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The Invisible Circus

Written by Jennifer Egan

Published by Corsair

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JENNIFER EGAN

'RICHLY IMAGINED, AND STUNNINGLY WRITTEN.' *New Yorker*

The INVISIBLE CIRCUS



'DARK, HUGELY AMBITIOUS.' *Elle*

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'BRILLIANTLY UNNERVING. . . A HAUNTING, SHARP, SPLENDIDLY ARTICULATE NOVEL.' *New York Times*

Jennifer Egan is the author of four novels and a short story collection. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* was awarded the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and also won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her stories have been published in the *New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *GQ*, *Zoetrope* and *Ploughshares*, and her non-fiction appears frequently in the *New York Times Magazine*. She lives with her husband and sons in Brooklyn.

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The Invisible Circus

Jennifer Egan



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For my mother, Kay Kimpton
and my brother, Graham Kimpton

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'For the present age, which prefers the picture to the thing pictured, the copy to the original, imagination to reality, or the appearance to the essence . . . *illusion* alone is sacred to this age, but truth profane . . . so that the *highest degree of illusion* is to it the highest degree of sacredness.'

Ludwig Feuerbach

'Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,
Past the houses – past the headlands –
Into deep Eternity— . . .'

Emily Dickinson

part one

one

She'd missed it, Phoebe knew by the silence. Crossing the lush, foggy park, she heard nothing but the drip of condensation running from ferns and palm leaves. By the time she reached the field, its vast emptiness came as no surprise.

The grass was a brilliant, jarring green. Debris covered it, straws, crushed cigarettes, a few sodden blankets abandoned to the mud.

Phoebe shoved her hands in her pockets and crossed the grass, stepping over patches of bare mud. A ring of trees encircled the field, coastal trees, wind-bent and gnarled yet still symmetrical, like figures straining to balance heavy trays.

At the far end of the field several people in army jackets were dismantling a bandstand. They carried its parts through the trees to a road, where Phoebe saw the dark shape of a truck.

She approached a man and woman with long coils of orange electrical cord dangling from their arms. Phoebe waited politely for the two to finish talking, but they seemed not to notice her.

Timidly she turned to another man, who carried a plank across his arms. 'Excuse me,' she said. 'Did I miss it?'

'You did,' he said. 'It was yesterday. Noon to midnight.' He squinted at her as if the sun were out. He looked vaguely

familiar, and Phoebe wondered if he might have known her sister. She was always wondering that.

'I thought it was today,' she said uselessly.

'Yeah, about half the posters were printed wrong.' He grinned, his eyes a bright, chemical blue, like sno-cones.

It was June 18, a Saturday. Ten years before, in 1968, a 'Festival of Moons' had allegedly happened on this same field. 'Revival of Moons', the posters promised, and Phoebe had juggled her shifts at work and come eagerly, anxious to relive what she'd failed to live even once.

'So, how was it?' she asked.

'Underattended.' He laughed sardonically.

'I'm glad it wasn't just me,' she said.

The guy set down his plank and ran a hand across his eyes. Blunt, straight blond hair fell to his shoulders. 'Man,' he said, 'you look a lot like this girl I used to know.'

Startled, Phoebe glanced at him. He was squinting again. 'Like, exactly like her.'

She stared at his face. 'Catnip,' she said, surprising herself.

He took a small step away.

'You were friends with Faith O'Connor, right?' Phoebe said, excited now. 'Well, I'm her sister.'

Catnip looked away, then back at Phoebe. He shook his head. She remembered him now, though he'd seemed much bigger before. And beautiful – that intense, fragile beauty you saw sometimes in high school guys, but never in men. Girls couldn't resist him, hence his name.

He was staring at Phoebe. 'I can't believe this,' he said.

While Catnip went to extricate himself from the work crew, Phoebe struggled to catch her breath. For years she'd imagined this, a friend of Faith's recognizing her now, grown up – how much like her sister she looked.

Together she and Catnip crossed the field. Phoebe felt

nervous. There were blond glints of beard on his face.

'So you're what, in high school now?' he asked.

'I graduated,' Phoebe said. 'Last week, actually.' She hadn't attended the ceremony.

'Well, I'm Kyle. No one's called me Catnip in years,' he said wistfully.

'How old are you?'

'Twenty-six. Yourself?'

'Eighteen.'

'Eighteen,' he said, and laughed. 'Shit, when I was eighteen, twenty-six sounded geriatric.'

Kyle had just finished his second year of law school. 'Monday I start my summer job,' he said, and with two fingers mimed a pair of scissors snipping off his hair.

'Really? They make you cut it?' It sounded like the Army.

'They don't have to,' he said. 'You've already done it.'

Traffic sounds grew louder as they neared the edge of Golden Gate Park. Phoebe felt like a child left alone with one of Faith's friends, the uneasy job of holding their interest. 'Do you ever think about those times?' she asked. 'You know, with my sister?'

There was a pause. 'Sure,' Kyle said. 'Sure I do.'

'Me too.'

'She's incredibly real to me. Faith,' he said.

'I think about her constantly,' said Phoebe.

Kyle nodded. 'She was your sister.'

By the time they reached Haight Street, the fog was beginning to shred, exposing blue wisps of sky. Phoebe thought of mentioning that she worked only two blocks away – would be there right now if not for the Revival of Moons – but this seemed of no consequence.

'I live around here,' Kyle said. 'How about some coffee?'

His apartment, on Cole Street, was a disappointment.

Phoebe had hoped to enter a time warp, but a sleek charcoal couch and long glass coffee table dominated the living room. On the walls, abstract lithographs appeared to levitate inside Plexiglas frames. Still, a prism dangled from one window, and tie-dyed cushions scattered the floor. Phoebe noticed a smell of cloves or pepper, some odor familiar from years before.

She sat on the floor, away from the charcoal couch. When Kyle shed his army jacket, Phoebe noticed through his T-shirt how muscular he was. He took a joint from a Lucite cigarette holder on the coffee table and fired it up, then lowered himself to the floor.

'You know,' he croaked, holding in smoke as he passed the joint to Phoebe, 'a bunch of times I thought about dropping by you and your mom's. Just see how you were doing.'

'You should've done it,' Phoebe said. She was eyeing the joint, worrying whether or not to smoke. Getting high made her deeply anxious, had paralyzed her more than once in a viselike fear that she was about to drop dead. But she thought of her sister, how eagerly Faith had reached for everything – how Kyle would expect this of Phoebe. She took a modest hit. Kyle was bent at his stereo, stacking records on a turntable. *Surrealistic Pillow* came on, the rich, eerie voice of Grace Slick.

'She remarried or anything, your mom?' he asked, resuming his seat.

'Oh no,' Phoebe said, half laughing. 'No.'

As Kyle watched her through the smoke, she grew self-conscious. 'I guess that phase in her life is kind of over,' she explained.

He shook his head. 'Too bad.'

'No, she doesn't mind,' Phoebe said, wondering as she spoke if she knew this for sure. 'She's sort of past the age of romance.'

Kyle frowned, toking on the joint. 'How old could she be?'

'Her birthday's next weekend, actually. Forty-seven.'

He burst out laughing, spewing smoke and then coughing with abandon. 'Forty-seven,' he said, recovering himself. 'That's not old, Phoebe.'

She stared at him, stunned by his laughter. 'I didn't say she was old,' she said. The pot was confusing her.

Kyle's eyes lingered on Phoebe. Smoke hung on the air in folds, dissolving slowly like cream into coffee. 'What about you?' he said. 'How've you been?'

'Fine, thanks,' she said guardedly.

By the time they finished the joint, the room seemed to pulsate directly against Phoebe's eyeballs. Her heartbeat echoed. The pillows exhaled a cinnamon smell when she leaned back.

Kyle stretched out flat, hands cradling his head, legs crossed at the ankles. 'I want to talk about it,' he said, his eyes closed, 'but I don't know how to.'

'Me too,' Phoebe said. 'I never do.'

Kyle opened one eye. 'Not even with your mom? Your brother?'

'I don't know why,' Phoebe said. 'We used to.'

'Plastic Fantastic Lover' came on, meandering and druggy, invading Phoebe's mind with fluorescent splashes of color. They listened in silence.

'So . . . did you ever find out what happened?' Kyle said at last.

'You mean, how she died?'

'Yeah. How it happened exactly.'

As always when the subject turned to Faith, some pressure inside Phoebe relaxed. She took long, peaceful breaths. 'Well, everyone says she jumped.'

Kyle sighed. 'In Italy, right?'

Phoebe nodded. After a pause she asked, 'Do you believe it?'

'I don't know,' Kyle said. 'I mean, the way I heard it – you'd know better than me – it would've been pretty hard to fall there by accident.'

'Except no one saw.'

Kyle raised himself on his elbows and looked at Phoebe. She gazed back at him, very stoned, trying to pinpoint what exactly had changed about Kyle since the old days.

'But I mean, why?' he said. 'You know – why?'

He looked so earnest, as if he were the first person ever to pose the question in quite this way. It made Phoebe laugh, softly at first, then convulsively, tears running from her eyes. 'I'm sorry,' she said, wiping them on her sleeve. Her nose was running. 'Sorry.'

Kyle touched her arm. 'I just wondered what the story was,' he said.

'Yeah,' Phoebe said, sniffling. 'Me too.' Laughing had relieved her, the way crying did.

'You think it was an accident,' Kyle said.

'I'm not sure.'

He nodded. The subject was closed, somehow. Phoebe felt as if she'd lost a chance. It was her own fault, she thought, for laughing.

They drifted into silence. Phoebe's thumb and middle finger were sticky with resin. Kyle relit the roach, and when he handed it over, she smoked without hesitation. Finally Kyle let the nub of roach drop to the floor and sat cross-legged, the fingers of one hand pressed to the other. 'You look like her,' he said. 'I guess you hear that a lot.'

'I don't hear it,' Phoebe said, confused as to why. 'Because' – she laughed, realizing – 'well, I mean, no one sees us together.'

Kyle smacked his forehead, clearly mortified.

'But I wish they did,' Phoebe said. 'Say that.'

He left her, crossing the room to the window. Phoebe stretched, reaching toward the ceiling in her painter's pants and desert boots so the muscles pulled at her ribs. She was very stoned, but today it seemed all right. She even felt a loopy sort of confidence as she lay on her side, watching Kyle squint through his prism. A nylon thread attached it to the window. He twisted it, scattering smudges of rainbow light. King Crimson's song 'Moon-child' came on.

'I just had a weird feeling,' Kyle said.

'What?'

'I thought, if you told me right now you were Faith, I bet I'd believe you.'

Phoebe turned her face away to hide her pleasure. She still wore Faith's clothing sometimes, frayed jeans and lacy flea-market blouses, a crushed velvet jacket with star-shaped buttons. Nothing quite fit. Her sister had been thinner, or taller, her black hair longer – something. Try as Phoebe might to bridge the gap between herself and Faith, some difference always remained. But one day that difference would vanish, she believed, part of a larger transformation Phoebe was constantly awaiting. She had thought it would come by graduation.

'I'm leaving for Europe pretty soon,' she lied, seized by a desire to impress and dazzle Kyle. 'A long trip.'

'Oh yeah?' he said from the window. 'Where to?'

'I'm not sure. I thought I'd just go, you know? Kind of be spontaneous.' There was some truth in this; Phoebe did intend to go one day to Europe, retrace her sister's steps. She had always known it. But she'd enrolled at Berkeley for the fall semester, chosen five courses and even dorm space.

'I'm all for spontaneity,' Kyle said, sounding envious.

So had their father been. In his will he'd tried to ensure it, providing Faith and Phoebe and Barry five thousand dollars each after high school, to explore the world. 'Do it first,' he'd said, 'before you get tied down. Do things you'll tell stories about the rest of your lives.'

'Just go, you know?' Phoebe said, losing herself in the lie. 'Just take off.'

Kyle moved to where she lay, his bare feet sticking on the polished floor. A knee cracked as he eased himself on the cushions beside her. Phoebe shut her eyes.

'You're beautiful,' he said, touching her face. Phoebe opened her eyes and quickly shut them. She felt giddy, as if the room, like Kyle's prism, were twisting on a nylon string. He leaned down, kissing her mouth. Phoebe kissed him back, some blind part of herself rushing forward. She was still a virgin. Kyle's mouth had a sweet, applesauce taste.

He adjusted the cushions and stretched out beside her. As he touched Phoebe's breasts through her T-shirt, she sensed his confidence, and it helped her relax. Kyle took her head in his hands, his palms cool at her temples, and Phoebe heard behind her covered ears a rushing, seashell noise. Kyle eased himself on top of her. She clung to the muscles along his spine, the heat from his body seeping through Phoebe's clothes to her skin. The coiled strength of his stomach moved gently as he breathed; his erection pressed her thigh. She opened her eyes to look at him. But Kyle's own eyes were clenched shut, as if he were making a wish.

'Wait – wait,' Phoebe said, squirming out from beneath him.

Kyle resisted her at first, then sprang to his feet as if a stranger had entered the room. Phoebe heard his shallow breathing. She sat curled like an egg, chin on her knees. Kyle moved to the couch and hunched at one end. 'Shit,' he said.

But Phoebe had lost track of him. There was something she

needed to remember. She shut her eyes, forehead pressed to her knees, and saw Faith and her friends swallow tiny squares of paper and sometime later start laughing, crazy weeping laughter that in Faith soon turned to helpless sobbing in her boyfriend's arms – 'Wolf' he was called for his brown skin and white teeth, brown hands on her sister's head, 'Shhh,' stroking her hair as if Faith were a cat, 'Shhh.' Shirtless under a soft leather vest, his brown stomach muscles reminding Phoebe of the shapes on a turtle's shell. And then Faith was kissing him, Phoebe watching, uneasy. 'Come on,' Faith said, and tried to stand, but she couldn't; she was sick, her eyes feverish. 'Come on.' Kissing, kissing, but Wolf saw Phoebe crouched beside him, and their eyes locked.

'Faith, wait,' he said. 'Babe, hold on.'

But finally he helped her up, Phoebe creeping behind them into the hall, where they tottered to the far end, her mother's white bedroom door swinging shut behind them. Then silence. Phoebe waited in the hall for the door to open up again, growing frightened as the minutes passed – her sister was sick, could hardly walk! After their father got sick that door was always shut, sweet medicine smells in the hallway. Phoebe threw herself down on the rug and lay there in a kind of trance, the white door burning a hole through her head until finally after what seemed like hours she ran at the door sobbing, cool smooth paint against her cheek, but still she didn't turn the knob. She was too afraid.

Then footsteps. Phoebe jumped back as Faith opened the door, her sister's eyes wide and black, drops of water sticking to her lashes. Hugging Phoebe close, 'Baby,' rocking her gently, 'Baby, baby, what's happened to you?' Smelling of soap – had she only been taking a shower? And Wolf, the hero, watching Phoebe with such pain in his face, as if he'd hurt her. No, Phoebe wanted to say, no, no, but how could she speak

when she understood nothing, when everyone was mysterious?

Now Phoebe looked at Kyle, miles away on the couch. It was always this way – something she needed to remember pulling her back, like an undertow. A white door sealing her off, reminding Phoebe that her present life was unreal and without significance. What mattered was hidden from sight. At times she hated remembering, wanted nothing in the world but to rush forward into something of her own, lose herself in it. But this wasn't possible. The only way forward was through that door.

'Do you miss her?' Phoebe said into the silence.

Kyle groaned up from the couch and sprayed water on the leaves of several spindly marijuana plants leaning toward an ultraviolet bulb. Delicate threads tied them to stakes. 'Sometimes I feel like she's still back there,' he said. 'In that time. I miss it like hell.'

'Me too,' Phoebe said, an ache in her chest. 'Even if I wasn't really there.'

'Sure you were there.'

'No. I was a kid.'

There was a long pause. 'I wasn't there, either,' Kyle said. 'Not totally.'

'What do you mean?'

'I kept circling, circling, but I never quite hit it.'

This admission made Phoebe uneasy. 'You were there, Kyle,' she assured him. 'You were definitely there.'

He grinned, seeming heartened. He sprayed his mister into the air, granules of vapor catching the light as they fell. Phoebe heard the cannon, fired each day at five o'clock from the Presidio military base. 'I better go,' she said, wobbling to her feet. One of her legs was asleep. It was 1978. Faith's boyfriend Wolf lived in Europe now. Phoebe's mother hadn't heard from him in years.

Kyle waited, hands in his pockets. 'I'll give you a call.'

'Okay,' Phoebe said, knowing he wouldn't.

She walked carefully down the macadam steps to the street, gripping the rail. Sunlight glittered in the trees. There was a distant cable car prattle, silence around it.

'Hey,' she heard overhead. Kyle was leaning out his window. 'I forgot, I wanted to give you something in case you get to Munich. I've got a cousin over there.'

Phoebe shielded her eyes. She'd forgotten her Europe story, and was startled now to hear it repeated as fact.

'C'mon back,' Kyle said.

Phoebe retraced her steps. Kyle handed her a joint wrapped in fluorescent pink rolling paper. It felt dry and light in her hand.

'Tell him it's the same stuff we smoked at Christmas,' he said, copying from an address book onto the back of a receipt. 'Steven + Ingrid Lake,' Phoebe read, with an address. The telephone number seemed short on digits. She rolled the joint carefully inside the address and slipped it in her wallet.

'Tell Steve to stay clear of the anthills,' Kyle said, laughing in the doorway. 'He'll understand.'

Descending the stairs a second time, Phoebe felt a curious excitement. As far as Kyle knew, she was going to Europe – next week, tomorrow – and this thought amazed Phoebe, thrilled her with a sense that anything might happen.

On the street she looked up. Kyle was watching her from his window again, absently touching the prism. 'When are you leaving?' he said.

'Soon,' she said, almost laughing. 'Next week, maybe.' She turned to go.

'Send me a postcard,' he called.

Phoebe found herself smiling at the bony Victorian houses. Europe, she thought. Birds, white stone, long dark bridges.

Going all the places Faith had gone – exactly, one by one. Her sister's postcards still lay stacked in a shoebox underneath the bed. Phoebe recalled awaiting them feverishly, right from the day her sister and Wolf had first left, a summer day not unlike this one. They'd driven to the airport in Wolf's truck, with a girl who'd already paid him for it. Phoebe had stood on the sidewalk a long time after they'd gone, wondering what would happen to them. She'd been wondering ever since.

Her sister died on November 21, 1970, on the rocks below Corniglia, a tiny village on the west coast of northern Italy. She was seventeen; Phoebe was ten. Traces of drugs were found in Faith's body, speed, LSD, but not enough that she would have been high at the time. If her neck hadn't broken, they said, she might have lived.

If Phoebe could string together the hours she'd spent circling this event, they would surely total years. She lost herself in these contemplations, her own life falling away like a husk as she sank into the rich, bottomless well of her sister's absence. And the longer Phoebe circled, the more certain she became that a great misunderstanding was at work; that if Faith had taken her life, she'd done it without a hint of the failure or hopelessness the word 'suicide' implied. When Phoebe thought of her sister's death, it was always with a curious lilt to the heart, as if Faith had been lifted into some more spectacular realm, a place so remote she could reach it only by forfeiting her life. Like kicking away a ladder. Where was the failure in that?

Phoebe's mother, Gail, had flown to Italy and returned with Faith's ashes in a box. She and Phoebe and Barry scattered them from the clifftops near the Golden Gate Bridge, a place where their family used to picnic. Phoebe remembered staring in disbelief at the silty, uneven chunks, like debris left in a fireplace. Her hands had been sweating, and as she tossed

fistfuls into the wind, the finest powder stuck in the creases of her palms. No matter how hard Phoebe shook, the powder remained. Afterward she'd locked the door to her room and gazed for a long time at her open hands. The house was quiet. Phoebe stuck out her tongue and lightly ran its tip along her palm. The taste was sour, salty. Horrified, Phoebe fled to the bathroom and scoured her hands and mouth in the sink, staring into the toilet and willing herself to be sick. Lately she'd wondered if what she tasted that day was her own sweat.

A white door at the end of a hallway. 'Come on,' Faith had said, reaching for Wolf. They closed it behind them.

Phoebe pacing outside, driving her toes deep into the soft rug. Terrified – of what? That her sister was gone. That the door would never open. That when finally it did, she would find herself alone in a bright, empty room.