

The Snow Clown by Jeff Raz

Chapter 1

The Frozen River (Excerpt)

“Take it, Clown Boy. You can fly this crate until we get to the Kuskokwim.” The bush pilot lets go of her steering wheel, or what would be a steering wheel if we were in a car. I grab mine, pulling back a little too hard, and the Cessna swoops up sharply. “Easy, Clown Boy. Just keep us here at 500 feet and follow the shoreline.”

The Bering Sea, frozen thick, is almost indistinguishable from the tundra. Only ripples in the ice, solid waves, give me a hint of where the shoreline will be in the spring, after breakup. It’s February, the dead of winter, the only time the Alaska Arts Council brings performers up from the lower forty-eight. It’s the time of year when everyone is grouchy, bored with sub-zero weather and frozen salmon dinners and ready for a couple of clowns to fly in with 21 bags full of juggling balls, costumes, stilts, face-paint, a unicycle and peacock feathers for balancing. Our job is to bring some circus light and warmth to the frozen tundra.

We’re just starting our third week, out of seven, flying bush charters and mail planes in and out of Bethel, a town of 4,000 and Southwest Alaska’s biggest city. This is my first trip to Alaska in winter and my first long tour ever. It’s also my best-paying gig to date and a résumé item that I hope gets me into Dell’Arte International, a big-time theater school.

I grip the handles, trying to keep the plane above the last line of frozen waves, peeking at the instruments every few seconds. Jenny, the pilot, leans back, folds her arms behind her head and closes her eyes. I grip a little tighter. Jenny looks like Xena: Warrior Princess and talks like Dolly Parton. She’s our regular pilot and has been teaching me how to fly a plane since we started this tour, but I thought she was just filling the time and maybe flirting a little. Now she’s napping and I’m in control of a Cessna going 150 miles an hour over a frozen wasteland.

The vibrations of the plane and the monochromatic view are starting to un-jangle my nerves. Tina, my clown partner, who always gets the back seat because my 230 pounds are needed up front to counterbalance the luggage, gestures to Jenny. I give a thumbs-up and tip the wings from side to side to show Tina I’m good to go. Without opening her eyes, Jenny smacks me on the top of the head. “Don’t get fancy, Clown Boy. I’ve already had my crash for the year.”

Tina yells over the roar of the motor, “What crash?” Jenny, arms still behind her head, tells us about her accident:

“Right before Christmas, middle of the tundra, nasty weather, didn’t have the tools to fix the Cessna. Pitched the tent off a wing, good sleeping bag, pretty comfy. I could’a radioed in, I guess, but I figured then I’d have to go down to Nashville for Christmas. Ever been to Nashville?”

She doesn’t wait for an answer.

“Don’t. Or at least don’t visit my family if you do. So, I have my tent and a gun and a little cook stove. Shot some ptarmigan, cooked ’em up nice; already had salmon strips, candy bars and stuff. And a good book. Ever read John McPhee, *Coming into the Country*? Good read, real good. One part, this guy stops a charging grizzly by saying ‘shoo.’ Just ‘shoo.’”

Tina, who is no fan of bears or bush planes, asks, “How long were you stranded?”

“Got back for New Year’s Eve. Big party in Bethel. Dry, of course. Didn’t want to miss that.” Jenny laughs so hard the plane jiggles. Alcohol is banned in villages on the Yukon/Kuskokwim Delta, which means that “Friday beer” is a favorite drink — “Make it Monday; drink it Friday.” Some pilots smuggle in the real stuff from Anchorage, Fairbanks or even Seattle.

Tina says, “Let’s not crash today, OK ? I’m not fond of ptarmigan — I’m a fried chicken kind of gal.” Jenny laughs again, “Hey, Clown Boy’s doin’ good,” but she takes the controls and I exhale.

Chapter 21

A Jew in the Heartland (Excerpt)

It is Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, and I am doing a show in Lincoln, at the Johnny Carson Theater at the University of Nebraska. This is my first trip to the Heartland and my first tour as a playwright and actor. It’s also a chance to bring my history, my family, my stories to a part of the country that seems even more remote than the Alaskan tundra.

My visit is starting with a full performance of my one-man show *Father-Land*. It’s a comedy about the Holocaust and my father’s suicide.

Light Cue 48: PHYSICAL CUE — Crossfade to Spotlight as the German Ringmaster stands on the chair

German Ringmaster
(accent like Joel Grey in Cabaret, top hat)

Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, *Meine Damen und Herren*, welcome to the center ring. You have seen the illusions, the sideshows, the affections, the passions, the pound of flesh nearest the heart.

Now I call your attention to this striking photograph. See the gravel yard in the foreground, the bunkhouses in the background, the shadow of the barbed wire on the wall. Look at that man, his tattered clothes hanging from his scarecrow frame. I need not insult your intelligence by saying “this man has suffered.” The photograph burns his face into all of our minds...like a tattoo.

The barbed wire — who strung it? Who laid the bricks to build the wall? Did this Dachau brick mason really believe that his bricks were innocent bricks? Imagine his children, and his grandchildren and the shadow that barbed wire has cast on their lives.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, please, take one step back. Look at the whole photograph. Imagine taking that picture — “Just keeping a record.” Imagine what it did to the picture taker. Imagine his children and his son’s shock staring at that skinny man, and the shadow on the wall and suddenly seeing himself in that face. And then, suddenly seeing himself in his father.

Sound Cue 49: Music fade-in — Bach Cello Suite No. 1, Gigue

German Ringmaster tips the chair forward, landing on the stage standing. He juggles three silver balls to Bach Cello Suite.

Light Cue 50: PHYSICAL CUE — End of juggling act, bow and black out

The lights come back up, I slip the juggling balls into my pockets and take another bow. The 30 or so students who are still in their seats clap dutifully before grabbing their backpacks and jetting out. The theater is empty before I get offstage.

The work lights come on, I walk back out to thank the crew and start to pack up my props.

Father-Land is the first play I've written. The idea started in the Dachau museum, standing in front of photographs of emaciated prisoners. Walking through the sterile reconstruction of a bunkhouse with the other tourists hadn't stirred much emotion, which made me nervous — was I numb to genocide? Even the pictures didn't move me until I started to wonder if my dad had taken any of them; he was a photographer in the U.S. infantry, a 6' 4" 16-year-old who joined up, according to my aunt, "to save our race." The museum docent didn't have a list of photographers and my dad wasn't alive to tell me. A question formed in my head — what if my father took pictures of starving Jews and what if those pictures stayed in his head and eventually drove him crazy? — and it became the seed of a play.