

SWALLOWING

The longer he looks at her, the more he wants to chew the thick layer of make-up from her face, like white chunks of meringue, and reveal her true self. Reinforced concrete will be easier to handle. She shows nothing, absolutely nothing from herself

Before him stands the best living statue artist on this planet, Tom is sure of that.

'Pedrolina ', it says on the note in the lid of the money box in front of her feet. ' The white clown who stands still with the speed of the Earth '. A mysterious beauty as Tom has never seen before.

The flower on top of her pointy hat, and her lips are red as blood and flow out of her black and white appearance. As if she is both dying and disappearing.

For a few seconds Tom stares at her, like a small child at the still wrapped presents under the Christmas tree, and then calls himself to order. He waves at her, makes a small bow and puts his friendliest smile on, knowing that she will give nothing back. That they both may have a beautiful and fruitful working day.

He spreads out his small carpet on a proper distance from her workspace, and displays, just as the early shopkeepers, his goods. They still have forty-five minutes before the shops open and the streets will fill with people. Most people are still tucked under their warm blankets. Snorting. Dreaming. Far away from the concerns that only appear by daylight.

He on the other hand had opened the curtains to let the moonlight in, and was awake for hours. Coffee he skipped. His breakfast he had in the car. Five cold pancakes. Number six was too much.

To be there before she arrived was what he wanted; see her before she turned to stone, to see her eyes get large and watery while yawning, to see her blow circles in one last cup of coffee, and to see her one last time getting her paint on before she gets on her grate and shows off her gift.

His eyes cemented with sleep crusts, the syrup dripping from between his pancake on his brand new trousers, it was all for nothing. She had already been there. Like a boulder that never left its place.

Tom unzips his black gym bag and retrieves a bottle of water, a red fiber cloth, a cassette player (My First Sony), a can of cooking spray and a sixty inches long sword. All his movements intentionally slow – to draw the attention from the people on the street – and with one eye on his frozen neighbor.

Starting from the handle to the point, he wipes the metal free from dust and hair. A sword swallower and a cat: an unfortunate combination. One itching cat hair and you're gone. The leaf will cut through the uvula

and throat wall valve, and enter the larynx after which you'll bleed to death or drown in your own blood. The trick – *not the magic trick!* – of sword swallowing is to switch of the swallowing- and puking effect. Something that can only be achieved by total relaxation of body and mind. First practiced with the fingers – above a toilet works best, Tom discovered – and once under control you switch on to knitting needles. Juggling is easier. But also, much more boring.

The attention of Tom goes back to what's happening aside of him. About a meter away from Pedrolina a young girl has come to a standstill. Her chubby body is shoved in a pink dress. Cotton candy in her hand. Freckles as a solar system. Eyes as dropped jaw mouths. A cheeky, sugar crusted tongue appears between her lips.

-You devils child, Tom thinks, and takes a sip from his bottle of water. A meter behind the little devil stands a woman who likely is her mother. A stretched version – red, but long and meat on the bone. She is too busy with her phone to see that her little Princess is trying to push Pedrolina over. When she fails she kicks against Pedrolina's shin with her golden glitter ballerina's.

Anger is boiling. He wants to shout to the mother – who is now making some photo's with her mobile, to show on facebook – to keep an eye on her little brat, and if she doesn't he has some educational fists to help her.

Pedrolina does not budge. Even her pupils stay calm in their place. After a final inward curse, Tom urges himself to calm down; stress on a sword swallower is like a flock of wood worms on a guillotine. Pedrolina will take care of herself. She always did. All those teasing faces, the obscene gestures, the foul mouthing, she had to take in. How people touched her, grabbed her when they went on a picture with her.

Just last week there was a junkie, who grabbed all the chains from her money box. He had not even bothered to run away. Motionless, she stood; everything for the art. Tom was stunned and had stood by apathetic.

The thief out of sight, he felt sick of shame from his own cowardice and that of humanity.

The following morning he had gone directly to the ATM machine and withdrew the maximum amount, two-hundred-fifty dollars, and put in one of her deep clowns pockets. Before her feet he had placed a large bouquet of Red Roses with a handwritten card attached.

-Pick it up, give me your voice, he thought, nearly begging. There was only silence.

In his dreams she had thanked him. With a wet sponge she had swept the white face paint of her face. Her red lips had moved and formed the words: 'I adore you'. They had found his lips.

She had hold her hand behind his neck, put her tongue into his mouth and pressed her soft body against him. He had brought her to life, the concrete melted in his hands.

Tom sighs, opens his tin bread bin and reluctantly works his last pancake away. This to fuller the stomach, and make it more more sensitive. The danger is not over yet when you lower the sword just millimeters apart from the lungs, heart, aorta and larynx. Pierce your stomach and you skewered yourself. Failures kebab.

The number of prying eyes around his rug increase gradually. Two-four-six-twelve-eighteen. Tom decides to start up his old tape deck stuck. Magnetic tape stretches.

The Bolero swells while he sprays the blade with cooking spray.

He gets up on his crate. A last look at his neighbor. He notices something on her; a crack, a hairline, appeared in the white layer of face paint next to the corner of her mouth. As cracked concrete. Possible by the sun, or an upcoming smile perhaps. Tom doesn't not know. He is inexperienced when it comes to impressing girls.

But, he thinks, while he puts his head in the back of his neck and keeps the sword above his open mouth, there must be a first time for everything.