

The Electrical Wire

The snow was falling, and I could faintly hear *O Tannebaum* playing, like a ghost of the normal city noise. December, 1962. The buildings around me were grey and chunks were missing in parts, the shops signs weathered and windows boarded up. The only people I could see were the men in their dull pants and dull shirts in the Club over the road, and an old lady with a madly patterned sweater driving a Trabant almost directly below me. If she saw me, she glanced away quickly, pretending she hadn't noticed. In East Berlin, it's better not to know things.

Even if it meant leaving my fiancée Elisabeth, I knew I had to get back to doing what I loved. I hadn't told Elisabeth I was leaving. She would've flipped her wig and told someone. I had to get to the circus again. I missed the smell, the sound of the cheers, the feel of the wire. The colour and the laughter. I had been banned from performing because I was anti-communist, even though the circus was what kept me sane. I wrapped my arms even tighter around the pole, not daring to adjust my sweater in case I lost my grip. The wind rippled inside my clothing. Ice slid down my spine. I *had* to keep going.

Inch by inch, I shimmied up the pole. My circus trapeze skills were going to good use. I glared at the Berlin Wall, my enemy in an impossible battle. I heaved myself up and up the pole, already tiring. The rope looped around my waist rubbed my skin as I climbed. When I reached the top, my whole body shook. I clutched the pole desperately, the ground churning beneath me. I should be used to this, but I was up so high – I must've been 10 metres up, at the very least. This wasn't like the circus at all – there was no net to catch me if I fell, no crowd to gasp and holler. Snow drifted onto the tip of my nose.

"Horst Klein," I whispered to myself, staring at the ground many metres below me, "you are an idiot."

What *had* I been thinking? How could I possibly get across the most fortified, infamous wall in the world? I sighed. I really had no choice now. My life in East Berlin was behind me; I couldn't bear the thought to return to curfews or guards or mysterious disappearances. I gazed up and down the wall; if a guard saw me, I was done for. A man perched on top of a working electricity pole wasn't very disguisable, after all. I gulped. I had come here for a reason, so I shook my head clear of doubts – reasonable doubts – and thought only of the West. Over there, I could join the circus even if I was anti-communist. The thought was unusually amplified; perhaps the taste of adrenaline reminded me of my passions.

"Horst Klein," I whispered to myself, fixing my gaze on the wire in front of me, "you can do this."

I stared at the electrical wire. It connected East and West Berlin's power, and it had reminded me of a tightrope as I had walked past it, which had given me my idea. The only issue was if I touched the pole and the wire at the same time, I'd be reduced to ashes. My only option was to jump.

I steeled myself, closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I did plenty of jumps in the circus. This wasn't hard; in fact, it was *easy*. If I got it right. I wobbled up into a standing position, arms outstretched for balance, and leaned forward with a thundering heart. I stared down at the sea of grey, uniform buildings, and the endless ocean of Trabants, and leapt towards the wire.

My feet had only just left the pole when I grabbed onto the wire. My first hand missed, but my second caught on well, securing me in place. I wasn't dead, at least.

I was dangling helplessly in the air over No Man's Land. I swung one of my hands forwards, then the other. I was like a schoolgirl doing monkey bars – in some ways. I froze as the searchlights swooped closer and closer to me. I froze, staring at it. I had relied on the snow being thick enough to remain unseen by the searchlights, but it wasn't yet snowing hard.

I could be spotted.

I stayed as still as I possibly could, hoping to look like a piece of cloth dangling on the wire. The searchlights skimmed nearer and nearer, until...they swerved beneath me. Just. One thing I know about the searchlights; they go in a pattern. If they had swooped beneath me now, then they would always swoop beneath me. One threat ticked off. Weak with relief, I continued to swing myself forwards. I had to hang tough.

The next time I dared to look down, I realised I was hanging over the Death Strip. My whole body seemed to tighten and shudder at the thought, but I made sure to keep my grip steady. The Death Strip was a concrete road that military vehicles and soldiers patrolled, where they could quickly pass on information of an escapee – someone just like me. I stopped still and examined it, blood rushing. Border Guards strolled below me, and my eyes widened. Their guns were easily capable of reaching me, shooting me. They paced back and forth along the Death Strip, looking left and right but not looking up. I knew I had to keep moving, but for the moment, I decided to remain motionless. I must've been almost invisible here, amongst the swirling snow, but I did not feel invisible. Not in the slightest.

A military vehicle trundled past, but of course they couldn't look up from inside the car. They all seemed oblivious to my climbing, which was, of course, a very good thing. I paused for a moment to muster my courage, some of which had been lost during my journey so far. I knew the instructions the Border Guards had been given: to kill anyone, even a woman or child, who attempts to breach the border. That thought didn't muster my courage very much. At least in the West the fuzz were a lot more relaxed, or so I had been told.

I kept swinging myself forwards, fear pounding through my veins, filling me up as fast as the Spree. Nerves buzzed inside me. The wind howled and swung the wire back and forth, back and forth. I held on tightly, clenching my teeth, then I kept on swinging forwards, over the Death Strip. I seemed to swing for hours. I grew tired and weak. My arms ached, my fingers were numb with cold and I was shivering violently. I was colder than cold; I was freezing like a corpse in the ice. I was going to fall soon if I wasn't careful. Maybe I wasn't even half way to the West.

I halted my swinging for a moment and regretted it immediately. I was exhausted. So exhausted. My whole body hung limply from the wire, and my hands began to slip. My eyes drooped. Everything hurt, my arms hurt, my fingers, my sore eyelids...

I caught myself just in time. I just had to make it the West. There I could rest peacefully. I squinted ahead through the whirling snow. Was I approaching a building? What was that up there – a structure of some kind, a...?

The Berlin Wall.

For the first time all evening, the excitement and hope that had driven me up the pole and across the wire fought to the surface. The West was just over there! I blinked and looked across the Wall. I could see a pub from here, full of golden light and cheerful people. The men were wearing dull pants, but their shirts – their shirts were every colour of the rainbow! Collared, they were, and seemed a little stupid, but I recognised them from the smuggled American magazines. Hardly

anyone in the East wore American clothes, but it looked like they were abundant in the West. They also had Mop Tops! I couldn't believe it. In the East, it was dangerous to listen to the Beatles, let alone have any Beatles inspired haircuts! The cars, though, gave me the greatest shock. I had been seeing only Trabants for so long I think I had forgotten that other cars existed – the cars I could see right now were bright and glamorous, their windscreens covered in a layer of snow. I even saw a bunch of VW Campervans and a Jaguar E-Types, the cars that were so rare back in the East! I narrowed my eyes determinedly and hauled myself up onto the wire so my stomach lay on it. However excited I was, I couldn't fight the weakness beginning to spread through me. Instead, I just pulled myself along, bit by bit. I forgot how far up I was, despite the unbearable pain and exhaustion that was only continuing to grow. I stopped to gather my whereabouts – West or East? The snow swirled around me, almost a blizzard. I clung tightly on to the wire. I could see no further than six feet ahead, the rest was a milky haze of ice. I was so wiped out, so tired, and I knew I couldn't go on any further. It was draining all my energy just to stay awake. West or East, I had to get down *now*.

Slowly, fingers trembling with exhaustion, I pulled the rope from my waist. I looped it around the wire. My plan was to lower myself down, quickly but carefully. I hadn't considered one thing; the cold. As I fidgeted with the rope, I hadn't noticed my numb fingers loosen, my hands slip. The wire suddenly swooped so it was above me instead of beneath me, and I was falling, falling, falling. The rope plummeted down beside me. I didn't scream. I couldn't. I was too tired, I was too weak to care, I just *hoped* that I had fallen in the West...

CRACK! Pain exploded in both my arms. I had reached forward to break my fall, and it had worked. Sort of. I lay, cradled by the thick snow, gazing at the whirling buildings above me.

"Quick! He's over here!"

Dull pants. Colourful shirts. Young men with well combed hair. Golden light flooding across the snow from the pub.

I was in the West.

My parched lips opened slightly, and I exhaled in relief. The men came pouring out of the pub, shouting at each other, racing to get to me first.

"He just came across the Wall! He just came across the Wall!" they were yelling.

The quickest one fell onto his knees beside me. It was amusing, his eyebrows creased in concern but his eyes shining with amazement and excitement. He pulled off his bright green jumper and threw it on top of me. I must be blue, or grey, or a cold colour. I blinked lazily as the world kept spinning and spinning until it spun into darkness.

I squinted, dazed by the golden light as I opened my eyes. I was drained and shaking uncontrollably in the warmth. I was lying on the floor somewhere – the pub, I suppose. I stared up at the bottles above me and saw that the shelves were full, full of things other than *Blue Strangler* that I'd become so accustomed to – Western liquors. I smiled again and closed my eyes.

That night I dreamed of the circus.

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Horst Klein was a real trapeze artist who escaped across the Berlin Wall using an electrical wire so he could join the circus again. His escape was among the very few successful ones, coming out of it with two broken arms but otherwise happy and healthy.