

“It was total coincidence.”

**That was how Pasha Muravyev, 22,
and Anna Soltys-Morse, 25, met.**

This is not a love story

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In three months, come February, the two of them will travel to Montreal to audition at the École Nationale de Cirque (ENC), one of the premier higher-education circus arts school in North and South Americas.

This was not a path that either one of the hand-to-hand duo would have anticipated a few years ago. Pasha is currently in his final year of his undergraduate computer science program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Anna is a former outdoors educator with Kropa Expeditions. Pasha has arranged a light course load that can be completed off-campus for the spring semester, and Anna has quit her job to train full-time for the impending auditions.

This is where all of their stakes lie.



Both Pasha and Anna are not shy about admitting that their chances of getting accepted are slim.

“Our technical level is fine,” says Anna, “if we were younger.” The higher risk of injury and the smaller prospects of growth and reaching their peak at their older age are large factors for why the circus school might reject them.

“But I have the motivation now to make circus my career, whereas I would not necessary have had that motivation when I was younger or had done circus my whole life. I traveled a lot when I was younger, so I have a unique perspective that I could add to circus.”

For Pasha, it was his experience at his previous career that so strongly drives him today.



At the end of his sophomore year, he decided to take a year off from school to work full-time at a local start-up.

"I'm not sure why I did it, something about trying it out, so I kind of went and did that," he says. But he felt cut-off and isolated at his new job. "I felt like I didn't really have a place to socialize. Like, I could come back to Fentry [his living group while he was on campus] and, you know, feel happy again for a little bit, but most of my time was spent at the job...and I didn't find that I was that invested in it, or that it was the purpose of my life."



“The problem is, I realized, if I graduate and I go into comp sci, nothing will be different. I will still have this same problem, the problem of, like, ‘Ok, now I’m here, now I’m working, but, but what? What’s the point? What makes me happy at the end of the day?’”

“You’ve got to do the work, you do the work, you come home. Then what? I think my main thing at that point was juggling. Basically, I’d come home and juggle for three hours, four hours, and go to bed. I’d wake home, go to work, come home, juggle. I would look forward to juggling...that was my thing, because I had nothing else.”



Pasha did not find a niche at that company during his year off.

“I mean, maybe I should have started going to bars and tried to hang out with [his coworkers] I even tried online dating, as funny as it is, because I was like, I don’t really know how this real life thing works... So, I don’t know, there was this sort of emptiness.”



His only reprieve was continuing gymnastics. Pasha began doing gymnastics with MIT Gymnastics Club at the beginning of his sophomore year, when he quit varsity lightweight crew (because “I really didn’t want to be second boat”).

Gymnastics was just something that he had always been interested in doing, and he found it so much to his liking that he went to practice two hour each day, six days a week.

During his year off, Pasha was not allowed by the Institution to continue any MIT-affiliated activities, so he joined the Cambridge Community Gymnastics (CCG) program to find another community of gymnasts.



His hand-to-hand acrobatics career all started when he and a gymnast friend decided to try it out at practice for fun.

“We...majorly failed.”

But, it just so happened that Anna, who was also part of the CCG program and at practice that day, saw the two of them going at it.

“She came up and was like, ‘Yeah, if you wanna try this hand-to-hand thing for real...’”, recalls Pasha. “It was total coincidence.”



At the time, Anna was training on the trapeze at a local circus school called Esh Circus Arts, located in Somerville, MA, so that was the natural place for the new duo to turn to for training and coaching. Anna had become interested in doing partner acrobatics after taking a few classes at Esh, but was unable to find a partner. Now that she had, the two of them went to the coaches to get privately lessons and jump straight to highest levels of training.

“Initially, I didn’t have any specific intention of pursuing [hand-to-hand acrobatics]. I was just like, ‘Let’s see what this is – Oh, cool, I get to lift people in the air, that looks fun.’ But then I got sucked into and started spending more and more time doing hand-to-hand.”



During a regular week in the semester, Pasha and Anna train ten to fifteen hours together, in addition to the time they spend training individually. Pasha's course load and class schedule makes it difficult for them to train as much as they want, but, Anna comments, "He works very hard, and I'm lucky that he wants to do this as much as I do. A lot of duos fall apart because of different expectations about commitment."

"The early gains were easy...At the beginning, it's like, you came in for an hour, you learned something new, cool. At some point, it's like, you came in for an hour and nothing happened. You spent an hour doing warm-up drills, now get to work," says Pasha, laughing. "Now, you have to put in a lot of calibration, a lot of work, to get anywhere."



Since Anna is now in the full-time professional residency program at Esh, she is able to spend thirty-five to forty-five hours per week training. This is what Pasha's, and Anna's, lives will be like if they get accepted into ENC.

"There will be physical pain," acknowledges Pasha, on training full-time, "but I would be a lot more excited to do that. I think that in circus, there's just a slightly better mindset, like, oh yeah, let's try it, whatever. There's a little bit less posing—you are what you can do."



Anna was the one who planted the seed in Pasha's mind about going to circus school. She has always been very active, an important aspect of her life that she had been able to fulfill in her previous career of leading outdoor expeditions.

"But I didn't get to do much that was creative. It felt like something was missing."

When she started circus arts, she naturally gravitated towards it.

"I really like the creative process of making a performance. Also, circus arts is changing. There's a lot more contemporary dance and theater these days, and that's exciting."

Anna made the choice to make circus arts her profession a while ago. She had in fact already auditioned at ENC for the trapeze, but she was not accepted. After beginning hand-to-hand with Pasha, she decided to switch her primary apparatus.



“Pasha can be pretty stubborn, but that’s both good and bad,” says Anna, on training with Pasha. “We have little arguments about who has the right idea about how to do a trick, but that’s really because we don’t have high-level hand-to-hand coaching here. We don’t have someone who can just tell us, ‘This is how you do it.’”

“We’re outgrowing the level of coaching that’s available to us right now in Boston. We’re getting to the point where the value real, high-level coaching would be immense,” says Pasha. So, they are setting their sights on Montreal.



But even Montreal is not the end of the road for them. If they were to be accepted into the ENC and they complete the three year course, it will still not be a straight shot to a steady job in the circus.

Anna says, "There's all of the business things with [circus performers being a] contractor, and that will be the real test, when we start performing."



Pasha retells how a recent top graduate of the ENC was on the job market looking for a "regular" job.

"I was just reading this story about how the US spends the same amount on art as France spends on opera, alone," says Pasha. "In the Americas, it's a STEM and finance society. America does not give any fucks about art."



Additionally, Pasha lacks the support from his family to pursue his new vision.

“My grandfather’s point of view on the whole thing is, ‘It was funny [to do sports and gymnastics] when you were a kid, but now you’re an adult, you have to grow up and get over it.’ I mean, that’s his opinion, there’s some of the Russian opinion, too, but [that opinion and perspective] is pretty pervasive in the States. Sports are seen as a childish thing, and when you’re an adult, you have work and obligations. You don’t do childish things. I think its bullshit.”

“Neither of my grandparents have come to terms with my plans to go circus school – well, one of them I didn’t even tell. So I have a rough road ahead...But I’ve always been somewhat contrarian, though. If I’m pushed a certain way, I’m like, ‘Fuck you, I’ll go the opposite way.’”



“So, I have a rough road ahead... We’ll see how it goes. There’s a lot of question marks. It’s certainly easier to take the usual route – I graduate, and I get this job, and I’m set. Versus, I graduate and...but if we don’t get into graduate school, what about in that case? That’s the big question mark.”

In the case that they don’t get accepted to ENC, Pasha and Anna have already begun discussing their future plans. The best move for their careers would probably be to move up to Montreal and take up residency at a local training center as well as apply for working visas and find a job to support themselves.

“I have a little bit of money saved up, so I can maybe make it there for a year, but then what?” asks Pasha. “You need to have a definite plan, but that’s all up in the air right now. I have no frickin’ clue. Those are going to be hard questions... you have to figure out how to make circus work.” He sighs. “Welcome to my life.”

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