

Love in the Balance

By Jack Helbig

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She was a circus princess to die for. He took the chance.

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The moment is pure Wallenda. A beautiful woman hangs upside down in the spotlight, high above the floor. She smiles, her long, reddish brown curls streaming earthward, as she slips one foot out of its slender strap. She is Lijana Wallenda Hernandez, 23-year-old great-granddaughter of Karl, the late patriarch of the Flying Wallendas. She dangles. There is no net.

This is the finale of the Flying Griffin Circus, a charming, ragtag little show put together by the Evanston-based Actors Gymnasium, and Lijana wants to give the audience a healthy thrill before they go home. Hanging midway through a line of straps by her feet, she's "walking," removing one foot from a strap and hooking it through the next, making sure the arch of her foot is nestled securely. Then she unhooks the other foot and repeats the process. Only her flexing toes betray how hard a trick this is.

Earlier in the show she'd draped herself through a ring hanging from the rafters, arching backward, balanced at the small of her back, her head touching her toes in a dangling circus parody of a yoga position. She does this three times a night at her weekend gig, Fridays and Saturdays at Circus, a dance club near North and Halsted.

Walking upside down is harder. Time seems to stop as she moves. We all hold our breath: one slip and she'll fall headfirst to the floor.

But what really touches the audience is not Lijana's amazing acrobatics or her effortless tightrope walking. What's exciting is the chemistry she has with her partner and husband, Tony Hernandez, 24. For most of the show they've been playing a flirty lovers' game--she runs away, he pursues her. But one never doubts how this story will end. Lijana may play the coquette and Tony the sad, yearning clown: Columbine and Harlequin. But you feel in your gut that they're too right for each other not to be together.

Near the end of the show, she's suddenly interested and he's uncertain how to respond. She inspires him to cross the high wire. When he does, she's clearly touched and follows him by a different, more difficult route--via the series of hanging straps.

In many respects the story Lijana and Tony act out in the Flying Griffin Circus recapitulates their own history. They grew up together in the insular circus world of Sarasota, Florida, the former winter quarters of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus and the place many circus folk still call home. "I never knew a time when I didn't know Tony," Lijana says.

In circus circles, Lijana's family was royalty. The Wallendas have been performing for generations--Lijana can trace her roots to the 18th century, when the Wallendas were touring Europe in the small circuses of the time. "In Europe," she says, "the Wallendas did flying-trapeze and trained-seal acts." Karl Wallenda, Lijana's great-grandfather, ended that. In 1927 he moved to the United States from Germany and made a fresh start, re-creating the family enterprise as a high-wire act.

Legend has it the Flying Wallendas found their name, which seems more suitable to a trapeze act, by accident. Performing in a small town, they were blown off the wire by a strong wind. Luckily, the ground beneath was

muddy and soft and they all survived. A local journalist, amazed, wrote that it seemed those Wallendas could fly.

For decades they were the country's reigning high-wire act, renowned for their seven-person pyramid, which they started performing in 1945. But one day in Detroit in 1962, a relatively new member of the troupe--Dieter Wallenda, a recent immigrant from East Germany--shouted, "Ich kann nicht mehr halten!" ("I can't hold it any longer!"). Dropping his pole, he fell 36 feet to the ground.

Two managed to maintain their footing on the wire. Of the four who fell with Dieter, two actually hit the ground. The third, Karl Wallenda, was able to catch the wire, straddling it as he fell. Because the wire dug so deeply into his thigh, he was stuck there. And miraculously, Karl was able to catch Jana, the woman sitting at the top of the pyramid in a chair, as she fell past him. Struggling to remain on the wire, Karl and Jana could see the inert bodies of the other three who'd fallen. Two, including Dieter, would die of their injuries, and the third was permanently paralyzed from the waist down.

Ironically, the tragedy added luster to the Wallenda myth. Suddenly they were fearless but cursed--and consummate showpeople. Once the ambulances left, the two Wallendas left on the wire resumed the act, improvising a quick ending and giving the circus a graceful way to continue the show.

Tony Hernandez can trace his family's circus lineage back only one generation. "My mother, Lissette, was adopted by a German circus owner. They made her do circus stuff. They were very abusive. This was during World War II--they toured Germany during the war. She has stories about seeing bodies just lying in the road."

In 1958, Lissette's circus toured Cuba, where she met her husband-to-be, Tony's dad. "My father was in the circus school in Cuba," Tony says, "but he also played base-ball. When my family came to America in the early 60s, he played triple-A baseball for the Milwaukee Braves."

When it became clear Hernandez couldn't raise his family on his baseball player's salary, he organized them into a circus act and began touring; the Hernandez Troupe's specialty was the teeterboard. The children weren't exactly forced to participate, but the natural competition between siblings played a role: "When I saw my older brothers doing acrobatics," Tony says, "I wanted to do what they were doing." He started out on the teeterboard at age two.

By contrast, Lijana was not pushed to go into the circus. But from an early age she was fascinated by it. "There was a low wire in our backyard," she recalls, "and for as long as I can remember, we used to walk it." The wire made their backyard a popular place in the neighborhood. It also prepared Lijana to be an acrobat. When she was in her early teens, she started performing with her cousins in Shriner circuses and amusement parks.

When Tony got old enough, he joined his family's act and spent most of his adolescence performing around the country as part of Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth. When he wasn't on the road, he was in Sarasota. He remembers one night there especially fondly; he was 19 and Lijana was 17.

"A group of us were going to the Dollar Cinema," Tony says.

"Circus families don't have a lot of money," Lijana interrupts. "The Dollar Cinema is like a second-run house."

"And Lijana was part of the group. I had, like, a crush on her. And I managed to sit next to her."

"Imagine that," Lijana jokes.

"And she was cold."

"The air conditioner."

"I didn't have a jacket, so I offered her my shirt. And she laughed."

Tony's sister, Sylvia, had left the Hernandez Troupe in 1990. "Her body was hurting, and she said she didn't want to be one of those old circus people who hobble around," Tony says. Soon after that, Tony's brothers, tired of the rigors of the road, began to talk about dissolving the act. "All my brothers were in their 30s, and they were like, we don't want to do this all our lives. And I was like 17--I was like, wait a minute, I'm not even in my prime yet." When the troupe disbanded in 1993, Tony was devastated, a has-been at 17. He became a Sarasota beach bum.

"My brother opened up a bait shop, and I worked there. Otherwise I hung out on the beach, let my hair grow." Tony also started seeing Lijana, coming by her house, taking her to the movies every chance he got. "He and I and my best friend used to pal around a lot," says Lijana. Her parents were not pleased. "My family is very strict," she explains, "very Christian."

And Tony, in his own words, looked like trouble. His ears were pierced, his hair was long, he wore a black leather jacket. He was driving the bait shop's beat-up truck, which reeked of dead crawfish and minnows. "I didn't take drugs," Tony says, laughing. "But I looked like I did."

Lijana's parents told the two that they were not to see each other anymore. "They wanted him to back off," she says, "because he was coming over a lot, every day, and they were like, you are too young for this."

Tony, shook up, decided to try to win Lijana's father over. He cut his hair, quit his brother's bait shop, and got a job busing tables at the restaurant where one of Lijana's brothers worked as a manager. "I'd make a point of being noticed by him--'Look at me, I'm working hard here'--so he could report back to her family. I knew he would."

Eight months later, Tony was invited to talk with Lijana's father. "He wanted to know what my plans were. Lijana's father is a very large, large man." Lijana says, giggling, "He's six foot one and very intimidating. All the young boys who dated me were very intimidated by him. My father wanted to know what Tony's intentions were."

"It was extremely terrifying," Tony recalls. But somehow he convinced Lijana's family to give him a chance. "Her dad finally said, 'OK, you are OK.' And we started dating."

Soon after, in 1997, Sylvia invited Tony to join her in Evanston, teaching circus skills at the Actors Gymnasium, a school created by former theater critic Tony Adler and Lookingglass cofounder Larry DiStasi. The program teaches skills often omitted in more traditional acting schools: mime, dance, physical comedy, and circus arts. Tony jumped at the chance, and for a while he and Lijana maintained a long-distance relationship.

But every chance Lijana got, she would come to Chicago. Then, just when Lijana's father was beginning to warm to Tony, the two of them did something that really angered him. "One time when I was visiting, Tony asked me if I wanted to get married. And I said yes. Without asking my parents, without checking with my dad. He was furious."

Tony was back in the doghouse, but an opportunity came up for him to redeem himself: he was invited to join the Wallendas in a re-creation of their famed seven-person pyramid. After the accident in 1962, the trick had been eliminated, though it was done once in the mid-70s for the made-for-TV movie *The Great Wallendas*. But after Karl fell to his death in 1978, crossing on a wire between two buildings in Puerto Rico, talk of reviving the pyramid ended for two decades. Then, in 1998, a producer in Detroit offered the Wallendas "a lot of money" to revive the act for two weeks there. Lijana's uncle was in charge of putting it together.

"He called me," Tony recalls, "and said, 'I know you've been playing around with the high wire. I can tell you are a talented performer. We've got an offer to do the seven-man pyramid in Detroit. That is where we fell in 1962,

and no one has done it since."

Tony was excited. "Growing up, you know the story of the seven-man pyramid. But I'd never walked the high wire. Just the low wire in Lijana's family's backyard. But they offered me a lot of money, and he said it would be great press and a lot of exposure. I said I'd have to call them back.

"My family was like, we don't want you to do it. Sylvia hated the idea." She had worked hard to give Tony a settled life teaching, and now he was thinking about this crazy thing.

But Lijana had a different take on the idea. "I thought it was awesome. I was excited for him to be part of my family." She smiles. "I wanted him to do it." Then she adds, "I was kind of sad because I wasn't in [the pyramid] regularly. My dad, my mom, and my fiance were in it. But I was an alternate."

Tony trained furiously for the role, practicing with the Wallendas for a year that culminated in an intense four months. His future mother-in-law, Delilah, would try to push him off the wire while he struggled to maintain his footing. When the day arrived, "You could feel the tension in that tent the first time we stepped out," says Tony. "Wow. Everyone knew what had happened in 1962--they knew why this revival was so important." Over the run the Wallendas performed the pyra-mid without a hitch.

Tony and Lijana were married a year later, on December 6, 1998. Currently they divide their time between the Circus nightclub, where Tony is the entertainment director and Lijana tops the bill, and the Actors Gymnasium, where the Flying Griffin Circus reopens this weekend for a five-week run.

Art accompanying story in printed newspaper (not available in this archive): photos/Eugene Zakusilo.