

"Dazzling and delightful."

—Ellen Keith, author of *The Dutch Wife*

the
CIRCUS
TRAIN

A NOVEL

AMITA
PARIKH



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CIRCUS
TRAIN
A NOVEL

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PARIKH

Dedication

For Rishi, the first believer

This novel touches on the experience of living with polio in the 1930s to 1950s. Anyone wishing to learn more about the reality of individuals affected by polio and/or disabilities in this era should refer to the Author's Note at the end of this book.

Epigraph

The first appearance deceives many.

—PHAEDRUS

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Author's Note

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Prologue

May 1929—Thessaloniki, Greece

“Twenty-four, maybe forty-eight hours.” Dr. Komninos delivered his diagnosis as though he were reciting a weather report or the answer to a math problem. He tucked his stethoscope in his black leather medical bag and snapped it shut, the shiny front buckle casting a shard of light across the room.

“Is there anything I can do?” Theo asked, grief cloaking his face.

Dr. Komninos hesitated. He knew Theo lived in a world of hope, of make-believe, of what could be. But there was no denying the truth about his wife.

“I’m afraid it’s too late for Gia. A cold towel will make the pain more bearable. Your daughter, however . . .” the doctor trailed off. Over the years, he’d learned that the most difficult aspect of being a physician was giving people false expectations. Pragmatic to a fault, he always found it better to err on the side of caution.

“Yes?” Theo asked, wringing his hands.

“Once the fever subsides, I’ll have a better idea of what her limitations will be. To be honest, I wouldn’t have expected her to survive,” Dr. Komninos admitted, stacking rolls of gauze on the bedside table. “Saint Demetrious himself must be watching over her.”

“So she’ll live?”

Dr. Komninos sighed, thinking about the pile of paperwork waiting for him back at his office. “If her fever breaks tonight, as I expect it will, then yes, I see no reason why she won’t live. As for what kind of life she’ll have”—he picked up his medical bag, forcing himself to look Theo in the eye—“it’s too early to say. But take it from me. In these types of situations, expectation usually leads to disappointment.” He pushed open the bedroom door. “I’ll be by first thing tomorrow to check in,” he said, descending the white stuccoed staircase.

Theo stood at his window, watching the doctor walk east on

Kassandrou. He willed him to turn around, to come back, to have a eureka moment.

From the crib in the corner, he heard the muffled sounds of the baby, barely twenty-four hours old. Fear rose inside him as he rushed to check on her. But when he looked in, he saw that she was fast asleep, her tiny fingers curled up in tight little fists. Relieved, he sat down on the edge of his bed, where his wife, Gia, lay sleeping. Her face was pale despite the deep glow of the glaring late spring sun. Though the hottest season in Thessaloniki was yet to come, the room had an invisible layer of heat, and Theo noted that her breathing was laboured but rhythmic.

Around six o'clock in the evening, as Theo pressed a cool flannel against her forehead, Gia's eyes fluttered open. Theo's heart leapt.

"Gia! Can you hear me?"

"Where is she? Is she okay?" Her words came out in a whisper, her voice scratchy and dry.

Theo picked up the little girl, holding his breath as he lowered her slowly into her mother's arms. Her eyes were still glued shut, but her mouth opened wide, forming a perfect O as she nestled her warm head into the crook of her mother's collarbone.

"Helena," she whispered, beaming. "We will call her Helena. Lena for short."

Theo leaned over and kissed her forehead. "You might recover. Dr. Komninos—"

"I know what Dr. Komninos said." Gia smiled. She appreciated that Theo always tried to look on the bright side, but this time it wouldn't be enough.

Helena stirred in her arms, and Gia used what little strength she had left to lean forward and kiss her lightly on her forehead, her nose, her cheeks. Suddenly, all the things she wouldn't be able to see, all the moments in her daughter's life she would never live to witness, flooded her mind at a rapid, devastating clip. Was this the price she and Theo were to pay for their respective pasts? Something good had finally come of all their lies, and now she wouldn't be around to see Lena blossom.

Overcome with emotion, she gazed up at Theo. "I kept your secret for you. Now you must promise to keep mine for me."

Theo cradled mother and child in his arms as a response. He didn't want to let go.

Eight hours later, it was apparent that the end was near. Resisting the urge to climb into bed next to Gia, Theo remembered the promise he had made. He sat down at his desk and took out a clean sheet of notepaper. He

picked up his pen to write but paused. Eventually, he began what would become a lengthy explanation, covering two, then three pieces of paper. Toward the end, he realized he was droning on. So he stopped and crumpled up the pages, tossing them in the rubbish bin, which was half-full of tissues.

He looked at little Lena, the new light of his life. In less than five hours, Dr. Komninos would return to confirm Gia's death. His visit would be followed by the arrival of a nurse, who would show Theo how to test the milk temperature on the inside of his wrist, tell him what to do if Lena required a nappy change, show him how to massage her legs with a special kind of apricot oil, and demonstrate how to use chilled compresses to soothe a heat rash.

But Theo first had to close the door on the past. He took out another piece of paper and began writing. This time, he got straight to the point.

I cannot be with you. I must think of the girl. Please. Do not contact me again.

Part I

*My object is to mystify and entertain. I wouldn't deceive you for
the world.*

—HOWARD THURSTON

Chapter One

September 1938—London, England

How many do you think there are?”

“D’you think any of them are handsome?”

“Trust you, Suze, to ask that!”

Lena Papadopoulos stared at the two girls standing a few feet in front of her. They were gathered at the end of the hallway that led to the study belonging to Horace, the circus director, trying their best to gauge what was happening behind the closed doors.

Laura, an acrobat from Brighton, pulled her long blonde hair into a ponytail and crouched down on the plush blue carpet. She was what Horace called a circus chameleon, possessing the rare ability to slip into any number of acts—aerial silks, trapeze, contortion—on a moment’s notice.

“Maybe I can spot something from this angle.” She splayed herself flat on her stomach and rested her chin in the tiny gap where the carpet met the cool marbled tile that made up the study’s foyer. Lena thought she looked like an elegant upside-down starfish.

“Oh, do get up! This is pointless,” Suze moaned, a spray of springy red curls bouncing madly around her face. Suze had joined the circus in Dublin a year ago and was training to be a water ballerina. She jutted her hip out and glanced at Laura brushing lint from her leotard. “I dare you to go up there.”

“No, thanks.”

“Go on,” Suze cajoled.

“No.” Laura stretched her slender arms overhead and arched her ribcage forward.

Suze pouted and began kicking at the hallway baseboards, her bright green eyes roving around impishly before settling on Lena.

“Why, hello, Lena. Didn’t notice you there.”

Lena blushed. She hadn’t realized Suze even knew her name. “Hi,” she

squeaked, tentatively inching herself forward.

A wide smile spread across Suze's face. "How'd you like to play a game?" She pointed toward Horace's study. "If you go up there and see if there are any handsome boys, I'll give you a shilling."

"Suze," Laura warned.

"I'd like to play," Lena answered, grateful for the chance to be included.

A satisfied smile settled on Suze's face and she nodded toward the study. "Whenever you're ready."

Lena took a deep breath and began rolling herself forward. As she crossed over from the carpet onto the smooth marble, she felt her stomach turn somersaults and told herself firmly not to mess up. She had a chance to be a part of Suze's friend group. Everyone loved Suze. She was like a firefly, her magnetic temperament attracting the attention of boys and girls alike. As she drew closer to the double oak doors, Lena imagined what it would be like to sit next to her at meals and have those same children clamouring to speak with her.

Horace's study was housed in its own carriage, styled in a way that one would expect from the wealthy entertainment impresario. Two giant spotlights shone from either side of the doors, ensuring that whenever Horace entered or exited, he was always the centre of attention. A tiny row of hand-painted blue-and-gold tiles ran around the perimeter of the foyer. In the centre, a stunning Ming vase, crafted from the finest porcelain, sat on a stone pedestal. The marble floor had been imported from a quarry in Italy, and the space just outside the doors was inlaid with a custom mosaic emblem of Horace's initials.

Lena came to a halt outside the entrance, positioning herself so that she could peer directly into the keyhole, which was level with her line of sight.

"Well?" Suze whispered loudly.

Lena squinted, pushing aside one of the blue velvet tassels that hung from the golden brass door knockers above. She could make out two young girls, a boy who looked to be a bit older than her, a set of older boys who were probably teenagers, a few adults, some children, and a mother jiggling her baby in her arms.

"I think I see him. Tall, black hair? Holding juggling balls?"

"That's him!" Suze nodded vigorously. "What's he saying?"

Lena placed her ear against the keyhole and tried to listen. While she waited, she thought about the initiation dinner that evening, the marquee event that kicked off the World of Wonders tour. Every year, Horace threw a lavish feast in the grand dining hall before the tour commenced. To be

accepted into the World of Wonders was a prestigious thing, and Horace saw to it that no expense was spared. Last year's dinner had an *Alice in Wonderland* theme and featured dishes like mock turtle soup, glorious icebox cakes in every shape and size, and glasses of champagne with little tags that read "Drink Me." After the meal, everyone had spilled outside, engaging in games of croquet with wooden mallets designed to look like flamingos and running through a maze that had been decorated with bushes of white roses splattered with brilliant splashes of red. This year's theme was based on the classic Russian fairytale *The Firebird*, and Lena could hardly wait, remembering the fat stacks of fluffy blini she'd seen Mario preparing earlier in the kitchen.

"Suppose I do like him. What of it?"

Lena refocused on the task at hand, straining to catch the new recruits' words. But they had moved around in the study and she wasn't having any luck hearing, so she looked through the keyhole again and tried to lip-read.

"Remember that Jamie fellow? A fine mess you got yourself into!" Laura scolded. "All I'm saying is you don't want a repeat—"

Suddenly Lena drew back sharply. "Quick! They're coming!"

Suze and Laura took off like lightning, sprinting away from Lena toward a set of heavy blue velvet drapes farther down the hall. It was only after they'd reached the safety of the hanging fabric that Laura looked back, realizing what they'd done. Her face fell as she watched Lena furiously trying to manoeuvre her chair away from the door.

"Lena! The vase!" Laura jerked her head toward the pedestal.

Lena twisted her head, her eyes falling on the vase. It wouldn't hide her completely, but she didn't have any other options.

"Laura!" Suze whispered loudly from behind the lush folds. "Leave her!"

From her position in the foyer, exposed beyond belief, Lena caught Laura's eye, noting the pity on her face.

"I'm sorry," Laura mouthed, before diving behind the drapes with a speed and grace that Lena would never have.

Lena shook her head and tried to move, intent on reaching the vase. But her right wheel appeared to be stuck.

"Come on," she muttered, bending over to see what was wrong. "Why won't you move?" Then she noticed that there was a small groove between the tiles where her wheel had gotten stuck.

"Lena!" Laura's voice echoed down the hallway.

Lena looked up to see the golden knob of Horace's door twisting. Out of ideas and time, she sat up and pushed extra hard, moving herself

backward at a fast clip. *Good!* she said to herself. *If I can just get away from the doors,* she thought. *That's it. Almost there.* She stole a quick glance forward. Horace had opened the door but was exiting with his back toward her. She just needed a few more seconds.

“As I said, dinner will begin—”

Crash.

Horace came to an abrupt halt, and the frightened shouts of the new circus members filled the foyer. From her place a few feet away, Lena squeezed her eyes shut. But when she finally dared to look, her heart sank. Tiny bits of blue-and-white porcelain lay scattered all over the tiles.

“Lena!” Horace boomed. “What have you done?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Lena saw the tips of Suze’s red hair disappear behind the curtains.

“It was an accident,” she said, forcing herself to look at Horace.

He was down on his knees, picking at the hundreds of pieces in front of him. “Have you any idea how expensive this was?”

“I’m sorry,” Lena whispered, wishing she could sink into the floor. She knew this wasn’t the first impression he wanted to give the new performers. Indeed, the dozen or so people who’d been in Horace’s study were now staring at her uneasily.

“What’s wrong with her?” A young girl pointed at Lena.

From the floor, Horace stood up with much difficulty, brushing bits of porcelain dust from his bespoke midnight-blue suit jacket. “Everyone, I’d like you to meet Lena, the daughter of our renowned illusionist, Theo Papadopoulos.”

Lena cringed, wishing Horace would let her go. She knew what was coming, next and sure enough, the question landed right on target.

“How’d she get that way? Not on account of your circus, was it?” A young man eyed her suspiciously. From the set of blades that gleamed in a bag slung over his shoulder, Lena surmised he was a knife-thrower.

“Of course not,” Horace replied hastily. “We uphold the highest standards of safety at the Beddington and Sterling World of Wonders. In nearly a decade of operation, we have yet to lose a performer to a long-term injury. Sprains and the occasional break are to be expected in this business. But Lena,” he continued, pointing to her like she was an exhibit at a museum, “tragically, was born this way.”

“Oh my,” one of the women whispered.

“Still, we count ourselves lucky to have her on board,” Horace said, his voice full of false care.

Lena swallowed. She wasn’t afraid of Horace, but she’d always gotten

the feeling that he viewed her as a never-ending bill he had to pay in order to keep her father happy.

“Everyone, I apologize for the disruption. You’ll find your carriage assignments on your key tags. I invite all of you to start getting settled in. As for you”—he turned to Lena, his eyes gleaming with contempt—“I trust you can keep yourself out of harm’s way until the evening’s festivities have concluded?”

Lena nodded and rolled her chair away, not bothering to glance back at the staring band of performers.

“WHAT TIME DO YOU think it will end?” Lena asked. It was a few hours later, and her governess, Clara Smith, had just finished braiding her hair and was now tying a length of midnight-blue ribbon to the ends.

“Why d’you ask?”

Lena pointed to the book on her nightstand. “I’m at the part where Alice meets the Cheshire Cat!”

Clara chuckled. “Might I suggest you forget about reading for tonight and try to make a friend or two? There’s bound to be a few new children on board.”

Lena frowned. “They won’t like me.”

“They don’t *know* you. If you talk to them, you might be pleasantly surprised.”

Lena shook her head, wondering at what point adults forget what it was like to be young. “I won’t. They’ll only pretend to be nice in front of all the grown-ups. Then they’ll go back to ignoring me,” she explained, reaching back to feel the silky ribbon in her hair.

“That’s not true.”

“It is!” Lena insisted. “And grown-ups do the same. I know because Johannes pretends to like everybody, but as soon as they’re gone, he starts making faces.”

Clara burst out laughing and Lena smiled at her governess in the mirror. Clara wasn’t anything like the stuffy, uptight governesses Lena read about in her books. She’d grown up in a place in London called Fulham and had come into Lena’s life three years ago. Fed up with the subpar suitors who kept calling at her family home and not wishing to waste her years of education, Clara did what most women her age would never do: she joined the circus.

Lena loved Clara. She liked the smart tweedy skirt suits she wore and the smell of the Amami shampoo she washed her hair with every Friday. She liked the way she wrote her capital letters so neatly while completing

the crossword puzzles at breakfast on the weekends. She liked that Clara had a proper job, not a circus job, and the way she sometimes paired men's trousers with bright red lipstick, her brown hair falling in soft ringlets around her face. She liked that she was young enough to chum around with Lena, often playing checkers and snap with her in the evenings, but old enough to be firm when required.

"Lena?"

Lena's smile vanished. She turned around to see that her father, Theo Papadopoulos, had returned from his trip into town. Lena noticed how pink his cheeks and nose were from the cool autumn air as he tugged off a pair of grey gloves.

"Papa. You're back."

"I am indeed," he said, hanging up his coat and draping his scarf over the door hook. "Clara, would you mind if I spoke with my daughter alone?"

Clara stood up. "Not at all, sir. I'll use the time to press my dress."

Theo smiled at the governess as she left, then took a seat in front of his daughter. "So? How was your afternoon?"

"Fine. I've almost finished the book."

"Already? Goodness, I wouldn't be surprised if you were the fastest reader this side of the ocean. Anything else happen?"

Lena bit her lip, wondering if she could get away with lying about the vase. But her father knew everything. It seemed to be a special kind of magic power all parents possessed, the ability to know about every little mistake their children made without having to ask.

"I didn't mean for the vase to fall!" She threw her hands up in the air. "It was an accident!"

"But what were you doing outside Horace's study in the first place? Did I not leave you with enough activities?" Theo gestured to the table by her bedside, where a stack of books, colouring pages, and a compass set sat, untouched.

"I wanted to play with the other girls," Lena whispered, twisting her hands in her lap. "I'm sorry I broke it. Was it a lot of money?"

Theo leaned forward, his eyes crinkling affectionately. "It's not the money. I know you like being around those girls. But they are a few years older than you and always getting into trouble."

"They're my friends."

"Would your real friends let you take the blame for something that wasn't your fault?" Theo raised an eyebrow and Lena blushed. "Next time, please listen to me and stay here." He waved his arms around the bedroom.

Lena glanced sadly at the shelves full of books and trinkets her father had purchased. From a hand-painted dollhouse they'd found in Utrecht, to a set of brilliant watercolours from Bern, to all the latest books by Beatrix Potter, Lena had everything a child could have ever hoped for. So why did she feel so empty?

But not wishing to start an argument with her father—especially ahead of the dinner—she braced herself and smiled. “I promise.”

Theo beamed and retrieved a silver bag tied with strands of sparkly ribbon. “Good. Now, every girl deserves something special before the inaugural dinner.”

Lena perked up upon seeing the bag and grabbed at it, tugging off the ribbon and removing the gift.

“Oh, Papa.” It was a deep red velvet headband, laced with an intricate pattern woven from thin golden thread, with three fake rubies shimmering at the centre. She placed it on her head and twisted back and forth, admiring herself in the mirror. “It’s beautiful.”

“You look just like a Russian tsarina,” he said, bending down and planting a kiss on her forehead. “Now, you must help me decide what to wear.”

THE GRAND DINING HALL was the most magnificent carriage at the World of Wonders. Gargantuan chandeliers crafted from the finest Austrian crystal hung from the ceilings, making it look like diamonds were raining down on the tables. Blue paper flecked with gold leaf lined the walls, and the doors that faced the inner courtyard had been unlocked so that guests could go outside. From her table, Lena watched, enthralled, as performers entered clad in traditional Russian dress; the men wore white *rubhakas* embroidered with red, blue, and green thread and the women had colourful *sarafans* and glittering *kokoshniks* perched atop their heads. The tables had been rearranged in a rectangle around the perimeter of the hall, leaving the centre open for performances and speeches.

After the main courses had been served, it was tradition for Horace to give a speech. Tonight, he was dressed in a midnight-blue tuxedo with tails and suede stripes, and he wore a matching suede top hat. As he waddled to the podium, Lena heard snickering. She turned and saw Suze trying to stifle a laugh two tables over. Laura caught Lena watching them and gave her a sympathetic wave and smile. Lena smiled back sadly then refocused her attention on Horace. Her father was right, she thought. As much as she hated to admit it, she would never be like any of the children here. It was best not to get involved with them.

“If I could have everyone’s attention, please?” Horace boomed. “As is customary, this dinner marks the beginning of a journey that will take us through Europe. I have been running this show for ten years, and each time I think it can’t get any better, it inevitably does.” The audience whistled and howled, and Lena joined in with the clapping. “I shan’t bore you with the intricacies of every act, costume, and musical piece that I’ve planned, but I would like to give the newcomers a brief glimpse of what to expect.”

Theo had left Lena’s side at the start of Horace’s speech and was now standing in the centre of the room, flanked by two fire jugglers. On his cue, the jugglers lit the ends of their sticks and began tossing them high above. Behind them, the orchestra began to build, the strains of a traditional Russian folk song filling the carriage.

Theo held up a handful of red, yellow, and orange feathers for all to see. They were the kind easily found in a children’s crafting shop for pennies a pound. But in Theo’s hands, the mundane became magical. He scrunched them up into a tight ball in his fist. Then with the flick of a wrist, he tossed them into the air at the exact same time the fire jugglers threw their sticks up. The audience gasped as the flames touched the feathers, setting them alight. A loud crack reverberated through the hall, a blast of orange illuminated the room, and out of the centre, a magnificent firebird emerged.

The onlookers pointed as the firebird gathered speed, floating majestically through the air. Its wings were a rich ombré, starting from the deepest crimson at its breast and feathering out to canary yellow at the tips. A halo of orange encircled its head and a hint of gold glinted off the feathers whenever they caught the light.

Suddenly, the firebird swooped down and stopped in front of Theo, who was moving his right arm like a conductor. The bird looked to the ceiling, hovering as though trapped in a trance. Then it spread its wings and soared upward, weaving in and out of the chandeliers.

On the ground, Theo motioned to the fire jugglers to toss their sticks one last time. On the count of three, they threw them as high as they could, just as the orchestra reached the apex of its piece. Smoky ash filled the air and the bird looked like it was about to burst through the roof when Theo made one final sharp hand movement. There was a loud bang as a brilliant ball of red washed over the entirety of the carriage. And then the whole room went dark.

“The lights!” Horace yelled over the murmuring spectators, who were all trying to figure out what exactly had just transpired before their eyes. “Chadwick, the lights!” he scolded his assistant, who scurried to the back