't afford to take a risk like that right now."

"Please, Renon. We're friends aren't we? Have I ever done anything like this before? No? Exactly, just give me a chance!"

Renon sighs and rubs his eyes. "Please, just pack up your things."

Léon shook his head ruefully as he made his way to the costuming section of the tent. No sooner had he removed his ruff, he felt Monique's tender touch along his shoulders.

"Léon, why would you do this? This is so unlike you. What happened out there?"

"I really wish I could tell you. I'm sorry."

"Do you have a plan? What are we going to do now?"

"I don't know. I don't know what I'll do." Léon cups Monique's hands in his. "Come with me, we can figure this out, together."

"I don't know, Léon. You've brought this up so suddenly."

"I love you."

"I know you do."

She delicately pulled her hands from his and placed them in her lap.

"I think you need time to process this and to figure out what comes next. This must all be very stressful for you, and you need time to decide what it is you want."

"I want you."

"...Do you really?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Monique looked down at her hands, twining and untwining her thumbs.

"Are you happy, Léon?"

He didn't respond.

"I want you to be happy, you deserve to be happy."

Léon felt disoriented, as if he was being turned inside out. "...I need some air. I'm going for a walk."

"You know where to find me. Please don't do anything rash like you did today. I'm worried about you."

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Léon stumbled through the night towards an unknown destination. He had no earthly idea how long he had been wandering the city's labyrinthine backstreets, tripping over loose cobblestones while grappling with the conflicting thoughts in his head. He felt ready to give up when he finally encountered a cafe, a rare beacon in the oppressively silent night. The whole place smelled like a crematorium. A middle aged woman sat alone at one of the tables under a blue striped umbrella, radiating smoke and ash like a house fire. The artificial light from the cafe window framed her hazy form and the chain separating him from her and the rest of the tables made Léon feel as though he were looking at a painting in an art gallery. He moved on quickly when she met his gaze.

He didn't recognise the area, though hadn't for some time. But he knew he'd find a landmark soon, every tangled mess of sideroads in this city inevitably lead to a main street or a tourist trap. He found his father instead. He was posed at a bus stop behind a plastic wall. Beside him stood a colorful cast of characters, each falling into a seemingly more obvious trope, Léon could tell just by looking at them - the misunderstood brawn, the funny drunk with a heart of gold, and finally the brainy, uncompassionate scientist. Well at least he was well cast. Léon aimed approximately where he thought his father's balls

would be and kicked the advertisement. Laurent's hard plastic groin sent rods of pain through Léon's foot as his toes smushed against it. He winced. The alcohol no longer muffled the pain, he was coming down. Léon slumped defeatedly on the bus stop bench.

"Excuse me monsieur, what are you doing?"

Léon froze, he couldn't afford to be charged for vandalism or disturbing the peace right now. He shot up, preparing to flee despite having not regularly exercised in years, only to see an old man in a newspaper cap sitting across the road from him. The man sat with his back to the dark waters of the Seine on a makeshift bench of milk crates. He patted the one beside him. Léon slumped beside him.

"Name's Jules. I'm curious - the only thing that ad will hurt is your brain, should you make the mistake of watching the show it's advertising. That's what it says in the papers, anyway. Why were you assaulting it?"

"Léon. It's a long story." Jules looked at him expectantly from underneath gray caterpillar brows. Léon looked around for some kind of topic changer. Beside Jules rested an antique wooden fishing rod, partially duct taped to the railing beside him.

"Caught anything?"

"Sure I have, just can't keep what you catch is all. Gotta conserve the Seine's ecosystem n' all.

Don't mind much anyway, it's all about the thrill of the hunt for me."

"Is it thrilling? Most of fishing is waiting."

"You ever fish before?"

"Used to."



“It’s all about your mindset. Sure, you can sit and try to pass the time as quickly as you can between the exciting times you hook something and enjoy the battle between fish and man. But I find these quiet moments between bouts to be equally as thrilling. I’m thrilled to listen to the city’s sounds, to breathe the night air. I’m thrilled just sitting here, waiting for the next bite, it’s like counting down till Christmas.”

“Huh. I never thought of it that way.”

“Most never do.”

“I think I’ll come back here with my rod sometime, give your philosophy a try. Thanks Jules.”

“Sure thing.”

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As an oleander sunset bloomed overhead, Léon walked along the Seine towards an ornate pedestrian bridge. In his left hand, he held a box of line and tackle and in his right his faithful Zebco 33 spincast telescopic combo rod. He hadn’t put it to use for nearly ten years, but ever since he had met Jules the night before, he had felt his old angling urges resurface.

Léon set up on the center of the bridge, baited his hook, cast downstream, and waited. And waited. And waited some more.

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The moon had come out by this point, and Léon had come no closer to plucking a fish from the Seine or an epiphany from his mind. He sighed in resignation, beginning to reel in his line. Something bit.

The reel screamed as meters of line were ripped from it by whatever had grabbed onto the hook. The rod was almost ripped from Léon's hands, but he managed to hold on, bracing his right foot against the bridge's railing and pulling against his new opponent with all his strength. Suddenly the pulling lessened. He began to reel in the line as quickly as he could, peering over the railing to see where the wake from his line was. Not too far, he might actually be able to catch this fish. The fish disagreed, resuming the game of tug of war and almost pulling Léon over the guard rail. Léon was thankful that he splurged on extra tough line, he was actually beginning to enjoy this. The fish started swimming towards him, this was his chance. Reeling in the excess line as quickly as he could, Léon wrenched the rod upwards as with all his might. He felt something pop in his back, but that didn't matter at that moment.

For Léon, time stopped. Out of the Seine rose the most beautiful creature he had ever laid his eyes upon. Silvery sequin scales scattered stars and moonlight beams upon the gray water below, river water rushed off delicate fins like iridescent cloud trails. The creature danced, guided through the air by Léon's line and into his grasping hands. He was mesmerized, staring deep into her wide yellow eyes. She didn't struggle, only stared up at him questioningly, waiting for him to make his move. He wanted to take her with him so badly, but he also knew that she would die if he took her away from where she belongs, and Léon couldn't bear to snuff out such a uniquely magnificent thing. He closed his eyes for a moment, searing her radiant image into his mind.

As gently as he could, he removed his circle hook from her lip and wordlessly slipped her through the wrought iron guard rail. Her slender form glided into the Seine, leaving nothing but the smallest of ripples to remember her by.

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Paris seemed different. Léon had lived in this city for so many years, yet noticed so much he hadn't seen before. The dense layers of history that oozed off of the zinc rooftops and that were used to whitewash Haussmanian promenades. The anti authoritarian, often sarcastic graffiti that was scrawled on most anything that wasn't a major tourist attraction. The surreal cast of people who simultaneously loved and absolutely despised everything about the city they lived in, each other and themselves. The perfect stillness of the witching hours, despite being in a major metropolitan area. Perhaps he had been so focused on himself and what he should be at this point in his life that he took these everyday sights for granted. Perhaps he shouldn't think this way. Perhaps he should. He is 35, afterall.

Léon pondered all these thoughts as he stood at Parvis des Droits de l'Homme holding his flip phone. But he'll never mention any of them to another living soul. His thumb massaged the call button, the contact selected read "Monseur Creaux". It was about seven in the evening in California, Léon wondered if he'd even pick up. He was probably out having a thousand dollar meal with some studio exec at this very moment.

The phone began to dial. He heard shuffling on the other end as someone raised the receiver to their ear.

“Hello?”