

• CIRCUS • SMIRKUS

• BY ROB GURWITT •

IT IS COLD IN THE TENT. A FRONT FROM CANADA HAS PUSHED today's rain into the hills of northern Vermont, and the chill June air pierces everything: clothes, skin, bones, marrow. Water sprays in from the top, and every gust of wind roils the canvas. Filled with the warmth of eight hundred bodies and the glowing light of a performance, a circus tent is indomitable; now, all but empty, it gathers in the gloom from outdoors and throws it at the ring.

Across the center, fifteen feet overhead, a tightwire runs from stanchion to stanchion and then out between flaps to where it is anchored by four-foot iron stakes driven into the soaking ground. The wire was put up yesterday, and now Rachel Schiffer and Willow Yonika are trying their first full practice session on it. Their opening show, the kickoff to a six-week tour through northern



New England by the troupe they belong to, Circus Smirkus, is just a week from tomorrow.

Willow has never performed with Smirkus before, and there is a certain insouciance to her practices. But this is Rachel's sixth summer with the troupe, and she is emerging as one of its leaders and stars. Though she laughs easily, especially with Willow, there is a self-possessed intensity about her much of the time, as though she's still grappling with the weight of the expectations she has shouldered.

Willow goes up first. She is dressed in a thin gray leotard; her body, slender and supple, suits her name. The wire coach, Jade Kindar-Martin, helps her into a climber's harness and tightens it so firmly she winces. He watches as she climbs one of the masts that support the tent, reaches the wire, and clips a safety cable onto the harness. Tentatively, she slides one foot out onto the wire. "Don't look at your feet!" Jade calls.

For the last week and a half, Willow and Rachel have been practicing on wires a foot or two from the ground. They've learned to jump, run, kneel, turn, sit and get up again, do a split, get up from a split. They've learned to grip the wire with their feet, to fight for their balance, to bend their knees when they're losing it, and to understand what it means to be vertical in a way that nothing else could possibly teach them. They've learned never to look down: to fix their eyes at the far end of the wire and feel their next step by sliding their foot out, rather than picking it up and placing it down.

Up this high, it all has to be relearned. Willow, who on the low wire has shown herself to be a prodigy of balance, steps and slides, steps and slides across the much longer high wire, and then falters; she bends her knees, regains her composure, takes a few steps backward, gingerly lowers one knee, then rises, turns, and glides back to the mast. She clenches each rung as she climbs down the ladder.

"I don't feel like I can do tricks up there," she announces.

"You can," Jade responds. "Say it: 'I *know* I can do tricks up there!'"

Willow smiles sourly, one corner of her mouth rising. "I *know* I can do tricks up there," she mimics. "If I practice a lot!"

Rachel falls on her first step. It is a hard shift to make, that small step from the generous security of the mast to the unforgiving emptiness along the wire. She swings out across the ring, held by the "lunge"—the safety cable—then swings back to the mast. She climbs back on.

"I don't ever want to see you just give up like that," Jade tells her.

"That first step's *hard*!" she protests.

Jade softens. "You don't have to come out straight. You can bend, you can shuffle out. Take a couple of minutes to find your balance. And breathe," he says, drawing the word out.

"Let all of this tension go. Just relax." She tries, squaring herself, loosening her stance, but she falls again. This time, she grabs the wire and hoists herself back on. She stands, does a half turn, and slips off, dangling horizontally in midair. Jade, who is holding the other end of the lunge, lowers her to the wire, where she sits and catches her breath.

"Did you guys think a week ago when you first got on the wire that you could walk this high?" Jade asks, insistent.

"No," Rachel admits.

"Right," he says. "Whatever you think is impossible is not impossible. It's completely possible."

But at this moment, for Rachel, it's not. Four more times she tries standing up from where she sits, grabbing the wire in front of her with her hand, wedging her foot as close to her crotch as she can, and then pulling her weight slowly onto the wire, as though onto a fulcrum; but each time, some subtle force pulls her away from the wire's plane, and she sprawls out into the air. Finally, she manages to stand, walks back to the mast—even now, the slide of her foot is more forceful than Willow's, more intent—and climbs down. She crosses to the ring curb, the circular platform that separates the ring from the bleachers, and sits, alone and mute, huddled against the cold. Her face is drawn, her eyes lack their customary flash, and for the first time in the two weeks since Smirkus's members showed up at the old farm where they train, Rachel looks like what she is: a fifteen-year-old girl who's discovering the limits of her will.

The practice wears on, and Willow grows more confident, her walk looser, her turns steadier. It's clear she's beginning to get her bearings at the new height. Rachel, too, seems surer the second time up, more in command. "That's the Rachel I know!" Jade calls at one point. She nails her turns, fights for her balance and wins, even runs once, her feet slapping into the side of the wire, after Jade urges her to try. Reaching the mast, she breaks into a brilliant smile.

But then comes her third turn. Outside, the rain has stopped, but as she climbs up it starts again, and a cold breeze blows through the tent. On the ground, Willow hunches up, shivering. Rachel starts out confidently—step-slide, step-slide—moving briskly, but then feels the lunge tugging at her back, loses her concentration, and falls. She grabs the wire, tries to stand, and falls. She sits on it, tries to stand, and falls. She tries rising from her knees and falls. Nothing works, so she falls. The lunge holds her each time, but it is exhausting, and the wire is merciless, just a bruising steel-hard line through the air, nothing above it to grab onto for help, nothing below it to push off from, nothing to its side to lean on so that her muscles can find a second's calm. Finally, Jade says, softly, "Come on down, Rachel."

This would be the moment for her to give in, to allow herself to be lowered by the lunge, and Jade suggests just that. But with a tight voice, Rachel asks if she can try walking to

the mast. Shakily, she steps and slides, steps and slides; three feet from the end, she falters, tilting to the side, bending her knees, and trying desperately to shift her upper body back over the wire.

"Keep moving!" Jade yells. "Keep moving! Keep moving! Keep moving!"

She can't. She slips off, swings out and back across the ring at the end of the lunge, and is lowered to the ground. As her feet touch, a deep sob comes bursting out, and she makes her way to the ring curb, where she drops next to Willow, weeping. A couple of Smirkus members who have wandered into the tent look panicked, turn, and leave. Jade lets Rachel cry for a few moments, then walks over, kneels at her feet, and starts talking to her quietly.



Greensboro is a small, well-tended town on the eastern shore of Caspian Lake, in Vermont's remote Northeast Kingdom. A favored summer settlement for academics and writers since early in the twentieth century, it is the sort of place families visit for decades with the understanding that they won't upset its sedate and orderly traditions. Wallace Stegner, the novelist, spent a half-century of summers there. John Gunther, the journalist and chronicler of American political life who is best remembered for *Death Be Not Proud*, his memoir of his son's losing battle against illness, is buried in a cemetery on the lake's western side. William Rehnquist, the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, has a house there. It is definitely not a town where people call attention to themselves; a circus is about the last thing you'd expect to find out in the woods past town.

Yet there it is, at the end of a half-mile of dirt road, centered around an old red barn and a rattletrap white farmhouse in an amphitheater of former cow fields. The main tent, known as the *chapiteau*, is set up in the first field you pass. It is a cheery white, blue, and green, held up by four forty-foot masts flying blue and yellow pennants. Beyond it, closer to the barn and farmhouse, are some smaller practice tents, a couple of old sheds, and a quadrangle of trailers where troupers bunk down. From the top of the highest field, after a short, brisk climb, you can look out across the lovely, unchanging Vermont hills and then down at the scene below—at the three Percheron horses grazing in the field by their practice ring, at troupe members walking arm-in-arm down the dirt road to the *chapiteau* or sitting languidly in the mouth of the barn, at the thick forest beyond—and marvel at how so serene a setting can contain so much tumult.

Smirkus is not your run-of-the-mill small circus. Its performers, for the most part, are kids, some as young as ten, some out of high school, most of them somewhere in be-

tween. They arrive in mid-June, fresh out of school for the summer, and in just three intense, punishing weeks put a show together, which they then take on tour to small towns as far away as Cape Cod.

Circus Smirkus has developed a devoted following around northern New England, in no small part because it has a habit of setting up in places that don't get a lot of attention from more commercial touring companies—out at the rec fields in Middlebury, Vermont; on the town common in Newport, New Hampshire; in the state park in Newburyport, Massachusetts. It is also, quite simply, astonishing. For a youth-obsessed culture, we don't tend to put a high value on what kids do unless they happen to be making a lot of money at it, so if you've never been to a Smirkus show, you probably won't have very high hopes for it: you'll figure you're being dragged to a particularly boisterous version of, say, a high school production of *Once upon a Mattress*. This won't last.

At its best, a Smirkus performance is like a sly, pleasing seduction. Even as you head for the tent, between concession stalls hawking cotton candy, Sno-Kones, clown noses, light wands, and T-shirts, you can feel a small nudge of beguilement. You file through an entranceway lined with gaudily painted, mysterious posters—a girl floating serenely in a hoop held by a dove; a woman standing on a winged horse, her arms thrust up to support a second aerialist doing a handstand above her. Already, without realizing it, you've put yourself in Smirkus's hands.

The opening act, known as the *charivari*, brings out the full troupe in a rush of tumbling and acrobatics; you'd have to be a stone not to feel a little shiver when Olivia Oller, an exuberant twelve-year-old, does a bewilderingly fast, impossibly long series of flips across the center of the ring. Now Juliana Frick, who is thirteen, is hoisted aloft for her swing trapeze act: she stands on the bar and sets it swinging, kicking it out with her feet and hauling on the bar, forming her body into a dramatic, muscular C before unclenching at the top of an arc that she drives so high the back of her head grazes the roof of the tent; then in one motion she drops and swoops upside down across the ring, and your breath catches.

Then the cradle act begins. The cradle is a rectangle of metal bars through which a catcher can wedge his legs and hang upside down as he swings an aerialist, who in this case happens to be Rachel Schiffer. She stands on the bar high in the center of the tent, smiling into the spotlights, her eyes gleaming, then suddenly does a full back handspring, leaping off the bar and arching backward over empty space before she plunges head-down to where her coach and catcher, Oleg Sergatchiev, has risen to grab her wrists, and you hear yourself gasping with the crowd. It is a collective hoot of stupefaction and, finally, surrender.

Over the years, Smirkus has sent any number of graduates on to wider exposure. Molly Pelley and Adam Kuchler went on to clown for Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey; Molly Saudek became a widely admired wire dancer for Cirque du Soleil and the Big Apple Circus; Toby Ayer is perhaps the only former Rhodes Scholar able to juggle eight balls; in 1997, Jade Kindar-Martin earned a place in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for his high-wire walk across the Thames River in London.

Even more extraordinary is the array of coaching talent Smirkus has been able to field from all over the globe. Alla Youdina, for many years Smirkus's head coach, started out performing with the Moscow Circus on Ice and later became a fairly high-level bureaucrat in the old Soviet circus system, and now helps Ringling develop new acts. Vladimir "Volodya" Avgoustov and his wife, Zina, performed with the Moscow Circus and now coach balance and other acts. Chingee Haltarhuu, who helps coach cradle, acrobatics, and balance, performed with the Mongolian State Circus and then with Ringling for five years. Alberto Zoppé, who for the last half-century has ranked among the most respected equestrian circus performers in the world—if you've ever seen the film *The Greatest Show on Earth*, you've seen him in action—coached Smirkus's first horse act with his daughter, Tosca, in 1999. Former Ringling clown Troy Wunderle runs Smirkus's off-season workshops in schools around New England; he and Stewart Lippe, a Florida-based juggler, filmmaker, and small-show impresario who helped get Smirkus started, steer the juggling and clown acts.

Smirkus's animating spirit is founder Rob Mermin. A bit over thirty years ago, when he was nineteen and filled, as he once put it, with "a combination of ignorance and chutzpah," he ran off to Europe to find a circus. Hitchhiking around Great Britain, he came across a small show late one night, along the Welsh border. "Itchy with adventure," he later wrote, "I snuck under the tent and slept under the bleachers on some sawdust and straw. When I was found out in the morning and dragged to the owner, I pleaded guilty to being a clown and was peremptorily thrown into the ring that night, unrehearsed. My new partners were a tap-dancing Spanish midget, a burly German clown who doubled as strongman, an unruly dromedary, and four ornery mules from the comedy *Unrideable Mule* act." That night, he fell off the dromedary.

Rob had found a "mud show," named for the most ubiquitous substance in a hardscrabble little circus's life. He traveled with it for a while, then moved on to other things—studying mime with Marcel Marceau, working as a clown for Circus Benneweis in Copenhagen, and becoming a television star (along with his dog Rufus) in Denmark—before returning to the United States. He had grown up through the circus, be-

coming an accomplished and skillful performer with a store of insight into what moves audiences, but something about his days of pounding stakes, shoveling dung, and cavorting in the ring with that first, Welsh circus stuck with him.

"The greatest time of day," he says, "was at the end. When the tent came down—and everyone took the tent down—we were all just exhausted. All that was left was the sawdust in the ring and all the caravans in a ring around it. Everyone would go off to their own caravans and eat. And then, around midnight, people would slowly come out, holding bowls of tea—not cups, but bowls—piping hot. There'd be a bonfire, the stars were bright overhead, you could see the Bulgarians across the ring over there, the French over here, you'd see the steam rising off the tea, and everyone would be standing around, feeling good." In a sense, it was this moment—of companionship and intimacy, of belonging, of satisfaction in hard work and pleasure in having shared the rigors of entertaining an audience—that he set out to re-create for young people in this country when he founded Circus Smirkus in 1987.

In Smirkus, Rob also created a sort of traveling rebuff to our turn-of-the-century obsessions with celebrity and image. At a time when circuses and circus acts have been nourished by the revival in this country of one-ring, European-style troupes such as Big Apple and Cirque du Soleil and an influx of superb Eastern European and Asian performers, Smirkus stands out precisely because of the unfettered youthfulness of its members.

At some point during a Smirkus show, you'll suddenly notice that its performers, young as most of them are, have tapped into a wellspring of communal exuberance and shared good cheer that is absent in most commercial entertainment these days. When you walk out of the tent into the night—past Rob, who makes a habit of shaking hands and saying good-bye outside after every show; past knots of laughing parents who have stopped to chat in the light spilling out of the tent; past their kids, who now, at this very moment, have to try out their handstands and cartwheels—you carry with you a sense of exhilaration and warmth born of some subtle emotional alchemy wrought while you were inside. Unlikely as it seems, in fact, it feels as though you've just left someone's home, an oddly furnished one, with extraordinarily entertaining hosts, but a home nonetheless. And you find yourself hoping that you'll be invited back.

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The second floor of the old barn was once a hayloft, but now it is used as a practice space for Smirkus troupes. It is also where they gather at night to talk about whatever is on their minds. Its flooring—the first thing Rob improved after he bought the place and started giving circus classes to local farm kids—is settling at

one end and profoundly worn, and the floorboards have the dull glow that inhabits wood after years of intimate contact with the human body. Hanging from the rafters are a pair of gymnastics rings, a long pair of straps, and a "skywalk"—six small loops into which a performer can hook his or her feet, hang upside down, and then essentially walk through the air. Tumbling mats rest against the back wall, unicycles hang along one side, and off in a corner sits a rolling globe, a large ball that the fleet of foot can walk on. A few wooden stairs lead to a storage loft crammed with costumes, sequined jackets, swords and mirrored balls, stilts, unicycles and bicycles, hoops, boxes of sneakers and clown shoes, a gorilla suit, and two entire shelves of musical instruments: horns with black bulbs, horns with blue bulbs, tambourines, bells, trumpets, drums, cymbals, a trombone, a tuba, and a box of kazoos. It is impossible to poke through it without feeling a seditious little thrill, a half-forgotten pricking: "Holy cow! What I could do with this stuff!" This is a circus in waiting.

Which is also what arrives at the barn on a Sunday in mid-June. The day the troupers come is brilliant, with a soft wind blowing down through the fields. Everything around them beckons: the barn, with its practice loft above and tattered furniture and beaten-up old Ping-Pong table below; the farmhouse, whose living-room walls are covered with photographs of past performances and troupers; the *chapiteau* down the road, its banners waving in the breeze; and, in the upper field, Old Blue, Smirkus's first big top, blue and green with yellow trim and stars covering its holes, now a practice tent that smells comfortingly of worn canvas and sweet grass. It is all reassuringly plain, a place devoted to hard use.

Returning troupers bound out of their cars to a welcome of hugs and screams. New troupers, most of them chosen after auditions in Montpelier back in March, are more reserved; the younger ones stick close by their parents while the older ones carefully watch the hubbub and figure out how to start fitting in. In all, there will be thirty-five troupe members, most of them from Vermont, New Hampshire, or Massachusetts, but also some from states as far away as Colorado, and from Israel, England, Mongolia, and Russia.

They are a cross-section of kids. Some come from families that are contented and calm, others from turbulent, destructive homes they're desperate to escape. There are kids who get the best gymnastics classes money can buy, and those who have to scrape together enough to jury-rig a practice apparatus. Some are straight-A students, others are at constant risk of getting tossed out of school. What unites them all is having fallen in love with the circus. Ian Caldwell learned to juggle when he was in third grade, and now, at age sixteen, feels pulled to see how far he can go with it. Dan Brown, a gifted high school gymnast, went off on a family vacation where the kids were kept occupied by a guy with a flying trapeze rig. Juliana Frick arrived late to gym-

nastics class one day and found a circus class in progress; the trapeze coach took one look at her and said, in a thick Russian accent, "Okay, you do bird's nest." She's never looked back. Kerren and Kaleen McKeeman, twin sisters who studied circus arts at a Waldorf school in New Hampshire, fairly glow with a quiet, wide-eyed hunger for new experience. Fifteen-year-old Ryan Combs was, quite simply, born a clown.

Circus is slowly catching the attention of American kids and their parents, who find in it an appealing blend of athletic challenge and guilelessness. Smirkus runs a camp and draws from it to fill its troupe, but the touring company is well enough known now that kids from all over seek it out, and so its auditions have become increasingly competitive. The company these days numbers some sixty people, including troupers, coaches, technical staff, roustabouts, concessions crew, cooks, counselors, and jacks-of-all-trades.

Smirkus is expensive to run, and troupers have to pay tuition. Beth LeCours, the group's administrator, remembers her first summer, when a farmer from a few towns over handed her a pile of soiled bills his son had earned by working until two or three in the morning milking cows on neighboring farms. "We never turn anyone away for their inability to pay," says Beth, "but we ask people what they realistically think they can pay. And if you can pay it, pay. If you can't, we'll find a way—beg, borrow, steal, fund-raise, whatever."

After the 1998 tour, Smirkus lost a large number of veteran troupers who had hit eighteen or nineteen. They were the troupe's mainstays, and with them went crucial bits of knowledge—how to time a clown's double take, how to dance on a tightwire, how to help set up the *chapiteau* in the middle of a violent rainstorm. In 1999, fully half the troupe is new, and only a few of the returning troupers have ever had to carry a major part of the show. Although Rob has decided it will have a Robin Hood theme, in a very real sense he and the other coaches have no idea what their show will look like. Circus acts are layered, built on a natural accretion of possibilities—this swing through the air leads to that weightless moment, which, if you time it right, is when you can do this somersault—and they are limited only by the performer's abilities. Figuring out which acts are even possible, and then how sophisticated they can be, and then how they'll fit together into a coherent, artistic whole, will take every waking hour before opening day.

The sorting-out process starts the first morning in the *chapiteau*; having formed two lines, the troupers are showing what they know of tumbling. They run through their flips, cartwheels, and handsprings at a quick pace. The kids with prior gymnastics training move loosely and fluidly down the mat, the strongest few seeming to explode into the air. Others get stuck in the middle of a basic forward roll and need help finishing it. Troy Wunderle observes, "That's the

thing about circus: if you're the best juggler, you're probably not the best tumbler. It keeps you humble."

As the troupers move past Alla, she offers a stream of advice that grows more specific and vehement as the practice wears on. "Ariele! Push straight as possible, tight, and then lean forward. When you do handstands," she declares to two girls, "keep your hands close, even with your shoulders. . . . Thora! Stretch your hands forward. You don't! *Then* bring your knees to your chest when you roll. Oh, it's too much to remember, right? Julia! Hands forward! Feel them! Feel them! You don't *feel* them! Olivia, stretch forward, don't dive under. Stryder! Where is your head?" Stryder Crown, a former troupier who has come back to work on the technical crew this year, stops in the middle of his forward rolls. "It's tucked," he insists. "No!" Alla retorts. "It's back! And I don't like feet crossed. Who taught you this? Amanda, why are you arching? When you do a handstand, you are arching. Keep your stomach in, it makes you strong!"

It will go on like this for the next few days, coaches dispensing advice as they take the measure of each kid. Stewart starts each juggling class by teaching the "trick of the day"—how to catch a ball on the back of your neck, say, or balance a juggling club on your chin and then bounce it off the top of your head. As kids practice passes or side-by-side juggling or juggling arm-in-arm, Stewart wanders around, offering advice on technique: loosen the shoulders, bring the elbows in closer, hold the hands lower down, and, always, relax. Volodya and Zina drill troupers on handstands, flags (balancing the body horizontally over one hand), and, for the strongest, lifting into a handstand with another performer wrapped across your back. "These Russian trainers are brutal!" winces Dan Brown, who has already become one of Volodya's favorites. Alberto and Tosca begin the slow process of introducing troupers to their three Percheron horses, Tobruk, Venezia, and Zingaro, and showing the students how to feed them, how to walk them from the left side, and how to mount and simply sit. Later, they will learn to ride around the ring straddling two horses, how to run across the ring and leap onto a horse that's cantering by, and how to perform a three-high pyramid on a pair of moving horses.

The troupers move cheerily from clowning to wire, aerials, and perch (a tall pole used for the equivalent of vertical gymnastics). In their spare moments, they toss juggling clubs to one another, or try out knife-throwing with Stewart, or pedal around on unicycles, or steal away to the low wire while no one else is around to watch, or hang out in the loft and learn grueling stretches from a visiting Mongolian contortionists' coach. It is an exhausting regimen, but they go at it all in high spirits. As Alla announces one day to a group of new troupers, "In circus, it's the only place in the world you cannot say, 'No, it's not possible.' *Everything* is possible! Your imagination is free. Everything is possible."

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After her last fall off the wire, Rachel disappeared for a while to be on her own, but now she's back at work with Jade on the two-foot-high practice wire. She sits, places her foot on it, brings her knee over it, then rises with all her weight on the foot—the same move she found impossible not long ago. She does it again, and again, and then tries a sit, a slow drop with one leg out for balance and the other holding her all the way down. "Where'd this come from? It's awesome!" Jade says buoyantly. He asks her to hook her right foot under the wire and lie back on it. She loses her balance and rolls off, laughing.

Her session on the high wire left some emotional bruises, and Jade didn't want night to come with nothing to soothe them. After she leaves, Jade turns serious. "Just these fifteen minutes of practice, I wouldn't have been able to sleep tonight if we hadn't done them," he muses. "She'll have more confidence tomorrow, because she got it. I guess the wire doesn't pick people who are easily bent."

Jade would know. Now twenty-five, he was one of the original Smirkus troupers. A "roguish troublemaker," as Rob puts it, he might well have lost himself in drugs and general hell-raising if it hadn't been for Smirkus, which he joined at fourteen. "When I left Smirkus that year," Jade says, "I knew that was what I wanted to be. I wanted to be a wire-walker." Tattooed on his wrist are two circles joined by a line. "It's the story of my life: Start at point A, go to point B, in between is one line, one road, one wire."

After leaving Smirkus, Jade followed a clear trajectory, patiently learning his craft in France. But then came his record-creating Thames walk.

The walk was to promote London's 1999 Thames Festival and was performed on the centenary of the death of the French acrobat Blondin, who once crossed the gorge below Niagara Falls on a tightrope, blindfolded. Jade's act took place as darkness fell, on a 1,000-foot wire stretched 150 feet above the river, between two cranes. A huge crowd watched as Jade and his longtime colleague Didier Pasquette started from opposite ends. The river was at low tide and offered no protection. "If we fall," Pasquette noted, "we die."

"Their initial tentative steps gave way to a degree of showmanship," wrote the *Times* of London the next day, "as they performed various high-wire antics for the benefit of the crowd. They crossed at the midpoint, as Pasquette slowly lowered one knee to the wire while his American partner climbed over him. They then went their separate ways to complete the journey in just over half an hour." It was the longest tandem walk ever completed.

In many ways the event was what Jade loved most about wire-walking. He was in the air, surrounded by emptiness—*le vide*, as he calls it, using the French—yet still, by way of the

wire, part of the earth. Standing in the *chapiteau* one day, as troupers practice diving through hoops, he explains: "For me, the earth has become too small. It's a big place, but almost every single piece of this planet has been looked at, stepped on, or engaged in some way. These days, we can get onto the Internet, and we don't even have to go *anywhere* anymore to see it—we can sit at our little cubicle and we 'see the world.' Well, I'm an explorer. I want to go and find new forests and uncharted territories, and for me the wire does that. When I was doing the Thames walk, I'd stop and look around and think that nobody had ever been at that point before. Nobody had ever been at that single point along that line, walking. They'd been on this building or that building, or they'd been underneath, or flying over, but in that spot, no one had ever been there. And nobody ever will be again."

The inevitable letdown occurred after Jade returned to the United States. In France, he'd had a name, equipment, and a career. Back home, no one in the circus world knew him, and he had to start all over, with nothing but his skills. He was in a funk for eight months, losing sleep, not eating, unable even to set foot on a wire. His closest companion was his border collie, Lily. When the two of them arrived at Smirkus, Jade was exhausted and dispirited. He still looked dashing—there's no other word for it—with his lithe, elegant body and spiky, bleached-blond hair, but he needed the unbanked fire of kids yearning to reach beyond themselves. He needed to rediscover what had drawn him to circus in the first place.



Down in the *chapiteau*, Kerren and Kaleen, the twins, work on the cloud swing, two long ropes slung from trusses at the top of the tent; Kerren, whose difficulty learning to swing has brought her close to summary dismissal by Alla, loses her concentration and slips into a brooding trance as she drifts back and forth below her sister. After a few lost minutes, her body somehow begins to feel the right moment to pull, the right moment to push, and she is now swinging in graceful, sweeping arcs. Her entire countenance lights up.

As the weeks of practice wear on, bruises and sore muscles and scratched egos settle in, and some of the buoyancy wears off. Kids are being dropped from acts now, because they don't have the skill or the concentration the coaches demand. A constant undercurrent emerges, an uneasy awareness of the shifting relationship among what is, what might be possible, and what *ought* to be possible.

What you have to know about the coaches at Smirkus—even Alberto, in his relaxed and charming way—is that they bring not just a high standard of professionalism and experience but a worldview that is starkly different from what their young American charges have encountered before. This is es-

pecially true of the Russians. Rob, Stewart, and a band of troupers got to know the Soviet system during a 1990 cultural exchange tour that left a deep impression on the troupe. It was not just that every town they visited had its own circus building, but that, for the first time, they saw what it meant to treat circus as an art. "I remember a conversation with Alla," says Molly Saudek, who was on the original Smirkus tour to the Soviet Union. "She was describing circus as the battle between mankind and the elements, and the resolution of it. We take things human beings are not supposed to be able to do—fly, work with fire, communicate with animals, manipulate our world in ways that are impossible—and in doing [them] we find a deeper communication with the world."

It was on that first trip that they met Alla, who took them under her wing, and Volodya and Zina, who were known for an act in which Zina would climb a perch pole that Volodya was balancing on his chin; once at the top, Zina would lift herself into a one-handed handstand, Volodya still standing there, his head back, the perch perfectly poised above him, and then he would turn and climb another pole anchored to the ground, still using his chin to support Zina's perch, while Zina held her handstand high above him. Rob invited Alla, Zina, and Volodya to come work with him, and others followed. Even now, years later, Smirkus hasn't gotten over the shock to its system. What had been a small, idealistic troupe run—let's face it—by a few children of the sixties fell, all of a sudden, into the hands of people who quite sincerely consider circus their religion. "It is like cathedral, it is like church," says Alla. "We are all like servants in a church for the art." The off-handedness of Americans still bewilders them. "If you do something just, you know, with legs like this," Alla says, imitating an awkward move by one of her aerialists, "for us it is like insulting this place with the name *circus*."

There are times when this encounter between American teenagers and a group of coaches who literally don't have the word *fun* in their vocabulary seems more than either can bear. "Everybody who leaves my practice goes with tears and bruises," Alla laughs one day near the end of training, and it's true. But if, over the years, the Russians have given Rob as much trouble as pleasure—"They don't know how to compromise," he grumbles—on the whole, their rigor suits him fine. "I don't want everything to be rainbows and smiles here," he says. "It's not Disneyland. You don't learn from that."



From the moment Jade first started working with Rachel and Willow, the high-wire act was a gamble. Ordinarily, students progress from a one-foot-high wire to two feet, and then to four or six, and only then do they move on. Safety is a constant worry at Smirkus, as in the circus world in general, and Jade is uneasy about forcing

his performers to adapt to new heights twice in such a short time. It's not just that the wire feels different and the ground is farther away, it's that the world is different at each height: your vision takes in more that can catch your attention and distract you.

But then, Jade has developed unbounded confidence in Rachel and Willow, who in turn have found a close, trustful relationship with him. He knows, for instance, that Rachel simply does not quit. "She doesn't need motivation," he comments a few days before the opening performance, "she just needs to be told what to do. And then, because she's a gymnast, she can train her body to do it." He spends his time with her working on physical details: "Think about being in a tube," he tells her after she falls on a turn; "your body has to be in a straight line." Or, after a fall as she tried kneeling on the wire, he points out that she needn't be in a straight line as she comes down, but she does need to bring her second knee down more slowly once her first is steady on the wire. Gravely, she practices everything he tells her.

Willow couldn't be more different. She has striking, wide eyes that give her the look of a meditative fawn, but there isn't much that she takes seriously. "Willow needs more motivation," Jade says. "I see it just in the way she is when she's not on the wire, in the difference: when Rachel's not on the wire, she's watching, always. Willow, it comes so easy to her. Her body just understands how to keep its balance. And she gets up there and is automatically beautiful. I say, 'Put your arm up,' and she doesn't do this"—he shoots his arm straight up in a planklike salute—"she does this..." He raises his arm languidly in a gentle arc, his fingers pointing gracefully. "People have to be taught for years how to put their hand up like that."

What Jade has in mind for the wire act is an arresting, dreamlike sequence in which his character, the Sheriff of Nottingham, after being captured by Robin Hood and his men and left to wander in Sherwood Forest, is bewitched and lured into the air by two wood sprites. It has the potential to be breathtaking, but only if the two sprites manage to stay in the air together. Which means that Willow and Rachel have to learn how to walk on the wire at the same time. This is not as easy as it sounds, since the cable, even though stayed by *cavalletti*, or guy wires, transmits every movement of one's foot; any slight tremor in Rachel's step, Willow feels.

The first day they try it together, the day before the show opens, Rachel falls while Jade and Willow are both on the wire. She groans and asks Jade if she messed him up. Not at all, Jade reassures her. "Freaked *me* out," Willow pipes in. As they continue to work, coming out from opposite ends of the wire, sitting and stretching one leg out, kneeling on the wire, practicing their turns (quick moves that have to be done absolutely vertically or the centrifugal force will pull them off), their faces become masks and their eyes grow fierce and in-

tent. There are moments when it seems as though both are fighting some invisible cylinder of air that has become unsettled and turbulent, and then, slowly, each finds a calm space, and all falls still again.

★ ★ ★

That first summer of 1987, when Old Blue was brand new and there were only twelve kids in the troupe, adults and kids were all making it up together as they went along. One of the staff members kept a journal in which she cataloged each day's crises. "Crisis #7: Kids and parents arrive today," she wrote.

The stove broke down (from nervous tension?) so another was brought in, but didn't fit through the door. Lots of discussion; [the door] was dismantled. . . . #14: Full house, fifty circus people and kids—plumbing decides to back up, toilets everywhere overflow. Much discussion. Lots of scurrying and the cook digging outside with a shovel. . . . #19: The health inspector on a surprise visit, stone-faced, taking notes in the kitchen. Molly Saudek runs in barefoot, happily holding up a garden snake, and offers it to the cook who is making stew. . . . #28: Rob should be at rehearsals, but power went out. . . . He is at the house in the basement, fooling with the fuse box. No lights in house, tent, barn. . . . Stewart arrives at tent with message from Dottie, Rob's mom: "Tell him to stop all this nonsense and get a job in a bank."

Dottie was only half joking. Rob, who is fifty now, grew up in a close-knit, rambunctious family that did not quite know what to make of his choice of profession. His grandfather ran a small store in New Haven, Connecticut; his father, Al, had to work there and never had a chance to finish college. So when Rob announced he was running off in the middle of his studies to join a circus, the news was received without jubilation, although Dottie's dismissive parting shot did prove useful later on: "Circus, smirkus," she said, "get a *real* job!"

"This was a rather strange occupation for a nice Jewish boy," says an old family friend, a New Haven pediatrician named Morris Wessel. "In the beginning, [Rob's parents] were a bit, I hate to use the word *intolerant*, but for a while I'm sure they thought, *My God, where's our boy going?*" In the first year or two after Smirkus started up, Dottie would come to see the show and Rob would point her out and ask her to stand for the crowd; she did so tentatively, ill at ease.

By the time Dottie died, in 1993—Rob's father had died in 1977—all that had changed. At performances, she would rise and acknowledge the crowd with relish. In a family scrapbook, Rob's brother, Paul, wrote: "She became a full-fledged circus mom to Rob's small performers. She was tickled to be a part of it. She took in stride the sudden arrival of hordes of Mongolians, Latvians, and Russians to sleep on

her floor and raid her larder. This role was a public extension of her place in the family."

Of course, a woman like Dottie Mermin didn't stand a chance against the charms of Smirkus—against the eagerness of children who'd discovered they could make a crowd of hundreds laugh or gasp or fall absolutely silent. Nor against the passion of Russians, Chinese, Mongolians, Romanians, Ukrainians, Latvians, and even Americans who believed in circus as the most perfect, the most universal of the arts, and who wanted to pass on their love for it. And especially not against the realization, which she must have had, that her son was, in his own way, echoing her and Al: he was building a home and nurturing a family.

People find their way to Rob and to Smirkus. Volodya and Zina live at the farm. So do Chimgee and her fourteen-year-old son, Tamir, who is a mainstay of the troupe and of the local school's soccer team. Sonny Barringer, the technical boss, is a quiet ex-Marine who for three years headed up maintenance on the Ringling Brothers train—"Let's just say it's a good place to be away from," he says—and now lives in a tiny cabin by the farmhouse. Beth LeCours, the office administrator, was mourning the death of her first husband when she saw an ad in the local newspaper for the job; after a couple of interviews and a long pancake breakfast with Rob and Smirkus's general manager, Ozzie Henschel, she just stayed. Something like this also happens throughout the summer. Toby Ayer drops by after failing to make the U.S. national rowing team; in addition to being a superb juggler, he stands six feet, five inches, and within a half-hour Rob has convinced him to spend his summer touring with the circus as Little John. Other former troupers show up just to say hello and wind up on the tent crew or traveling with the troupe, unable to stay away. There is something about Smirkus, Molly Saudek says, that makes it "as much the center of our lives as our family."

This role as father figure may seem an unlikely one for a clown, but then, Rob is an unlikely clown. True, he has nimble eyebrows and a wide, pliable mouth that can stretch up in a beaming grin or turn down at the ends in abject dismay, and he can be silly—"La-a-a-a-dies and jellybeans!"—and astute about the nuances of slapstick. But Rob latched onto clowning in the way that shy and introspective children often find unexpected ways to reveal their inner selves; the circus became his way of being in the world. During Smirkus's 1996 tour, Rob did a solo clown act dressed in gray tails, playing a silver cornet to a recording of Glen Miller's "Moonlight Serenade." As the music rose, he would put his head back, and suddenly a small white feather would waft from his horn. Surprised, he'd catch it and blow it away, but it would float back past him. So he'd put the horn down, catch the feather again, blow it into the air; then, with a sudden smile, he would back off and beckon to it with his finger as it

ghosted down. Catching it with an elegant motion on the back of his hand, his face alight, he would keep it aloft, slipping into an unhurried, delicate pas de deux as the music played behind him. Then he'd catch the feather one last time and offer it to some child in the audience, who would invariably rush up to take it and try to imitate his dance. Rob would back off, leaving the child alone and wholly engrossed in the center of the ring, and he would pick up the cornet, lean nonchalantly against one of the tent's support masts, put the horn to his lips, and resume the "Serenade." Moved and laughing at the same time, the adults in the audience would break into sustained applause.



There is something sweetly anachronistic about the run of days at the old farm. Kids are expected to do their chores every day: clean the bathrooms, haul scraps to the compost heap, wash the pots after meals, make sure the studio and barn are kept clean. It's fairly common for some parent to call Rob after the summer's over to marvel at how helpful a once-sulky son or daughter has become. Troupers are also expected to eat healthily. Candy was banned early on, after a group of ten-year-old girls got hold of a pile of Smarties one night and woke the whole troupe at three in the morning with their shouted rendition of "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds." In a world that increasingly prizes speed and agitation, the children and teenagers who become troupe members are asked—or perhaps it's that they're given a chance—to find something of value in the slow, hard-won accretion of skill.

"There's things as a result of life in the nineties that kids just don't know," Ozzie Henschel comments a few days into training, as we sit talking on the porch. Ozzie is a former VISTA volunteer with a ready—though slightly wicked—smile and a pitch-perfect way with teenagers; if Rob is the surrogate father at Smirkus, then Ozzie is the smartass uncle who, all kidding aside, expects you to eat your vegetables. "They come here and they're just oblivious to certain things," he says. "Kids these days talk real fast, and they talk real fast because of, you know, the whole attention-span thing. So here we give them a chance to slow down and learn some of the old ways, because God knows we need some of those back . . . taking the time to look, and taking the time to care about other people, and to be polite, all the little things that are gone these days."

If you happened to see the Big Apple Circus's 1998–99 tour, and saw Molly Saudek do her wire act, you'll understand that there's something else kids learn at Smirkus. Molly is a spell-binding performer, a dancer who happens to do her work on a tightwire, and she can make an entire ring seem effervescent. Her ability to make her art a reflection of herself is very

much what Smirkus strives for. "There's a lot of performers who sort of go out there and paste on their smiles," Molly says. "When I got *how* to smile from Smirkus, I got a *reason* to smile. Rob always let us know how important it was for us to tell people, though our performances, how much we were enjoying it. You're not risking anything you don't know how to risk, you love what you're doing, and the reason to be in a ring and the reason to be sitting watching somebody in the ring is that life is good and there's happiness out there to be spread around."



In the stillness of a circus tent before a performance, in fact, happiness is a detectable promise. You can close your eyes and smell the balmy earthiness of hay and sawdust, hear the wind in the leaves outside, the birds overhead, the gentle snuffling of tent flaps in the breeze, the ring of a fastener blown against a pole. It is serene, languorous even, until you open your eyes again and realize that everything you see teems with possibilities: the juggling pins, rolling balls, and other props by the backstage entrance, the bleachers circling the ring, the stanchions garlanded with guy wires, the rigging high in the cupola, the tightwire stretched overhead.

If you sit there long enough, the space comes to life much like a stream in a spring thaw, a trickle at first. Ryan walks through wearing Rob's venerable oversized clown shoes, scuffed black leather alight with lime-green laces; Jade wanders in, already in his Sheriff of Nottingham costume, to check the wire; Alberto, alone, methodically sweeps the ring until the sawdust is pristine and smooth and inviting to his horses. Then the crew starts checking lights and sound. Now you can hear the bustle of the concessions staff setting up, the steady crunch of early arrivals driving up, the inchoate murmur of a crowd gathering by the entrance. Soon that murmur swells to fill the air all around until Troy Wunderle's voice cuts through the buzz—"Milo-o-o-rds and miladies!"—and you know he's made his way out front on stilts to entertain them with juggling and banter. A single shaft of light cuts across the ring, and music, a soft Celtic air, filters through the tent; then, after a pause, as though the rising water had to build enough to break through whatever tangle was blocking it, the crowd bursts in, kids scrambling to get a spot ringside, their parents climbing over the bleachers behind them.

Outside, Ozzie is yelling, "Squeeze in, folks! We've got a great crowd and a great show! Squeeze in!" And they do: with astounding speed, the tent becomes full, the air charged. The clowns wander the ring, trying to keep the crowd entertained; somehow, Ryan ends up stretched precariously between an unbalanced ladder and the trapeze, high in the air. Finally, the tent darkens and loudspeakers fill with the

pound of a drum and then a sparkling fanfare of trumpets and the lights come up again and the Sheriff of Nottingham, high atop Venezia, the immense white Percheron, bursts into the ring and circles it, all coiled energy and glaring at the crowd, which erupts with cheers and whistles.

The ensuing *charivari* is, as Smirkus sometimes likes to put it, "A Teaser of Great Activity in a Short Display of Numerous and Varied Skills in a Veritable Burst of Color, Fast Music, and Furiously Paced Action." Troupers career in pairs across the ring, in flips and roundoffs and cartwheels, feet to hands to feet to hands to feet, emerging from their airborne blurs with broad smiles and their arms cocked wide in a "style," the expansive gesture that both acknowledges the applause of the crowd and says, "Look at me!" The occasional stutters and missteps, in the midst of a series of acrobatic moves that command respect simply for the amount of work it obviously took to learn them, make it all somehow more engaging—more human and approachable—and by the time the *charivari* comes to an end, with troupers diving headlong through a set of upraised hoops, tucking and rolling to their feet at the last minute and then bounding onto the ring curb to stand, rhythmically applauding their fellows, most of the audience is wholeheartedly along for the ride.

The show is hung, loosely, on the high points of *The Adventures of Robin Hood*—Robin's fight with Little John atop a log, his incognito appearance at an archery competition held by the Sheriff, the reappearance of King Richard at the end. There is a deliberate ebb and flow to all this—a crowd-rouser followed by a solo act, spectacle followed by lyricism—so that when it's all over, the audience doesn't feel as though it's been shouted at for two hours.

It has, however, been unabashedly entertained. There's the William Tell Act, for instance, a venerable bit of clowning in which an invariably reluctant recruit from the audience is placed in front of a target, balloons clamped under his armpits and between his legs, while Dylan Fuller, a rubbery-faced clown who mocks bumpkin dimness with alarming ease, hoods himself and, apparently blinded, takes aim with a bow and arrow; Ryan, who has been toying with the volunteer—mopping his brow, flicking him under the chin to make sure he keeps his head up—then hoods him, too, so that the hapless mark is the only person in the tent who can't see Dylan lower his bow while one of the other clowns, who has been hiding behind the target, sneaks around and punctures each balloon.

There's the Dynamite Duel, in which Troy Wunderle and Dan Brown, each with a pie tin of firecrackers strapped to his waist, have at each other with flame-tipped épées in a boisterously choreographed, acrobatic showdown that ends badly—and loudly—for Troy. There's the juggling, with a small knot of the most talented jugglers weaving elaborate patterns among themselves, an ornate geometry of sparkled

pins that at moments move so rapidly the air itself appears to be twinkling; and there's the cloud swing, in which Kerren and Kaleen can produce moments of gossamer beauty when the two, dressed in white, are perfectly in sync, reaching the apex of their swings at opposite ends of the tent at precisely the same moment, flipping, and swooping back past each other. And there's the archery contest, in which troupers fire from atop rolling balls; the fire-torch juggling; the horse act, with its pyramids and sprints across the ring to mount a cantering Percheron; and a rousing perch act, which builds to a finale with four twenty-foot poles crammed with troupers poised along their lengths and standing atop them juggling and flipping around on ropes hung between them—so much movement that your eyes don't know where to settle.

A curious thing sometimes happens. In the cradle act, early in the show's first half, Rachel's dramatic back hand-spring off the bar, the one that invariably leaves the audience gaping, is not in fact her toughest move. That comes right after, as she and Oleg swing high above the crowd, and she leaves his grasp at the peak of their arc and does a somersault from which she has to emerge with her arm thrust out at just the right moment if he is to catch her again. Sometimes they miss, and she drops until the lunge catches her short. As Oleg, who is hanging upside down, hauls her back up, the audience, which has given a fervent groan as she fell, begins applauding; as she tucks and swings and lands back on the bar, the clapping grows louder, and louder again as she repeats her back dive, and then redoubles—you can hear people shouting and stamping—when she tries the somersault again and this time makes it. There is a glint of satisfaction in audience members' eyes, as though they believe that somehow they collectively helped her along, and it is right here that you get a glimpse of why Smirkus has grown so popular over the years: people don't simply want entertainment, they want *heart*. They want their children to see it—to see the ardor of other kids—and they want to feel a part of it themselves. When this happens, when the audience becomes as much a part of the show as the performers, Smirkus is extraordinary.



On closing night, a current of expectation and sadness runs through the troupe. Behind the tent, the girls in particular are a little weepy. They sit, arms laced around each other, still and pensive, or practice their juggling or handstands, then wipe their tears off and go in and perform. In a manifest but undefinable way, they are an ensemble now, different from the group that left Greensboro six weeks before. There have been days of almost unbearable heat, when the thermometer at the top of the tent—just above where Oleg and Rachel stand on the cradle—reached its max-

imum reading of 120 degrees before noon. There was the terrible moment when a trouper, running into the ring, tripped and slammed onto his arm; the bones will require several operations to repair. There was the afternoon on the Martha's Vineyard ferry when one of the troupers, the most outwardly hardened of the girls, finally broke down over her mother's death the year before and was immediately surrounded by a knot of sobbing friends. There were the weeklong romances, the unrequited crushes, the simmering resentments that boiled over and got resolved, the nights of bunking down on church floors or in the homes of strangers, the alfresco meals served out of the "backwoods chuckwagon," a converted school bus with a six-burner stove, a counter, a sink, two freezers, and two refrigerators. Above all, there were the shows, where the troupers learned to read each other and rely on each other and play off each other, where they helped one another overcome butterflies, beat back exhaustion, swallow disappointing performances, celebrate small triumphs. By the time their bus rolls back through the half-mile of woods and out into the field below the red barn, the troupe members have reached a kind of exalted physical ease with themselves and emotional attunement with one another that are just waiting to express themselves in the ring.

Tonight, the audience is thunderous, a hometown crowd filled with people from around Greensboro and other parts of northeastern Vermont who have watched Smirkus grow up over the years. It is the sort of crowd you can't refuse—responsive, appreciative, understanding of what it took to get to this moment, determined to let the performers know it. They roar at the *charivari* and at the trapeze act that follows. The troupe members respond not by relaxing but by pushing themselves: the clowns fall harder, the jugglers add little filips they've been practicing, a sort of crazy physical joy takes hold as troupers play to the crowd and watch one another bathe in the response.

The wire act comes near the end, after Khulan and Bogie, two young Mongolian contortionists in white, shimmering costumes, have finished their stunning final moves, lifting themselves into parallel back-arched parabolas, first one atop the other's shoulders, then side by side, supported only by posts clenched in their teeth. They run off to wild applause, and Jade (as the Sheriff) is led, his face hooded, into the dimly lit ring. The hood is taken off, and he stands for a moment, bewildered, looking around. Above him, on the support masts, stand Rachel and Willow in the dark, until they're suddenly lit by spotlights and Jade looks up and they step out over *le vide*, smiling at him and beckoning him to join them.

On opening day, there was no triumph on the wire: Rachel fell several times, and both girls seemed relieved just to be done with it. In the early weeks of the tour, their routine was still gelling and would sometimes draw only tepid applause;

the girls were still so wrapped in their efforts to stay aloft that they seemed withdrawn. But now they have begun to play with their roles. They step in tandem along the wire until they come near the center, sit with grace, and stretch their legs languidly and elegantly, their eyes alight, their expressions impish. Below them, people in the crowd—children, men in worn T-shirts, women with infants in their laps—gaze up, their mouths open, in unconscious imitation of Jade. The girls raise their arms and pour streams of glitter in a spiral over him, and he spins in the shimmering light, his face gazing upward, his arms wide, entranced; the audience is spellbound, too, and breaks into applause. As Jade climbs Willow's mast, she and Rachel turn—Rachel quavers for a moment, but that's all—and make their way back to their platforms, and now it is Jade's turn.

What strikes you most at this moment is how steadfast he is as he lifts his thirty-foot balance pole and steps out onto the wire. He could just as well be on a sidewalk. (As far as Rachel and Willow have come, you're still aware they're walking on a strand of metal.) He prances along the wire, a leer of delight on his face, until he reaches Rachel, who playfully taps him on the head. Then he makes his way back to Willow, who covers his eyes with a band of leaves. Now he seems to struggle, feigning imbalance as he walks backward until he suddenly drops (the audience gasps), does a precise backward roll along the wire, and comes up straddling it, having shed the blindfold.

Then comes a set of lofty pas de deux as Jade quickly brings Rachel out along the wire, both of them holding his balance pole; he kneels, and she does a confident arabesque, one foot on the wire, the other on his knee. Then, in a move he used to do with Didier Pasquette, he balances his pole at its midpoint, and Rachel slips upside down beneath it, her legs hooked over it, and sways for a moment, suspended. Other than the dreamy music that accompanies them, the tent is silent until Rachel climbs back up on the wire, at which point the audience's shouts usher her back to her platform. Jade backs along the wire to Willow, who climbs on his shoulders, sits, and then, unexpectedly—Jade has been urging this on her all summer, to no avail—she puts her hand on his head and rises to stand on his shoulders as he walks out over the ring. The audience roars, and out at the edges, in the spaces where they've been able to squeeze in to watch, the other troupers whistle and stamp their feet. Willow, in spite of herself, smiles.

From here on, the clamor of the crowd is constant, through the sword fight between Rob and Jade, through the finale, through the horse act that ends the show. When the final, pounding, standing ovation is over and the crowd is still, Rob steps into the ring, surrounded by troupers, who fill the circumference of the ring curb. Tosca and Alberto stand by him, and Troy and Toby Ayer and Jade, and you can

see the Smirkus generations, the family line, the kids Rob began with years ago and the kids they are now teaching. As he thanks the audience for coming and announces where each troupier is from, he suddenly stops and brings his hands to his chest. "My heart is full," he stammers, his eyes filling with tears. "I remember, as a young boy I used to dream of finding a place where emotions could be shown openly and honestly, and in the hard discipline of working, you could find a product of joy. It took me decades to find it, and here it is."

After all the troupers run out, the audience continues clapping, as though willing the show not to end. After a minute or so, a sweet, melancholy old English tune starts up, and the audience files out to the strains of guitar and flute. Some former troupers who have come back for closing night set off fireworks from the hill overlooking the tent. Parents eager to reclaim the children they've given up for the summer stand by the costume tent, wanting to rush in but holding off. Olivia goes by, sobbing. In the now-empty tent, a young troupier named Julia Kaminsky stands on the ring curb and yells, "Hey guys, it's less than a year 'til Smirkus," and then turns, her eyes shining with tears. She hesitates for a moment, not quite sure what to do.

One of the first things troupe members learn from Rob is that in the circus, you never say goodbye. "See you down the road" is about as final as it gets: there's always a next stop. Soon, Rob, Volodya, Zina, and some of the other coaches will head to Connecticut to perform at a fair they go to at the end of every summer. "Smirkus is so sweet at the end," Rob says; "it's nice to go down and hang out with the carnies for a weekend." Alberto will make his way back to Arkansas, where his farm and training ring are, and on to other circuses. Jade will head to Orlando, Florida, where he's been hired by Cirque du Soleil to join its troupe. Though he expects to chafe at the organization's rules—among other things, it requires its wire-walkers to wear a safety harness, which Jade hates to do—he leaves content. "Giving what I had to teach," he says, "seeing it shine through the girls, this was the best thing that could have happened to me. I'm going someplace huge, but I'm going there from this small place I've always come from."

And he's left a legacy, a knot of troupers in thrall to the wire. Kaleen in particular has been drawn to it all summer long, slipping into the *chapiteau* when Rachel and Willow were practicing and watching intently as Jade worked with them, taking every chance she could to drill on the low wire, spending the tour quietly mastering it. Back home in New Hampshire, she will prevail on her father to set one up between two trees in their backyard, and over the next few months she'll spend her free time figuring out turns and jumps and leaps and splits, until the darkness and cold drive her inside for the winter. ■