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### Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Circus Circus

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of  
Fine Arts

in

Writing

by

Keith Long McCleary

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Michael Davidson, Chair  
Ben Doller  
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K. Wayne Yang

2014

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2014

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page .....	iii
Table of contents .....	iv
Acknowledgments .....	v
Abstract .....	vi
Part One: Rooms.....	1
The Long Walk .....	1
The Hotel .....	25
The Lions .....	51
Part Two: A Story In A Bar .....	85
The Wars .....	85
Coney Island .....	97
Maureen .....	108
The Walk Home .....	123
Part Three: The Big Top .....	130
Friday .....	130
Saturday .....	161

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Professor Michael Davidson for his support as the chair of my committee. His attention and patience with several drafts of material, as well as his discussions and suggestions for a critical framework through which to approach this manuscript, has been incredibly helpful.

By extension, I would also like to acknowledge the rest of my committee: Cristina Rivera-Garza, Ben Doller, Elizabeth Losh and K. Wayne Yang. Their support in both my creative and professional development cannot be understated. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge Anna Joy Springer for looking over a significant portion of this manuscript at its rough draft stage.

I would also like to acknowledge the members of our second year “student-run workshop,” who read through and provided detailed feedback on the rockiest parts of my rough draft: Hanna Tawater, Rachel Lee Taylor, Kiik Araki-Kawaguchi, Sophia Echavarria, and Amanda Martin-Sandino. And lastly, I would like acknowledge my longtime collaborator Sophia Starmack, whose feedback on this latest draft will surely help my work as it continues to move forward.

The Long Walk, in part, is a reprint of the material under the title “The Man of Many Tattoos,” as it appears in Weave, Issue 8, January 2013, McCleary, Keith; Weave Magazine, 2013. The thesis author was the primary author of this paper.

The manuscript, in full is currently being prepared for submission for publication of the material. McCleary, Keith. The thesis author was the primary author of this material.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Circus Circus

by

Keith McCleary

Master of Fine Arts in Writing

University of California, San Diego, 2014

Professor Michael Davidson, Chair

Circus Circus is a novel that deals with trauma and mourning in the war veteran experience, discussed in tandem with the outsider subcultures of the carnival and the grotesque. It also explores the role of body modification as both an identity signifier and a source of ritual, and investigates popular preconceptions of how gender, race, perspective and narrative conventions are portrayed in the horror, mystery, and noir genres, set against the framework of the American pastoral. The manuscript's ultimate goal is to interrogate the tropes of these genres with regard to language, character, and linear narrative, while embracing the structures and traditions that define both the genres themselves, and the divisions that separate them from one another.

## PART ONE

### ROOMS

#### **THE LONG WALK.**

ONE.

The morning rose gray, with a fluttering of crows in some nearby dead trees. The air smelled like puke and looked like it. It was a miserable burg south of Pickinpaw and of course we got there first.

The rest of our caravan was trapped in mud on route 20 or 40 or whatever it was came up from the south. It was hard to remember that there were other roads other places. It seemed there was only one road and it led only here, to a mud-trafficked highway with crows in the trees and puke on the air.

Omar had risen first, along with Cook, and they groused at each other while stew steamed in a rusty kettle we found in the freak truck. It was lucky we had that,-and lucky we had Cook, who'd shacked up drunk with us the night before. But having Cook wasn't having food. Food was back with the rest of the trucks, and probably those beautiful French tumbling bitches who cooked good were even now breaking out the fixings for crêpes or French toast or Belgian waffles or some other foreign-named sweet-smelling thing.

We had beans. We'd found one can wedged in a camp kitchen the Simple Twins had dug out and been trying to open with their teeth, so Cook cracked the lid and it didn't



smell any worse than the breeze. He found a kettle too and started a fire, then lit a cigar to cover the stink from the beans and the air.

Omar the Strongman watched the highway and the hills. The breeze blew around him and he didn't flinch. Winds whipped the little hairs on his arms and beard and head.

I watched him from the stoop of the truck while I rolled a cigarette. I was happy to sit for a while with no stares. You'd think I like staring; I ain't a natural freak like some. I bought and paid for every tattoo I got on me, in all manner of ways. But I don't think on them times no more.

The tattoos were happy too. I felt them buzzing in the sun, watched them crawl on my arms and grin at me.

Etta sat with me. She was leftover too from the wrong truck the night before. She was one of the Russians, but she was still all right. She could do pretty flips onto and off of horses, and you might think that would have busted up her cootch but I saw no problem there. Everyone said the ringmaster was half-queer anyway, and just kept her on his arm like trained parakeet, whenever she wasn't jumping on or off some horse.

We didn't talk much, me and Etta, and whe we did it was like haiku – a few words only, so as not to clutter the space in my bunk when we lay side by side. I half-thought she loathed me, or loathed herself for being with me, or some other complicated thing I couldn't ask her. No one joined our caravan just for nothing – there was always something worth running from. So it was me, and Omar, and Etta, and Cook, and the Simple Twins under dark skies ready to tear apart like wet paper.

It was about then that I was watching Etta and the way she kept tucking her hair behind her ears that I saw a shadow come up over the farthest hill, and just got a terrible bad feeling, worse than watching storm clouds with no rainslicker.

Omar called out the obvious – that some man was coming, some thin man, some thin man with a hat, some thin man with a hat and a suitcase – over and over in his eastern European shout, each time adding one more detail like we had no eyes to see the thing ourselves. Cook grunted he wasn't feeding nobody extra, and Etta whispered something to me about that and made me laugh all right. We waited for Mr. Tall Suitcased Stringbones to walk the highway from there to here.

He had big lips that pulled back over big teeth when he smiled and he was in a violet suit with a matching top hat. I'd seen a lot of get ups almost like his, but never on someone walking down a road just past dawn, on his own with a suitcase. He was shining that big grin at us before we could even make out his face.

“Ahoy there!” he called. “Have you lost your friends?”

“What?” called Omar.

“I say,” the man said, his voice lowering as he got close, “Your truck looks lonely. You missing some people? I saw some other trucks like this when I was walking, before I got here.”

“Doubt that,” said Cook. “We got others but they're further'n you could have walked.”

“Is that so,” the man said, not asking but saying, and his smile held on his face and he looked at me. “Beautiful,” he said, looking at my skin.

Well sir, I hadn't gotten *that* before. I sat and smoked at him.

“I ain’t got no extra,” said Cook at the meager helping of beans in our pot, like a question had been asked. The stranger followed his finger.

“That’s fine,” said man said. “I seek the town yonder.” He smiled even bigger. “I’m sure I’ll see you again on my way out.”

And he kept walking, and we all watched him until he disappeared over the horizon.

Etta whispered to me, and I nodded. The morning mist was burning off in the grips of dirty sky. I felt for some reason that I was waiting for something. I leaned back on the stoop, rolled another cigarette, and lost track of time awhile.

## TWO.

The violet-suited man was just about the highlight of things for a few hours at least. The sky had gone from gray to orange, and now was blue. It hung over us in that muddy field next to a dead forest in the middle of nowhere.

Around 10 o’clock my brain started getting the creep-crawls. Circus protocol when trucks got split up was you waited for them that was last to catch up before moving on. So here we sat -- Omar and me kept outside with Cook, while Etta had long since wandered back into the truck. I smoked till I realized I’d run out of tobacco if I kept it up, and while I assumed Pickinpaw had a smoke shop I knew not to risk it in these thimblewhistle highway backwaters. I let my last stick burn down to my knuckles alone there on the stoop.

I started to think about that empty highway, with no trucks on it. I started to wonder if we were really south of Pickinpaw, or if we’d wandered off onto some sideroad

in last night's rain. I started to get that feeling I used to when I was on leave too long on some nameless island, waiting for the boats to pick us up again.

Omar kept pacing and staring off down the highway like I was, but bigger about it. I only gave the road sidelong glances, but Omar kept staring straight down that empty stretch like it was a fight to win, and when Cook made some comment that it wouldn't make the other trucks come no quicker, Omar smacked him to the ground. Cook got up and cursed a blue streak, about Omar owing him a replacement cigar for the one got smacked to pieces, but Omar was already past it, so Cook went off behind the truck to have a smoke and a nip in piece.

Even a cold ink heart like mine gets to feeling anxious in the company of anxiousness, and I had decided that it was Omar that was making me sweat. I decided to engage him in a game of Throwin' a Knife at a Tree. There was a sycamore sapling at the edge of our makeshift camp that had been giving me supple shakes of its leaves all morning, just begging to be a bullseye.

So. Knife. Tree. I went into the freak truck and hauled my Bowie out of my rucksack, then wandered back outside.

Omar stamped over to me by the third time the blade dug into the bark with a *whump*.

"What noise you makin'? What you doing?" he demanded.

"Just passin' time," I said, genial as anything. I handed him the knife by its hilt and he looked at it at like he had to decide whether to eat it or crush it or cave it in my head. The moment slid past us, and Omar threw that knife fit to split the sycamore in two.

We'd only been throwing a half hour, talking about traveling north or where the other trucks were or where was good eating in the places we'd lived, when another storm started rolling in. Cook saw it first, called out a curse while he brought in his supplies. I grabbed my Bowie and helped Omar shutter the windows on the freak truck, then doublechecked the latches.

We hauled ourselves inside and lit the lamps, then realized we hadn't seen the Simple Twins since after breakfast.

"Shit," I said, since I knew Omar and Cook wouldn't give a rat about bringing them back. I looked at Etta and she nodded. We headed back outside into the oncoming storm and dark.

### THREE.

The wind was loud and fast and sucked the words out of our mouths. It had come up quick all right and I couldn't but feel in the center of a twister, although I knew it wasn't so. Out to the horizon I could see the trees torn one way and another, so whatever it was we were getting the ass-end of, it was spread out across as many acres as I could count.

Etta and I couldn't decide whether to team up or split, but finally worked out heading into the woods back to back, covering the trees all the way round us without losing sight of each other. And we called for the Twins – me for Ben and her for Tom, just to keep it easy.

We found a raccoon with its brains dashed against the low spines of a pine tree, left there by storms or predators we couldn't know. The bracken densened as we ventured

farther from the truck, dead sticks cracking and giving way as we pushed through. I won't say I flashed to one hoary jungle or another from the wars of my youth, but it seemed every one of those past jungles were pushed together out here, made gray with the muted tones of the midwest, and emptied of the rotted greens and browns of those hot days gone.

Now this is something I don't talk about, but my skin itches some. I once had my palms read by a gypsy in some carny show when I first came back from my last tour, and she saw strangenesses in the patterns on my skin. Over a glass of vermouth she told me most of what she did was hoodoo, but occasional she got a glimpse of something bigger, and one a them times was looking at my skin.

Though my inks were nothing special – knives and hearts and roses and snakes and skulls – and though they'd been done at different times, in different cities, by different watery eyed drunks – she said they formed patterns she recognized, like map lines in my flesh. She said she wouldn't be surprised if they called to me in the soft hours, in the little darkneses that haunt a man.

I would not presume to say, even if I wore whispering skin, that larger forces found importance in our small storm amidst the universe's giant crushing wheels. All I say is sometimes my skin itched at me, like fingers at a dog's collar. And it itched me now, through downed trees and brush and bracken.

Etta reached behind her to lock one elbow with me, like we weren't rider and tattooed man, but twin acrobats. I could have turned and kissed her then. I spoke to her in my clumsy, rusty tongue and her to me in Russian verse. Winds ripped trees and bark apart, and we stood and huddled close till we could move again.

We found Simple Tom first, alone and crying, naked and clinging to a torn-up tree so hard Etta had to smack him. I grabbed him from behind and got him in a hold, so he walked where I walked him. Simple Ben was just nearby, inside a hollowed trunk. The two boys saw us, then each other, and wailed into each other's faces.

I grabbed Ben's naked hide and only walked a few more steps before I saw the light from the freak truck peering at us through the trees. A hundred steps, a hundred fifty, and we were out. Above us already the storm was dying.

But a heaviness and a blackness lingered, though it couldn't have been more than late lunchtime. The sky was the color of river mud, and no light shown.

We made it back to the truck and pushed the twins inside, smelling something resembling food that was probably just beans.

#### FOUR.

A single candle hung an amber light on the truck's insides. The lamps were snuffed and Cook and Omar played cards at a table away from the windows, with tensed shoulders and tensed hips. They looked up as we came in, hauling naked simpletons.

"Well you get 'em at least," said Cook. Departing thunder echoed. "That's good enough."

"Good enough nothin', you useless shit," I started, but instead I grabbed an old stained towel from the camp kitchen, and another from a wash basin underneath the bunks. Etta and me wrapped up Tom and Ben, and I scooped them two scoops of crusted beans from the bottom of Cook's pot.

“Them shits share one serving,” snarled Cook. “Last thing we need is a pair of fat retards.” He went to grab Tom’s bowl from him and Tom cried out.

I stood, snatched Tom’s bowl from Cook and threw Cook an elbow. My arm hit bone and came away sticky. Cook yelped, and then Omar was up and crossing the trailer to me. It only took him a step or two and he swung a windmill, so I knelt faster and punched him in the balls.

Omar gasped, hunched over. I took the moment to knee him in the face. A tooth crunched, then Omar slipped to the floor.

The truck got empty-quiet.

I went back to my seat. Ben and Tom were staring at me, eyes wide. I glared at them and shouted “Eat up!”

They started crying like they was in a choir, and dragged their food to the other end of the cabin.

Etta was looking at me, face blank.

“We should either head out an’ look for some a’the other trucks, or head to the next town,” I said, sucking in smoke. “Or I dunno. Somethin’.”

Cook dragged himself up. I could tell he wouldn’t be no trouble. Later, maybe.

“So what do you expect us to do out there, out in the cold and dark?” he asked, and spat something black on the floor. The open window cast him in a low flat glare on one side of his face, while the candle lent a glow to the other. He stared hate at me.

“I don’t suppose I know,” I said. “But it’s silly, all of us waitin’ here til we die. We could probably walk to town in an afternoon. That purple-suited fella had no trouble with it.”



“I did not like his face,” said Omar softly. One eye glinted in the dark.

I hadn’t liked it neither, nor nothing else in the purple man’s whole body, but I thought I might eat my way through my own skin if I sat in that shack a second longer.

“One of us should stay while the others go,” said Cook. “On lookout.”

“I will stay,” said Omar.

“Ayuh. We’ll stay,” said Cook, and sat back in his chair like he’d suddenly decided to grow into it.

“Fine,” I said, and looked at Etta. She was staring ice at me. She wiped her mouth and stood up from the table, and I followed her to the door.

“Keep a light burning,” I said, and walked out. Cook and Omar’s eyes burned holes in the back of my head.

Outside the trailer Etta stretched and then I did. As the door shut behind us I looked back on the Twins, eating their beans and already forgotten we’d been there. Etta watched them too. The sky was brighter, but clouds trailed over us like bad feelings.

I thought to turn then to Etta and apologize for the knockups inside the truck, but I didn’t have words for it. I thought to suggest we take the truck ourselves and drive to town, leave Cook and Omar to freeze their asses off in this sorry field. That I could find words for, so I turned to Etta, when we saw a figure on the highway behind us.

The figure was skewed and flattened and just wrong, twisted and limping as it walked. I pointed, and Etta cocked her head and then walked slowly toward it, slower, slower—pause—and then she was running and calling out, and I watched her, awestruck a moment, just caught up in her muscles and form.

When I came back from my last tour I lived in New York a time, working the carny show on Coney Island. There was a girl about ten years old who lived there. She had a tripod-camera and walked the boardwalk, taking photographs for five cents apiece. She came around my booth nights, and we'd walk together on the beach. I'd give her nickels and tell her to photograph what she chose. She snapped birds and sea and stones, garbage and the crowds, but she liked the dog races most. She'd come to my booth on Sunday evenings after Sunday afternoons, and show me how she froze the dogs in sand and dust and flight.

Her face as she showed me each photograph was beautiful. I closed my eyes and listened to her laugh and saw my daughter.

And now, as Etta sprinted down that muddy road, it was the racing hounds I thought of, all supple limbs and taut skin.

But there was nothing beautiful in it when that thing in the road began screaming.

FIVE.

Her limbs were tied in nasty, corded ropes that chewed her skin and she'd been folded over, walking with her wrists by her ankles. It was a posture might tear regular folk apart.

But she was Mei Shen, the Rubber Woman. Getting folded, she could take.

Still she cried as we untied her, she'd been in knots so long. I had to go in on the ropes with my Bowie, scaring her and me both. Her because that knife was big, and me because I knew what it could do. I breathed slow and soft as the blade worked the twine.

After she was loose she lay unstretched, her body pulsing, opening and closing like a moth being banded, while Etta sat with her and brushed her hair. All the noise brought out Cook and Omar, and even the bean-fed Simple Twins crossed that flat dead wet grass to see what new horror had been drug up. Cook offered his flask, which Mei Shen refused; Etta offered water, which she took.

“We can carry you into the truck,” I said.

“One minute, one minute,” Mei Shen said. “Let me lie.”

But she started to talk, in staggered breaths and broken English.

Mei Shen had woken up with pigs and rain.

She'd come to and knew horrendous hurt, all her body twisted and on fire, and then she heard the boars. Opening her eyes showed her she was ass-up in a drainage ditch off a side road. She couldn't make sense of her own body, but Mei Shen saw a sounder of boars huddled nearby, digging for mushrooms under the cover of some firs. The moment held as her limbs found themselves.

She watched as one hog looked up at sky and squawked. The others followed suit, before they all ran into the forest and the sky opened.

The downpour where we'd lost the Twins had almost drowned Mei Shen. The ditch started filling fast and she hoisted herself up before rainwater got in her lungs. As soon as she saw herself in knots, she knew she'd been hog-tied. It was then that she smelled oil.. Working every contortionist trick, she crawled up the embankment slick with mud and dragged herself to the road.

Mei Shen had traveled with the acrobats and horse trainers—several trucks with a lot of folks and animals besides. Now it was all a plume of smoke twisting into the sky,

the yellow caravans licked clean of paint as they bubbled and melted with fire. She saw a pair of white horses tied at the snout, running into far trees to escape the downpour. Each fought for control from the other, yanking and pulling and trotting sideways as they went.

The field was turning into a bowl of wet clay, so thick with rain that the air looked black, sucking up light in raindrops, the sound of it muffled by the blood in Mei Shen's ears. The horses only saw her a moment, then pulled at each other again. She took one lurching step toward them and they fell back into the trees.

Then she saw something near her, ashen and smoking, black and red, a lump of charcoal in the grass. It had hands and teeth, and little fingers.

The fingers stretched toward her.

And she started screaming then, falling and walking and falling through the storm, a blur of mud and fear and sky.

Etta sat over her now, shushing and calming, Cook whispering "shit" and Omar pacing, glaring at me sometimes like hitting me could make it right.

Inside me things turned over. I was on my first tour, and I was young. I was talking to this old Crow Indian named Jack, who'd been working infantry some long time. It was our late night watch, and the trees around us crawled with dead chinks whose faces were tore up with the scattershot I'd shot through them. I was drunk then always, and told Jack what I was seeing. He nodded, and told me he saw them too.

The quiet stretched and I asked Jack how a fellow dealt with it, all them years a soldier.

And Jack looked at me blank and just said, "Don't." And he went to sleep, leaving me up alone in the dark. I knew then we were different kinds of men. And I felt space

open in my head and my heart. My heart was a house, and I lived by the entrance, keeping all my thoughts and secrets there like they were worth something, like I had anything of value to hold to. But horror held a key. It opened rooms in me. Back rooms, empty and covered with the dust of time, just waiting to store my guilt and fear.

And I found peace then, while Jack slept and I kept watch for my platoon in the blue marshes far from home. *There are rooms in me*, I thought then.

I know now the price you pay for thinking you can store away them badnesses. I know how hard they are to clear out, once they're in. I know what you become if your soul's a house, and each room in you is built a special hell.

I looked down at Mei Shen's broken body, smelling blood and knowing someone would need to figure out what came next. I felt a key open a door into a room for peeling fear.

SIX.

"Let's take the truck and get the hell outta here," I said. "We'll head back where Mei woke up, then we can go up to Pickinpaw, see if we can find the rest of the show. Better than sittin' here to rot."

"Someone else might be lookin' for us too," said Cook. "We'll be hard to find if we're movin around."

The group glared at him. "We might just leave a note on a tree or somesuch," he said quickly, stepping back.

We propped a bright piece of broken against a tree with words smeared across it in grease. Omar laid Mei on a cot in the back of the truck, and made fists at the Simple

Twins when they came near. Etta slid in the cab with the ring of keys and started the rig. I got into the passenger side and tried not to eat my own hands.

The truck woke up with a wet, grinding retch and Etta aimed south, where clouds crawled from the corners of the sky. The mood inside the cabin was the quiet of waiting. It was a quiet that wondered if we'd all died, and if this was the land of the dead.

What we saw first was canopies hanging from the trees. Tent canopies, yellow and red with circles and other shapes, crosshatched now with tears and dirt, draped across the skeleton branches of elms and sycamores blowed clean of leaves in the overlapping storms.

Canopies hung along the tree line between the roads and the fields like drying skins. There were the tents for the sideshows, for the midway, for the freakshow I knew well. The ropes that bound them dripped down through the tree branches and dragged like veins across the grass. Some stretched across the road, and the truck thumped each one that we ran over.

Etta drove slow, and above us the clouds thinned and turned blue. Everywhere the air was still, the rumble of the truck motor a profanity over the endless quiet. Cook peeked through the window with suspicion, like this weren't just a road and cornfields but a dangerous, unholy place.

Etta called out that up ahead the road turned to mud, too thick for the truck to travel.

"Can't walk," said Omar, pointing to Mei Shen.

"I walk," said Mei Shen. She got halfway off the cot then sucked in her breath real fast, and Omar made her stop.

I opened the truck door and got out, then took a few paces down the road before coming back.

“I think her trailer is up ahead,” I said to Etta. “Just a pile of a black mess now. Prolly the fire got put out by the storm. But I think it’s it. I think we’re close.”

There was a thick grove of trees near the roadside and Etta pulled off to park underneath them. No one wanted to sit in the truck anymore, but we also didn't want to know what was out there. Mei insisted no matter what she wasn't getting left alone, but no one else wanted to hang back with her. After some argument between all of us in four or five different languages, Etta found a twist of bandages somewhere, and we wrapped the rope burns on Mei’s wrists and ankles in wet cloth. Cook fashioned together a giant sling from a bedsheet, and Omar hung the sling around one shoulder.

We all went outside and while Omar stood rock-still, Mei climbed up him and sat herself in the sling with just a few quick steps, like a spider scaling leaves. It was the kind of thing you wanna see twice to make it true, and I think only me and maybe Cook, as the no-talent carnies, could really see the magic in it.

Etta nodded in tight approval. Simple Tom picked a snot from Simple Ben’s nose, and ate it.

SEVEN.

It was one of the storage trucks that burned. All the trucks were mostly kindling on top of a wheelbed, so it had gone up quick. The ashes sat now in a cone shape —what was left when the fire went out had been so shapeless it melted in on itself from all sides.

The surrounding grass was too long and green and wet to burn proper, so beyond the truck the flames hadn't spread. It wasn't clear what had started the fire at all.

Lightning seemed the only possibility that made things less strange.

Other broken trucks and equipment littered the roadsides at intervals that seemed arranged. There were torn up tents and rigging, and sideshow stand-ups smashed to pieces like the magic in them had bled into the air.

Our group spread out to cover the grounds as if we were marking graves. No one spoke. As I walked, I thought I saw movement under every broken board. Little burned arms pulled themselves up from the grass each time the wind blew through it.

“Blow up,” Omar said, and gestured with his hands. I nodded. Mei hung off him with her knees locked in the sling. She reached to the crowd to pick up the odd bit of flotsam and inspect it, before dropping it again as Omar walked through the debris.

“No midget truck,” Cook called out. We all looked at him. He stood in a pile of refuse.

“This is just ballerina shit,” he said. “Tumbler shit. Midgets didn't travel with her.” He pointed at Mei Shen. “She said she saw some burned-up midget. How'd she see some dead midget out here?” His hands went to his hips. “She lost her mind.”

“What he say?” Omar asked.

“He wrong. Here it was,” Mei called out. “But not now.”

We all walked over to where she was pointing, at a spot of ground no different from any other. But I saw that the grass was matted, and stained with black and rust.

We looked at Mei, questioning. She held up her fingers.

“The hand,” she said. “It was here. Now gone.”



I pictured the small burned digits in my mind and looked at Etta and she looked at me, the same thought on her face. I knew I should say something and opened my mouth to say it, wondering what it would be.

Ahead of us came a pair of shouts. Tom and Ben were flapping their arms as they ran at something giant and dark. It was so big I couldn't get a handle on it. We made our way forward, while in the distance the sky murmured threats.

Cook got to them first, and smacked Ben in the head so he cried. Then Cook looked down at whatever they were looking at, rubbing his head.

"It's a big hole," he called out.

It was a big hole. What we'd seen from far off was a rim of upturned dirt that formed a soil wall. At its highest point the wall was perhaps four feet, and then tapered off into a trench about fifty yards long and thirty feet across. It started away from the road to the west, then dug in about thirty feet deep before stopping abruptly in the center of the road. It was like the earth was a wet sandbox and a child bigger than worlds had slid a finger into it, then pulled it back out.

After running around in the hole for a minute getting covered in filth, Tom wanted out. But the sides of the pit were loose dirt, with no handholds. He threw himself against the walls, screaming, while Ben stared at him. I sighed, then lay down on my stomach on the edge of the hole and reached a hand out. Tom ignored it. I sighed again.

Etta started talking soft to Tom, guiding him with her voice and her hand as she began to walk off the road and west into the field. Tom followed her, turning it into a game. He laughed and ran backward each time Etta reached down to him. I shook my head.

As a group we walked from the road into the field, a crop of knee-high wheatgrass, blowing in patterned swirls of gold and amber that was oblivious to the gloom of the leafless trees and smouldering fires in the road behind us.

Etta continued to call softly to Tom. It occurred to me she hadn't said thing one about finding her horses, despite the fact that they had to be the same pair Mei saw disappear in the storm.

I realized then that Etta was being brave. She was perhaps the only one of us who was. Cook didn't want to be left alone, Omar couldn't put a thought together, Mei Shen was probably half in shock. And then Ben and Tom.

And then me.

As she stood silhouetted against the clouds, I thought of going to Etta and taking her hand and telling her all the feelings I had. The wind blew her hair around her face. I imagined looking in her eyes and not seeing what I wanted to see there.

I'd had these thoughts many times. I knew what to do to quiet them, and dug in my pocket for a cigarette.

Up the hill Cook gave a shout and lifted something from the grass. It a big painted flat with a lion's face on it, split halfway in two.

"Shit, where's the rest of it?" he called. "You think they made it? You don't think there's lions out here, do you? Could animals have made it through that storm?"

"Horses," Mei Shen said. "Horses survive."

"Not if there's lions," Omar said. He laughed. I winced and looked at Etta.

But if Etta heard Omar she wouldn't say. She was watching as Tom finally made his way out of the hole and ran into Ben's arms, where they giggled and laughed at each other. I walked over to her, stepping fast with the words coming up my throat.

And then Omar was shouting, and he pointed uphill. We all followed his finger to a giant farmhouse at the hilltop, with people milled around outside.

Omar and Cook yelled to one another, and Etta smiled too at seeing it. She looked to me as she led Ben and Tom toward us, trying to read my eyes.

But I was looking back the way we came, seeing something in the trees that shouldn't have been there. It was another of our trucks, half-smashed but graced with a giant painted lion's face, skidded into the brushline. The open end of it faced towards us.

And in the dark of the truck was four sets of yellow eyes, looking back at me.

EIGHT.

The lions seemed in no immediate need to move. They saw us seeing them -- and they were between us and the way we came. I turned to Etta and pointed out their truck in the grove of trees. She squinted and her eyes got wide. Cook looked too and said "shit," which was his answer to everything that morning but it wasn't like I disagreed.

Omar was shouting about the house up the hill and why we needed to get to it, even though no one argued the point. "Omar!" I called out, and pointed down the hill to the truck in the trees. Tom and Ben were finally half-calm and didn't seem to understand most conversation, but I didn't wanna take a chance "lions" was part of their vocabulary.

Omar didn't get it, but Mei did and spoke low to him.

“Lions!” bellowed Omar. Etta grabbed Ben and Tom each by the hand and sung them some Russian nursery rhyme outta nowhere. “So we go to house!” Omar said. “Not go back!”

“We’re fine goin’ to the house,” I said. “Let’s just move slow, all right? And hold off on the ‘L’ word.”

“Fine, fine,” he said, and started walking up the hill.

Etta walked with Ben and Tom while me and Cook took the rear, craning our necks back every second like ninnies. I was feeling silly about it after a few minutes, when Cook stumbled over a rock and fell.

He cursed into the earth, but his rear stuck straight up and his drawers hung halfway off and when he went down he let loose a pretty considerable fart. I went to help him, but he rolled over like a pillbug to get up and refused my hand. I insisted I wasn’t laughing at him.

The lion truck was just a dark blot in the trees now. I had no way of knowing if those lions were there, or in the tall brown grasses surrounding us.

“All right, man,” I said, getting Cook stood. “Let’s keep up the pace.”

“Fuck you!” Cook spat. “They ain’t even movin’. Look, you can see ‘em right now.”

Looking down the hill one more time I saw one of the biggest male lions perched atop the busted truck, stretched out with his paws dangling. He yawned.

Our lion tamer was out of northern California and called himself Claude VanDare. He was third generation circus, and talked the history of the trade like it made him something to have the facts straight. But some of the Europeans and Chinks went back

seven generations, ten, a thousand years. We put up with him because lions make a circus, and because he was a little sad.

The combination of drink, boredom, loneliness and the heat indoors put me outside my truck one summer night and I was fallen upon by Claude, who came along carrying a cub for company. An hour later, I was still learning more about lions than I thought I'd ever need.

“You know the big ones ain’t the ones you need to worry on, you know that,” he said. “It’s the females you gotta watch. First thing you learn. Males are big but they're dumb and mostly mane. The females – shit – they’re ornery and too damn smart. We just keep ‘em to make sure the males are well-fucked. Were we all so lucky, right?”

It was less than a year later one of the females took half Claude's arm. That had been two weeks ago. Now the lions were traveling with us to meet up with another trainer who was going to take them on, but they'd been without a tamer that short time. Which made them about as sure of their place in that wheat field as we were.

But in those grasses we were easy to spot. Couldn't say that much for the lions.

NINE.

The sky had finally begun to clear, and a warm, hesitant sun snuck over us. The clouds patterned light across the meadows, in stark contrast to seven carnies running like hell.

It happened like this:

After curtailing an intense debate on lions, navigation and every point between, we got the group continuing up to the house at the top of the hill. I hadn’t realized how

big it was, but now I saw at least four stories, all misshapen. There was a little figure running around a rooftop balcony.

As I watched, it brought something to bear and a great black shot rang out. and we all ducked and yelled.

One day when I was a boy hunting with my pap, I got seperated from him out in the woods. After ten minutes alone with shots firing around me, he came crashing through the brush, scooped me up and ran screaming “Fire! Fire!” till we got to the treeline. When he got me home he licked me so good it hurt to shit after.

I stood up now in that field and about to yell “Fire” when I saw the figure atop the house was waving at us, and Cook hit my back, saying “run, run, they’s comin’, run” and I realized “they” was lions and the shot was for them and that got me running too, jumping over the furrows of the field while behind us I heard them galloping through the tall grasses to take us down.

And I was struck with the strangest feeling; I felt that itch – the itch from my skin, tugging at me, telling me where I belonged.

It pulled me backward.

It was this shit-stupid moment, running after pinheads in a wheatfield chased by lions, when I should have felt alive, when my instincts should have reminded me that I was, as are we all, a breathing fucking shitting machine of God. But that’s not what I thought.

I thought of slowing my pace, of tripping, of dipping beneath the grainy surf. I thought to turn around and let the lions take me.

I thought of Etta.

I looked up and saw her ahead of me, her muscles like a thing on fire. Her head was rimmed in light.

Etta would run. Etta would hang on. She was better people.

She ran. I followed after.

Pound pound pound pound and then out, hitting grass as another shot rang out, and I looked up and it was a crazy old coot standin on top of this crazy ramshackle house, firing into nothing. I looked back into the wheatfield, and saw the tails of two damn lions runnin back off the way we came.

Cook was clapping me on the back and laughing that we were alive and waving to the man on top of the house. And an old woman waved us in, saying they'd been watching the lions all morning.

There are times I think the heaviness in me has won. That I am a ghost person, plunging forward for the sake of nothing, stuck in the neutrality of breathing. Each time I get my flesh carved into, I hope they might take a part of me with them, one less piece that won't hurt no more. I wondered if God had spared us as part of sparing me. Alive, I couldn't escape my skin. I couldn't forgive myself by being dead.

I think Etta kissed me then. I think it mattered.

The Long Walk, in part, is a reprint of the material under the title "The Man of Many Tattoos," as it appears in Weave, Issue 8, January 2013, McCleary, Keith; Weave Magazine, 2013. The thesis author was the primary author of this paper.

## **THE HOTEL.**

TEN.

I have thought a few times since of one horrible jungle year back when I first got called up. Our platoon was fragmented and moving south of the enemy camp, having missed our rendezvous by an entire day. It was my first time in charge but already I was just meat and liquor wrapped in skin. Without an obvious strategy, I'd decided just to march in circles until the fire fight started, but that hadn't happened. We heard nothing but our own stupid boots crunching the undergrowth all that time, until a bad turn walked us right into the middle of the enemy camp.

The platoons coming in from north and east were already there, every man drunk and dancing with the locals and having an excellent time. An officer ran up and gave me a big hug in front of my men and shouted how glad he was we were alive; that the mission was a complete botch of bad intel and the entire regiment was just waiting for new orders. He apologized all over and asked if we were late because we'd run into our own problems in the jungle, since every other bit of info on the area had been so assed up.

And we all looked at each other, and I suppose my boys were just as interested in not looking like fools as I was. We just nodded and said we'd gotten into some bad shit out there, yessir, bad shit. And the officer clapped me on the back and threw us a barrel of warm moonshine, and that was that.

I remember another year, another war, another jungle. I was older, and my boys were making a sneak on one of our own foxholes, which was low on food and hadn't seen reinforcement in weeks. That was all we knew.



We came up on piles of dead men, three bodies deep all ways around. The air smelled thick of smoke and gasoline, and was still with waiting. We called out to the squadron, then made our way into the trench.

It was like crawlin into a crypt full of living folk. The men 's eyes were sunken toms, half-moons that glowed in the dark. They were rats drowning in blood and I couldn't look at them. I was already dying inside by then —my wife had left me, taking a daughter I wouldn't meet — and I felt like I cursed those boys somehow, just because they were in my charge.

The house we came to, running from the lions, reminded me of pieces of both those times — the revelry of AWOL soldiers, and the sad eyes of all them boys.

Someone was touching me, leading me but I was just arms and legs moving. A windowed back door was opened and we were ushered in, greeted by a thousand familiar eyes turned wary and dark.

Whatever it had been before, the back room of the house was now a way station for carnies. Wrecked trucks separated by the storm had not been our unique experience, nor had whatever strange abuse Mei Shen had suffered. The wood-paneled room was full of the weak and infirm. Teamsters, jugglers, the bearded lady, and acrobats all stared at me like we was down in the foxhole and I had to get them out.

Etta and Cook and rushed forward; warm hands encircled Simple Tom and Ben. There was comforting and discussion in at least three languages while I stood aside. I couldn't see the walls or the floor of the room I was in.

Then I was getting shook with a hand like an old claw.

I turned, and an old woman said, "Come and let me wash you up, old son."

Leathered fingers led me from the back foyer through a swinging door into a small country kitchen. It was yellow and white in here and a low breeze blew in from a small window. I was sat on a stool and the old woman stood next to me, no more than four feet tall. I was just about even with her sitting down. She wore an apron and her white hair was combed back over her head. Her eyes were deep-set and half-closed by skin. She looked at me a long while, reading into my eyes. Then she turned to the sink to rinse a washcloth.

“That’s a nasty bump,” she said. “How’d you get that one then?”

She wrung out the cloth and pressed it to my temple and lord it stung, my whole face waking up at once.. I sucked in air as the rag came away with spots of blood on it.

“I didn't even know I had a scrape,” I said.

“Ayuh,” she said, not unkind but not warm either. “We can get you washed off anyway.” She took a look down my arm and across my chest at all the ink dug in there.

“I’m supposin’ you’re circus folk too, then?” she asked, reading my eyes again.

“Either that or it’s a hell of a birthmark,” I said. She sniffed.

“Well I’m about out of beds,” she said. “Less folk start shackin’ up triple, which they may have to. I ain’t figgered if the men should stay with the wimmin, but we may have to.”

I realized that we were only in an alcove, while straight ahead it opened up to real line kitchen with two stoves, a sizeable walk-in pantry, and an icebox. With enough food you could cook for a regiment, or a mess of out-of-towners, or a gaggle of downtrodden carnies.

“This a hotel?” I said.

“Of a kind. Me n’ husband,” the woman replied, dotting my forehead with her cloth. “An’ you’re all damn lucky,” she said. “Storm’s so bad the last few days our reservations all cancelled. Then you lot starts showin’ up. Though I didn’t plan on triple a room and no one’s ante’d up to pay for anythin’. Lucky you I have a sweet heart.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I said, doubting the hell out of it. “But if he ain’t already here, our ringmaster’ll show up looking for his show. He’ll have money.”

“The reckonings of a painted man, that I’ll take,” she said. “Eh, you’re a good boy. We need to find you a clean shirt. Be gone with ye.” I nodded thanks, and the old woman walked back out into the back room to look for other stray dogs needed bathing.

As the door swung open I saw the hordes still hoarded on the other side. I wondered if each band of carnies had found themselves that morning spread across the county in various states of distress, every one different and bad and strange.

The kitchen had another door at the opposite end, and I decided to head that way for some quiet, and found myself in the front part of the house.

W hat struck me queer about the interior was that there weren’t much to it. The back foyer had been dark and oak paneled, but empty, and the front was the same. There was at least furniture here, in a big dark room that seemed to take up the entire bottom floor, with some fat wooden pillars leading to the ceiling. A fireplace sat against one wall, with chairs and big couches and a table set up around it, like a farmhouse that wanted to be a hotel but didn’t quite know how. The other side of the room was taken over by a staircase leading to upper floors, and the front wall was windows that looked out onto a grassy lawn, and dirt road and fields beyond.

I peeked around a pillar and saw Etta standing next to the fireplace, talking fast in Russian with another horsetrainer. They didn't see me, so I made my way for the open front door.

The staircase groaned as I passed it, and an old man came down, white haired and stooped, in pale overalls, carryin a mop and bucket. He stopped at the landing and looked up at me, then headed back toward the kitchen.

Husband, I guessed. I stepped onto the porch. The sun had fallen behind a cloud and the air was cool, the light soft and gray. To my right, the road rolled down a hill, then back up again into blank forest and cow fields and countryside. To my left, the road fell away steep into a hamlet – a cluster of houses, a few stores and a church. If this was Pickinpaw it seemed smaller than the circus itself would have been, under normal circumstances.

I needed a cigarette but didn't want to talk to anyone to ask, and thought if I stood in one spot long enough that the universe might will me a smoke.

ELEVEN.

I woke up and it was dark and I smelled beans.

Etta was sitting over me. She'd been stuck in her carnival outfit ever since the morning, but now she wore a light summer dress and her hair hung half down her neck. She was smiling, and she had a plate in her hand that smelled spicy and rich with brown sugar and cayenne.

There were worse things.

I tried to move and pain arched my back like a newborn; and loosed a scream in my head. I'd fallen asleep like a drunk in the middle of the boardinghouse's front yard, with my head on a tree root. Everything ached. Etta touched my hair and kissed my temple, then sat next to me.

She gave me a plate with beans and a potato. I sat up. I ate.

Light shown from the other side of the house, and past Etta was a tent on the sidelawn, with a long table and a few pots of food. Carnies were milling, eating, talking, wandering in and out the dark. There was a quiet anxiousness that chewed in at the corners every time we went off schedule or had a break between shows. Carnies don't sign up structured lives, but damned if we don't get into a rhythm and hate to break it.

My fork scraped nothing and I saw my food was gone. Etta laughed as I licked my fork clean, both sides, and laid back to rest on one elbow. Something shifted in my back pocket, and I found crumpled cigarettes and a matchbook. Goddamn.

I pulled out cigs and gave one to Etta, then lit us both. There was a small thicket of bushes behind us that grew up from beneath the porch, and we moved to sit behind them.

I looked at Etta, said "So?"

Etta began to speak. The Russian made beautiful boxes and fences around her words.

We'd been the last stragglers, she said, although much of our circus crew hadn't showed at all. A lot of the teamsters were gone, and the mimes, and except for the lions the animals were all gone too.

But a truck of performers we were supposed to take on for the next leg had gotten run in by the storm as well, and many of them showed up at the boardinghouse along with us. So it was a full house, and there were more folk sleeping upstairs in the rooms. Like me, Etta said, most everyone had just passed out on arrival.

Etta herself had fallen asleep in one of the big chairs inside the house, and woken in late afternoon to clattering from the kitchen. Cook and the old marm who ran the place were working on a meal to feed a thousand, but seemed already set on killing one another in the process. Folks were getting the tent set up outside, and Etta explored into the upper floors to find tables and chairs.

“Frank get here?” I said.

Etta nodded, took a puff, and brushed her hair back in a way.

She stepped over the hole in the story and moved on. There wasn't any more hint of what had happened during the storm the night before, she said, except for the states of strangeness everyone had woke up in, scattered in the surrounding roads and fields the following morning.

“Uh huh,” I said.

Voices started coming from inside the house behind us. Shouting voices. Men's voices. Etta stiffened, flicked her butt, and smiled at me. I smiled back, hard. She stood, and brushed herself off, and was gone.

For all the horror of that morning, it had the advantage of existing outside our normal lives. Back in the real world, the walls between us righted themselves again, and the space my body occupied didn't fit me no more. I got up, stretched, flicked the ash off my cig, and picked out some of the tobacco that had fallen back into my mouth.

I heard a voice laughing like a pig and a wolf both, and I peered into the back lawn to see Cook sitting there, leaned up against the house enfolded in his own flesh. A flask hung in his hand and he grinned at me evil.

“Poor old Sue,” he said. “You gon’ be blueballed fo’ life, boy, long as you hang ‘roun that woman. Ain’t no future! She the ringmaster's girl! She got no use for you! What you gotta offer, boy? Whatchoo got? Ha haaaaa!”

“Shut up, you old fuck,” I said, and walked off before I could kill him in the dark.

## TWELVE.

The makeshift slop tent on the side of the house was overfull of people and light. I turned toward the house.

The voices that had rung from outside got louder, and as the screen door swung behind me I could see who spoke. A long table had been pulled into the otherwise empty room, and chairs gathered round it under the yellowed hues of a single hanging lamp. Otherwise, the house seemed dark and quiet; apparently our hosts had gone to bed, and carnies are known for keeping odd hours.

There were four men at the table and one pacing around it, all lit from above in yellow hues.

“I don’t see it,” said Papa Canelli. His was a circus family. The sons were jugglers, the daughters acrobats, and his youngest boy performed with Canelli and his wife in a dog act with maybe a thousand-and-a-half Pomeranians. In the show, the dogs ran around him while he bounced his guts in a primary-colored Napoleon costume. His fancy jacket hung unbuttoned now around his shoulders. Bean juice stained his undershirt.

“I don’t see it,” he said again. “What you tryin’ to say? That we carry on’a show with no crew an’ half the acts? What we gonna show, eh? Buncha ripped costumes and tents covered wit’ mud? We have to fin’ those men we missing! Someone must know somethin’! It was just a storm! The ground didn’t swallow dem up! Dey out dere somewhere!”

“Of course they are, of course they are,” said another man. “But we have to trust the local authorities. I know a lot of people in this town. Good people, good men. They’ll find your men if you let them do their jobs.”

I recognized him as the old man who'd scared the lions off with rifleshot from the roof of the house that afternoon. He wore a light tan suit and a powdery handlebar mustache, but despite the outfit, I decided to place bets he was a civilian. At first I'd thought the old marm's husband was the sleepy-eyed janitor from the afternoon, but now I wasn't so sure.

“Mr. Nelson is right, Antonio,” said a third man. “Hell, we can’t find those men on a good night in Tahoe when we need ‘em for breakdown. How’re we going to find ‘em now? What we can do is put on a damn show, get some money in our pockets an’ haul out.”

The third man was Mr. Frank Colt.

Frank Colt was a young man, a good-looking man—too young and too good-looking to run a show, folks like Papa Canelli said. So there that was. He was boss and ringmaster, and not much aware of me or the other freaks. Frank was tall and lean and made more arrogant by having two levels of arrogance—the concious kind that made him a charming bastard, and the unconcious that made him more than half a brat.



He mighta been more aware of me if it were more obvious I was giving it to his woman.

So there that was.

Fourth at the table was some kind of human snake.

“Putting on a show, Mr. Colt,” said him, “Is a capital idea.”

I guess not a snake. Just a trick of the light. For awhile I couldn’t figure on what it was struck me so odd about him. He was tall and thin and all right angles, with a purple topcoat over a purple suit, and a tophat sat next to him on the table. He out-circused the rest of us, and seemed bored doing so.

He turned toward me now, eyes flat in the dim light, and smiled a smile that sat on his face, lips pulled back on his teeth. His eyes got my spine clammy. I remembered the little thing that got the morning got started off bad—a stranger on the road.

The day sewed itself together wrong.

“Hello, Sue,” the interloper said.

THIRTEEN.

Frank Colt turned around to look at me. As he did a waft of cigar smoke was released, like the energy of the men at the table had created a spell that contained even the air and was now broken apart. His eyes flicked over me in a way would have made me twitch, had I not been eyeballed many times by harder men. The others looked too, in unison, and I held ground as they sniffed me out.

“Hey there, Sue,” Frank said. He turned back to the violet-suited cipher behind him. “How you know Sue there, Alphonse? You all met before?”

The man's eyes never left me. "We've exchanged hellos, but I believe I heard his name tossed around today by that horse-rider he came in with." He smiled. "Ain't that right? Ain't that who you come in with?"

"That's right," I said. His eyes sunk through me.

"Oh, right," said Frank. "Etta."

He laughed. "Hell, Sue! Way I figure you saved her life! Or she saved yours! What you figure, she save you or you save her?" He smiled too. "I owe you one for bringin' back my girl, Sue. Come and have you a drink."

I sat down in a wicker chair that held me at the table about six inches too low. Frank poured me a glass of whiskey and passed it over, and I threw it back.

"We was just discussin' with Mr. Ambrose here the fact that we're in shit city," Frank said watching me.. There was a man sitting beside him I had not seen before. It was Tillinger, a teamsters who doubled as Frank's snitch. Right now he was sixty sheets to the wind, red-nosed and blind and bobbling in his seat.

"Shit city!" Frank said again, and Tillinger guffawed amiably.

"You work for the show, yes?" asked the white-moustached fella that had been pacing back and forth. "Teamster, are you?"

"Sue's on the freak truck," said Frank. The man peered across the table at my arms.

"Oh, I see," he said. "Yes, of course."

"Don't know how you put up with it, Sue," Frank said. "You're the only one a'thems not a mutant or a retard. Sue does a hell of a job, all right, getting' the rest

a’them oddjobs in line. King of the freaks, he is.” Then, to Tillinger: “King of the freaks!”

I looked at the gentleman across the table. “Believe I owe you thanks. You were shootin’ from the top of the house when we were comin’ in.”

“Oh yes,” the fellow said. “The lions. We’ll get those buggers soon enough; not enough for them to hunt around here except rabbits. I should only hope we find them before they attack one of the local children.”

He walked around the table to me. “You’re Sue? Another man cursed with a woman’s name. Lindsay Nelon,” he said, sticking out his hand. “Welcome to my house.”

I shook, and then reached for another drink. Mr. Clemons continued to stand too close to me. “I’m a bit of a collector of odd names,” he said. “I can’t say I’ve heard Sue on a man before, though. Very interesting.”

I threw back a second glass, let it hit me, and looked at him through burning eyes.

“Right,” I said. “Well.”

Clemons resumed his tour of the table. The snake was looking at me now.

Grinning.

“This here’s Mr. Ambrose,” Frank was saying.

A hand slid in front of me.

“Alphonse,” said the violet-suited man.

I shook the hand once, and it was smooth just like any hand would be. But the eyes of him twisted me.

“Mr. Ambrose is one a’my investors,” said Frank Colt. “Comin’ up to take in a show an catchin’ us with our pants down!” Frank laughed again, thin and hard.

“Accidents,” said Ambrose. “Who can say?”

And he sat back in his chair and looked at Frank and at Tillinger, too drunk to notice, and Mr. Nelson, making another tour of the floor.

Then at me.

“The storm busted up most of the riggings — that is, what little has been found. The performers are mostly passed out in the rooms upstairs, or in shock — thse few who've shown up at all. “It seems we’re all out of ideas on what to do next, Sue,” Alphonse Ambrose said, his lips making shadows. “What you got?”

The eyes made shadows too.

I cleared my throat.

When I’m working, eyes on me are easy. I set up in a wooden chair and the world slows and the eyes on me, the voices, the wanderers become like waves and I let time go. Sometimes when the twins are troublesome and we want to keep an eye out, we'll set the entire freak tent as an enclosed theater. Then I'll walk the tent freely, and on occasion a child comes up terrified, but wanting to see the tattoos. Half the time a mother comes along as escort, and then the ink pulls at me. It knows these small-town women want a taste of strange, and that there'd be no consequences.

But in my life, there ain't never been a lack of consequences.

*Where did you get them all?* The child will ask, and I kneel down next to them so they can touch my arms, see it's skin just like what they got.

*All over the world, I say. I been all over the world and I get a picture on me everywhere to remind myself where I been.*

These are words I've memorized. Someday I will say them to my daughter.

And if I have a parrot or a monkey on my shoulder, they may want to see those too, but I tell them to hang back and keep their hands safe. Me they can touch, and I got animals too – crawling across my shoulders, back and chest.

*You're so good with animals, the mothers always say. Do they bite? Not that it matters to you; I suppose the ink stung worse, huh?*

*That ink don't feel nothin',* I say, and we breathe each other in. It is these moments, when a child's reverence and a woman's fascination opens me, that a little blood flows into my sad heart.

And it was now I called up such an image, as I sat with these men who were drunk and empty, and the snake-thing that sat at my right side looking me over and flicking his tongue in and out, in and out.

I had been asked a question that hung now like the smoke in the room.

“What did y'all come up with so far?” I said.

“As I've said,” Mr Clemons started like no one else was in the room, “Letting the local authorities round up your missing performers is the best thing. In the meantime, we'll do what we can with what we have.”

“We, we'!” said Papa Canelli. “All this time this man says we! It is *us*,” Canelli said, his finger pointing around the table, “And you!” and here he pointed at Lindsay.

“Nevertheless,” Mr Clemons replied, “As one of the senior members of our town council, I believe my opinion on how best to capitalize on your company's misfortune should be taken well in hand.”

“He’s right, Signore,” said Ambrose. “If you excuse his imposin’ on your territory, he has a point about making a little money here. Treat it like real ol-time carnny – a few acts, a few tricks, what? What do you say, Frank?”

Frank looked at Ambrose, then at me.

“Sue? You’ll be the one actually playin’ the part. I’d like to hear what you think,” he said. His eyes were half in his drink. I couldn’t tell if I was being set up or condescended to, and chewed my tongue.

“Well,” I said, “We’ll have to paint the town red gettin’ a good turn out for whatever kinda show we put on, anyhow. And we ain’t got enough trucks right now to go nowhere. But you could do a little dog n’ pony while we see if the rest of the company shows up. We shown up. Figger they will too.”

I sat back. *Unless they’s dead. Unless the storm swallowed ‘em up.*

Frank looked at the group like he’d said my words. “We all live with that?”

Silence hung around the table like dormant volcanoes.

“Settled then. Thanks Sue.” Frank said, and laughed, and they all laughed. I smiled with them like a fool. Frank held up an empty bottle and looked back to Lindsay Neslon. “Mr.Nelson, do you have another bottle of this excellent whiskey?”

Lindsay Nelson twitched, and nodded. “I believe I can find another.”

“Y’all don’t mind,” I said, and stood.

“Ain’t gonna have another drink with us, Sue? Well all right,” Frank said. Nelson reappeared with a second bottle, and there were cheers all around as Frank began to pour.

I felt myself disappear, and with nothing else to do I decided to take the stairs on up to the second floor. Each step creaked and groaned, but not loud enough to mask a voice that slid across the house toward me.

“Good meeting you, Sue,” said Alphonse Ambrose in my ear. “Much obliged.”

FOURTEEN.

The house was big, and once you were in one part of it the rest ceased to exist. As I hit the landing to the second floor, the men on the first set down to a rumble and then was gone. Aside from the people-sounds outside, this was a pocket of nothing and quiet.

A slim window cast in a glow on the floorboards here. I looked down through the glass and saw clusters of folk about – teamsters getting drunk, and younger girls practicing a balancing show for a few of the horse groomers standing nearby. Pairs of couples were on different parts of the lawn like a late-night holiday. I watched them and then looked away, the longing in me tempered by my inability to love.

There was Etta, there was my baby somewhere out there in the world. There had been other women, and family, and army buddies too sad to think of. I got this ink slung across me to keep them out, to keep someone safe, though I didn't know quite who anymore. Maybe me. Maybe everyone who wasn't. There had been a time when I could have been one of those young lovers, not much concerned for the strangeness that had besieged the circus that morning except in the most doomed romantic sense. But now I was stuck watching from the inside looking out at folk I couldn't ever comprehend because they could stand themselves.

I wanted Etta to find me then, but knew she wouldn't. I was lucky she'd been brave enough to serve me beans. I sat on the landing, watching out the window and feeling like nothing, the whiskey humming across my eyes.

As I slumped against my forearms I saw that a few performers below were folks I didn't recognize as a part of our traveling show. You run into every tumbler, juggler, peepshow and one-man band dances the stage at least a few times in this business, and even when you hit the big time you find out half them bottom-feeders got hired up with you to repopulate the world. But now I remembered Etta saying some of our stragglers were from a circus we was supposed to have caught up with, so it made sense that new faces mingled with the crew as I counted heads.

I saw Marvelous Ling, a dish-spinner out of Frisco who was only decent to be around when he was loaded with opium. I saw a puppetman who'd got sweet with me in a bar in Saginaw and since refused to look my way, and a young trio of identical triplets I'd worked with a hundred times without knowing what they exactly did.

I saw Omar too, sniffing around them girls like a sewer rat, with a smile on his face that turned my stomach. I pounded the window, once. Omar didn't look up. Again. Again.

He had no idea where the strange noise was coming from, but he stopped and craned his neck around and that gave the trio of oblivious girls time to wander outside the range of him. I sighed, then watched as Omar got himself turned and talking to another woman. Her body language said she could handle herself better than the triplets would have been able, and she threw her head back and walked away from him.



As her face hit the lamplight, the sight of her cooled my skin. The posters called her Serena the Snake Woman. No wonder Omar'd been refused.

I sat back and worked on breathing. I knew Serry. Omar got off easy.

I heard chairs pull out and grunts from below, and steps across the floor and on the landing. As I sat in the dark, Frank Colt came around the steps and up toward me, sliding against the wall to hold him up.

He stopped, recognizing someone else was there.

“Shit, Sue,” he said. He lurched forward on me, and I leaned back and he grabbed my undershirt to hold himself.

“We’re,” he said. Full stop.

Then he looked at me. His face rippled and he smiled.

“Tell me you’ll save me from this people, Sue,” he said.

The smile flickered away again. “Or it’s your ass.”

I eyed him over. He smelled of drink and filth and flop sweat.

“Sure, Frank,” I said. “It’ll be all right, anyway.”

He nodded slow, once and again.

“Fuck it will,” he said. He smiled a second time in shuddering sneer, then patted my chest. Between each pat, his hand strayed on me longer, till he was holding me by my shirt again. The resting fingers curled, and twisted, and he was squeezing a ball of fabric in his fist. He looked over my shoulder.

We sat awhile like that in the dark.

Then Frank looked down at me, and I looked up. His black eyes went straight inside him, and inside him there was nothing.

He licked his lips and his tongue clicked inside his mouth.

“I am dead, Sue,” he said. “And if I am dead, you are dead. We all go down together.”

His whole face shook. More waves of rank drink ran up my nose.

“So fuckin’ help me, man. Help your goddamn self!”

He became a silhouette, slumped, and released me. Then he stood.

“I know you,” he said. “Think I don’t. There’s no bed up there, by the way. Other side the house.”

And he smiled a third time, his face rotten, and turned and stumbled back downstairs.

A moment later, my body released.

It hit me all sudden. Marvelous Ling and the puppet-man, Serry and Omar, this house run up a hill to nowhere crawling with carnies and Frank fallen down a rabbit hole. And the man Ambrose, snake-tongue flicking in the room below. I was stuck in a bad way, with no clear road out. The only life in the world I could feel was something bad growing worse, taking its time to piece itself together.

I told myself I was just drunk and sad. I told myself things always look better in the morning.

Aside from the morning I’d just been through, of course.

FIFTEEN.

The upstairs rooms were blue and empty, a long hallway with doors down both sides hanging open like sores, lonely and sad. I remembered my early days on Coney

Island, walking the boards with my first ink and hungry for a chance to work with any kind of outfit that might get me paid, or at least fed and slept. There was all manner of oddness there, the detritus of the city flushed out to one strange strand of sand.

I'd been pointed there when I had nothing else to return to, and started out looking for muscle work when a stray dog commented that I might make a buck as an illustrated man. I followed directions given me by the carnies to a rundown three-story brick castle off the boardwalk. Inside was a hodgepodge, with a ballerina's studio on the second floor, a noisy theater on the third. I felt like Noah's Ark had gotten beached and loaded with freaks, then left to bake a thousand years in this place where I'd run aground myself.

The lady of the house was a half-dwarf named Nan who was chain-smoking herself to death. She looked me across, found my eye and said, "You need more ink but you look like you can work. You put half each paycheck to more tattoos, I'll get you started with a paintjob in a dark room. You handle that?"

I could.

I got the ink on me and in me and through me for weeks after, sucked it up through a straw and drank it into my blood till I didn't exist no more. My new self had no history, just the vague weight of regret that stirred my deeper waters and gave my patience food as I sat afternoons and nights on the boardwalks, doing what was needed, healing from my wounds, and meeting young girls with cameras, true freaks, fake ones and anyone else who didn't try too hard to know me, which no one ever did.

I'd been like that four months when I met Serena the Snake Woman.

She'd come up on me one late night after the shows, or at least between them. I'd moved from our tent on the boardwalk down to the beach where the surge came in and

carved out the shape of the island itself. Islands always made me think of wars, and God, and borrowed time.

I smoked and the tobacco mixed with surf and fuzzed out the overload of light and sound from the carnival shows. And I looked down the coast and seen a woman slinking along with the tide.

She was an hourglass and a mop of hair and I couldn't make out much else. From my spot I watched her move like a balance of soft spheres. After crossing in front of me about thirty yards off, she found a stairway leading back up into the boardwalk. The glow of the show light hit her and I saw she only wore a fitted two-piece, with makeup and glitter-paint on her shoulders and thighs. It was slick enough that I figured her for carnies, and not one of the islanders, who were no small shakes themselves in measure of pure weirdness.

The cig ran down to my fingers and I watched the ash, wondering when it might start to burn and if I might just want one more before I left. Then a shadow was hanging across me.

"Your name really Sue?" Her body was muscle and curves and a long neck led to a face all hard angles, with deepset black eyes framed in makeup glazed green. Her skin was painted like mine, all twists and dark swirls, but hers would clean off in the morning. Every part of her dripped hunger and sex and hurt.

"Here it is, yeah," I said. I tried not to be so obvious about drinking her in.

"So somewhere else it's not?" she asked, and sat down next to me. She smiled at me out of the side of her mouth, pretty and mean. Her energy sunk into me quick. I could smell her heat and blood, and I got stirred in the darkest parts of me that hungered for

pain. I wanted to eat her heart and and burn my eyes and nose and mouth closed to keep her inside me. I knew she lit this fire in me and everyone.

So I sat and smoked, and breathed out.

“Somewhere else it’s not,” I said.

She snorted. I could have pulled her hair back and poured myself into her face.

“Whatever you say,” she said.

The haze I was in lifted a second. “You come out here for me?” I asked. She nodded her head back the way she came.

“Nan’s lookin’ for you,” she said. “Their geek’s home drunk and she wants to know you’ll fill in.”

I shook my head. “I tole her I don’t geek,” I said. “That’s bad business.”

“You never geeked? You’re too good for it? Gimme,” she said, and I cigged and lit her.

“Good nothing,” I said. “I just ain’t got it in me for killin’ chickens. I’m a plain coward.”

She pursed her lips and looked at my skin, which by then was pretty well filled. Only needed the last few pieces to make it whole, and they’d come later, all together, when I’d find out what being done with killing was really all about.

“I don’t see you as the yellow type,” she said. “Too good for it, that’s you.”

“However you cut it,” I said. “I ain’t no geek.”

She took a drag. “I done it,” she said, and smiled again as my eyebrows raised. “Bit the heads off snakes,” she said, and mimed the act. “Then spit ‘em with a blood capsule, rubbed ‘em on my tits.” She leaned back. “It’s good money but it’s a mess.”

I looked at her again and revelation dawned. “Now I got you. Ain’t you a snake charmer at this show?”

She nodded. “Sometimes I forget where I’m at and try to bite one still,” she said, and she laughed and stood. “Nan said you’d be pussy, but she wants you to find her anyways.”

Nan was a tough bird, but she didn’t deserve what happened to her in the end.

“I’ll come by,” I said. “Who do I say sent me?”

For a moment, she looked charmed. Then it passed. “Serry,” she said. “Well see each other around.” And she turned with a twist of thigh, her boots clicking as she left.

She was right on that. We saw each other around. Wish I did she wasn’t, but I would have found some kind of trouble either way. Maybe not so bad or bloody, but things always went wrong, real wrong, back then. Some people just can’t wait to be human wreckage.

## SIXTEEN.

The slick darkness of the upstairs hung over the corridor. There were stairs and passageways leading to other parts of the house, and creaks and groans echoed from other rooms. I imagined clowns and tumblers piled on one another like stacks of old clothes.

I had found, at the end of one dark hallway, a small, small room with a small, small window, a sagging mattress, and a closed closet door. It seemed as though someone had forgotten this entire part of the house. My mind spiraled out, unlocking little black cords of worry like rotting tendrils that rolled across the floorboards and stuck to the walls. I pictured myself laying down as I lay down, inside a future tense.

I thought of Etta. I saw her sitting in front of a makeup mirror, fitting her domino mask and touching her hair, helmeted into place with pins and spray. I saw the healthy flesh of her back sliding into her costume, smelled the night smells of crowd and elephant. I imagined her sleeping now in one of the far rooms, waiting for Frank Colt to find her. I thought of the strangeness of the man Ambrose, whose arrival seemed like the storm that swept half our show away.

I wondered if Etta thought of me now, staying awake in the dark as I was. The unease at seeing Serry again chewed at the bad thoughts I carried with me always, waking them and rattling the chains that held them to me.

I fell asleep. I dreamed no dreams.

Hours later the ink woke me. It scratched and dug underneath my skin, gnawed my neck and forced my eyelids off my eyes. I came to jaw clenched, my veins hot with black blood.

A silhouette sat on the edge of the bed, rimmed in moonlight.

I pulled back from her, tucking my feet.

“I didn’t know I’d find you here,” she said.

I heard Etta’s haiku form in her words, and Serry’s alto growl. Between them was something else I couldn’t place.

“But here I am,” I said. The room was warm somehow, the sheets slick with sweat.

“You in the habit of taking another man’s room?”

She wore a white gauze gown and through it I could see the curves of her, the shadows breathing atop her breastbone.

“What you mean?” I said. I wondered who she was, why I could not see her face. Why she spoke with so many different voices.

“You see?” she said.

We stood in the hallway outside my little room now, and I looked across to see a quiet shape asleep in a room opposite I hadn't seen before. I recognized the old man in overalls from that afternoon, sacked out in an stuffed chair beneath a thin blanket, mouth hung open and aimed at the ceiling.

“Hell, I didn't know he slept up here,” I said “I'll give him back his damned room.”

“Rude to wake him,” she said.

I wanted to see her face, to pull her voices apart so I could make sense of them.

Instead I leaned over and touched the old man's arm. He fluttered awake and looked at me. I helped him stand, and pointed him back to the bed I'd stolen. He nodded, and toddled out. But instead of heading to his own sheets, he wandered down the hall, down the stairs. The wood creaked as he left the house.

“You see?” She said next to me.

“You're better off leaving well enough alone.”

I looked out the window to the lawn below, saw the old man shuffling into darkness. Then he stumbled and fell, laid out in the grass.

“Shit,” I said. “Let's--”

And we were running to the lawn, clamoring down back stairs and through the house that at night seemed to be only dust and cobwebs. I think I knew by now that I was dreaming but there were important things in the dream, not so much symbols as moments



of consequence. I recognized these things separate from myself, and could not make them congeal.

We hit the lawn, she and I, and ran to the old man and dragged him by his ankles back inside, and as we did I heard lions in the fields beyond, their hunger crawling toward me and we could not save our cargo fast enough.

But the old man would not wake up.

The animal sounds grew closer.

We could no longer lift the old man's limbs.

The shadows came at us and we escaped back to the house.

We left him there beneath the moon.

And me and this woman, so soaked in sweat we could not think – we took each other there. She undressed me even of the pictures in my flesh, freeing me of the weight I'd borne for all my years.

I think we were there on that bed, in that old tiny room on a soiled stained sinking mattress, parts of her in my mouth and parts of me in hers and then sleeping, sleeping, wrapped round each other then pulled away, sleeping sleeping like sinking ships. It was a night of fever and when I woke it would be to skin scratched clean, a million little cuts, and someone was in bed with me, and someone was shouting, and I could not decide if I felt more absolved or more guilty for the things I did not know yet that I had done.

## **THE LIONS.**

### **SEVENTEEN.**

The morning light hung flat in the little room, swirls of dust mites strangely active in a house of the sleeping and the dead. Thumps on the stairs ruptured a living silence eating air and sound.

I slid a hand over my face, tracing each part in an attempt to linger as I felt my troubles find me. Something rattled; something rotten. Food smells hung in the air, burned and soured. The secluded room was getting hot with morning light. No air moved.

I stood, stretched, and turned to see Serry lying in bed, looking odd at me.

“Shit,” I said.

She smiled with raw lips.

“Sorry,” I said. That weren’t no better. “I mean, not—”

“Shhhh,” she said. She sat up, brown and tanned and oily skin, the big mess of hair like several cities vying for control of her head. I wanted to lick her and bite her and just plain guilty and wrong.

She stood and threw a robe over, pacing out my regret. The strangeness on my face was her lover; I was a husk, a cuckold, an invader to this place.

“You stare,” she said. “You stare and stare, I remember that,” she said, smiling like nothing was good enough to smile about. “Don’t worry, Sue.” I began to speak, but she looked at me like a view in a broken rearview.

“It’s just one room,” she said, and slipped through the door.

I stood in that small room awhile, naked and hot, feeling the dust settle into all the cuts and scratches she'd left in my skin. The ink was only a mild buzzing across my shoulders, reminding me against forgiveness.

I became aware of a worlds outside the room, and sounds outside and below. And while I was in no shape to stand it, my stomach was feeling brave. It followed the sick sweet smell of burning food and got me dressed, and got me out.

I stumbled downstairs and stood again on the landing, now in sunlight. Even that felt strange. I could imagine this was my landing in my house, with a yard and wife and child. I could place myself into all these things, as if they hadn't been stolen from me and littered across counties and states so I might never gather them again.

The strange dreams of the night before hung on me, struggling to connect. It was a shit of a morning, all right, before I could even eat.

Damn Serry; damn my bed.

EIGHTEEN.

The downstairs of the house looked much as it had the day before--large and empty. But I had the feeling there was a morning I had missed. Voices echoed from the backyard.

I looked in on the kitchen as I passed it. It was empty too, but pans were sprayed the countertops in a pattern I recognized. Cook had been here, but whatever he'd done was burned now and abandoned.

There was a wailing that came in through the windows, and as I stepped over the threshold and onto the back lawn I was swarmed with color and sound. The sun lit up the

grass an electric green and the sky sang blue and the fields orange beyond. I made it through to the outside, and what was there made me wonder how I'd slept as long as I did.

There was a corpse out there. Not that I could see, but under a cloth stained with blood was something ripped up and misshapen. I'd seen enough dropcloths to know when some dead fool was under one.

Cook was sitting and drinking by the door, and carnies gathered round trying to block things off. But the wailing continued and I saw it was the the old Marm fallen to her knees, no use to anyone and no sense to her, just a horrible unending retching of solid grief.

"Lion's got 'im," said Cook, not looking at me. Then he nodded.

I looked up to my left and realized there was a hill around the east side of the house I'd never seen before with a large wooden porch built off the side. Up there was the rest of the carny folk, eating breakfast and looking down like indifferent predators. I was starting to feel that the house's shifted in the night, reforming itself across the hills where it perched.

The old Colonel, Lindsay Nelson, and Frank Colt stood near, watching over the fields that led to the wreckage of trucks and tents down past the trees.

"We'll simply have to comb the fields," Lindsay was saying. "We make a grid and cover all of it. Between yours and my rifles, we'll be armed enough for it."

I stepped up. Frank Colt looked at me and said, "The lions got the husband in the night."

Across the grass I could see the tiny arthritic hand, all tense and scrabbling at the crabgrass, coming out from underneath the cloth and splattered with blood. The cloth

itself was a maze of gore poking through the fabric, like something underneath was just ground meat and gristle, punished into the ground for being alive. The old Marm knelt by what was left of him, knees wet with dew, her wail falling into silence, sucking in air and coughing out the dust inside her. Several of our bigger men circled her like you would a rabid cat.

“What you got over him?” I asked. “That a bedsheet?”

“Meat wagon's a town over,” Frank said. “Til it comes, here we are.”

“My sister and he hadn't got along these past ten years or so,” Lindsay said. “But the husband, yes. Been drinking for years; with the ruckus last night he passed out on the lawn. Then – well.”

“Hell,” I said.

I thought on dreams, and truths lying down with untruths together in the night. I stood there dumb as the weight of things rolled over.

“You seem like a capable fellow,” Nelson said to me. “Can you fire a gun, Sue?”

I looked at him, turning slow.

“Ayuh,” I said.

“Weren't you overseas, Sue?” said Frank. “Didn't Etta say somethin' about that?”

“Sue, you're ex-brass?” Lindsay said. “You don't say.”

He rolled across me with his eyes, taking judgment.

“Hell, I'm getting distracted,” he said. “Listen, after the docs are through, our work's not over. We'll have to get a crew together after lunch and comb the lions out of those fields.”

Then he nodded to us, and walked back toward the house. Frank moved to follow him.

I grabbed Frank's arm. "You're taking down the lions? Can we do that?"

"Tranq-darts, Sue," said Frank. He was sober, but now we were alone and his eyes were just as hollow as they'd been the night before.

"Those lions are the last valuable thing this show's got going. We get them, then start piecing together the rest. I still have a circus spread across this county. I never let a rube get between me and my business, and I'm not starting now."

#### NINETEEN.

It's always been, when you're carny, that you live in a kind of bubble in which non-carnies ain't real. I stood half-in, half-out of this world, coming to it late in life and only by way of ink. I was an outsider, mostly accepted by the other carnies because I had horse sense and a decent hustle. I would still always be outside, but I was fine with this. It made me aware of the smaller rituals, the differences between carny folk and men.

It was like this that we watched the docs come and scrape up the the ravaged pieces that were the old Marm's husband, the sad little janitor we'd met only briefly, if at all. The carnies hung back, eating the breakfast put out for them by Cook, on the wooden patio up the hill. One of the teamsters hooked up a hose to wash the grass of blood, and even that was regarded as natural – the teamsters, big and gruff and drunk by noon, cleaning up the messes while we ate and watched from the comfort of our feeding tables.

I suppose Lindsay Nelson, too, had a hand in the callousness of the morning. He showed no concern for his departed brother-in-law, instead standing with Frank Colt like

they'd known each other a thousand years. Somewhere inside the house was the old Marm, insane with grief, shellshocked in one of the higher room.

Even this soon began to fade into the background, until background was all there was. I sat and for a moment refused to believe the sun was beating down on me, the chair beneath me, mashed in with carnies above carnage, lost somewhere between storms.

I needed a cigarette, and lit one up. I hid in my smoke as the Simple Twins were brought out and fed their jelly and peanut butter, as Omar and Serry came out together with some of the other sideshows, throwing back their liquor early. I watched as Lindsay Nelson and Frank stood off, nodding to one another as they looked over the fields. As the carnies milled round into rumbling quiet, I saw that Etta sat with some of the other horse-folk.

“Watch those eyes, Sue,” a voice said. I looked to see that Serry had paused nearby, and was following my gaze. Her tone was almost kind. She sauntered away and I could smell her sex and blood.

From across the room, Etta looked at me. Smiled with cautious eyes.

The food in my mouth was dust.

Down through the trees I could see the thumbprint of black dirt where we'd found the strange, deep ditch the morning prior. It sat like a shadow that would not move.

Our small army was taking over the house like an invading plague, and that Lindsay seemed so comfortable with this was an unnatural thing. I held no truck with it; none at all.

TWENTY.

We all got real busy staying clear of things when the police swept up Frank Colt and Lindsay Nelson for questioning, and Frank Colt, who had a few smarts despite the rest, was enough of a smooth talker to keep us all out of getting grilled.

Not that it's hard to undersell a bunch of carnies as unobservant half-drunk fools.

So it was that in the time we had after picking up the bits and pieces of the old man's body, while Lindsay and Frank Colt was gone, we had a bit of time between us to sit and mind our manners close. For several hours the sound fell to the tink-tink, tink-tink of silverware on plates and a slow mumble as the carnies chatted soft on the patio, and in a small country dining room inside. Some folk left to nap in the upper rooms, but the bloody grass outside kept us from wandering farther, like a bad hex.

I was sitting in the dining room when Cook wandered up and nodded, then slumped beside me, kept sat and drank. From across the room, Papa Canelli smiled a conspiracy at me, then crossed over and sat down too.

"There's you," he said. "Where you sleep, Sue? How you avoid craziness this morning, eh?"

"I sleep heavy is all," I said, and he laughed too big for it.

"Not what I hear, eh?" and he winked. I leveled an eye at him. "Oh, I kid you," he said. "What you think all this? Big mess, eh?"

"Big mess," I said.

Canelli leaned in, still smiling.



“I think we got to get hell out of dodge, eh?” Canelli said. “Stick aroun’ here, bad business. Got a bad stink all over it. You know one girl, Chinese, contortionist – she was all tied up! Wake up in ditch!”

“That was Mei Shen,” I said. “She was some mess all right. She okay?”

“Ach sure, now,” Canelli said. “Bruises, arms, legs. My wife saw her, clean her up. She can’t remember anything! Why this happening? Not just storm out there, no!”

About then I saw a pack of cigarettes in his pocket, and nodded to them. Papa got us a pair of smokes, lit us, and turned his chair to look out the door, and into the fields.

“Not just storm out there,” he said again. “Something else.”

He pointed out to the end of the hedgerow, just beyond the treeline. A couple things stood out from this distance. The bright reds and yellows of the smashed trucks down there was one.

The other was the large black furrow in the earth.

“I talk to that man Lindsay,” Papa was saying. “That hole out there. He say that not there before the storm. Show up when we did.” He turned to me, still with the smile. “We have been marked, you know? By God.” He laughed all queer, then gave a wave and looked back down into the fields.

“What do you think about it, Sue?” he asked, not looking at me.

“I don’t know, Papa,” I said. “What do you think?”

He looked at me again, losing the smile. “Who knows?” he asked. “Highwaymen? Animals? Devils? Don’t matter. We leave, that’s what matters. Best we roll on out soon as we can, I think.”

“Well it ain’t like we’d decide to settle here,” I said.

“No, no,” said Papa. “But *him*,” and here he thumbed toward the house, where Frank had disappeared with the police. His voice dropped low, and lower. “*He* will say we stay. Put on show, make bucks, *then* we leave.”

“Ain't no way we're gonna have a show here,” Cook said. His eyes crawled up his face to look across the table.

Papa Canelli nodded, eyes closed. As he did, a few of his broodlings came through – some of the younger children, chasing each other like meadowlarks, jumping on him and off him as part of their playground. He spun around to shout Italian at his wife, who'd just come outside, and she shouted back at him.

“*Polizia!*” she hissed, and pointed back inside.

With the Canellis came a few others that had been holed up in the house somewhere, flushed out like sewage. The movement caused ripples around us. Omar emerged from inside, and snaked near our table.

Papa kept talking. “We have sense, we get out of here. Leave this people in peace.”

“Peace an’ lions,” I said. “we give ‘em the world’s worst rat problem, what we done.”

“Take care of lions,” Papa said, shooing me off. “Of course, of course. Don’t be obvious. But after that—” and he slapped one palm across the other, “we go.” He whistled.

“You think we owe these people anything?” This was Omar, having sat down and now listening in. “For food, lodgings?” His face had shadows, and something tickled on my skin. I had the idea that he might have stayed up late in the night, watching Mei Shen.

“Man take care of it,” said Canelli to him.

“What man?” Omar asked.

“Black. Long hair. Ambrose, Ambrose,” Papa Canelli said, working around the name as best his cancerous accent would allow.

The skin on my neck tightened.

“You know him?” I heard myself ask.

As more carnies gathered, Canelli nodded to me again in a show of obvious disgust with my ignorance. “Of course. Been around, long time. Not lately, but. He *financier*.” He said the word as if it existed separate from all others; a studied piece of foreign vernacular he had clearly memorized for just such an occasion.

“He take care of these things.”

“Frank's gonna owe big for a scrape like this.” Serry had come up now too, and leaned against the doorframe as she spoke.

Canelli shrugged with complete disinterest. Frank's needs were the point where his concern ended. He turned round to face the others, and made what came next seem casual and true.

“I will tell you what will happen,” he said.

“He’s gonna come outta there and tell us we stayin’ here to do a show. That we owe these bumpkins. But this a waste of time. Give the cops longer to play with us. And that bad news.”

He had the attention of the group, and knew it. He played the moment out.

“I tell you what we oughtta do,” he said. “We gather up what we can from what storm left, and get out!”

“And do what?” someone asked.

“Don’t matter,” Papa said. “This show is dead. We save ourselves.”

I stopped my eyes rolling round as the words echoed. The thought hung on silence.

TWENTY-ONE.

“Our problem’s them lions,” said Frank Colt.

His face was heavy as he came out. On both sides of him stood the law.

“These men, they want the things taken down.” said Frank Colt. “Of course I don’t agree, and I have a tranq gun so we can try to bring ‘em down another way.”

“Just one gun!” shouted Omar. The crowd, gathered round, rustled to itself.

“I know,” said Frank. “It ain’t gonna do the job on its own. Best we could hope for is to herd ‘em somehow an’ then get off a couple shots. That might work.” More rustling.

“Do we know where they are?” someone called.

“I had track on them this morning,” said Lindsay Nelson. “But they have since disappeared. I have,” he continued, “Full confidence that the are still in field somewhere.”

“Unless they made it to the backroad, where our trucks wrecked. You can’t see past the trees from up here.”

Not sure who said that bit. Might have been me.

“So we get lions,” Papa Canelli said. “But what then. We go, yes? Leave here?”

“We’ll talk about that after,” Frank Colt said.

It was afternoon by the time we were underway, as clouds gathered. About half the circus was divided into squads: Frank Colt and some teamsters, me and Cook and Omar, the Chinese acrobats, and two other groups of carnies. Lindsay and his sniper rifle stood atop the house, along with a few others as extra pairs of eyes.

We went in with threshers first, and spent a good part of the morning cutting into the field from all sides about a hundred feet even. This was in a way the riskiest part, but we cut in from all sides – a few starting down by the far road where the wreck was, still not cleaned out, and a few up by the boarding house. We shouted as we went, banging pots and pans, hoping to cut our chances at running afoul of lions.

But this part of the process was uneventful, and within the hour we had the field trimmed and circled by men on all sides.

“Torches,” Frank Colt called out.

We lit prop torches one of the jugglers had salvaged, one for each group. They ignited, smoke floating out in sick twists of blackness in the late afternoon. I held the fire for our squad, while Omar and Cook stood by. The ink was climbing back and forth on me so bad that I felt it must be something you could see, pictures sliding between my skin and muscle like insects, like they wanted me to know something but were in disagreement as to exactly what.

All around the perimeters of the field I could see the other torches go up and then came forward, licking at the nearby grasses. I smelled fear and gasoline, and I turned down our end to Cook and Omar. We was all gonna kill each other this way, I knew, and their faces said they knew it too.

That was when I heard the sound.

It was a *klumpf, klumpf, klumpf* – something soft hitting something hard, like meat on metal. It came from down the hedgerow, in the shadows where circus trucks sat to wait out the slaughter. My ink started to pulse, *thump thump* across my chest, keeping rhythm with that strange sound.

“You hear that?” whispered Cook. The early evening birds began to call cautiously to each other in weird koans as the sky dimmed.

“Ayuh,” I said. The torches sputtered between us as I tried peering between the trees, asking for them to open. The ink sang in me in pullings and twitchings that ached, giving me no real choice.

“What you think?” asked Omar, and I could feel him getting tense.

“Burn them out!” called Frank Colt across the grasses.

I looked at the other men and shouted, “Wait!”

As the other groups looked over, I slid down to the hedgerow, wishing Frank’s tranque weren’t all the way on the other side of that field. I made my way to the bottom of the slope under the midnight shade of the trees, where the air got cooler and wetter in the midst of green.

“Sue! Sue!” Cook was hissing through his teeth, and I turned and shushed him. He took a look across the field and then hustled down to me, even as Omar had already made the decision to follow. Their faces softened to silhouette as they entered the tree line, and together we shuffled to the service road. The canopy overhead made a round, uneven light beneath. The road was rich and the foliage velvet green, like a new snake skin.

“It’s in here,” Cook said.

The *klumpf, klumpf* kept beating its drum, but our way was blocked here. The strange dirt trench stretched across the road, too deep to cross and full of soil made soft by rains. I could see again how big it was, and how purposeful – a giant cut ending in a rounded crescent.

Omar stepped around the thing like it almost weren't there, getting to the hump of soil on the far end as best he could. Cook just stared down into the abyss, a cigarette hangin' from the tip of his mouth.

With one ahead and one behind, I nimble-stepped across the dirt. The noise pulsed in me now. I couldn't help but love that moment, for the beauty and stillness of the evening and the painful swell of anticipation while smoke from distant fires began to filter through the leaves. I stopped breathing and became aware of every vibration in every tree around us, of Cook rolling the cigarette in his mouth, of the way Omar's breath echoed in his chest.

Footsteps on the path.

I spun around and swung my rifle high. I saw muscles swinging like clock rotors. Etta, Serry, and Mei Shen stood on the path, looking at me and Cook and Omar.

“What in hell?” Cook asked.

Serry held up a small long-barreled airgun.

“We raided the basement,” she said. “Found a horse tranq. Etta saw you running down here from the house.”

“You all came for one gun?” Omar asked.

“You try waiting up at that house like old maids,” Serry said back.

“Women, shit,” Cook said.

“One a’ you fire that thing?” I asked them.

Etta nodded. I nodded back.

Above us in the fields, the men called to one another. Dark bursts of movement came from the farmhouse up the hill. The light made everything silhouettes, but my ears were still keen. I heard something smaller and softer, a *tip-tip-tip* in uneven drops, like leaves after rain.

The others heard it too. We all tensed, our eyes crawling around us. Serry's widened first, and she pointed at Omar.

I turned and looked up at Omar's bald head. It was dotted now with brown smudges, and more appeared with each *tip-tip-tip*. As I watched, one ran down his temple. He reached up and rubbed it with his fingers. The smudge streaked across his cheek.

We looked at the ground around us, at the spots hits the undergrowth, staining them with rust.

And Cook was calling out in a yelp-retch, and I was looking upward. The dim light only made shadows, and as my eyes adjusted I saw them – Misha and Rasha and Ferdinand, hung together with fat ropes, tongues hanging over they teeth, great paws loose around their sides and tails. Their intestines hung forward like drying flowers, and their eyes hung dead on me.

A piece of charred sheet metal was caught between nearby branches, and as we watched the corpses swung against it in the waning breeze.

*Thump. Thump-thump.*

I'd found them half-covered in mud, where all the ruckus started. It was a testament, or a warning. From someone with power over confused and foolish men.



TWENTY-TWO.

“There’s a sickness here,” Omar was murmuring. “A sickness, I tell you now.”

We was soaked in blood, the stench of us rising thick like heat. The cats lay on the ground in pieces spread over the earth.

Etta had climbed the tree first. She ankle-crawled out on the limb that held the beasts, and worked with fingers and knife to loosen their bonds. I got the worst of it, standing underneath to catch the corpses while Omar hauled slow on the ropes to bring them to the ground.

A small crowd of teamsters had gathered to watch, and their heads turned as cries echoed from across the fields. I lowered the lions to the soil, then followed the shouts to see a rounded silhouette hold something aloft. The thing wriggled and I made it out.

A lion babe, half-tired and too small to fight, hung from Papa Canelli’s hands. The pup curled around his fist, its big paws swaddling the old man’s callouses.

I pictured Claude the lion tamer, dead in an abandoned field somewhere, eyes skyward and not yet picked out by crows. I wondered if he might be alive, and lost like this lion child. Lost like we were lost.

The ambulance that had come just that morning to take the body of the old caretaker now came again in late afternoon. They cleared the cats, all in pieces, and carted the slop away. We all retired up to the house. As we walked, most were silent. Some folk focused on the lion cub, discussing what best might get it fed.

Those of us that got the lions down stopped for a hose shower along the side wall of the house, to wash the blood. Omar spattered his head, Serry and Cook rinsed their hands, and left Etta and I to finish.

We took lye soap and scrubbed our skin. I saw the pebbles pucker under her flesh and she caught me watching her.

#### TWENTY-THREE.

The truth was that Papa Canelli had been wrong, but only half.

The carnies were gathered again in the dining room off the side of the house. Late day sun washed the room in a dim glow. Outside shadows began to creep, and flattened the world beyond the windows. Circus folk had draped themselves over white tables like spilled food, and eyes turned toward the front of the room where Frank Colt stood.

His face was shadows, and Lindsay Nelson stood beside him

“Law wants us in town a few more days,” Frank said. “They got questions about them lions.

Murmurs all around. Days passing was deathknell for a carny. Even in good times, a week in the sticks meant you cleaned that town out of whatever money they had in two, three days, max. Under our circumstances, we was two days behind when we should be getting on to the next town to sucker more fools.

“Until the police are satisfied there's no foulness here, we stay in grabbing distance,” Frank continued. “Particularly with the dead fella.”

“Foulness hell!” someone shouted. “The lions got the old man!”

“What happened to them lions was sick,” said someone else. “We oughtta tear this town apart til we find the hayseeds killed those cats!”

“You wanna run-in with some throwbacks ready to gut a lion? I’m tough, but I ain’t that tough! We need to run on outta here, and quick!”

Frank raised his hands. The furor quieted.

”I know,” he said. Of course he knew.

“I want to get out bad as you,” he said. “Put this town and its badness behind us. The old woman ran this place --”

“She gone crazy!” someone called. ”They got her in hospice and she's talking to the walls, I heard.”

“Her care is paid for,” Colt said, “By the show’s financiers. All the more reason to clear out and get to our next paycheck.”

“So what's stopping us? Can they hold us here?” asked Serry.

“No,” said Frank. More mumurs.

“They’re not holding you,” Lindsay said. “We did you that favor. Saved us and you a lot of individual paperwork, especially since a lot of you might have,” he coughed, “trouble with the discrepancies in your stage identities and your street names.”

He let guilt hold for a moment.

“But they don’t want you to leave, either,” Lindsay continued. “Although, as we’ve said, any one of you is free to go.”

“This is ridiculous! What are you trying to say?” demanded Papa Canelli.

“They have not held any of you,” Lindsay repeated again, “But all circus equipment within town limits is now police property until such time as we clean it up, or

the circus gets fined. During that time, we're subject to any investigation they see fit to carry out."

Uproar rose like famine. Might as well cut our throats, our limbs, our livelihoods to the quick. Frank Colt took the room.

"This was our compromise," he said. "They have to keep up appearances just like anyone. All they know is a crew a' strangers came through and now the town's lost their boardinghouse and the folks that run it. All they want's us to stay here, answer some questions, make things square and be on our way. We should be grateful none a'this goes on the books except some downed equipment."

"We have all been through this before," Papa Canelli shouted. "Local law, no good! They make things difficult, any excuse. We stay to clean, they hold us on something else!" He stood. "We go out now, take what we need, get out this place! Leave the rest before they come back in morning!" A cry rose up as the chorus agreed.

A snarl twisted on Frank's face as the tide of rage came in to greet him. Etta might have grabbed my hand, but something in me took over, spraying filth. The room was all shouting, wanting.

I stood, and my mouth opened.

I was aware of shouting, but I couldn't hear it for the blood in my ears.

I only know it got silent as I left, save the lion cub crying for milk in someone else's arms.

## TWENTY-FOUR.

As I walked through the house, no one followed. The getting was getting strange for folks, I'd guess. I headed out the front door, needing air and separation from what hung over that house.

On the steps was Mei Shen.

In the far east the sky was purple and red, while the west glowed gold. She had her legs hugged up and under and she was dressed light. Her bandages peeked through. She didn't turn as I came out, just kept watchin the sky darken, losing light to blue.

I thought on whether she needed company, then thought maybe I needed company. I sat next to her.

"How you healing?" I said.

She made a noise in her mouth, considering the question: "Mm." She nodded.

"It hurts," she said. "They told me, the women, they told me sleep? But I can't. Hurts too much," she said, and looked at me and smiled for not being able to sleep in her wounds.

"I keep hearing pigs," she said. "I hear the sound they make in water, with noses." She snorted, wrinkling her nose and mimicking them.

"I think, how this happen? Rain, tied up, how this happen to me? I don't remember anything, just wake up, not move. But I stand, I make it out, but I have training, I think, what if I not? What if that happen? I think the people, who would do that? And do they know this, about me, that I am able to move even if my arms and legs are tied? I think of this.

'People, very strange.'

She smiled again. "My English, you can't understand me," she said. She rubbed her wrists.

"I hear you fine," I said. "We just gotta get the hell on outta here. That's what they're talkin' now, inside. I just lost patience with it."

She looked at me. "What you think? You think we leave? Do you know?"

She was all deference and questioning and there was something in it made me sad. I was no one to ask of anything, on a porch in a place as foreign to both of us as we was to each other.

"You ask Omar," I said, picking tobacco off my tongue. "He's suffering through the meeting. I got out, same as you." I tried to smile, but my smiles are ripped and broken things.

"Mm." Mei Shen said again, and nodded. "I'll do that."

"Right," I said.

I nodded and stood and walked to the edge of the lawn, where some of the low-level swags stood smoking. Maybe one of them would share a cig. I had nothing in me that knew how to talk to folk. I held best in a job with people staring but not talking. Kept them safe from me. Kept me safe from them.

It was no such luck at the edge of the lawn. Only one was carny, the other two was local boys. The carny was a teamster named Nick Owens. He was the kind of fella everyone said the full name of: "Everyone showed up for breakdown but Nick Owens, you know him." "That was a fun night last night till Nick Owens puked all over the beer."

The local boys I called Mutt and Jeff. Mutt was thick and Jeff was thin. Mutt and Nick looked like twin pitbulls and Jeff was a sprout with hair hung over his eyes. They offered a flask before I could ask for a sip, then said they was heading to a water hole. I asked if the water hole had cigarettes, and they laughed.

Like a pack of raccoons, we sauntered down the hill in the direction of the hamlet, but turned off a side road. Nick Owens was one of the last to arrive at the boardinghouse. He hadn't come in till that morning after a bout of strange adventures. Jeff and Mutt had picked him up sunburnt on the side of the road and made it into town with him, where he'd found our camp. Throughout the curse-filled explanation of the road he'd taken getting to us, Nick Owens made it clear he not only believed he'd had the worst time of any of us, but that something was owed him for it.

"All's I'm sayin' is this is shit right here," he said as we walked. "An' if no one sees that....well hell." And he drank from the bottle.

Mutt and Jeff were quieter, looking hangdog at my inks. Normaltimes the inks got me treated lower than other men, but they watched me with a kind of envy like I might think myself too good for them, like the inks was a fine suit they could never afford. I followed them down a dirt path between ferns and green.

"You been all over, I bet," said Jeff, his eyes rolling in his head when we finally got to the water-hole. It was an algae-caked mudpond with some logs nearby, and beercans all around. "You fight in a war or somethin'?" he asked. "You look like you did."

"Long time ago," I said. Jeff blinked with something like lust, but Mutt and Nick Owens were too involved with each other to notice.

“You all been out to where them trucks got smashed up?” Mutt asked Nick.

“Yep,” said Nick Owens. He hadn’t.

“Shit, it’s a mess out there,” Mutt said. “Don’t know how all that will get cleaned up. An’ some kinda big ditch out there or something! It’s this weird shape, all rounded on one side. I looked at it, I said, ‘How’d that even happen?’ You see that?”

“We’ll get it cleaned up,” said Nick Owens, long-suffering. “We always do.” He threw a drink back. Mutt looked at me.

“You help with that too?” he asked, grinning with only half teeth. “Or you just make assholes like this do it?”

“Eh, Sue’s good,” Nick said. “He ain’t like most. He pitches in much as he can.”

“An’ the rest?” Mutt said.

“Useless,” said Nick, and he and Mutt and laughed.

Jeff still stared at me. “But you’ll help, right?” he said, that empty stare digging into me. “Ya’ll need to fill that hole, whatever it was.”

“An’ let us know what made it, you find that out,” said Mutt. “All rounded out. Like a big ole shovel right in the earth! Damnedest thing.”

I nodded, looked at Nick, who said we’d have to work on that. I slapped at the mosquitoes hovering round and begged my out, saying I needed to find cigarettes.

“Here’s one,” said Nick. He pulled a half-smoked joint from behind one ear, and passed it to me. I looked it over, pulled matches from my pocket and lit up.

“Head down into town,” said Mutt. “Might be something open still.”

“Good luck,” said Jeff, unsmiling.



I walked back the way I came, feeling heavy and rotted with a grime that had nothing to do with drink, and everything to do with the men wasting their airs around a stinking dirt-slicked water hole. They were men I could have been, and might still be, killing space in the muck we're born from for dark year after dismal decade.

#### TWENTY-SIX.

It was the late summer when the golden parts of the evenings were longest in this part of the country, and last of the birds mixed with the first of the night insects in a back-and-forth of sound as I headed west down the hill into the first little hamlet closest to the boardinghouse. Past some green-brown meadows and a grove of trees surrounding a water pipe that ran under the road, I entered into what passed for the neighborhood – a collection of houses tight together, with similar lawns and a few cars in driveways. I felt the presence of folk without seeing them, voices through one screen door, the light from a television through a window. So it did not feel like a ghost town, despite the sleepiness of it, and I walked and smoked and supposed I'd be left alone although I wasn't sure that was what I wanted.

Past more houses and a sidestreet the road dipped and then arced upward. Another grove of trees hung near the top of this hill, and as the light faded the pavement beneath them had gone dark. And so it was that as I reached the dip, the shadows ahead of me release a figure with a face I recognized.

It was Mr. Ambrose, Alphonse to his friends, dressed more informally than was his usual. His topcoat hung loosely from the place where his hand met his pocket, and

across his chest he wore a thin undershirt and suspenders. Even in the warm glow of evening he somehow cast a pall, but smiled his same wide smile as he approached.

“Sue,” he said. “I didn’t know you folk would explore the rest of town. I suppose given time it gets a bit antsy up by the boardinghouse?”

“You could say so,” I said. “An’ grim. Most ev’ryone’s shell-shocked, still.”

“Oh yes, the old man,” he said. “An’ them lions. Certainly is strange ‘round here, isn’t it? Like we’s getting’ picked off by God.”

I took a drag on my cigarette that I much needed. “Ayuh,” I said. “Exactly like.”

“I know you’ve been through shit, Sue,” Ambrose continued. “You know how to handle yourself. Not like some. Think they been around cuz they’ve lived carny, but that ain’t real badness—still don’t know what to do when somethin’ bigger than they is shows up at the door, nor even how to name it when it does. Takes a survivor to do that. I can tell you know.”

My cig was already sucked down to the nub. I flicked it to the asphalt. “That so?” I asked. Ambrose arched an eyebrow and pursed his lips.

“That’s so,” he said. “You know what’s comin’ ‘fore it arrives. Not in specific to right now, of course—just as a general rule, I think. But you carry it like dead weight, Sue. That ain’t healthy. That’s somethin’ you’ll learn – how to live with how much you understand.”

We sized each other a moment, and then he laughed.

“Ha! All right, I’ve bullshitted you long enough. I’m going to get going before daylight’s gone. You be careful too—it’s black as mud out here past sunset.” He patted me on the shoulder, like we was friends, and went off in the direction I’d come from.

I turned. “You stayin’ at the boardinghouse? Will I see you back there?” I called out.

He turned back to me and smiled.

“Lord no,” he said. “I have a little place. I’m here till I’m not. On business, you know.”

“With our circus?” I asked.

He wobbled his head back and forth. “Yes and no. It’s complicated. But don’t worry. You’ll see me around.” And he waved and turned and walked away, leaving me to watch him go.

Seeing him around made me worry an awful lot. Which he knew—and he knew I knew. That was probably worst of all.

#### TWENTY-SEVEN.

I continued down into the hamlet, uneasy as the sky let the light go. As I crossed into what I thought might be the center of town, there was a man out in his yard, staring off into the sad alleyways. He turned to look at me as I approached, and we each observed the other: me as I was, him in hornrims and a shirt and slacks. Behind him I heard children, and I could peer through his front screen door to see a few little ones thumping around inside.

He nodded as I passed and I nodded back, wondering if he saw me as one of them, a regular man walking down a regular street, not a thing of the hides and hollows.

It was after I was past him he called out, not loud, but enough to penetrate the flat grey evening.

“You with the circus?” he asked.

I turned and nodded, still walking.

“When’s that start?” he said a second slow, as if through a haze of smoke. I looked back at him, felt him sussing me out, but it could have been nothing. I imagined him knowing the trouble our show had made in just one night in his town.

“End of the week, maybe?” said I.

He blanched. “End of the week? What’re you doin’ till then?” And he smiled, sincere and gentle. Maybe I pegged him wrong.

“Cleanin’ up,” I said. “We lost a lot in that storm, spread all over. Gotta repair ‘afore we can perform.”

He nodded, said “Hm.”

“Hey, you mind I bum?” I said, making the coded V of a cigarette between my fingers. He smirked, not mean.

“Sure,” he said. He popped a pack out his pocket, drew one for me and even struck a match in the time it took me to put it to my mouth.

“Obliged,” I said, and he nodded again.

He asked me where we came from, and I told him. Asked me how long I been on the road and I told him too. I asked him how long he’d lived here and we talked awhile. I believe he was a few years younger, and a lifetime softer. Of course I don’t remember a specific word we said. I am not the men we pretended ourselves to be.

As we talked, we saw a figure come walking up the road toward us. Its features sharpened and I made out a man, middle aged and softer still than my new friend on the

lawn. He was grey haired, dressed in shorts and a vest and hiking boots, carrying a walking stick. We both nodded to him as he approached.

He smiled to us as he came up. "Hey there!" he called. "Am I in Pickinpaw?"

"Hey there," said my friend in hornrims. "Pickinpaw's north. You're heading west."

The other man smiled bigger. "Well I know that. You all had a pretty shower up here the other night, din'cha?"

Hornrims looked at me, then back at the man in hicking boots. "We had a storm, fella," he said. "Tore the place apart." Hornrims pointed at me. "We were just saying. He's coming through with a traveling show and got grounded here."

Hiking Boots looked at me with his grin quivering and his eyeballs popped. "Is that so? Just around here?"

"Up the hill toward the edge of town," I said, and pointed back the way I'd come. "All the fields tore up, and us with it."

"Where, did you say?"

I looked at him. "There's a boardinghouse up at the edge of town. Our trucks got spread to pieces all up around there. That's where."

Hiking Boots nodded, still smiling.

Hornrims looked at him flatly, and pointed a finger behind us. "And Pickinpaw is to the north. And you're heading west."

The man nodded, eyes looking up the road now. "I know that, I know that."

Hornrims and I smiled at each other. I craned my neck around to follow his pointing

finger, peering down between the long-shadowed streets, slashes of the last day's gold shedding light on stripped-away nothing.

"There a bar in this town?" I asked.

Hornrims nodded around the smoke. "Bout three blocks down and hang a left. They close early, but it's what we got out here."

I said my thanks, and told them I'd be taking my leave. Hiking Boots hadn't started moving yet, but stood transfixed looking up the hill. Hornrims sighed as I turned to go.

"Who knows," he said. "Maybe I'll join you." He looked at Hiking Boots. "In a little while."

But Hiking Boots suddenly snapped to, said "Thank you," as started walking up the hill toward the boardinghouse. Hornrims and I shrugged to each other.

His wife come out their front door with an echoed slam, and joined him on the lawn. I saw her step to him. He flicked his cig out and crushed it in the grass, then kissed her head.

"Who's that?" she asked. I was walking before I heard his answer, as the shadows made dark.

TWENTY-EIGHT.

As I walked through town I saw no signs – no posters or flyers letting folks know a circus come to town. Under normal circumstances a street crew drove ahead of the rest of the circus, and set upon towns like Viking raiders, layering giant scrawling canvas

signs over every square inch so that entire populations might funnel themselves into our big top to be dazzled and entertained.

But here I saw nothing anywhere I looked. The town itself seemed vacant, shuttered windows and flat colored houses intermixed with the the foliage. I'd hear the low hum of a radio or children indoors, but no one on the street as the last embers of the sun flickered out of the sky. These were not the streets of my youth, in which we would have to be dragged in by the short hairs to stop playing in the neighbor's yard past sundown. But I'm not the first to make these observations, nor the most honest. This is only how I believe I remember those times.

I did as the man with the horn-rims had advised, hanging a left three blocks down. This took me up thin, grassed-over railroad tracks cut through the center of town. I walked longside them past the first streetlamp I'd seen, into an sidestreet glowing neon at the end.

The bar was about what you'd expect –grey and sad and orange-gold with light. I couldn't imagine a town this small could even serve such a place, but perhaps the railroad might have brought in enough visitors, back when it ran.

I thought suddenly that I should have worn a jacket to cover my ink. Even in the shadows of the bar I felt like they were a sort of beacon of strange in a place where men took offense at such thing. But the swig from Mutt's flask had stirred the urge in me, and overwhelmed my worry.

My concern dropped away as I saw the establishment's only clientele was a sad sack at one end of the bar, a broken woman at the other, and a couple silhouettes in one far corner. I took a spot midway down the barstools.

“What'll you have?” a shadow asked.

“What you got,” I said.

The night came on and softened; I finished my cigarette as the sad sack cleared out, followed by a swing of the front door that meant the shadows in the back of the room had left too.

As the smoke swam around, the woman down the bar slid up on me. I could feel the heat come off her. She was maybe older than me by five years and sagged all round, her body sort of pulsing with that late slow-burn, suggesting what it'd be like to lose yourself in all that flesh.

She said one word, and I had no idea how it was meant.

“Gin.”

“You buyin' or askin'?” I said.

She laughed, a deep bark.

“Neither,” she said. Her lips stretched from fat to thin in a half-smile. “I'm askin' if you play cards.”

I thought she was kidding and told her so. She shook her head.

“What I wanna do right now is take you to the back corner booth, and beat the hell out of you at cards. Play for cigs and I'll steal your pack.”

I looked down at the table. A pack of cigarettes was there. I turned my head sideways and the woman laughed her barking laugh again.

“See how nice I am? I'm even giving you a pack to start with,” she said. “I'll even let you smoke one. But take the rest and follow me.”



I thought again of the gypsy that had once divined my cosmic energy after being fascinated by my tattoos, and how that moment cast me in an uncomfortable brightness, like I was being watched by the universe and poked at like a bug, laid bare so that I had to witness the simple gears that spun in me and accept that they were all I was. As I turned to follow the suggestive sway of the woman who only wanted from me a game or two of gin, it seemed like the hours I might idle here were good a way as any to ease the weight of sharper and more distinctive times.

I sat on one side of the booth. She dealt from the other. I asked her name and she told me, but that don't mean you need to know.

I put a cigarette in my mouth and she said, "That's your one. Rest of that pack stays on the table. They're gonna be mine."

I smiled. "You ain't even gonna put out one on your side, just for appearances?"

She smiled back. "Honey, you think I care about appearances?"

The arched eyebrow was drawn on, the lid underneath heavy with cosmetic. I laughed. It was my sort of time.

By the time the old bartender wiped down his bar a last time and flipped the Open sign to Closed, my cigarettes were gone. The woman laughed as, on the last hand, I prepared to remove my shirt.

"Ha! You keep it," she said. "I'll let you play one more to try to win a light to get you home."

We began to deal when the barman walked over, pulled a chair up backward with a bottle and a glass. He plunked both on the table, and poured himself a shot without a word.

“We dealin’ you in? We’ll have to switch our game,” she said. “And I’m no good at poker.”

“Hell you are, I’ve seen you,” said the man, through a droopy mustache and sheepdog eyebrows.

“Well then,” the woman said to me. “One more hand?”

“I might just take a last beer instead,” I said, looking to the old man. “You mind?”

“Long as I don’t have to get up again,” he said back in the same flat drawl.

I found a long bottle in an icebox underneath the bar, threw a few dollars on top the register and came back to the table. The woman was shuffling but not dealing.

“Keeps my hands busy,” she said. I nodded and said that was fair enough. I was aware of a buzzing and thrumming beyond the bar windows.

“Bugs you got around here make a racket,” I said, cocking my head toward the outside.

“It’s locust season,” the old man said.

“Don’t listen to him,” said the woman. “There’s no such thing as a locust season.”

“Oh really? What do you call when locusts come?” the man said.

“Summer,” the woman said back. The man harrumphed and turned to me.

“So you in town awhile?” he said man.

“I’m in a circus,” I said.

“We have a circus in town?” he said.

“You need to read a paper once in awhile,” the woman said.

“Hell, I didn’t know that,” the man said. “What do you do in the circus?”

I tapped my shoulder while I drank. His eyes peered forward.

“He’s a tattooed man, Bert,” said the woman.

The old man made a long “oooooh.”

“Where you from?” he said. I shrugged.

“Well, where?” he said again.

I paused. “You want the short version or the long?”

“I got nowhere to be,” he said.

The woman laughed loud. He looked at her, surprised.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothin’,” she said, and looked at me. “Give us the long. My daughter’s got a man over. I’m not headin’ home till late.”

It was already late, but I took no mind. I sipped a beer, and started talking. Talked a lot more than I done a long time. I skipped around, telling parts wrong and backwards with what pieces might make a good story. We smoked, lifting from the woman’s hard-won cigs.

Which used to be mine, sort of, so it was really like I was paying them a little, to listen to me prattle on. This is what we all do, when we can’t help but feel a little guilty for using each other’s space.

## PART TWO

# A STORY IN A BAR

### **THE WARS.**

TWENTY-NINE.

I came home from my first war with three tattoos. This seemed a fair amount, not as much as some but enough to mark its claim on me and separate me from other men forever. I'd gone in a grunt as young and dumb as any, and backed my way up the ranks through death and dispatchment simply because I didn't know no better.

Places where you got inked was mostly all the same and under the same circumstances. The loudest and most anxious of us would get blazing drunk and rally up the rest. I was just a stroke and hadn't much started drinking, so I didn't have the advantage of liquid courage to ease my nerves or the sting of needles. It might sound funny, but I never liked finding new ways to get pained neither. As we walked through camp on our first late-night drunk to get tattooed, I asked our idea-man, a big sloppy hulk named Johnson, what the pain factor was on getting inked.

"Like a bee sting," he said, which I have heard many times since. "Cept it just keeps goin' an' you forget about it after the first minute."

I told him that didn't make sense, and if it was all the same I would not be getting the anchor ringed in devils and cherubs with the words "RIGHT TO FIGHT" down my forearm with the rest of them.

Johnson and group stopped in our walk across the campground. He touched me light on the chest with a half-smile. “Fellas, listen to this,” he said, and the men gathered round like jackals.

“I’ll get inked with you,” I said, “But if it gonna be a half-hour bee sting I’d just as well get somethin’ smaller.”

“So you’re queer,” Johnson laughed, his big meat slab man-tits jiggling under his shirt.

To this day I don’t know where I got my ease from. It disappeared along with my youth, but back then I was diplomatic as a chaplain.

“I’m tired enough gettin’ shot to hell by day an’ eaten up by chink mosquitos at night,” I answered. “I don’t need another reason to have trouble sleepin’.”

“Tell you what,” he said. “You can get somethin’ small, but *we* get to pick it out.”

“Tell *you* what,” I said. “I’ll go last, and if all y’all get through it without cryin’ like women, I’ll get your anchor.”

The men laughed. Johnson grinned big. “The anchor *and* whatever we pick.”

I shook my head. “How’s that make sense?”

“How *don't* it?” Johnson’s pals were lined up behind him like geese in formation.

“Hell,” I said. “Last time I talk deals with a dumb mick.”

I needn’t have worried about the anchor.

THIRTY.

McLaren howled. Sloveki wept like an infant. Even Big Tom Styverson was gritting his teeth under the needle. Johnson was openly ashamed.

“This is just pitiful. Pitiful. You may be queer but at least I didn’t have to watch you cry,” Johnson said, coming out from the shop. Outside I was sitting and smoking.

“You figure out what I’m gettin’ yet?” I asked him. “I gotta special place on my shoulder just for you.”

“Dwyer is in the back lookin’ through some books they got,” Johnson said.

“Though I can’t imagine anything they come up with will make you look sillier n’ he did when the ink hit him and he starts callin’ for his mother.”

They made me look away when I was getting it. Dwyer, this spectacled dweeb outta Akron that wouldn’t survive the year, brayed like a donkey at the tat he chose but wouldn’t let me see what it was. Sloveki had me do a staring contest with him, yelling at me to keep focused on his eyes while he hooted and hollered about how much blood there was, about how my face turned red while the needle sang. The others were falling over themselves with whatever stupid thing they’d chosen. As many tears as they shed getting tatted just about doubled with how goddamn funny they thought I was. Johnson didn’t laugh as much. The whole thing had gotten too dumb for him. He wandered back outside to smoke, and said to call him when I was done.

So you know, anyone they tells you the bee sting feeling goes away when you’re getting drawn on is just full of shit. The sound of the gun, the whine and the buzz starts in hot and then creeps in deep, and there’s something cold about knowing your skin ain’t just yours no more. Those are the sensations I took away, even then, and in the years since those feelings have mixed and gelled with many others. Sometimes those thoughts make me feel good and sometimes bad, and sometimes nothing.

Finally the needle's whine turned off with a thin click, and the old chink that inked us all wiped down my arm. Johnson poked his head back in the doorway. McLaren and Big Tom looked down at my arm.

"What in hell's that?" Big Tom said.

McLaren squinted, and then smiled like he was looking into the face of God.

"That," he said, "is a rabbit givin' it to a goat."

It surely was. A google-eyed cartoon bunny was plowing away on the backside of a billy goat, who looked just as pleased to be receiving as the bunny was to be giving in the space between my wrist and my elbow.

It took a moment of silence as all of us peered down at it, harsh and bruised under the tattooist's lamp. Then Johnson roared. He guffawed loud and long and the others joined in, even the tattooist, like schoolboys telling fart jokes.

I looked at it, and smiled myself. It felt like a stray dog wandered in during a rainstorm and taken up residence on my skin. It was small and ridiculous and just plain humiliating, but I couldn't help but be strangely pleased.

"But why's it say 'Sue'?" I said.

"Shit, you dumb chink!" Dwyer yelled. "Who in hell's Sue? That don't make sense! I didn't tell you to draw that!"

"Fuck you!" the tattooist shouted back. "I draw picture! Picture!"

"Hell, he's right! Haw haw haw!" shouted Sloveki, holding up the tattoo book.

The drawing of cartoon sodomy in question, like most of the others from the book, was given an air of specificity by having its own inscription. In a faithful curve parallel to the shadow beneath the goat's rounded belly, the original artist had written "Sue" in an

elegant cursive font that might, to the untrained eye, have looked like part of the larger design. And through the hand of a backwater tattooist who didn't know written English, this random addition to the first work had, in turn, been branded onto me.

"You stupid squint! You ruined it!" Dwyer yelled, backing the tattooist into a corner. Johnson grabbed him.

"Dwyer, you idiot," he said. "You wanted a goof tattoo and you got one. Leave him alone."

"Well I ain't payin' him!" Dwyer shouted.

"You don't have to," I said, pulling out my wallet. "It ain't your tattoo."

Dwyer cursed that chink the whole walk back to camp, but I didn't mind. There was some small poetry in it all that I appreciated, even then. I wore the ink that whole tour, as the horror set in until I was discharged a year after. Folks started calling me Sue as I got shipped around, and I didn't mind that either. I had started getting numb to everything as I was shaped by jungle skirmish, and my name was first to go.

The last two pieces of mail I got during that war came in the same day. One was to tell me my tour was over, and I'd be shipping out in two days time. I was expecting that one, as most of my boys had gotten the same thing already.

The second was a telegram that my father had died.

Everyone's father dies, so I won't go into losing mine. You don't need to know what kind of man he was and it'll only make you think of things you're trying to keep buried your own self, which I understand.



But for the sake of the story you should know he was a preacher, just not a pious one. I remember him telling the foulest jokes and the bluest stories to the shame of my mother, who was a bit more tightly wound.

A preacher's family get moved quite a lot as a church's needs come and go. And while it wasn't much discussed, at a certain point in my growing up it seemed easiest for everyone if my father were to travel alone, and leave my mother and the rest of us behind. We kept in touch through letters, but for years that was all.

So on the last day before I flew home from my first war, I went back to that same chink tattooist and got two pieces done.

I got that goat and rabbit filled in, so as not to offend my mother. When they was done it looked like a sideways heart.

And I got a little cross, to remember my father. I weren't much of a bible man myself, and I knew he wouldn't have cared for the gesture none. It was what made sense at the time, is all--to lock his spirit into me before I left the steaming war for whatever ghost of life I might find back home.

The cross is so small it's gotten lost in all the swirls of drawings around it since then, as obscured as that farm animal rutting that got covered up way back when. I think it's better that it's hidden. As many inks I got, it always seems there's more of me in need of covering up.

### THIRTY-ONE.

I was on an island I didn't know the name of. I was drunk. I was in an ink chair.

Laura had left me.

I met her in the southwestern backwater where I'd ended up on return from my first war. It was a town I know nothing of except my father had died there, and when I showed up from hitching rides across four states I found a community that was expanding and in need of strong men with two hands, a work ethic, and no larger ambitions. My own hometown had been abandoned, and what was left felt like a grave. So I started working in a place where folks woulda known me by my father's name, if I'd cared to share it. Being close to him rooted me somehow, and that was something I needed just that little bit.

You see a lot of drunks in wartime. Men who push through by planning their next drink, who can shoot a bullet three to the wind. Anything you can find to get addicted to that makes the horror fade into the wallpaper. I myself had been all right. I was holding it together.

But then I lost Laura.

I'd met her when we built a new gym for the school. It was a big job, one of our biggest, and the whole district came out to do what they could. The incoming faculty, mostly bookish if not also amiable, would set us up a picnic lunch the days we worked. This meant a lot of pretty young things serving up egg salad and chocolate cake to big dumb lugs – two kinds of folk with no business being around each other. Half our town ended up schoolteachers married to construction workers within five years. Laura and me were two of that blessed lot.

I wouldn't know how to tell you any details to make them worth hearing. Laura was blond, and tall, and whip-smart, and like me wasn't much for long discussion. We fell in love without speaking, just being round each other long enough till it was so. She was

funny, and mean, and ran circles around me. I took whatever she dished, and when we were alone her head got light and she was a giggly schoolgirl in my arms.

I won't say I was the most attentive man. Our town grew so fast that there was always new folk around. I had a taste for most anything that was easy enough to take. And I always suspected Laura, at the start of every school year, of lusting after the college-taught academic bucks that came in to teach from fall to spring. It created an obsession in me, wondering at the safety of our marriage, and wondering made me ugly inside.

One summer Laura told me we'd need to build a nursery. That changed things. I turned into the proudest foreman that town'd ever seen. All the men from work came by to help, and in a week we had a room set up any baby'd be a happy piggy to live in.

That summer I got called up again.

Laura took it hard, and I felt blame in her. The army was an entirely foreign entity. I felt her blaming herself for marrying a grunt like me, and like I was leaving on purpose for fear of raising a child.

Or maybe she didn't feel that. It ain't nothing I can guess at no more.

But when you feel accused, you can't help but get mean because part of you is hungry to believe every terrible thing you possibly can about yourself. And you say things that make it seem like you cannot wait to leave, to fall out of the life and love you no longer want any part of.

At least that's how I am. Maybe you're lucky. Maybe doubt don't sow such seeds in you.

I went to war again already fighting, with Laura and for her and against her, feeling like the future would empty me out, so I could be quit of her forever. We wrote

back and forth, starting sweet but getting sad and then hurt – both frustrated, both lonely, her having it hard since I'd left, me fearful she'd carry on without me.

She sent me pictures of the pink raisin that turned out to be my daughter. I saw her open her little eyes, stretch out her little hands. I watched her walking, laughing, having never met the angel I'd created for this world. It made my highs higher, my lows unbearable. I stopped writing back. Soon the letters trickled in from her: was I all right? Was I upset?

One horrible, rainy day in a disgusting port surrounded by rotten fish and aging whores, I wrote to her. I told her not to write me. I told her I couldn't be the ghost of the man I was supposed to be at home, and the ugly thing I'd found myself to be in an ugly world.

It was the letter ruined my life.

I followed it by drinking for half a year. I was getting schlepped all over by now, at no station more than a few weeks before another mission came down the pipe, moving us from blood and shit to blood and shit. I didn't know if I were still alive, or how I could be.

The next time I heard from Laura would be the last. Those goddamned academic bucks.

THIRTY-TWO.

It was at an army hospital when I came upon Johnson again.

His thickness was mostly gone, and from the look of it, gone fast – his skin hung loose below his neck and across his cheeks. The rest of him was wrapped in bandages,

and there was a stump where his right hand had been. His eyes swam almost a minute before they got a bead on me.

“Shit,” he said.

I smiled at him best I could without pulling stitches.

“I wanna show you something,” I said.

I was sitting next to his bed in a tiny wooden cedar chair and I scooted it forward, screeching against the linoleum. A nurse pursed her lips at me as she walked by. I got a lot of that by then.

I flipped my forearm over to show him: an anchor, sharp as could be, with demons and cherubs flying around it. Below it was the familiar scrawl of SUE. And beneath that was a sideways heart, now filled in. Beneath that a rabbit was railing a goat eternal.

“Didn’t have the room for no other words,” I said. Johnson’s eyes crawled around my forearm, up my shoulder, then back down to my wrist.

Every bit was a pattern now – strange swirls that led into a pinup girl here, a bomber there, a skull or two and stranger things – fish and wheels and guns and shapes thrown together without plan or purpose, a maze of stories leading back and forth over the run of me.

“Fuck, man. What’d you do?” he said, his words numb with morphine drip.

“I got shot across the back a’ my skull, what I done,” I said, turning round to show him the wound that graced me. My hair would eventually grow over it, but for now it was a nasty worm of bunched flesh where my spine latched onto the back of my brain.

“Jesus,” said Johnson. “You’re lucky you can do more than drool an’ piss yourself.”

I wasn’t so sure if I was lucky. There’d been shadows crept in since the shot, and I didn’t know if things were more or less decent than they were before I’d gotten hit. I still don’t know, to speak the truth. I just shrugged.

Johnson looked at me again, seeing that my left arm had begun to crawl with pictures too, though not as many. They would all fill in. I had time.

“You been getting’ those...the whole time?” he asked slow.

I’d been getting them since the drinking didn’t do me no more. There was only so much I could take before my eyes were swimming not just when I went to bed but even still when I woke up, and I wanted to be drunker but it just didn’t work. Laura was still there, and everything I’d lost, and some nights my agony was what was getting drunk, not me, engorged on the fullness of itself. It had been a shit batch of years, fighting the bad fight in a thousand dead places, through jungles hung with gutted, faceless bodies and burning towns of rotting raped corpse-women. Some days I thought I was just piles of bones and muscles who couldn’t figure out it’d just be easiest to stop moving, foolishly resistant to my invitation into that flat and restless world.

It was one night when I lied awake with flies licking my eyeballs and mosquitoes crawling in and out my mouth that I remembered getting tattoos with the old boys of the first war. It seemed that war had been part of a glowing golden youth that now I’d lost – and even then, I’d done nothing but kill who I was told. Half them old boys I knew were dead, but their memories were at least familiar.

The next time we hauled off at port, I hit land and walked into the closest ink shop I could find. The anchor tattoo was first. It was the only one I even gave instructions on.

Every time we docked I'd saved up enough money for another piece. I'd have one started in one country and finished somewhere else, so the ink itself got changed through mistranslation and a thousand buzzing pens. I came to know a man can find a new addiction in anything.

Soon I didn't know if I wanted more but I kept searching, in every town and village, for some sick scared ink merchant that would take a turn of violence on me. I continued to feel incomplete, undone, unfinished, and the creeping fear was rising that there might never be another way to live.

Sometimes I just lay in the dark and looked at myself, counting the lines to remind me they was there. My skin was being shaped into something I no longer knew, and without me it became a higher version of itself, and the rest of me that was familiar got hollowed out. I was empty eyes and missing face and mouth fallen open, hanging upside down with my guts scattered and my own blood run up my nose on the jungle fields of Hell.

All this, in that dank hospital on the eve of my flight home, was more than I could say. It's taken years to even know that much, and there's still much of me that's missing.

"Well," I said, looking at the painted scars covering my body. "I been gettin' them. A while now anyways."

Johnson nodded, then looked into nothing a minute. Then back at me.

"Shit Sue," he said. "They couldn't find my hand."

And his face, all worn and jagged creases, crushed in on itself with tears.

## **CONEY ISLAND.**

THIRTY-THREE.

Five years later, I woke with my bed on fire.

“Sue! Up! Up!” Serry shouted at me through the door. The sheets licked up from the floor to the mattress and the wall next to me was like a boiler set to explode, a belching hole of flame coming in the window off the alley, the narrow crawlway between my building and the next on that sad clustered stretch of flophouses down back of the Tornado, which wasn’t the Thunderbolt and wasn’t the Cyclone but still drew crowds down Neptune Avenue.

My first thought was that I had got my room lit in my sleep through spilled drink and a smoldering cigarette. Then as I focused on the flames tearing apart my wall I realized something bigger had happened, like bad wiring eating the building to ash.

Old instincts kicked in and I went from drunk to animal death machine, quick-leaping across the room. I tumbled through the door, and caught myself rolling down the stairs, I flopped open on my back looking at the ceiling with the sharp angles of the steps against my head.

Serry was kicking my shoulders, saying, “Get up, get up,” and I pushed myself standing, aware but not aware that the steps here, the wall here, was cool despite the heat above. A little scrunched man, one of the dwarves from the indoor rodeo called himself Mr. Shift, at the bottom of the stairwell shouted to move! Move! With him was Puzzle the Ape-Man, staring up at me dumb through the hair over his face and eyes.

And me and Serry tumbled down the stairs, as something above us roared as it died through the bottomless hunger of the fire. The thoughts were coming through my



head in a jagged rush, and it occurred to me look back, down the downstairs hall, to the miserable old wretch who owned the place, who I'd sooner died but felt a weird pang of guilt at thinking it, feeling like I needed to save her and her stinky bush pig of a husband and their thousand cats, but then I realized the cats was running over my feet in a stream and Old Wretch and Stinky Bush Pig were outside, so's me and Serry followed ape and dwarf as the scaffolding caved in, pushing us out into the street where fire trucks swarmed past us and the neighborhood was bleary, awakening screams.

Winter in New York don't mean snow until January, and in early December all you got was cold and bite. Ice hung on the wind with tendrils of heat floated through, so that I knew I would regret running out of doors in bare feet. All round me folk in their underclothes poured out of buildings, a thousand voices demanding answers over sirens. In that sad decade the parks had been stripped to vacant lots and the few remaining rides stood against the skyline like camp lights. We gathered beneath them, the freaks and the damned, while the pigs and the firebugs slammed their cars in a criss-cross to break up traffic across the crumbling structure of the peninsula.

I shouted at Serry "What is this? What is this?" as we cut through the fractured mobs, following the dwarf and the ape. And fingers were pointing up and past us and I felt something like the sun as we ran down Neptune and around 17<sup>th</sup>.

We turned a corner and ran headlong into it. My eyes went blind with heat.

The Tornado was on fire.

It was as if some angry god had screamed, and in that scream belched filth and bile that tore the wooden coaster through. The rails twisted upward in melted curls where the structure had cracked and collapsed. Fire hoses gathered, but there was little to be

done except contain the inferno before it spread to more surrounding slums. But flames crawled across the rooftops, over and behind us from the way we'd come, and fire ate the sky.

I looked to Serry, and to Puzzle and to Mr. Shift.

And they looked back at me, three sets of eyes in the night.

These are looks that I have come to know well, in men's face who set their minds to destruction, and are then forced to watch it carry out. I saw something familiar in those faces now, something guilty in their glassy eyes. A completion stank of things beneath.

As knowing dawned in me, a crew of paramedics emerged from the flames. They rolled a stretcher between them, on which lay a long, contorted lump of coal that used to be alive.

“That sideshow underneath the coaster’s burnt to shit!” one man called out.

“Anything else inside it’s gone. We just heard this one screaming.”

“Won’t be screaming any more,” sighed another, then: “I’ll bring the wagon ‘round.”

One hand of the burned figure curled in agony as it reached into the air. The rest was blackened. This dead thing that had once been a woman screaming was small, not dwarf-small but close enough.

Scraps of an ugly bright green pea coat looked at me from beneath the ashes. I could still see the horrible mash of peacocks and neuveau trim that patterned it, a tapestry of tasteless loops and repeated plumes in a checkered grid.

The coat had belonged to our old boss. Her name had been Old Nan.

As we stood there, me and Serry and Puzzle and Mr. Shift looking down at her burned-out pieces, one of the tubby stagehands ran up.

“Christ!” he said, eyes wide. He looked at us. “They’re not wasting any time! They’re rounding up the shows for questioning. If they don’t get every one of us, they’re bringing back six squads in the morning to tear all our squats apart!”

Footfalls echoed on the walk behind me. I turned around to see Serry and the dwarf and Ape-Man scrambling, cutting away and back through the crowd without a word.

I smelled it now, the stink of wrongness, and I should have been smart enough to let it go. At the very best I could have followed the tubby stagehand. At the least I could have turned tail in my own direction, before I got involved in anything more dark and deep.

But maybe I was back in the jungle that night already, and taking matters in my hands felt good and right. Maybe not. Maybe I could not stop myself until I was covered in the dark.

I took one more look at that stagehand, shook my head, and chased Serry back into the crowd.

#### THIRTY-FOUR.

Old Nan did not live by the waterfront. She had an apartment two blocks north amongst the warehouses and vacant lots that covered the peninsula. I through the narrow alleys and heaps of garbage, under the blue cast of the witching hour that could not cover the misdeeds of dishonest men. Ahead of me I heard footfalls splashing through the mud

and grit of this horrifying city and the horrifying southland burg that took us in. Even after I lost their sound and scent, still I followed.

Each of us went to Old Nan's only once, after the first six months if we hadn't been fired or mangled in the grinding wheels of the coaster. You made it that far and the other carnies would jeer you for your 'date with Nan,' and offer fair warnings that a strong stomach was needed in order to survive.

Mine was on a Sunday afternoon in early fall, when the grey skies and rain-stained buildings mixed with the purple leaves that only fell in the urban country, making the rest of the city beautiful and Coney Island a sad and savage waste. It was the end of our season but we would milk it a little longer, and if I found find work till January there was a sideshow down in St Petersburg that had an open call.

But that was some time off, so first I had my date with Nan.

She opened the doors and handed me a glass of wine before I stepped through, told me "Mind the cats" and instructed me to dodge the shit on the floor.

"One just made a mess," she said, which I took to mean many cats had made many messes. With the stench rising, I knew I was getting drunk.

The odor was only combated by the tripe Nan served for our main course, a meal of guts and brains while a feline Nan called Lucky took a dry, crumbly dump on the table next to me. Over this Nan talked to me about her grandchildren, her two ex-husbands and the third deceased. She said I looked good now that I was more inked up, like she hadn't been paying attention to the new tats that she'd helped pay for in the months I'd been there.

As I adjusted to the casual decay of her crypt, our conversation got mixed with laughter and sloppy drink. She leaned forward and stared at me like an owl.

“You know, Sue,” she said. “You know, you're not like some.”

“These folks are jackals, Sue. Always remember. You're dealing with animals. You never let them know where you keep your money or your housekey. I don't even keep my till at the sideshow office after dark.”

“Oh no?” I asked.

“God no,” she said. “Everything I have is in these walls, Sue. No bank! no accountant! You can't trust a fucking one. ‘Scuse me. But....you know.” And she leaned back. “Lockbox in my bedroom.” She patted a silver chain around her neck. “And *I* have the only key.”

And we both howled at that, and then she swore up and down she'd kill a child at that moment for one cigarette, so I cigged her and we smoked. I stumbled home drunk and forgot most everything for weeks after.

But now, as I splashed through the ugly alleyways between Mermaid and Neptune, I remembered pillow talk with Serry during the in-between days. Maybe I'd joked getting past old Nan's million shitting cats for her silly bedroom lockbox. Hell, maybe the joke had had a shadow to it too.

Maybe that shadow crossed over Serry's eyes, and maybe one week later some new folks started at the show, which seemed odd so late in season but they was up to work for cheap. And maybe one was an ape-man and the other a dwawrf, and maybe Serry had seemed to know them a bit already. Maybe them three whispered thick off by themselves some nights when I walked home.

And maybe all this flashed through my head, so neat and black-hearted clean that I could not doubt them.

And I ran crosstown to Old Nan's place, to prove what I knew was so.

Nan's door hung open like a mouth with a broken jaw, her cats out on the front steps with flat light in their eyes as I approached. As I pounded up the stairs they scattered and headed south to mix with the cats from my own apartment building, who even now were forming tribal bands to slink through the dark places of Coney Island.

And I entered Nan's house, sticking to the darkness like Coney Island cats, with my fur up and a low growl in me, ready to be claws and teeth if the moment struck.

#### THIRTY-FIVE.

I got my Bowie knife nowhere specific. It had been a gift of some sort from a man in town whose face I don't remember, when I got called up for my first war. He showed it to to me with some sort of fetish glee, as if the idea of cutting throats made him stiffer than any woman. I remember the women in the mountains where I'm from. That he might choose death before sex didn't surprise me.

The knife had no history, just some huntshop special wrapped in low-grade leather that still had the tag attached. It seemed sterile and mundane and not akin to the savage mystery I thought I would enter into when I had finished basic.

The year and a half in my first war, the knife stayed sheathed. Perhaps I pulled it out to pop a beer, if I remembered to carry it at all. It made no sense for me back then. I did not see its use.

It gathered dust most the time that I was home, along with everything else stained green. The week I got called up again, I'd been sorting through my steamer trunk left over from the first war, while Laura avoided me in the kitchen. I found the knife then, and watched it wink in the twilight of our bedroom creeping full of cold and sadness.

I'd wandered outside and found an old oak tree. I began to throw the knife against the trunk, while the hardness inside me uncoiled and began to breathe. I threw until I could not see, until the dusk and turned to dark. When I packed for true I made sure the knife was in my bag.

It was my second war that I began collecting operating tools. So did every man, although they will not tell you. Knives and blunts and bits of hurt might got found in one small village or another. For every bit of ink got scratched in me, I'd done things to feed those long strange years.

I hadn't even realized till I got running cross the neighborhood towards Nan's, but somehow that mountain huntshop Bowie knife had made it to my hand when I escaped the flames in Coney Island. It might not have been till I crept down Old Nan's front hall, cats running past me into the street beyond, that I felt it in my hand clutched in reverse, teeth out, while my other hand reached out into the dark. It may not have been till I heard sounds of movement that I felt my grip tense round the hilt, and might not have been till I was running across the apartment that I felt the thirst. The old movements. The old breathing.

Then I was in Nan's room.

It was hung with floral paper that withered from the walls, and photographs and framed crochet. An old lockbox sat upon the bed, and the dwarf named Mr. Shift stood

above it with a hammer meant to break it open. His eyes swung up to squint at me, while another shape rushed forward.

I slammed the ape-man Puzzle in what I believed to be his guts as he rushed me. There were things I could do, back then, when the training had not yet fully left me. Now I'm every bit the clumsy animal that Puzzle was that night at Nan's.

Puzzle doubled over, vomiting into his pelt. I kicked him in the face and head. Serry was shouting somewhere, I looked up and the lockbox was gone and dwarf legs was hanging out the bedroom window. I realized Serry shouted not at me but Shift, about to scamper off with the shared spoils.

I crossed the room to grab him back, but I misjudged his strength and weight and wound up getting pulled through with him, falling outside into garbage as I hit the asphalt. Shift was already up and running past me, but I grabbed him and rolled over on him, pushing him against the ground.

He spat tobacco juice and mucus, but I'd had worse and I would not let him go. I held the knife to him and he sneered. The street light cast weird scars across on his face from many a knife that had come before.

"What you done?" I said, grabbing round his neck to keep him.

"We'll cut you in!" he said. "Lemme up, we'll cut in you in for nothing!"

"You trapped Nan inside her own damn show and lit her up, you little shit!"

"So what?" Shift spat. "You think you'll save her *now*?"

"That show wasn't worth more than the paycheck you got," I said. "You killed that woman for a kiddie's piggy bank."

This is what I think I said. Perhaps I only hit the dwarf, over and over.



“You don't know *shit*,” he whispered through bleeding teeth, an eye weeping down his cheek. “That place was due for torching. Old Nan would have shut it down!”

“Bullshit,” I said. “She woulda run that show from her deathbed, and then she would have run you out.”

He shook his head like I was stupid, like hanging beneath me in that alleyway was a charity from him to me.

“That show was dead. What do you know?”

He grinned.

“There's nothing worth its salt in you.”

I felt blind hate in him, a poison in him killed a woman and burned her island down. It burned with arrogance and stupidity, a righteous hate that cursed him with a brand of truth.

I had no room in me for him. The Bowie hung above his eye.

THIRTY-SIX.

Serry stood at the mouth of the alleyway as I came out. I handed her the lockbox. It was warped shut from where I'd bashed in Shift's skull and brains.

“You keep that,” I said.

Serry looked down at it, then back at me.

“S'pose we both run now,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said.

With Serry it wasn't that we couldn't get along. But neither of us could make the room. We both took up the same kind of space. There was nothing in me that could take

her in my head nor my heart, and that wasn't a slight she could forgive. I couldn't love her, but in that, somehow I knew her. Knew her, and could do nothing for it.

Already we were pulled in opposite directions, stealing away our guilts and spoils from the garbage dump of Coney Island. We took separate sidestreets, and neither she nor I looked back.

I would not land again for months. When I did it was as some other kind of man, in skin that fit me better. Or less worse, at least.

**MAUREEN.**

THIRTY-SEVEN.

I will tell you one more thing, which may in turn lead to one other.

I was crossing America drunk, or at least part of it, which may have been halfway through Ohio or Tennessee. I made it a long way just stumbling, stumbling, carrying a bottle and pissing in my own clothes. This was how I had escaped New York, and those I believed might be after me for the death of Mr. Shift. I didn't know if anyone cared who I was any longer. I settled into a sickening drunken haze for weeks and hours and days.

And so it was that I found myself on a dirt road, much like the one where I'd be stranded years later when my circus got grounded by a strange bad storm. And on this late evening as I stumbled along, half-running and hobbling forward, hiccupping and crying to myself, another storm was coming, making the air hot and purple-yellow like a bruise, while the sky lanced quiet with lightning miles away. I could smell rain coming, and it had me in some kind of panic, as if in escaping it I might somehow escape some horror inside myself, but knowing neither of those was true nor possible.

But I had seen a house, some distance off, with no barrier for wind nor rain but sturdy and solid against the last grey streaks of dusk. I saw it like a beacon for weakened broken things, on that darkened evening of midsummer when the world had lost all meaning.

I'd had my shoes stolen somewhere east and my feet no longer felt the gravel that bloodied them. I hardly knew when I collapsed, but it was raining and I slept in rain like a blanket. Strong hands lifted me, bringing me into warmth and light, throwing me across a

large pine table so I groaned with hurt as my body hit the wood. And soft voices surrounded me, saying that there was little else to do but keep me from the storm.

### THIRTY-EIGHT.

A light hung over me, rocking from tumult and wind. My neck ached, my spine ached, all twisted as I lay on my stomach, cheekbone pressed hard on pine. One hand attempted to push me up and I believe it was my own, crawling backward, the other arm assisting, while the fog thinned inside my eyes. A rocker was creaking, climbing above the white squall, and I smelt the stink of my own mouth in drool dried down my face. Welts and wounds woke up with me, like hornets flying from a sunrise, and I looked to clear the puzzle of the darkness.

I saw the blue wisp of cigar smoke before I smelled its ochre. A face was turned from me, toward a window dripping with the last of the storm. It had moved on now, with neither of us leaving scars too deep on one another.

The face turned to me, and I put my hands to my own and pushed the blood into it with my fingers, begging the rest to just wake up, wake up and make sense of something, work, process, clear me so I might think. And some part of me just groaned, like a sob without tears or reasons.

More movement, someone else in the room. I didn't yet have the inks that would finish me, the ones that pulled me in mysterious directions. But that time was creeping up so soon, and I think now that my skin was quivering in anticipation, eager to become more than what it was so it might tell me all the secret things it knew.

I sat up, muscles kicking in at once. The other folk laid eyes on me like twin cogs in a machine. Two women, one young, one older. The older smoked at me from the chair, while the young leaned in a doorway to another room.

I was in a country kitchen with a wood stove burning, in some sort of farmhouse in some quiet world. And I didn't know what to do or say, even as I realized I'd dumped myself on strangers in a pit of loss and sorrow.

"Lo," I said.

"Lo," the older woman said. Half cynical, half warm. Like you'd be.

"How you feel?" she said. Knowing it wasn't good.

"Better than I was," I said.

"So like hell," she said.

I nodded, then squeezed my head for moving it. I didn't look at either of them.

"Could I get some water?" I croaked out.

The younger woman moved to the sink and poured out a cup, then passed it to me at arm's length.

"Thank you," I said to her, then drank. When it was gone I looked at the women again.

"I'm sorry," I said.

The woman in the chair had one hand resting idly on the barrel of a rifle. She looked at me, dragged on the fat cigar clamped in her mouth, then blew it out.

"Yeah," she said. "I'm betting that you are."

## THIRTY-NINE.

The elder woman was a painter. She called herself Maureen. It seemed she'd made some name for herself through what she'd done, but I didn't query much. The younger woman was her daughter, and she attended to Maureen's day-to-day while her mother painted. I didn't find her sullen, but peculiar, a last seed on a dandelion bud; clinging on by short hairs but not quite able yet to blow away.

I stayed three days, till the storm was well gone and it seemed safe to travel again. By day I helped her with chores while Maureen painted in a studio that took up much of the house. In the evenings time was much my own, and the second night after supper Maureen's daughter and I walked out to smoke among the hay bales one field over while the sun began to set.

"I don't see myself here forever," the daughter said, dragging on a cig I'd rolled for her. "These are good," she paused, watching smoke curl up from the joint. "I'm gonna save up and move, but—" and she threw a thumb over her shoulder, "—but she needs me."

I nodded, and wondered who was needing who.

Neither of them much asked me what I was doing, or how I come to end up drunk and stinking in their front lawn. It seemed whatever story I might tell them wouldn't clear up anything they couldn't already assume. I might have offered up some cursory words that first night, after I'd bathed and borrowed a clean shirt from chest of clothes. Something vague I'd said about being in a bad way, about not quite being able to shake a fever that had plagued me since the winter's thaw.

And it was suggested that more could be said once I was feeling better. A conversation that never came. Some folks is like that, and it don't always fall in line with

just how much bad and toughness they been through already in their lives. There's just a knowing of how things is, and how they always been. Bad things all blend, given emptiness and time.

It was the last night, early after dark, when we three sat round in Maureen's studio. I looked through her canvases, while Maureen's daughter watched out the window as the light disappeared in the west. Maureen pattered at an easel in a discontented way.

"Tattoo man," she said to me, blowing out smoke. "You gonna look for more circus work, when you leave here? Is that your plan?"

"No ma'am," I said. "I'll just look for labor work, I guess. Don't know exactly where."

"Pity," said Maureen. "Waste of all that art that got done on you. Except those empty patches. What are those about?"

I looked down at the places where my skin poked through – one across my sternum, and uneven spots high on either shoulder. There was a fourth below the back of my neck that I would never see.

"I suppose I just ain't got to 'em," I said. "Seems easier to wait til something strikes me."

"That's your problem, Sue," Maureen said. "That is exactly it." And she laughed, in a crow's cackle, but didn't explain more.

"Maybe," I said, not knowing what she meant.

"C'mere," said Maureen. She had a wooden chair next to her at her easel, and slapped it, then beckoned to me with one claw.

I crossed the room to her, then sat down. "Take off your shirt," she instructed.

I looked to her daughter by the window, set against the evening sky. Something flickered across her eyes, but just as soon was gone.

“Now sit still,” Maureen said, and she wiped down the blank spot on my chest with a damp rag. Several jars of muck were lined up behind her easel, watery and clotted with half-mixed clays. She dabbed a brush in one, then looked at me.

“I’m gonna need you to hold still,” she said.

I gestured toward the brush. “You know that ain’t exactly how the rest of these were done.” I said.

“At the rate you bathe, this’ll last long enough,” she said. “And I want to do it. Never had a man as a canvas before, and here you are. This is a kismet meeting, Sue. I see you and I must paint, so let me do what I’m meant to.”

“Well all right,” I said.

Maureen went to work on the center of my chest, painting something I couldn’t see. She worked quick, like the picture was already there, though what she saw wasn’t clear to me.

“You know why we don’t ask you about yourself, Sue?” she said

“Politeness, maybe,” I said back.

The daughter spoke.

“You talked,” she said. “When you were knocked out, you talked.”

I looked at Maureen, who nodded to tell me it was true.

“You asked for someone to come back to you,” she said, and dabbed at me again.

“You asked someone to let you go. You told someone you’d never meet them. You told someone you were sorry. That you were wrong.”



“Four voices, Sue,” she said. “Four holes in you where the pain can’t go.

“Four clean spaces on your skin.”

Maureen looked at me.

“I’m filling all them for you, Sue. Kismet. Now sit back. We were always meant to meet this way.”

She painted me, and I sat back trying not to think on all the unchanging roads of fate that led me to this place, drink draining out of me, ink stained on top of me, in a home that wasn’t mine in a town I couldn’t name. And as I lay there, a cool tingling ran through me, like all of me was waking up.

I felt the brush bristles rasp across my chest, smelled her oils mix with evening and the wood walls of that room. I watched the dust swim through the air and out the window, the low shimmer of heat leaving the earth. I saw a thin trail of smoke leaving her daughter’s cigarette slow, crawl, stop.

And then in that moment I had the sensation of time becoming fixed. I took air in and breathed it out. The room was crux, crossed ley lines. An unending Here. A never-sleeping Now.

Then just as quick time washed back in, once again taking speed. My eyes opened, my heart quickened. I continued breathing, finding home inside my muscles, in the realness of my bones. I looked at Maureen, who looked back at me. I felt both knowing and unknowing, the strange trappings that reveal themselves in these small, slow moments where patterns fade, the past refuses, and that what’s left abstracts.

In these days I am no longer who I was. I know now that I live in the future of that still block of space, and my half-life since that point has done nothing but recede. I

am in a time past time, and can only wait, while the universe runs down in the manner that I know it must. From that moment on in the chair of a woman named Maureen, the beginning began ending.

The ending began breathing.

FORTY.

It was a small wagon, and it floated in disease. I sat inside it, at one end of small round table hung with purples and greens. It smelled of incense in such a way that only burned to cover the rot of dead things. A door was closed behind me, blocking the outside from coming in. This was a womb, a thick and darkened place, and I was in the parlor of some fierce ritual of weird.

The old witch – for that’s what she was, no matter the name under which she sold herself – tottered round the cabin, checking on her tea, grabbing small bits of this and that from a thousand shelves and sliding them up sleeves, in pockets, behind robes. She wore a black shawl that covered her all over, and it too seemed to reek of dirt and waste and unclean things.

And I waited and I sweltered in the heat and heaviness.

Then she sat, and asked me questions – about my travels, about my life, as if I were on trial or being profiled for my own obituary. I can't remember now the things she said, or her voice or the accent that shaped it. I only hear the click of syllables, of tongue and teeth sliding, her jaw clicking as she spoke in musky whispers while she peeled pieces from me, one by one. I can only reconstruct now what had happened. It’s the final piece that leads us here to now.

“Your tattoos are so interesting,” she said. Her words felt circular, like patterns of incantation. “So many layers, and time. Do you have a favorite?” She raised black tea to her lips.

I paused.

“Can’t say,” I said, feeling sweat on my back and breathing through my mouth.

“Can’t say, but there is,” she said. “You are aware the pattern they represent?”

A fly buzzed in my ear, looking to make itself a home. “Not sure what you mean,” I said.

At this her eyes, giant and green, peered at me so hard from beneath her cloak they was like to fall from her face.

“Don’t know?” she said. “Is that true?”

There was a way she spoke that cut through to me in such a way I wasn't sure if the truths she assumed about me had any stake in what was real, or if just by speaking she changed the nature of what I thought I knew .

She stirred her tea and moved ahead. “If you truly got those tattoos unplanned, over the course of years, which from their age I would guess you did,” she said, “Then it’s passing strange.” She looked at me.

“They’re like a constellation,” she said. “But instead of stars, they map a heart.”

She looked at me again. “No one but me would have been able to tell you that,” she whispered. “And here you are. That’s strange too.”

She lifted her spoon from her cup, sucked it clean. “There’s a lotta fake and shimsham here,” she said, “From men smarter’n hell than you. Then there's real magic, all over you, and you don’t know a thing.”

I held my gaze. She blinked; once, twice.

“Perhaps it’s best,” she said. “Keeps you safe. Or at least ign’rant, which is close.”

I cleared my throat. “Does that mean I have the job?”

“Of course you have it,” she sneered. “Don’t insult me. You knew you did the moment you walked in.”

She pointed her spoon sharp at me, glaring with one eye. “I know just what kind of dumb you are; what kind you aren’t. That’s something no one will tell you either, boy.”

She said the last between her teeth:

“But don’t think I ain’t watching you.”

And I left her then, burst out into sunshine, the center of a bustling crowd of circus folk – my first, my truest circus, up from the the scaly alleyways of Coney and every dog-and-pony since. I’d trailed their show through the square states following posters, whim and rumor, for the first time in my life a man looking to shape himself new.

I had started in the first city I came to past Maureen’s, with the marks she’d painted on me still splattered on my skin. I found an ink shop, plunked down a few dollars and said I’d do whatever needed to pay off the rest, if one of their ink men would make permanent the fading paintings on me.

The owner looked me over. “You look strong,” he said.

“Been said I was.”

He smiled. “I get a hundred men in here, no money, sayin’ they’ll work for ink. I turn ‘em all away. You, though. You.”

“I gotta roof needs fixin’, few other things need done. You do that, I’ll get you straightened out. I’ll do traces of that art right now, before we lose it.”

“‘Spose that means I’ll be able to take a bath after,” I said. “Which would suit me fine.”

Roof took a week, and on the day God rested the man gave me my inks. Did it fast and I bit through it, and when he was done we both stood in the mirror.

“Still don’t know what they is,” he said, running fingers over his moustache.

“Me neither,” I said. “But they look good, I think. Maybe flowers? Is that what?”

“Thought it might be flames, sorta,” he said back. “Ugly things. But they look good.”

I was in a time in which each moment felt placed by hands much larger than myself, and the tattooist was just one more along a road I’d got lost down but felt I had to continue on. I thanked him, and that night I walked north to find a traveling show that wanted an illustrated man.

When I tracked it down days later, I was sent to interview with the witch. She ran the freaks, and it was reliant on her approval that I get the job I knew I’d have already.

“They’ll know,” she’d whispered, before I left her cabin. “The marks will know that magic boils on your skin. That’s why you’re hired, boy. Not cuz you pretty or you got the most designs I ever seen. But something’s *stained* on you, more than just the ink. *That’s* what they’ll see. *That’s* what they’ll believe.”

The witch would not survive the winter. She fell ill and I barely saw her in the weeks after I began to work. All I knew was that at the time she’d met me she had seen,

with her demon's eyes, that my tattoos seemed important and alive. And I'd taken what she said as nonsense, but didn't bother to disagree.

It was much later, once I'd started in and was beginning to know the crew – Cook, Omar, the Simple Twins, plus our smarmy leader Frank and his woman, name of Etta – it was then the letter came. We didn't much get mail, of course, but somehow sometimes it would make its way to us, at Western Unions in the bigger towns where folks that cared might know we'd be.

Not that I had folks, of course, which made it odd when one of the dwarves dropped off a single envelope to me in my trailer late one night. "Came in yesterday," he chirruped, and then he turned to leave. "Half us didn't know your name, so it took awhile to get around."

It was small and frail and yellowed and I opened it, smelling cigars and a puff of ash. A single sheet fell out, and I picked it off the floor.

*Sue.*

*I'm taking a gamble, but it's an educated one. An old beau of mine just rang tonight to say he'd been to the circus. He lives to the north and west but it's not too far away. I asked him if the show had a tattooed man. He said as a matter of fact there had been, with odd shapes on his chest and shoulders.*

*So I'm glad you got the work, and gladder still that it's a job where you can show off what's been worked so long on. And I'm touched because I think this means you got my paintings permanently affixed. You did it without me ever explaining what it was they were. I suppose that was a small cruelty on my part.*

*Now that you're too far to come back and rail at me, I want to let you know what it is that's on your skin. I think once I tell you, you won't unsee them, but you can still rest satisfied that to the world they'll just be shapes and whorls.*

*I told you that when you first arrived, you'd called out in your sleep. Do you remember?*

*I can't tell you how I knew who these four people were. Not because I'm a mystic! I'm just an old woman, who's lived a long time.*

*On your left shoulder, and your right, are hands. One pair is your fathers'. One your mothers'. One who left you, one who wouldn't let you go. So it is for all of us, Sue, those who are cursed with knowing them who birthed us. For those that don't it's no less sad, so don't think too hard on the lot God gave you.*

*On your back are eyes. If I could, I'd cleanse your heart of the person you are sorry to. Probably a woman or a man that did just as much to hurt you as you may have done to them.. But guilt and sorrow are what kills us, and the hurt you carry with you is a wolf scratching at your door. I put its eyes at your back, Sue, so that nasty wolf might be always be turned away and distracted by something else. It's the best I could do for you, since I know I cannot cure you of the hurt you insist on holding to.*

*The ink on your chest is what I hesitate to explain. When you landed on our table that night we cleaned your pockets, to try and find out who you were. My girl found one small picture, almost faded and washed out. I never told you we had seen it, and we put it back before you woke. But I thought on it a long, long, long time. And in your sleep you cried out, saying, "I'll never meet you, never meet you," and in my heart I knew who it was and what you cried for.*

*On your chest your daughter sits, Sue. She's curled and small and sleeping, and I promise you she's content. I can't give you any more than that, nor do I know if there's some real small girl out there who's calm and happy in her heart. These aren't about the people, Sue. It's about the versions of them you carry with you. It's about making peace with ghosts and guilt, and I hope it's something you can do.*

*But I am just a strange old woman, painting scenes on wanderers, writing letters so in my own way I might make peace with tensions I can't assuage. If this finds you, I hope you'll forgive me. I wanted only to make you whole.*

*M.*

In the silence of the circus car I sat, stunned and stony. And as I sat I felt a crawling, a whispering on my skin. Like feathers, then like insects, squirming, crawling, climbing.

It was the inks. They were stretching. They were scratching. They were coming now to know me.

I twisted; I writhed; I swore. But that would come much later. For the first minutes, there was only horror realizing that my body had become a trap.

Perhaps, perhaps, what Maureen sought was pure; but what she believed of ghosts was wrong. The past weighs us, and we're beholden to it; those of us who try to find ourselves by patterning our skin are pulled forward through transformation just as much as we're anchored to the things we choose to mark our hides. I know, for I carry the past



with me now, always alone and always not. The marks on me I'd hoped to find some sort of freedom with have become a prison too.

As Maureen's letter shook between my fingers, my body pulsed. The years of ink, like a world of curses, skittered themselves awake.

And it was then I understood, as I have ever since, exactly what the witch had meant. The ink lived in me, all right. No matter how many doors I opened, there weren't rooms in me enough to hold it all.

## **THE WALK HOME.**

FORTY-ONE.

I'd finished speaking. The pile of cigarettes on the table was butts and ash.

The story written here isn't perhaps the one I told that night, at that bar in a small town south of Pickinpaw. But it was close, with few parts altered save those that might have got me in more trouble than the story's worth.

The old man, buried in his eyebrows, stared low in the table, musing on the mound of burned cigarettes. The woman remained non-plussed, making her last smoke last, blowing it from her mouth over our heads.

The moment stretched as silence cleared the space around us. The man looked up.

"So," he said. "Where's it was you said you'd from?"

The woman smiled. I crushed my last butt into the table.

"I didn't," I said. "Mountain country. East."

"East," the man said. "That makes sense."

The woman crushed her cigarette too, then stood, grabbed a trash bin near our table and swept all the butts and ash away. The old man watched, tired and dumb, till she put a hand on his shoulder and he sat up with a start.

"Bedtime, Bert," she said. "Big day tomorrow."

"That's right, that's right," he said. "Of the same old shit."

The woman crossed to the door and turned to me.

"You too," she said. "Walk a girl home?"

I nodded, stood, shook hands with Bert and then we left. Behind us I heard Bert lock the door and totter off inside, wherever it is that old men go when the world's forgotten them.

"Some story," the woman said, as we stepped into what passed for the street. She looked at me, squinting half her eyes. "That all true?" she said.

"What I remember," I replied. "The rest I just made up."

"It's a good one," she said, nodding.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll remember that next time I tell it wrong."

We walked down the railroad tracks, feet crunching gravel in heavy pairs. She talked to me about her daughter. "Hope I don't walk in on her and her boyfriend," she said. "Hell, this's the latest I been out in twenty years."

Then she stopped, and looked down a grey alley full of doors to tiny bungalows leading off into the trees.

"That you, down there?" I said. "Still need an escort?"

"Think I can make it fine," she said. "Hell, can't have you knowin' exactly where to find me, can I? You lot steal kiddies in their sleep."

"And worse," I said. "Can't fault your logic there."

She stuck a hand out. "Good to meet you," she said. "Crazy illustrated man."

"Thanks, hometown lady," I said, and shook. "Keep a light on."

She grabbed my hand and brought me close, then smiled warm and confidential. "You know I will. We always do." Gave my hand one more squeeze, and let me go.

"Take care of yourself," she said, and walked off into the darkness of the alley towards her home. "Look away!" she called. "Can't have you know where I'm going!"

And I smiled, and let her go, and headed back the way I came. Up the hill, out of town, walking slow, hoping the spell of the evening wouldn't leave me soon.

#### FORTY-TWO.

By the time I got back up to the boardinghouse it was dark past dark. The nightbirds called to one another in the trees, the insects rose and silenced in unpatternable waves. I hadn't told them folks in town the worst bits; the bits I told you. I had changed and obscured those complicated parts so only tone survived. And perhaps that made it worse; so I lived half-visible to no one with the rest of me all broken twisted flesh and mud and unmentionable things. It was as though my own shadow, dim though it was in the last light of moon, was an inky brine sucking me deep within each step.

The boardinghouse set against a low blue-black sky. Stars were hard to come by except straight overhead, where the clouds broke and they glistened flat and ice.

I saw a blackness in the blackness, a shape shouldn't be there, on the porch as I walked up. The shape was watching me. Closer still and I made out Frank Colt. As his features revealed themselves I saw him stony, unaware, immobile. His chin sunk into his chest, and he watch me come through lidded eyes. But he made no movement to call to me me, and I thought he might be gone.

I touched a foot down on the first step when his hand went out, like the arm of a crane swinging till it hit something, in this case me. The hand grabbed at my jeans, squeezing and releasing.

"We're gonna stay," he slurred. "We're stayin'. We're stayin'."

He patted me, nodded, looked off down into town.

“Ah,” I said. I stepped past Frank, thinking all his energy was spent on that single line.

“Didn’t wanner go,” he said. I turned back to him. He was a silhouette in the dark.

I shouldn’t have asked. I did anyway.

“What’s that?” I said.

He looked back round, his eyes black and shining. He shook his head. Looked away again. “Nope,” he said. “We shouldn’t stay. Should..” and he pointed off towards town and past it.

“Get the fuck out of here,” he finished.

I took a minute to translate all that.

“So what's stopping us from going?” I asked.

“No one,” he said, his mustache swimming across his face. “Nelson. Nelson convinced 'em we oughtta stay. Make.... a little money. Make... nice with the townfolk.” Frank shook his head.

“Hell, you’re the boss,” I said. “Just tell ‘em we all have to leave, if no one can hold us here.”

He looked back at me with an exaggerated sneer. “You think that’s how it works? Hell.” His words came together slow. “I’m thirty-nine, Sue. You ever met a man owns a circus at thirty-nine? I’m the youngest ringmaster you’ll ever meet in your lifetime. And fuck, I’ve owned this thing seven years. Seven years! People think I ain’t earned it. But I paid a price.”

He paused.

“I paid a price.”

All this slow and stumbled from him.

“And there’s somethin’ I know,” he said. His eyes swung back up to me. “You can’t *make* these folk do anything. I couldn’t have made them leave. Gotta hold the middle ground. The middle ground. Hell, I wish they’d thrown a coup, up and left already! Thought they would.”

He sighed. “But we’re stayin.”

“Well,” I said. “One way or another, sure it’ll be fine. What’s three days, anyway?”

But there was something slow creeping into Frank’s voice, and the air around us. I was trying to leave because I was run down, and sad and tired. But I also had this itching feeling, not wanting to know the crumbled troublings in Frank’s mind.

And Frank was shaking his head, slow, slow, and he whispered, “No. No, ain’t gone be fine.”

I sighed. I don’t know what it was I saw in him. Some scared private in his first year.

I sat down next to him.

“All right, Frank,” I said. “Why ain’t it gonna be fine?”

He breathed. I let him.

“We need to leave this place,” he said, his lip trembling. “It’s bad here.”

It was the second time he’d been on the verge of breaking before me in as many days, and I didn’t know what to make of it no more. Before this point I rarely had to deal with him. No good could come of this.

“Hell Frank, we all know it’s bad,” I said. “Our trucks is wrecked, someone hurt those lions. Some old coot got killed we don’t even know from Adam. I agree with you. We should go. Just tell ‘em what’s what; screw the local law. Let’s cut our losses.”

But Frank was pushing his head back and forth, dripping with drinker’s sweat. “We’re gonna stay,” he said. “We’re gonna stay. We’re gonna eat ourselves alive.”

“Frank,” I said. “Don’t get like that; nothin’ has to be. I know it seems—”

Frank stopped me.

“We have a buyer, Sue,” he said. “He’s been trailin’ us all season, checkin’ our numbers, closin’ in to snatch us up. He knows how much money our show turns over, and he’s gonna make me an’ offer. And that offer’s gonna be right. He’s gonna tell me this show’s half-cursed, and with everything that’s happened in this town we won’t get no more shows as long as my name’s on the banner.”

He looked at me. “And he’ll be right, Sue. Word gets around what happened here, we won’t be able to book nowhere. You all, you think circus keeps to itself; none of the bad gets out. But you’re all wrong. A man’s dead. Our lions is dead. That ain’t normal bad, Sue. That ain’t something that can be contained.”

He looked into his chest again. “We have to move to stay ahead of the buyer, Sue. The sooner he gets here and offers me what I know he will, the sooner I’m gonna cave. All that keeps me goin’ is stayin’ on the road; I’m not nearly so strong as turnin’ down a good offer.” He sighed. “I never was.”

“Christ, Frank,” I said. “You can’t sell out mid-season. Folks is away from their homes for this. You can’t send them packing before the fall comes.”

“It don’t matter,” Frank was saying. “It don’t matter. I’ve known this would happen.”

“What’s that mean?” I asked. “Is it that Ambrose fella? He your buyer? Is that what all this is?”

Frank sniffed. “Naw,” he said. “He’s just here to make everything goes smooth.”

“So what then, Frank?” I said. “You got us sold out to the devil? What is it, then?”

Frank paused again; the longest one. The silence stretched a thousand years.

“Might as well be,” he said.

He looked at me again. His eyes were hollowed out.

“Might as well be.”

#### FORTY-THREE

I won’t tell you that I left him then.

I won’t tell you that I stumbled up the stairs of that old house, enfolded in death, to the tiny back room I’d stolen from a corpse.

I won’t tell you Serry’s body waited for me. I won’t tell you I collapsed there in her arms, like punishment.



## PART THREE

# THE BIG TOP

**FRIDAY.**

FORTY-FOUR.

But I awoke to hailstones.

They banged down on windows and shutters, grey specks on a sky grey with clouds from apex to the horizon line. Their grey flat light cast a glare in our little attic-room, only serving to illuminate the filth of that unkempt space.

Serry was buried in her own hair when I woke, dead gone. I rose and stretched like my skin was full of centipedes, rubbing my face, grabbing what clothes I had and standing up. I heard a mumble from the bed, but I couldn't be tasked no more. A furious crack of a larger stone hit the window as I stepped into the hall and I saw Serry roll over, so I moved before she looked to see me gone.

I felt jangled, like I was cracked eggshells strung together in bad shapes. I was cold, and needed bathing and a whole lot of other things.

I walked down the hall of this crooked house, noticing once again that it seemed like things had changed in the night, with angles all wrong and questioning themselves and floorboards twisted in this hallway no one ever used or went to anymore. I imagined the old woman and her dead husband and Lindsay Nelson living here alone, the place empty from winter through the crisp of spring, all three moving in separate circles amidst

hot soup lunches and afternoons spent reading books under blankets. It seemed both cozy and the saddest thing.

A small step up at the end of this hallway into another, an adjoining branch painted a pale sick green. The two hallways joined together strangely, and I felt sure this house had been somehow hackjawed together from roaming disparate pieces, like two trees grown together in a forest. I seemed to remember such a pair of marriage trees that stood alone in a field near my childhood home, but wasn't sure if I correctly placed them, if they indeed had been borne from that memory perhaps were products of other field in another time, slicked with rain in the decades I had lost track of them.

I stepped up onto the landing of the conjoined passage, the floor creaking to announce me. It was cleaner and brighter, and I looked back to see the dingy back hallway from which I'd come. Standing here it looked as though the hallway I stood in now was the correct one, with the other hall fit all wrong. Once in one place, the other would always feel off and ill-assembled, put together backwards.

Here, I felt a heat come up from the kitchen below. A wardrobe stood heavy here, and I opened one door to find a pile of thick quilts there for taking. I wrapped one around me, the clutch of home that lived in it wrapping itself around me too.

Above me was a pitter-patter, pitter-patter and I looked up to see a skylight, miles above me, cut into the house's roof. The light was soft through the morning's clouds, and a rhythm of hailstones dropped and burst, sliding into slush and making the glass obscure.

I stood here, in this ball of light, and I breathed in the cooking smells, the wood smells, the house smells, like I could have any claim to them as my own.

“What you doing?” came a voice, scratched and rusted. Serry was standing at the lip of the hall, her hair a swarm, in skivvies and an undershirt with the small swell of her belly peeking out.

“Just standing,” I said.

She came toward me. “Make a little room?” she asked, and pulled my arms apart, stepping into me and shuffling my shoulders round her own, enfolding herself inside.

And she looked so lovely there, waked-up and earthly. I felt layers of things tumble in – of women, years, parts of myself I’d shared and scarred and tried to salvage. I saw slow numbness spread from the places where our bodies touched.

I pulled the blanket from around me, tucked it around her, stepped backward. She leaned into me and then asked me where I’d go. I mumbled something and left her, felt her confusion turn to frustration and emptiness behind me as I went. She couldn’t expect more, but that she did just turned over something cold in me.

And as I left that hall, and found the steps to lead me out, the events of the night before unfurled inside me and curled like snakes around my heart.

There were things needed doing. I needed first to find them. Then I would look for you.

FORTY-FIVE.

Outside, hail had peppered the land so thick it looked like an early frost, like winter in late summer. The front foyer was a mess of blankets and makeshift beds, all sacked out with clowns and dwarves and skydancers in a chorus of snores and sleep. It seemed our band had been given free reign of the house now. I could only imagine such

sanction given by the oddly malevolent Lindsay Nelson, even now sleeping himself tucked away in one of the upstairs rooms, with no way to find it and no door to enter in.

Food smells wafted from the back of the house. As I looked through the maze of sheets and bodies, Cook stepped out from the kitchen entrance down the hall. He was drinking coffee from a tin cup. I imagined him keeping the grimy thing in one sweaty pocket of jeans that were never washed on a body that weren't no better. Even now he looked to stink of flies and oil.

But he nodded to me, and waved me toward him, serious and somehow comforting in his seriousness. I ginger-stepped around Yang Tsin and the Flying Dutchmen, then followed him.

“Shit, Cook,” I said, walking into the kitchen. “What in hell?”

It was like the colors themselves were warmer, and several steel bins of food were out and scattered round. Not just one pot but several were on different burners of different stoves, and I didn't see one damned bean anywhere.

“Sit,” he said, and pointed at a stool along one of the countertops. He walked to a stove with that same weird collapsed saunter he always had on him, the same broken cigarette dangling from his mouth. But like some kinda sleight-of-handsmith, he picked up a pair of spatulas and scraped across some of the skillets, once, twice, thrice, then slid in front of me a plate: eggs; bacon, potatoes.

I do believe at some point there was motion involved in me shoveling the food down my throat, but I don't remember it. That old training kicked in again and I was devouring like some animal, cleaning my plate better than dish rags and soap.

“Hell, Cook,” I said through fistfuls. “You got some skills after all.”

Cook was already sat on a stool next to a small window by the farthest stove, looking out to the world outside. He took another drag and blew out.

“There’s more,” he said. “And coffee.”

I poured myself a cup, took another piece of bacon and then sat back down. The coffee steamed up into my face and I watched the crags of my own reflection in its surface, collecting the parts of myself went missing in the night

I looked up.

“We the only ones awake?” I said.

“Nope,” Cook said, stretching. “Wimmin went over across the fields to see that old lady owns the place. She took sick and’s staying at the next farm. An’ Frank an’ that ol’ fuck Lindsay went down to county clerk in town to set up permits for tomorrow night. They’re already back and up in their beds, I think,” Cook said.

“Tomorrow night?” I said. “So the show goes up?”

“Yep,” he said. “Gonna search all the fields for pieces, put together some kinda thing. Think it might be the last one, too. I mean, last with all of us.” He nodded at me, dragged, blew out. “What I hear.”

“That right,” I said. It all sounded a jumble.

“I’ll tell you who’s gonna be pissed,” said Cook. “Canelli. All his little family.” He wiggled his fingers. “They wanna leave. Don’t wanna do even one more show. Hell, I’d go.”

“Oh?” I said.

“Sure!” he croaked. “Where the hell we even are out here? Just get the hell out, move on. But whadda I know.”

We both heard shuffle-thumping in the hall behind us, and as we turned Frank Colt and Lindsay Nelson walked in. They were night and day now. Frank looked like he'd lost half a pint of blood and been sucker-punched by God besides. It seemed he'd passed out in his clothes, and now wore pants with suspenders hanging off and a sweat-stained undershirt. His eyes were purple and underneath them his cheeks were pale.

Lindsay, on the other hand, looked ready to get into fisticuffs with a rabid bull. His skin was rosy, he looked well-slept and contented as a cat for being so. He wore a downy bathrobe and came in with "Morning Sue," walked over to the stove, and began narrating his own meal: "Cofffee, hmm! Bacon, hash browns, oh, and eggs..."

Frank looked like it was some miracle if he even poured himself a cuppa. But he did, and leaned against the counter, drinking it in with his hair tumbled forward around his eyes.

"Mornin," I said back to Lindsay. "Mornin' Frank."

"Mmm," he said.

"Did you hear, Sue?" asked Lindsay Neslon. "Your permits are all set. The show goes up tomorrow night!"

"I heard," I said. "What kinda show this gonna be?"

Frank shook his head around the coffee cup, but Lindsay answered.

"We've gotten some men from town, along with your boys, to scout for lumber as well as anything we can salvage in the surrounding fields," Lindsay said. "It'll be stripped down – bare bone! But authentic! Real honest stuff!"

"Hmm," I said. Frank dropped the cup from his face.

“Don’t worry, Sue,” he said. “I’ll sit down with each act, figger somethin’ easy,” he said. “That may include you, for the sideshows. Y’all have it easiest. We’ll talk tonight.”

The room was twice as small with these men in it, and filling faster. I cast around and spied some dirty old farmcoats next to the sink.

“I think I’ll go for a walk,” I said.

“I’ll go with you,” Cook said, just as quick.

#### FORTY-SIX.

Pale whiteness infected the air, making it soft and still. The morning hail was dying off strange, in stutters and stops. It fell against leaves that had been knocked to the ground in the storm, ice on leaves on green grass in a layering of seasons, as if it was all time here. The haze seemed to permeate. Over the horizon the world got eaten.

The farm coats I’d grabbed cut down on the wet chill south of Pickinpaw. Cook nodded to me.

“Them wimmin’s thisaway,” he said. He headed in the direction of town, walking along the treeline above the road that dipped into the hamlets where the houses dwelled. Here a path tracked inward, and the land opened into a yellow-green grid of broken stalks and long grasses that looked to have been a wheat field at one point in its life.

“Round on the other side of this patch of forest, like,” said Cook, and he dropped behind some firs. I followed, and the path led to a dirt road. The sky was over us like a bubble, the trees on either side trapping the stillness.

I walked, not quite knowing where was headed but feeling a rightness, an assuredness, a slowness, carrying me through the ground and fog. My feet crunched in hail and frosted grass. For a moment I could imagine me and Cook as men who did not travel far from Pickinpaw and had only ever known this place, who walked in farmclothes through forests as a matter of course and not a parody of normal, honest folk.

I realized we hadn't spoke on why we'd both been so heavily compelled to leave the house together. Perhaps it was a fear of loss, this feeling that the weird ritual magic caused by circusing, the magic we never noticed till it was gone, was in a very real way disappearing and unrecoverable, leaving us out here in grey backwoods.

"Weren't always no Cook," said Cook suddenly while we walked. "Just ended up that way anyhow."

"Huh," I said. Cook kept talking, like I'd asked him.

"When I was young I helped my mother more'n my father with chores, warshing, such," he said. "Always when t'other boys was out with stickball or helpin' build a toolshed, I wuz in makin' pies. Weren't till I got older I started thinking I might be a Cook. My mother died. Had a lump got hard. That's what killed her.

'She left behind Pappy and three boys. Pappy fell into drinking, and so did I. I don't know what happened to my brothers.

'I found my mother's recipes in a little tin. I lit a cigarette on the stove and smoked a hole right through them. My Pappy found out and beat hell out of me till there was blood on the kitchen floor. I couldn't see straight near a week, and I still don't walk straight. When I come to, I bought a black pickup and drove to Chicago.



‘The truck broke down outside city limits. I hiked the rest of the way in. Found a dishwasher job. I did that for years, til they saw I could fry an egg. Made me a line cook too.

‘Dunno what made me leave Chicago. A girl come through the downtown spot where I was set up. She had sparkles round her eyes, spangly makeup. She was circus, she said. “Was circus,” like that. She didn’t say much. But there was somethin’ in her. That night I stole half the recipes from my job and ran off with that girl when we closed.

‘I had awhile with her. Till the circus split into different crews.’

Cook was carrying a stick while he walked, thrumming it against tree trunks. As quick as he’d started talking, he stopped now. The sound of his voice dissipated, like the air ate it out of his mouth. I looked over at him. He looked into the fog ahead of us.

”Fuck that shit no more,” he said.

Now I think I told his story wrong, put too much of myself in it. Maybe on that narrow walkway of trees our lonelinesses mashed together into one loneliness.

I followed Cook’s eyes, and peered through the whiteness to see a shadow imprinted in it, an impression of grey on greys in the outline of a man. And as my eyes made shapes I saw the sticklike frame of Alphonse Ambrose, his tophat making it doubleclear who he was. From where he stood I could not see his face. I imagined him seeing through me, as the shore of some great underground river, flat eyes glittering in the dark with an offer to take me home.

It made me shudder, I’ll tell you true, and I almost took a step toward him to alleviate the feeling he was just a spectre, to make him real.

Two more figures crawled out of the mist, one rotund and upright, one worn and limping. They stepped to Ambrose, held out hands, and an exchange of some kind took place. Ambrose looked at something he was given, and made a cry mostly eaten up by fog. Then he clapped the stooped figure upside his head.

The figure took the blow, almost fell over, then rose again. The rotund figure made no move to help him, neither did Alphonse Ambrose.

With a turn, Ambrose bowed to the other men and then turned away into the mist. The rotund figure turned too, and walked, and the limp man followed behind him.

The rotund figure had Lindsay Nelson's eyes. And the second was the crawling heap of Frank Colt.

It was about then I realized my skin was itching something fierce, pulling at me beneath my coat.

I turned, grabbed Cook, and ran like the dickens where I got told.

FORTY-SEVEN.

The house sat enclosed by trees, eerie in the white stillness. Cook and I came up on it like thieves, for I felt that avoiding Frank Colt and Lindsay Nelson through that fog was paramount, though I wasn't sure exactly why.

Cook had directed us here, having seen the house they day before. It was an old clay ruin not fixed with heat nor light, but perhaps it was a safe place. Perhaps it was a holy place.

There was a window cut into the outside wall and shutters open, and inside we saw women gathered around the old Marm taken ill. She lay now with arms outstretched

and palms open, but her frame was thin and gray and grayer, like what was in her was getting sucked out.

The women around her washed her face and her arms, cooked, sat by and knitted. Etta was here too, set apart by beauty and grace. I felt a jump in my chest at seeing her again, and I tried to hide a grin – but Cook saw it, and cackled, and shook his head halfway when I glared at him.

We rapped on the door, and one of the women came and answered. She glared at us and cast an eye into the fog beyond. Etta called to the woman some affirmation that we were all right to be let in.

“But none a’them others,” the woman said, closing the door behind me. “I’m not dealin’ with any more of them just want to talk her about that house!”

“Oh dear lord, I know,” said another woman, sitting plumply in a chair and knitting. “Isn’t it terrible?”

“What’re they thinkin’?” cried the first. “Think she can talk? Think she can open her eyes? Heaven’s sakes!”

The woman knitting looked us up and down. My ink was most covered by the coat but the two of us were still a mess, stubbled and unslept. The woman scanned us with her eyes while her head didn’t move. Her mouth kept moving as she stitched, countin’ rows.

“What do you boys do with the show?” she asked.

“Cook,” Cook mumbled.

“I perform,” I said.

She pursed her lips small. “Long as you’re not the lion tamer.”

“Hush!” whispered another woman worrying round the old Marm’s bed.

“She’s right,” said the woman who’d let us in angrily. “My Lord! Well – there’s nothing to be said. Nothing to be said.” I could feel her eyes on me now, burning twin holes like suns.

I turned to look at Etta. She was standing next to the old woman, staring back at me.

“You’re the only one of ‘em any good,” said the woman next to her. “I’m sorry, I know they’re all your little friends, but it’s a travelin’ pack of dogs, is what they are.”

“Hush!” said the worrier, while the knitting woman laughed.

“Bad enough we have bandits in these hills,” said the worrier.

“Bandits?” I asked her.

“Ayuh,” she said. “In and out of the fog. Can’t trust cloudy days.” She stared through me. The moment stretched.

“Well,” I said, “It’s good you ladies takin’ care o’ your own. I know we’ve caused you no end of trouble.”

The women all stared me over.

And then Etta came toward me, grabbed my hand. She turned to say something to the women behind that we’d be back soon, in a voice even put Cook in his place and stopped him coming after.

She closed the door hard behind us, then shuttered the window. I saw her looking up and over us, and I followed her gaze. Above us a thin white wisp of smoke came from the chimney, and for a moment I saw it how Etta saw it. She wanted to hide it, to stamp it out, to make the house seem deserted so that no bad things might come.

Then she took my arm, and we hauled off around the corner of the trees into the world beyond, sneaking glances back all the while as we entered into secret places.

#### FORTY-EIGHT.

There was a hill above the town, looking down into trees and thin roads and the sheen of mist encircling the woods that morning. The hail was melting off, but the air got no warmer and the mist remained.

Etta brought me here, one hand clamped on my arm as we made our way upward, an urgency in her while we stumbled over rocks and around the slim knotty pine saplings that thinned as we reached the summit, closer to the sky.

Finally we cleared the earth below and stood at the hill's peak, past the last cluster of firs and the rest rocks and low grasses. Looking off beyond the trees I could see the dark mud of the groove in the earth our small band had found on our way to the boardinghouse, years and years ago now. We was well and truly alone here, as if one second off of time.

And Etta turned to me, and kissed me then, her lips dry and cold and frantic, her tongue in my mouth but not looking for nor finding that rhythm that lovers do, only desperate, as if she were lost in her own sea.

And she was sliding her hand underneath my shirt, crawling fingers up skittering like spiders so's it tickled even, and I held that hand firm to stop her so she crawled them down to my jeans, undoing the button and squeezing, still mashing her face against mine as if to break the bones in both our faces.

Half unbuckled she dragged me up the hill and over it to just the other side. She wriggled out of her jeans she wore like a fish and I fell on her, on that hill lost downside of Pickinpaw.

After we were done, I rolled off her and we laid there, looking at the sky as teeny bits of blue began to cut through the clouds. The air felt warmer too, like the morning somehow had been a season. And we breathed together, a halting, ragged pattern of air, chests rising and falling, mine old and scarred, hers tight and soft, in that moment of parallel after.

She rolled toward me. I looked at her.

“I been sleepin’ with the snake woman,” I said.

She smiled.

“I don’t know if it matters,” I said.

She slid over next to me.

“I don’t worried,” she said.

“Is okay.”

And we laid there, and I don’t know if it was. I don’t know if that were true.

FORTY-NINE.

Etta was smoking, which she didn’t do often, sitting up and hunched like a troll next to me as she looked off down into town. The anxiety had claimed her early, only lingering moments after we’d finished, and she’d got to covering up all the milky soft parts of her. I cigged myself and laid back watching her, waiting for whatever it was.

“Etta,” I said to her back. “I been feelin’ real queer since we got here. Since that storm the other night, even. I dunno.”

Her shoulders shifted.

“And I been seein’ things,” I said. “On the way here I thought I saw Frank with them men, Ambrose and Linday Nelson. I thought I saw them haul off and hit Frank in the fog, but I’d only left them up at the house ten minutes before. I guess they coulda followed me, but it was the damndest thing.” It felt strange just saying it out loud. But good too.

“Have you been feelin’ queer at all?” I asked her.

Etta continued to smoke.

“What woman said, true,” she said softly, finally. Like I hadn’t spoken.

“The hills,” she said, and pointed round at the treetops hanging below us in a patchwork.

“There bandits here.”

And she watched the horizon, her hair and the smoke around her hair cast in light.

“Oh?” I said, and my skin went cool.

Etta had always been steady, always calm. Now she was nodding, nodding as the cigarette burned to the nub on her fingertips.

“You see them,” she said. “If you look. All around.”

And just then, all strange, a breeze blew. I swear as I stand that I heard it whip up along one side and circle down below around the hill, swish-swish in front of and next to and behind and returning to it’s start, like someone stuck their thumb in a bowl of batter and wiped it all way round.

And she looked at me. Her eyes scanned me for something that swam just beyond my reasoning, but didn't quite connect.

"I draw you pictures," she said.

I began breathing slow.

She took a stone from the ground beside her, then turned to a patch of earth in front of me.

"Of bandits?" I asked.

She smiled. "In a way," she said.

Etta began to draw a circle. She started where the wind had come up on our right, and I swear with the same pacing as the air she swept around the base, the left side, the apex, the sand parting like water as she brought the stone around.

"We are here," she said.

A few strokes, with a knobby stick. Curled forms occupied the inside of the circle now.

"On the inside is you, and I. We live and spin here, sharing space, with no way to leave."

Etta looked at me.

"And I would not want to."

I got dizzy as her voice slipped inside me once again, finding rooms where it echoed, whispering to me in rubric shapes. I couldn't hear her accent no more. I heard her voice the way I heard it in my heart.



The stick waved, skittered light over the ground outside the circle she'd drawn, wide gestures and wider, somehow including the whole silent world beyond us, like catching in a jar the sprawling, crawling void.

"But there is an outside," she said.

"Larger places that have no rules or rhythms."

She waved the stick into the air. "They want to drag us out. To join them." She looked again at me. "So that we would not share each other."

And she kissed me sure, opening my mouth to breath me in, to breathe herself out, and like I'd never heard a word before I heard all of hers in my mind, clear, sharp, glowing.

She spoke further, in her way, in ways I've lost. Anyway, there ain't no real translation for what she said. In the end I only remembered one line that seemed to capture all the others.

*Do not surrender these worn roads,* she said.

*These worn roads lead us to holy places.*

FIFTY.

Etta left soon after, gone to play hospice for the old Marm. In her absence I stood alone, feeling tired and unused and strange. I couldn't enjoy the taste of cigarettes in my mouth, and my clothes hung like a greasy snake's shed. I felt that old feeling of wanting to scrub the self from myself, the stains from my skin. I remembered the first nights after that letter from Maureen, unable to end their tickling, nipping, crawling.

Near me on the path were tall daisies. I picked one and popped the flower, then put it in my mouth to chew the stalk. It oozed bitter, sharp and fresh. I breathed once, twice.

The morning now was getting warm, the idea that it had been near winter a few hours prior just a kind of joke. I walked back to the hillside, sat. Took off my coat and chewed.

I laid back, counting cloud patterns, picking bits of that flower from my tongue, with my hands behind my head and the heat on the undersides of my arms where sun never got to.

I knew today that the circus men and sideshow women would organize and spread themselves all over town and country to find scraps of all we'd lost. They'd rummage backyards and vacant lots, looking for junk to recraft for the midway. Old magic would be conjured in the mashing of ruins and relics to performance reds and blues. Old magic was something I had first hand in. I knew it as like I knew myself.

A thought formed as I lay there and morning heat sunk in; that a ritual was being enacted in these fields and back marshes. That we practiced parlor tricks to entertain a host of bad gods, standing at the edge of a basement world of wicked heaviness. There was an underworld set to judge on whether we found favor; otherwise we'd be left to die here, in this abandoned country of bones and dust.

FIFTY-ONE.

I slept and woke and slept and stayed up on the hill till near sundown, only deciding to leave when I became concerned I might not be able to find my way back in the dark. As I moved from the hilltop into the surrounding ring of forest, it was only that I could see the last light of day hitting the grass beyond that I made my way out and through. I passed back through the trees and clearings I'd crossed on my way here, but the hail and mist were gone now, leaving the lonely pink late summer I'd known in the days prior.

I walked through a harvested field where I'd made out Ambrose, Frank and Lindsay's shapes in the fog that morning, and now saw the skeletal remains of an old barn here. But it had been eviscerated, the shingles on its roof stripped so that only beams remained above its walls, splayed like fingers offering to the sky. I imagined a hand and arm connected, outstretched and buried beneath my feet.

But thinking like this so long was wearying. My own second sight failed me, felt false, felt untrue. Crushed by death.

I saw then stacks of wood placed next to the decaying structure in neat piles, bound with rope ties I recognized. It was the teamsters that had been here, taking apart the barn piece by piece. Pulling the town apart to entertain it, giving them a show they never asked for. Eating them to grow ourselves.

I wondered how I'd reached this meadow, how my life had left me here, watching this unraveling. Someone had to save this place.

As I made my way back to the house the night sounds welcomed me, insects, owls, animals in the bracken. They ran to their burrows to be with their families.

Meanwhile I already felt as though I'd been cast into another sort of universe, led by symbols instead of reason, lost in cyphers.

FIFTY-TWO.

I made my way in through the house's back entrance. When I'd left all was light, now was dark. The house was black but I felt forms sleeping. You could have told me that the band of carnies I'd left that morning had never moved, and I would have agreed it was true. But now I heard rumblings from the upper floors. Night games were up, and a ruckus had set in.

A single flat light stabbed into the hallway from the kitchen, and I wondered if Cook had been as good an evening provider as he had for breakfast. Not knowing what I'd find there, I opened the door and ambled through.

Frank Colt sat alone at one of the high steel tables. He was staring into his hands, peeling a callous from one of his fingertips. A small pile of white dead skin sat on the counter near.

He didn't look up as I entered, and I could smell something good hanging in the air. I watched Frank with one eye, and made my way to the giant refrigerators parked on the side wall. Inside I found spaghetti – pasta in one pot, sauce in another. I pulled them out, stumbled round in the semi-dark for bowl, fork, spoon.

Frank Colt didn't move.

I sat across from him, twisting noodles. I thought of Frank with Etta over the space of years, him finding her in some dusky European carnival and asking her to ride with him, growing fond then bored of her, getting lost in some dark troubles.

“Hello, Frank,” I said. The cold spaghetti tasted good.

He looked up. He weren’t drunk, but he was gone in there, rattling around in his own recesses. I’d seen many a boy with that look. And I ain’t seen a one come back, aside from me.

“Sue,” he said.

And he disappeared again inside his eyes, looking back into his hands.

“You all right, Frank?” I asked.

Frank looked at me again. His pupils rolled back into his head, then forward.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I suppose I might have done.”

And he looked back into his hands again, and he laughed. Like he was standing at the edge of an ocean, and the way the water pooled around his feet had brought him some amusement.

If I had not already known I stood in court with true strangeness, I would have been unnerved. As it was, rooms were opening. I only trembled briefly as I watched whatever it was eating Frank Colt alive.

“Show goes up tomorrow, Sue,” he said into his hands, looking them over as if to search for scabs and rough skin. Then looked up, eyes milky. “Did I tell you that?”

“Yep,” I said.

“Right,” he answered. “Do you know what you’ll be doin’?”

“Why don’t we talk on it tomorrow,” I said to him.

“Right,” he said again. Then back to his hands, smiling. Hie eyes rolled up to look at me, then down, some kind of dim knowing underneath the swill, his skin just hanging there off his teeth. I saw all the pieces of his face, every separate part held only by

coincidence, his eyes floating in their sockets, his bones floating under his cheeks, each piece made of light inside of the meat of him.

“Maybe,” he said, “If in all the upset tomorrow you can’t find me, you might ask Etta for a rundown of the routine I have planned for you.”

And he grinned out of his eye sockets. I used the coldness I felt then to keep my features frozen.

“That’s fine,” I said back. “What upset? Just settin’ up the show?”

Frank cocked his head, looked at the ceiling, then rolled his eyes back at me. He lifted his hand to his mouth, and I saw a crushed walnut in it, which he pushed between his lips. There was a spot of blood in his palm, and another on the counter, surrounded by walnut shells.

“Some damn thing, I’m sure,” he said. His eyes held on me. “Whatever done, you and Etta, you can help the others find their way.”

I lowered my arms to the table. “Listen, Frank –”

There was a cup of wine next to Frank too, and he threw his head back and poured it down his throat, keeping his sunken grey eyes on me, then put the cup back down and wiped his arms across his mouth and lowered them and hunkered toward me, staring across the table.

“Yeah, Sue?” he asked. “What you got to say?”

I looked him over. His eyes were accusatory, but glassy and swimmy too.

I scratched my jaw and looked at him.

“Frank, I saw what happened to you this morning,” I said.

The collections of pieces behind his skin lost some of their cohesion.

“What?” he asked.

I threw a thumb over my shoulder. “Out in the fog. I saw you, Frank.” I leaned in. “You an’ that Nelson fella and that Mr. Ambrose. I saw ‘em wail on you out in the fields.”

I paused. Frank’s eyes hung on me like hovering bees. The moment stretched.

“If you got yourself into somethin’...” I said. “Hell, I don’t know. Just if you did—”

Frank’s nostrils curled.

“If you did, shit,” he said. “You ain’t got nothin’ you could offer would help me.”

And as he leaned forward, the light hitting his brow and blackening his eyes beneath. They were coal above his cheeks, and from them twin shards of diamond glittered in shadow.

“And I,” he said, “Ain’t got nothing. I can offer *you*.”

He sat back. I was disappearing to him.

“I don’t think I know what we’re talkin’ about, Frank,” I said.

Frank watched me one last time.

“Yeah,” he said.

“You sure don’t.”

And the light faded and he was gone.

I sat with Frank another however long, till the night sounds crept in and buzzed into my ears, the silence beneath them stripping me of breath. But then I stood. He didn’t move as I walked out, leaving him still looking at his hands under the flat kitchen lamps.

All sudden I was tired. Goddamn spent. It hit as I climbed the stairs and crawled over the top of my skull, pushing it low, hanging off me like steel chains. I felt like if I pitched my head back the whole of me would tumble back down the stairwell and I held myself just as still and centered as I could, so as not to rock and crash to earth.

FIFTY-THREE.

There was a rolling bedlam here in the upper rooms, a tumult in the side corridors. As I came up, two forms ran past me, glowing amber—a child and a dwarf, one chasing another under sheets lit by flashlights. They thumped the floor and ran off laughing into some disparate place.

Showpeople are an odd and ornery folk. They don't have enough attention on them, they begin to put up shows for themselves. All them strange feelings of the need for bein eyeballed bleeds out sideways when they ain't fed. You get a bunch of drunk carnies together and bored long enough, sooner or later you gonna get some kinda show you might regret.

I heard a violin plucked, and drumming deep. Laughter echoed and a warm redness swam beneath a doorframe, pouring like scarlet wet mud and soaking the floorboards. Voices muttered from within.

I passed the red room, swearing to myself I just didn't care, just needed to sleep, couldn't be bothered with whatever foolishness went on in these late hours. I walked down the hall to the little room where'd I'd been sleeping, half expecting Serry might be lying there, her hair in an auburn halo on them old sheets.



But I came upon only an empty room, cool, with a stab of yellow light across it. I closed the door shut and lay down, looking at the ceiling, planning to drop into sleep.

Sounds came then through the walls amplified, so I heard each laugh, each rise and fall of conversation. The late energy had set the house awake, and one thing you cannot do is fall asleep in a house that stays awake without you. I tried awhile and then got up, rolling to stand when I heard them bring up something heavy from downstairs, slam it on the floor, and proceed with the clink of bottles.

I stretched, left my little room, walking back the way I came. As I went, I looked into one of the rooms across – there was a little vanity in there, dusty and thick with grime, but with a mirror and small stool complete. And as I looked I saw Etta there, a ghost-image sitting, doing her hair with her elbows up over her head and back arched, one long lovely curve from head to toe. I watched and a smile slid up inside me, until Etta turned and looked at me, quizzical, and disappeared.

I began to feel then that this strange lost week below Pickinpaw was a sort of ending, but what was ending I wasn't sure of, and what had changed I did not know.

Behind me was a shout, the smell of wine. Both attracted. I turned and left that darkened place.

#### FIFTY-FOUR.

Wolf hands, wolf claws, wolf teeth, wolf ears. Down the hall some kind of gauze-dripped masquerade was taking place, a shadowshow played out between reds and oranges hung all around. It had started out as a big room, and abandoned, probably strewn with furniture and storage. I saw a rocking horse here, a symbol of that which has

no value but cannot be thrown away. And an extra bed, outfitted with canopy in a death shroud, and chairs and desks and hutches and dry sinks now become a small city of light. Lamps had been set up underneath and around these relics, and sheets draped overtop, creating weird shapes—tents and arcades and midways and thoroughfares. The approximation of a setting we all knew, so old carnies could entertain themselves in the onset of storm and dark.

To this end a dwarf, a firebreather, the poodle-lady and even Cook were putting on a makeshift play, while one of the stagehands we called Ham poured from bottles of cheap wine. Empty bottles near the door told me this evening's festivities had been going on a time.

The dwarf had found masks to enhance their theater. He'd chosen to play the wolf, while the poodle lady wore a peacock's crest, the firebreather wore a jester's garb and Cook was left in stained, hanging dog's ears, further dirtied by dark smudge on his face meant as spots. Their story seemed haphazard, but pulled laughter from the huddled group as others chatted, dozed or wrapped themselves in one another far backward in the dark. Perhaps Cook alone had lost the sense of the thing —his righteousness and annoyance seemed less fabricated than the rest as he became the angry, muddled dog we all thought he was.

Omar and Mei Shen, drunk as lords, cuddled half asleep with lazy eyes on the show. Serry and other dwarfs laughed loud, nasty, raw as each piece was presented. Etta was here too, red-cheeked, now brought up to dance with the firebreather, and dressed in her stage costume, tight and clung to her long muscles. Offsides a guitar was plucked and

tom-toms drummed by other folks I couldn't recognize—perhaps if I had, the feelings I had about this evening would have sharpened.

#### FIFTY-FIVE.

“I was born ‘tween heavy trees in a dark forest,” said the wolf, his eyes shadowed by his mask, his arms cloaked in fur. “I come hungry to eat up men. Women. All they babies.” He smiled yellow teeth, and drunk laughter rose from the crowd.

“Then a hunter come!” the wolf shouted. “He shot up the forest! He shot me up!” The firebreathing jester bounced in, carrying a toy bow and arrow. The jester twanged his bowstring, and his little plastic arrow bounced off the wolf's pelt. More laughter. Cook, balancing his wolf mask on his head, reached to the floor and picked up the arrow, then stuck it under his and stood again as his arm went limp.

“I was hurt,” he said. “But I'm tough. I'm a survivor! I'm gonna drink me some man-blood!”

The poodle lady giggled from her chair, twirling a parasol. Cook leered over her. “Or better yet, some woman blood. I pounce!” he shouted, and jumped, and the poodle lady careened backward, her alarm only half for show. She snapped her parasol shut and swung it across his face slow, but not slow enough for how drunk Cook was. She caught his lip, with one of the parasol's barbs and he went down, holding his face in his hands.

“Shit!” he shouted, while the audience filled with loud guffaws. Cook pulled his hands from his mouth and they were bloody, Cook-juice bubbling between his lips. As the crowd fell over themselves he alternated between expletives, announcing that he was all right, and telling everyone to go on and shut the hell up.

The tom-tom and the six-string guitar kept playing, providing accompaniment to the confusion. And I looked, really looked this time, at the musicians in the corner.

It was another dwarf drumming, and a big old ape pulling on the strings. No folk I knew from our show, but by now that was commonplace—it was as if the house itself was a public house for freak and carnies.

Then the dwarf smiled at me. The ape nodded, thick and dumb.

There are times when your body gets ahead of you—when you touch your hand to a lit stove and pull away before you even know the heat. There are times, too, when the mind races and pulls the body after.

And then there are those times, oh my love, when brain and muscles fall into tandem, and those times are most terrifying—when all of you is throwing itself forward without consultation between your disparate parts. Some decision's been made and the essence of you, the part of you ain't mind nor body but only the soul between, is left asking for the whys and wherefores.

This is what happened now, in the small orange darkness of that room. I was stepped forward without me knowing, watching myself as I crossed to that dwarf and that big ape thing. My hand reached out, touching my own future.

And the dwarf saw me and snarled, the little face curling. One eye squinted at me while the other was a desperate slash of red and scars. And the ape growled, his wooden six-string swinging through the air so that I only had time to raise an arm when it connected, six lines of wire digging in my flesh.

The wood rebounded with a *tong*, and all the crowd looked over, Cook and poodle-lady and jester too. I looked to see the reaction of the room, just for a second.

A window, a dark window led off the room into the outside and the night beyond. In that second the ape and dwarf, with a smash, were on top of that window and through it, so I only saw feet and elbows as they fell into the night.

I could not chase them into that back alley, to clear the air and punish the wicked, for there was no alley and this was not Coney Island. But the echo was clear, icing my bones as the past became the present and laughed at me, teeth shining in the dark.

I ran to the window, glimpsed figures disappearing into the wheat fields. Behind me Cook was sitting up with blood running out his mouth.

“What in hell?” he asked around his hand.

One of the other drunkards glowered.

“Bandits,” he whispered.

And things began to glimmer and connect in me. A pattern in the patterns.

Papa Canelli stood in the bedroom doorway, wearing a greasy undershirt stained with sweat.

“I tell you,” he said, to the room but also to only me.

“I tell you there only trouble in this place.”

Perhaps no one knew else knew what he meant then. But I was a city of lights and each one started burning.

More movement passed me. Serry’s feet were flying out the room, down the stairs, thump thump thump.

Eyes on me, decisions unmade. I followed after.

## FIFTY-SIX.

As I describe it, it's as though time stretched and slowed, but that was nowhere near so true. It was a layered collapse of moments—Serry running out the house, me following, not so concerned about what she ran after so much as what *I* ran after, some part of me I'd failed at keeping buried now rising up and tearing through the vines and earth, as though the dwarf and apeman had escaped from my sunken memories into the space of that amber room. Serry and me chased the past, as if it might make clear the muddy banks of the here, the now, the open, unchanging eye.

Outside the night echoed silence like a held breath, still containing the sounds of breaking glass and running feet. We could see no figures making shadows against the darkness, but I could feel the absence they left behind them.

I breathed. She breathed. The night hung empty.

And then we saw a shadow. Serry gasped; she'd grabbed a flashlight and with shaking hands she flicked the switch.

A man sat across the road, looking at the house. His skin didn't illuminate as it should, though the road and foliage behind him got brightened. He had lines on him, like me, yet not like mine at all. Not ink but darkened grooves, thin concentric waves from head to foot on every scrap of flesh not wrapped in clothes.

I'd seen Maori scarring in my time at sea. But this man was white, and as he smiled his teeth were only gums. He lit a cigarette. The smell of smoke slid toward us through the dark.

And he blinked, and his eyes were sick and reddened for an instant, a flicker-flash you couldn't be sure a minute later had ever happened.

Beyond him now, as my eyes adjusted, I saw a dim light through the trees. And the night sounds cleared, and I heard drums and voices from the dark.

The etched man smiled again, and stood and nodded to us, and walked back into the forest. And he was gone.

Sherry and I breathed out together loud. I looked at her, she looked at me.

“Hell,” said Serry. “For a minute I was back in Coney Island.”

“Me too,” I said. “Stayin’ here’s just got us spooked.”

“Christ!” she said. “I thought it was just me. I feel like we’re dying in this place.”

“This circus is too damn big,” I said. “The house can’t hold ‘em. Now the freaks is in the trees.”

“Fuckin’ hell,” said a voice behind us.

Me and Serry turned, like lovers awoken from sleep.

Two dwarves stood by the door of the boardinghouse, but we heard their voices like in whispers in our ears.

“Bandits,” one said to the other. Then turned to go inside, heads down.

“Bandits,” again, like a rhythm. Like a ritual.

They walked back into the house.

“I wish someone would tell me what that means,” I said.

“I don’t,” said Serry back.

## **SATURDAY.**

### **FIFTY-SEVEN.**

I feel now that my narrative has lost its pacing, much as we lost ourselves in those nights in bad country. It's also hard to hold to my nightmares while I lie in your arms, my love. The hum of your breath makes me forget the hardships that brought me here to you.

Serry and I stood outside in the dark a long time after the dwarves had gone, watching the bonfires of the revellers through the trees. After the silence stretched long enough, a third shape joined us. Etta stood there, wrapped and shivering in a winter coat.

“Is cold,” she said. “Is late.”

We went inside, up stairs, each step behind us the slow disappearing of the world.

Two of the stagehands had taped over the broken windows in the upstairs room where we'd had our masquerade, and someone laid silks and mattresses into one large downy forest floor atop the hardwood. Cook fashioned a tent of bedsheets overhead, and those of us that still remained lay together underneath, swaddled together in a mix of hands and feet.

“Bebbies, bebbies,” Cook said. “Ain't no one find us here.” Despite it weren't true.

He kept the candles burning, so that a soft glow hung over us as we slid into sleep.

Outside through that broken window, the wilds called to us, slow and patient.



## FIFTY-EIGHT.

I woke for the last time the next morning, in the soft pink glow under the canopy. Light shone through the fabric and above us the ceiling leaked, a drip of water pattering the blanket above me, dark and red and in thin rivulets.

I sat up, my back aching like it used to when I was young and woke from fitful jungle sleep. Around me was a small band of sleeping carnies, knocked out and wrapped in dirty blankets across the floor. Here and there a stray hand and foot poked out from underneath, like they were a basket of children all cozied and unaware.

I crawled out from under the tent, and past the broken windows saw a world outside encased in fog. It billowed up thick and milky from the earth, and through it was the illusion of black figures running off into the woods beyond. But my eyes adjusted and the figures became just trees, enveloped in mist.

There was a rocking chair next to me and I sat in it, and began slowly to creak back and forth. From here I could see Etta's face, asleep in perfect calm. I watched her, feeling this breath of peace could not last, but a respite was welcome just the same.

I dozed off again by the window, and when I awoke the sunlight was brighter but no sharper. As I stood, a floorboard creaked and Etta woke. She sat up, blinking one eye at me to recognize who I was. I smiled at her. She blinked again.

I looked around on the floor for socks while she stood and went to the window. As I found them and turned back to her, she thumped her finger on the glass. Looking at me, she thumped again.

Thump.

I stood next to her, looking down into the fog. I thought a moment on Adam and Eve in the garden, then wondered where Frank Colt had slept last night.

The mists were clearing now and across the road the trees were barren. What I had thought was a dense thicket of saplings was really nothing more than a hedgerow with fields beyond. And the fields, once wild and grassy, had been mowed and flattened.

Across the land was a mapped crisscross of tents, riggings, packing crates – all laid out like a picnic blanket, waiting. Closest to the road was a great pile of clean golden lumber, stacked neat and tidy and new.

“When’d this happen?” I asked Etta. She shook her head.

“Yesterday,” said Cook, emerging from beneath the canopy. He rubbed his face, then stood, and came to stand beside us. “When you two was diddlin’ up the mountain. Brought all this in here, flattened out the grounds.”

“No one’s diddlin’,” I said. “Where’s Frank, anyhow?”

“Maywell we ask him,” Cook said, and nodded out the window.

Down on the lawn a figure approached through the mist. Alphonse Ambrose, on tall thin legs, tapping tent and wood and rope with a long cane, checking each piece was there.

As we looked down at him, he looked back up and smiled, tipping his hat to us.

There was a murmur that went around the upper rooms, as the carnies woke. My thoughts swirled with mud and I had only tunnel vision of Ambrose’s frame, waiting for us out on the edge of nothing with the future beyond.

FIFTY-NINE.

We all walked out and saw Alphonse standing atop his mound of lumber and waiting for us. As we crossed the road he shouted for us all to gather round. It seems carnies had been slept up in all corners of the boardinghouse and now numbered perhaps twenty, thirty on the lawn.

“It’s the day of reckoning, children,” Ambrose said, and his hands outstretched. “It’s been a long hard week, I know, for this town and for all of you. But now’s the time to make it right. We got one evening to show these simple people a night of the finest amusements they’re likely to see. Time to lift some spirits and even,” he smiled thin, “if we’re lucky, make a little coin in the process.”

“Where’s Frank Colt?” Papa Canelli shouted from the back. “Don’t seem right to make a move without him.”

On this a murmur went up. Where was Frank? Where was Lindsay Nelson? Who in fuck, in fact, was running this machine aside from the jackal up in front?

“Frank Colt is securing the final conditions for your performance tonight,” said Ambrose, and the words slid over his teeth without shape or fricative. “All I mean to do is get you set up. It ain’t a big thing y’all ain’t done a thousand times before.”

“This don’t feel right,” whispered Papa Canelli. “I did not like it then and I do not like it now.”

“You already said it twice then, now hush up,” I said. Beside me, Etta seemed present and aware. She waited, like the rest, for what Ambrose had to say. And in the soft morning twilight the tents themselves, for all their ramshackle foolishness, sat in tones of

yellow gold and vibrant navy blues. I thought of sacred dyes and the death rituals of ancient tribes wrapped in colors such as these.

Without list or record, Ambrose began calling out our names. Some I knew and some I didn't, and again I thought how in the four days south of Pickinpaw the nature of our band had changed. As Ambrose crewed up the sideshows and the tumblers and the clowns, I saw how the casts of our acts were reconfigured in tiny ways by his instruction. I no longer knew the man to the right of me, the woman to the left. We were a jigsawed people, an amalgam of hands and legs and faces, pieces in a puzzlebox disassembled and put back new with a sliding scale of changed details. It was as if we were a letter and that letter was being spoken in a different tongue.

But name after name he called, and so I waited. Papa Canelli waited too, whispering like bees.

“Frank Colt, Frank Colt should be here, where is our ringmaster? No one knows. Night of show he disappears, no one knows, no one is concerned, they should be, *merde, merde,*” he sputtered, angered but utterly resigned.

There was a strangeness, a slippery strangeness, as if we was all on board a ship rocking slow in a windless ocean and waiting to be capsized. It was Ambrose's smile, his teeth. It was waking up in a stranger's bed.

But Papa got called then, and he walked over to Ambrose and Alphonse whispered in one ear, and Papa walked off and may have looked over one shoulder at me. I pictured his wife and children waiting for him to come to them and explain how they'd play their parts in Alphonse's traveling show. The anxiety of the morning had worn into

an accepting numbness, as if everyone's features were blank masks. I could only render them in high contrast, full burn dreamtime.

But the moment passed and sounds of construction and normalcy filtered back through, and the blues seeped back into the sky and I could breathe. I was standing alone on that lawn while around me carnies walked to and fro with a renewed sense of purpose, a rhythm found in Alphonse's mix of dance and traveling show.

I was pretty sure I was out of cigarettes. As I tumbled across the idea a voice called out to me.

"Sue!" said Ambrose, stepping over. "Did I forget you?"

"Did you?" I asked. "You tell me."

He threw an arm around me and leaned in.

"I must have," he said. "Let's figure out what to do with you." He smelled of herbs and smoke and rust.

"I'll just pitch in whereabouts," I said.

"Sure, sure," he said, patting my chest. "Let's see. Let's see."

And we walked me round with one hand tight on my shoulder, the strong tight bones locked around the space where my arm met my neck. Together we looked round at folks working, hauling, shoving off the weird that had infected us.

"I know," Ambrose said. "Sue, let's have you go downtown with some of the tumblers. You get signs put up, invite people to the show."

"You sure?" I said. "I'm twice a better hauler. Look, you got the Bearded Lady raisin' a tent. She don't know what for; usually she's just foldin' napkins with Cook."

“She’s fine, she’s fine,” he was saying. “Down into town, that’s good for you. Watch the tumblers for me. Those half-wits need a babysitter, you know? Someone strong like you to grab them.”

“All right then,” I said, and Ambrose nodded and walked away, nodding to folks as he went. We were given what to do, I realized. We knew our roles. Only left was for us now to play it out.

## SIXTY.

We were hanging signs, me and some of the dwarves who climbed atop each other to reach the high and dusty places. Someone had found one tube of yellowed posters that had survived the storms, and we nailed them now in slipshod grids up and down the drag—across the main grocery store, the library, the town hall, each building a miserable grey shadow in a town that was only just barely. The sun threatened to warm but did not promise, and I knew already the day would size up cold.

The dwarves talked amongst themselves in mumble-speak, identical mouths on faces that moved like masks, waddling from signpost to storefront to glass door, oblivious to gawking passersby—mostly folks getting breakfast at the diner down the street. Alongside them I felt like I’d been relegated to the kitchens, but it gave me time to think as I hammered flyers and dodged my own thumbs.

And as I hammered, oh my love, the dark thoughts coiled and uncoiled in me. I was falling into old lines and patterns, walking through landscapes rough with deep spread, exploring the graveyards of long-dead earths. Truths were muttering, deep and rampant. All I breathed was smoke and rust and sun. A sharpness swam in on the air. I

was reaching into back rooms, unpacking rifles, knives, ammo belts. I was finding my old airman goggles; putting on my jungle eyes.

SIXTY-ONE.

I was digging through my bucket for more nails when Dwyer came up to greet me.

I had just found a couple unbent squareheads and set them to the wall of the general store when I saw a youth was standing there, in a white t-shirt and green-patterned jeans. He was staring hard at the posters I was hanging through thick plastic eyeglasses, skinny and pimpled and focused.

I thought on Dwyer, braying like a jackal as I'd got my first tattoo in a jungle camp, bespectacled and sweaty and thin and angled. I thought of him shouting at that old chink did we dragged him out of that tattoo shop, and walking him home, calming him down, cheering him up. I thought of how he talked in his sleep.

The boy wore thin headphones and his hair cropped short around his head, and his cheekbones stubbled with their first straggling hairs.

"That's the circus, right?" he said. He didn't make eye contact. I looked back at the poster I'd been hanging, which read CIRCUS in big red type.

"Pretty much," I said.

"You're staying at the boardinghouse up the hill, right?" the boy said. He still didn't look at me. Potato chips stuck in the braces over his teeth.

I looked at him. "Uh, yeah," I said. "You looking for a room?"

"No," the boy said. "Just wanted to confirm." I saw in his hand he held a map, and on his back wore a rucksack. As I watched him, he reached into the sack, dug around

inside it, and pulled out a canteen. Eyes never leaving the poster, or looking at me, he took a long slow drink.

“So you’re going to the circus?” I asked.

“I might,” he said. “I’m looking for it, anyway. Be seeing you.”

He stepped away from me and headed toward the road leading up the hill and out of town. He walked fast, his rucksack jangling with whatever was inside it, his stride sort of wiggly and innocent and light.

I thought of Dwyer, face half off and staring at me through mud, arms connected to body no more, body full of guts no more, hung upside from a tree and skinned a hundred miles into the jungle. I thought of finding his teeth in my clothes.

Dusk crept long shadows cross the trees and leaves and ground. It was cool as the sun tapered off, and I held Dwyer’s broken thick-rimmed glasses in my hand. His hairs and skin were stuck between the shards of glass. They smelled of mystery and truth too faint for me to know.

The streets in town were getting quieter. I looked off down the road and saw the dwarves were getting up to no goodness — one was poking a stick up a ladies’ dress and getting whacked for it with a shopping bag; two others chased children through the streets.

I knew I was counted on to bring them homeward, and thought again on Alphonse Ambrose working so hard to get rid of me while he raised the big top. Somehow I’d revealed my cards to the enemy, and now they kept me off in the front lines.

But I had my ways round that. O yes me.

I remembered the old sow I’d walked home two nights prior, and the tiny boxhouses where she’d lived. For all my casual grace and slurred speech I had not



forgotten the path we'd walked shadowed evening under the dusk moon, the thin grass alleyways near the town's only bar. And so, as the late afternoon wore on and my pile of circus pinups grew thin, I snuck idle from the main town thoroughfare, where the leaves and bracken led.

She came to the door quiet, and in the low light the glow of a burning cigarette and the cool crumbling of ash were silhouetted through the screen door.

She smiled sideways. "Thought I told you not to follow me," she said.

I filled the other half of a broken grin. Together we made a cheshire cat of false cheer. "Maybe I just got lucky," I said.

She sucked in on her joint.

"Maybe. Come on, you're letting bugs in," she said, and smiled. "Locust season."

And she let me in.

I took her in the yellow light of the stinking trailer. She didn't fight. The sweat and the dust of the kitchen shadowed us. In the aftermath I lay with her on the pebbly carpet of her floor, sharing one cigarette. Strewn around us were dishes, bottles, newspapers and old magazines. She lay on her elbow while I stared at the water stains in the ceiling tile.

"So what you need?" she said.

I looked over her. She smiled again.

"No man like you takes a broad like me without needing something. Tell me."

I took the cigarette.

"Need you to drive some circus midgets back to our camp without a fuss. You can take my truck."

“And then what?” she asked. “You expect me to leave the truck and walk back?”

“You keep it,” I said. “I’ll come back for it.”

She nodded, taking a drag. “Tell you, that doesn’t sound like much of a favor.”

“Maybe I need it done real bad,” I said.

“Even so,” she said, and blew out smoke.

“So you’ll do it?” I said.

She nodded. “Bring me your midgets. I’ll get ‘em where you say.”

“That’s half the trick,” I said. “You gotta round ‘em up. But they’re easy to find.”

I looked at her again. She looked back at me, then twitched an eyebrow.

I nodded, and sat up then, looking around her bungalow.

“Sorry I didn’t straighten up,” she said over my shoulder, making o-rings toward the ceiling.

On the floor one of the newspapers looked cleaner than the others. It was flipped open to the back, and stamped on it was a copy of the same rough print I’d been hanging all over town—our circus flyer, crude as they come.

She sat up next to me.

“You see this?” she asked, and turned the paper to its front side. “Up by the boardinghouse, where you all are. No end of crap up there.”

I wiped the light smear of dust from the page.

“You knew about this, din’cha?” she asked.

“Knew what?” I said.

“Last week,” she said. “That storm that knocked y’all out in the first place.” She blew smoke.

“It was a meteor shower,” she said. “Maybe y’all got took down by shooting stars.”

In my hands the newsprint lay prostrate.

The night peepers were coming out and making a racket, mosquitoes and mayflies humming round the trailer camp. I left quiet out the woman’s back screen door leading into wilderness. She watched me go, jangling the keys to the circus pickup in one hand.

Bugs buzzed my ears and I slapped at them, driving them away while nails dug deeper into the walls inside my head. I was off through tree limbs under rich blue sky of evening to find evidence against false things, and proof of things I knew were true.

SIXTY-TWO.

It was quite a walk to get out to my own camp, far beyond town where my troubles had begun several days prior. It was here I made my way, through maps of trees inside my head that led me through the undergrowth to find the source of things. As I walked my skull began to pulse against the inside of my temples, heat and sweat making my head ache down my jaw and neck and between my shoulders.

I come up on it as we had the first time, but now there was no fire or smoke to light the way. Just wreckage, picked over by the circus crews and bandits, or maybe both at once. I saw the general markings of horror like its own landscape —there was the cracked truck that had held the lions, there the bloody severed ropes hangin from the tree that hanged them. There the grooves in the dirt from the trucks that crashed here, and our own footprints following after.

And like a stain, that giant thumbprint pressed in the earth, a weird dug-out hole that still, three days in, felt somehow arcane and sublime. It and everything had begun to swarm with insects as the sun set. I stood over the pit and stared, and saw things crackling in it that I couldn't hold to.

The evidence was all around me and I could not make sense of it. I found broken horn rims under the twine ropes where the lions hung. I smelled a bomb blast in the dirt pit, for I am a man who's smelled all manner of explosive. It was a backwater mining compound, common for blowing out salt and sulphur shafts. I found creeping horrors in the dirt – stomach staples and tooth fillings and bone pins and pacemaker wires; like someone held together by machinery had vomited through itself and processed through a meat grinder into something new. I found a glass eye shattered and hearing aide, same.

How had I missed all this carnage in the soil? What weird pattern, now revealed, etched itself into my skin and teased apart the sinews that held my muscles in time?

Meteors, shit. I felt an honesty rising in me like an illness; I thought of reaching down my throat my whole arm into my throat, stomach, intestines to pull it out. There was some true darkness here unfolding like a puzzlebox, and inside it was insect eggs and bile.

The road called to me. Truth dragged me forward. I saw things leading me out to the old circus truck where I'd woken in a haze before the horror began.

My chest and elbows took me there. Wolf eyes fed me from my spine. Legs moved; I staggered forward. I stood. I began to walk. Locusts guided me. I would find you. I was coming now.

## SIXTY-THREE.

I walked up on the hill as the early evening rose, the sky a cornflower blue and soft and round, like to burst with the shapes of clouds a warm pillow over the landscape here, past town on the edge of the flat roads and cornfields beyond. I'd forgotten just how alone we'd been out here, smoking wet cigarettes and waiting. Now an awfulness was the payment for that lost time. A deeper sort of fear had opened its mouth and swum up from ink black underspace. It snapped loose wet jaws at our feet, pulling us inward.

I walked in swaths of color—from the sky to rich just-rained greens of the grasslands and the black late-day shadows of the trees and the pale brown-yellows of the road itself. I fell into the soft rustles of my own footsteps on gravel, and let the rest breathe out of me.

I could hear the shrill hum of the crickets and cicadas. It was all lovely, what it was, and I felt out of step, for a moment, with time—a young boy in the Ozarks on a back road after dinner, daring to stay out past sundown and a winter chill rising, knocking cattails against tree trunks, years before the lives that shaped me. A memory came to me, unbidden:

I am seven. I am in my father's truck. We are driving on a backroad in the north mountain country; I am in the back with my sisters. Their names are Jenny and Marjorie.

They are both blonde, one older than me and one younger, the older one freckles and glasses, the younger bubbles and light. We have a boar strung across the cab of the truck as we drive, its legs stuck into air and clouds, mouth hung open in a burp of filth. Blood streams out of it in a sunburst over the cab itself. Pap will hose down the Ford when we get home and unload the corpses.

The girls and me are holding court with giant dead buck riddled with buckshot. It drips blood too and the blood is in our shoes, our socks, soaked in between our toes. We smile at each other and hold on for dear life as Pap tears ass through the backroads.

Through the back window I can only see the curve of his jaw and cheek and ear and this is how I remember him, as the back of a darkened face. I have never loved my father so much; have never so much wanted to be him.

I cannot remember my sisters except by distinguishing marks. I sense that I have lost them in my old age and wonder where they have gotten to, how I lost them, what has become of me.

The scene ends with a flicker of tape like a burned out film strip and I am still standing in this clearing over the thumb-shaped hole in the earth. Below me in the pit are bloody ripped dresses. They belong to my mother dead and raped and Serry's mother lost in an asylum in the northlands and your mother who died when you were young.

I thought of these things now, and looked back over my shoulder into the hamlet south of Pickinpaw, a nook of eaves-hung houses peeking out from foothills. Above it wasn't so bad, not such a complicated mess. I wondered if perhaps it was only I that had found worse nightmares here, only me that created these worlds that demanded survival and escape.

The firepit was here where Cook had cooked, and somehow it looked like only hours since someone'd left it—I smelled the thick musk of smoke, and almost felt a low heat emanate from it as an afterglow. Beyond it were the trees where we'd torn a half-sign from our trailer and propped it up with a warning that we were leaving, and past that

a pile of rubble and detritus splashed with circus paint that we'd left behind, like a caterpillar's husk dried to a leafstem.

I was long out of smokes, but my feet ached and there was a heaviness in me like a waxen mold, covering some raw version of myself beneath. Perhaps while I'd walked here I'd simply broken, a fever peaking and disintegrating. The fire pit had a few cords of wood around it. I sat, pulled off my boots, my socks, stretched my toes. The pebbles of ash stained my feet, crumbling finer than sand, sticking to some of my skin but falling away other places where the callouses were too dry and thick for traction.

It felt like I could no longer remember what had driven me into such a panic, what imagined ills had built upon themselves inside me so that I'd dragged myself here against my higher thinking. Perhaps the tumult had spent itself against the whore from town; perhaps it'd slid out like sweat as I walked east. I thought I might hang my head and let what remained drip out of me and become dust.

I leaned over, started pushin with my fingers through the ash. First I brushed away the white and black, then turned up soil. I pushed that away too, in swipes with my hands, till I touched on the wetpack where the last day's mud had sunk. Still I dug, like a child on the beach making moats.

I put my fist into the burrow, twisted it in circles to continue emptying. I imagined myself falling first into it, swimming beneath the soil like a seal, free from the strange haunting numbness that was swarming me.

I imagined faces in the dirt, and treasures and bones and lost things, a spiralweb of faces spitting words in a mumble of reflection and trash images that cluttered me, refusing yet to leave. One by one I asked them to, to vacate the spaces in my eyes and

ears where they'd gotten stuck, where I could no longer hear and see the round horizon shapes of an unhinged world.

When the last of them had crawled out, I'd remove the mask that might serve as respite for any others sneaking in, the faceplate that covered all the gears and oil made me. Remove my skin too with no need for it, leave myself just blood and bones hung to dry by a dead fire, all stillness, all echoes.

A hoot-owl was calling the announce the evening. I stood, unsure why I'd come here but with no complaints for what small steadiness I might have got instead.

Around me I saw a council of my kinfolk—ghost traces of the other carnies poking at a ghost fire. Etta, Serry, Cook, Omar, Mei Shen and so many faceless others sliding back into darkness, with one space left for me. I saw them just a second. They disappeared as the light waned.

At the side of the camp, something glinted in the underbrush as the last sunbeams hit it right. I walked toward it, and dug through leaves.

It was some old bicycle, chrome loaded down with rust. It was small and creaked at every movement. The tires weren't much but a rubber skin.

I got atop and rode it back towards town. Behind me insects hummed, working hard to be louder than the racket I began to make.

As I swooped down the first hill I felt the first locust fly over me. The swarms were coming in. I led them, senses tensing.



## SIXTY-FOUR.

As I drove down to the the old boardinghouse on motorcycle tread night came on, dragged like a curtain by the buzzing hoard. The groaning churn of the bike burned my nostrils and I felt bites on my back, saw thousands of little eyes reflecting in the sparks spat out through the old grey engine.

I came up over one last hill and the insects flew past me, thumping me with clumsy wings. One bounced off me and got lodged somehow in the bike's controls. I watched it curl itself around the headlamp's wires, then scuttle and die. Around me the air was blanketed with a humming, fluttering cloud.

I swooped down the road, fighting for control as the wheels skittered over loose dirt. Pebbles scattershot my flesh and I couldn't help but feel a little younger, a little braver. These evils lost power as I saw their true faces.

The locusts screamed in my ears, but as I fell toward the house I dropped below their flyline. For a moment I looked up into a sheet of them flying kamikazi. Looking to the horizon behind me I saw they just kept coming. They reared up as one and flew over me, headed towards town, fit to devour the surrounding fields and trees. I cut the engine and dropped the bike, running for the house.

The porch glowed yellow and warm like an oven turned too high. Frozen ghost-faces stood in the windows—Etta's blue eyes and O-mouth wide as I chased tail towards the front steps like I was running from the first grenade I ever threw.

On my way across the lawn I thought a hundred thoughts, but as I threw myself forward the door fell open like a jaw, revealing Cook winced up on the other side. One

arm stretched to the doorknob, and his teeth gritted to avoid my launch path. I tumbled in and smashed the door shut behind me.

For a moment the carnies moved to gather round me. Papa Canelli stormed down the stairs with his children and his wife behind him like nesting dolls. Rage was in his mouth, demanding knowledge. Then the insects were upon us.

They hit the windows like a wall of nails and the whole house shook with it, teeming multitudes of beating wings bashing themselves to pulp in their hunger. We all hunkered at once, like some bomb went off outside the doors. We watched one another, frozen and awestruck as the noise, so heavy, so loud, found its frequency and never wavered. I looked around at the current company—Omar holding Mei Shen, the Simple Twins gibbering in pantomime— and watched as realization set in.

*Locusts? Papa Canelli was mouthing now. Is it possible?*

Slow we stood, like on a boat without sea legs. We looked at each other. Serry pointed toward the back of the house, and we followed. The hallway had a small door in it I hadn't seen before, and one by one we filed down into the basement.

Downstairs we seemed to multiply. Carnies kept running down from upper floors, and under a harsh bare bulb I counted scores of folks I hadn't ever except on posters— Lig Sung and the Spinning Children, Big Eyed Wally the Freak, The Sasquatch Woman, and a hundred others all cavalcaded into the dark as the world ended above.

Over our heads, there was thumping wood and breaking glass. Cook was staring at me, and Papa Canelli too, their mouths making shapes and the shapes were questions I couldn't answer. *Could little bugs break windows? How were they in the house?*

Past them and to my left, Serry made a head-count, her long tanned fingers poking air at each one of the folk in turn. Then she looked at me and mouthed two words.

Mouth shapes: *Where's Frank?*

My eyes and jaw tensed up, and Etta was standing beside me so I looked at her square. And her eyes were wide too, and she began pushing through the crowd, and I grabbed her hard to follow as she made for the stairs again. We crawled through human wreckage to get back up into the house above, to find a man half-dead inside, refusing to let one of them go, my boys, my boys.

The first floor we'd just left minutes prior already seemed a different place, infested now as locusts had lighted on doorframes and the hardwood. The windows were still intact, I saw, but the fireplace was like an open mouth spitting bees, and we brushed insects from our faces and crunched them with our feet, leaving tiny carcasses. I saw them steam and dissolve in death, these harbringers from the dark places creeping in.

Etta ran ahead of me through the downstairs calling some strange syllable—*Frahhnk, Frahhnk*. She made a circle of the place and now ran up, up, up into the labyrinth of floors above us. I felt a hopelessness at exploring the maze while evolution formed a blitzkrieg, but there was a tingling in me now. I was filling with water, drowning me in pressure-sense. I was entering the undermind, opening rooms. I followed Etta upstairs like climbing back inside a womb.

Upstairs it was dark, dark. Lights only flickered as Etta hit the switches one by one, calling *Frahnk, Frahnk*. Here the insects swarmed, buzzing angry for us to swallow them, to let them light on our eyes. In every shadow my wife, my child, my long dead brothers stared at me, astral yellow in the blue-black gloom. The first door in the hallway

hung open and through it I saw the bedroom where we'd gathered the night before, and the broken window that looked outside, letting more hordes in. Outside, outside the wood was shattering, panels cracking under the bearings of the monsters filled the air.

More glass crashed, and Etta reached into the bedroom to find the switch. The light turned on soft amber like was no oddness anywhere. And we neither screamed, though both us wanted to, for I think we both recognized some delicate ecosystem we both stood inside.

The horrors were on the window, and the dying insects were collapsing in from outside in a fetid heap, spitting themselves onto the floorboards and the pile of pink blankets Cook had strung over us the night before. They were stained, I saw now, rich and brown-red. I remember thinking that morning that the ceiling had been leaking rain. I looked now to the ceiling, and saw another rust-red stain.

Then I was pedaling backward, assembling the map of the house in my mind and running through the upstairs, lookin for a door I knew I'd find. I knew without looking Etta was with me. We were tied together now.

The stairwell up to the attic had doors on either end, and inside was dark, but a hole had broken through from the upstairs. More of the awfulness outside was coming in. In the dark we beat them back with our hands, and our feet crunched in the corpses of dead things. Etta reached for me and I held her, the inks taking the brunt of the attack, and we kept our heads down as we pushed upward.

We fell together, skidded on slick and collapsed through the doorway as it splintered under our weight.

But then we were into the abattoir.

I slipped on something used to be inside someone. I smelled a stink of rotting parts broken and exploded. A wet heat come from the attic room itself, thick in my mouth.

Etta stood behind me and I know she knew it too. The floor was thick with something that weren't water; weren't clay.

Dim light glowed a soft blue through slitted shutters. The weird flutterings of the things outside beat round, a whispering, muttering, anxious polyrhythm. I could see now that there were a hole in one of the windows like a wound through which the black flittering shadows poured in crumbled bodies.

Etta held my arm. She felt stronger than I felt, with coiled tension beneath, a brittle twisting of clenched muscle. I needed her to hold. Past the rooms in me was a nothingness. I was skirting closer to edge of it, waiting to collapse.

Etta and I were one, mouths meeting, chests beating.

I flicked on the light.

SIXTY-FIVE.

Frank Colt stared downward and outward, hanging by a noose. Dangling, rocking, drool and blood and bile all dripped down his chest, across the spatter of his lapel. A fountain of gore poured forth unnatural, covering the wood floor beneath him and soaking through.

I saw nothing left in him to remind me of the man I knew. Most of him had gone some time ago, and these days above Pickinpaw had taken what was left. The rest of what was inside him had devoured itself.

Lindsay Nelson was sprawled out below Frank, also dead. His tongue lolled out his mouth and his neck was bent irregular from the weight of his stupid head. He lay in his underclothes, slumped over himself, A giant hunting-knife stuck halfway out the flabby meat of his chest. Blood dripped down the whole of him, and I saw his wrists were slashed too.

One hand hang limply across the floorboards, and beneath him pool of raw umber mixed with dried piss and shit. The floor was tacky with the waste spilled from him, frozen in a stark museum display.

I thought again of the patter-patter of droplets cross our blanket-tent that morning. How I thought the house had leaks, and took no notice of the stain it left, an unusual shade of rusty brown. Some insanity had got to them, and God had burned them out.

Aside me Etta screamed, or perhaps did not, perhaps just a rising scream of each of us, shrill and thin like a tinnitus whine. As it had so many time in those few days, time slowed and moved in tandem.

Around us on the floor were piles of locusts, some popped like spoiled eggs and seeping, ripped shards and limbs attached to wings and giant roaming eyes. The stink of them filled the room as they died, an arrangement of roiling hate.

As we stepped forward, perhaps to tumble into dust, the world imploded. The glass shattered in that shuttered tower and the swarm came toward us with a shuddering whine. I turned to wrap myself around Etta same as she grabbed me. She dug into my arms, her nails making trails in my flesh. But the locusts wouldn't let me breathe. They filled my eyes and nose and mouth. I was a clotted mass of dried leaves torn apart by wind.

I swandove backwards in that little room and heard glass breaking, words screaming. I was thrown out the attic window and twisted like a kite through the night air and into the tall grasses. The sky around me cleared but I was blind and boneless, a skin of snakeskin. I called out, drowning in tidal meadows under an empty paper moon.

#### SIXTY-SIX.

My heart beat loud red in my chest in the flat pale empty dark. The shapes of trees and the road beyond were filtered with the scattered forms of night creatures.

But behind me wolf eyes opened. Mother's, father's hands swept their milky stained fingers over me, standing me, and daughter glowed and guided us up.

I walked us through the night sea. Some song was rising, choirs bursting forth voices and a rolling boil of drums and horns and pounding feet.

I looked above me and saw crags of rock as if I'd fallen deep into the earth. The clouds parted then, and as I watched a great head came through them. Arms and chest and three faces joined as one in the sky above, singing their terrible song. Six eyes looked down on me and knew me, though I could not look back up at them. Mouths opened and notes came up from throats. I was burlap dust and twisted loss.

But I reached, and pulled, dragging myself from the strata. Then lay gasping, gasping across the earth, the heat leaving me, the cool claiming me. I lay again under the moon and calming sky.

Nearby stepped to earth the strange of strangest men.

He were covered in carvings etched into his skin, a ritual of scars crisscrossing his body, and he turned to smile at me and his teeth were filed, his head bald and pierced

through skin at intervals so there was nothing human in him. And he lowered down and touched his face to my face. He cupped my chin in his hands and smiled again and closed his eyes and opened them.

And he said, shhhhh, and covered my eyes and then I slept and felt nothing on me and would not wake no more.

#### SIXTY-SEVEN.

The moon shone. The locusts beat around me in circadian rhythm. I smelled fresh soil.

The lights came up, and across the grasses I see what I thought was torn to nothing – the circus tents, standin' pure and perfect just across the desolate road, waitin for us, for the arrival of an audience.

I knew I was dreaming. I knew this was no dream.

There was a glow falling from above, from the house windows. I looked up to see the circus folk clustered round them, looking down on me fallen from the great attic height.

I knew then what we were party to, what we had made and what would happen when we played our drums and danced our dances. I had been given sight to the world beneath the world.

#### SIXTY-EIGHT.

The rain come up a slow patter, then stronger as though no one had noticed, multiplying itself as the sky opened like a mouth pouring flame. The tents and sideshow



booths were set up in a skeletal structure, an impossible architecture against the night. I ran toward it now like a thief with my arms sharp, machetes through thick trees.

I remember my first tour when we were called upon to burn down an indigent village. It was end-of-times and boys were heading home, but the brass above wanted to leave their mark. They grabbed the greenest of us, the easiest of us, and set to learn us something about the ways of men.

We each were given a pair of torches and sent around the village encampment, told to run as sure and swift as we could to set the place alight from the outside in. And we did it, not thinking, not putting pieces together. What did we know then? We'd just boys. You can't hate or blame us now, shut your mouth you try.

The jungle was wet, a rainforest muggy with ants and skeeters and dragonflies, and it took a while to start the fires—but the huts and such inside was all dry sticks and bark. When the trees began to smoke, the villagers came running.

We began to shoot them down as they ran. We stood outside and kept our shots low, just as we were taught, to avoid crossfire. This meant a lot of them got kneecapped, and lay there bleeding out, groaning and then crying and then screaming as the fire leapt to the village itself and started to eat them, to chew them into charcoal as they could not run away.

There may have been some part of me—some part that felt things I cannot find no more, that since filled in itself with darkness—that cried out then, and got tangled there, burning to the forest floor. Perhaps I was of the dirt, and meant to grovel in it, a scabbling insect, mining the soil, encased in dung.

I ran through them circus tents in that wet-slick field with my arms like swords, tearing each tent to ground. They collapsed around me like the corpses of deflating maggots. Soon the entire field was a cooling battlefield, full of burlap dead and dying.

A golden glow of lights flickered from the boardinghouse across the street. Carnies watched from their windows as the rain and wind churned.

One tent, the largest, was standing now in the middle—I had pulled a few of its ropes in my frenzy but not enough to take it down. It looked at me defiant, and I looked back at it, us both sliced across our faces with the storm.

And there is something in me, some roiling spinning hunger, as lightning boils and I am standing now atop them planks of wood that's all that's left. Still the carnies stare and even from this distance I can see their eyes, all dinner plates and incredulity and fear.

I think of Etta, alone in the bloody ruined death of that house's tower, and I cannot feel her anymore. We both gone places the other never go, no hands, no eyes to see and touch and love with.

Perhaps this was always me, nothing in me good enough to be the man inside my skin. Perhaps I just keep trying to turn what's inside out, all boils and pitch and tar and I am shouting now, I cannot hear my own voice as I scream into the sky.

"I know what you done!" I say. I don't know who I say it to. "You punish them for nothing!"

The words fragment and crumble and divide, syllables from feelings. My regret formed a hurricane above me. I was meat and muscle and failed escape. I wore only shadows on my skin.

There were more words I said, but I could not repeat them to you now in any order. The heavens sucked them from my lungs, and as the torpor lifted I now I was kneeling, weeping, all snot and mucus dripping to the rotten planks beneath me.

The rain abated, and the night went tired, and long and grey I sat there, huddled, cold. There wasn't much left in me. The past hung vast and I found myself in a quiet, airless space.

Across the street the glow-lights dimmed. Show over, eyes closed, forgotten.

There was a creak. Someone sat beside me on the wood.

I looked up. Purple slacks, violet shoes.

"Well now," it said.

I looked up into the face of Alphone Ambrose.

"Thought I lost track of you," he asked.

I continued to look at him. My mind railroaded. I tried to speak in parallel.

His amber eyes glittered, the braided hair impeccable. He pulled a kerchief from his breast and wiped the spittle from my face.

"Sue," he said. "You are a silly ragdoll. Walk awhile with me."

He grabbed me around behind the shoulders, and pulled me up forceful. He walked us both across the grass, smashed brown and dead. He walked me to the last tent standing, pulling back the curtain, and beckoned I go in.

SIXTY-NINE.

Beneath his arm and through the entrance. Under the the canopy. Into the center ring.

“Here,” Ambrose said, behind me, in my ear.

Gaslamps were hung up inside, turned low and smelling of kerosene. I was in a mosquito tent out in them bad jungles. The veil of youth clung to me like a damp sweat.

Ambrose led me cross the twilight inside of the tent, through spots of amber glow. It was dawn, dusk, and late afternoon all three.

There was a card table right in the middle in the dirt floor, with two chairs set up either side. Ambrose walked round and sat in the chair opposite, gestured to me. I sat cross from him. Around us I saw dismal shapes of things, like an old oilskin salesman’s wagon—jars and bottles, piles of moldy books, a skeleton hung on clothes hangers. An oldtime hoodoo show.

I knew, as one knows in dreams, that this was the inside of Alphonse Ambrose’s house, black and rotted sinister.

Ambrose watched me, and I saw now his gold eyes sparking hot.

“So,” he said.

“What in *fuck*,” he said.

I tried to speak and found I couldn’t. I dripped rain and mucus. Outside the rain pat-patted against the canvas.

He leaned back. His eyes shone in the dark.

“Sue,” his voice came. Eye glints intent at me. “Things have got real rotten.”

His eyes shone, intent. I could only look back. He shook his head. He took off his hat, and slammed in on the table. Scooted toward me.

“I’ve got a strung-up ringmaster and a crew gone batshit. I’ve got *you* all tightened up. Hell, Sue. I thought you had some sense. I thought you were beautiful.” He leaned in. His teeth were pearls in his mouth.

“And you tore up half our show! What in *fuck*, Sue?”

I waited, unable to do more. He looked at me a moment, then spat. Looked at his hands.

“Feels like end times, Sue. Storms of locusts and of fire.”

He looked at me, eyes and teeth.

“Enough to make a man think of tossing it all, I think,” he said, and outside the rain darkened.

Beyond Ambrose, the tent flap opened, and Etta stood there, framed against the night. She was soaked and a shawl clung to her. We both looked at her. She looked back at us.

“Don’t hurt him,” she said.

Ambrose’s eyes goggled.

“*What*,” he said.

“I say to *him*,” she said, and looked at me.

Ambrose looked at me too. “Oh,” he said. I stared at him. “I think the fight’s out of him,” Ambrose said, and sighed.

“What a mess,” he said to no one.

He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, put one in his mouth, and offered the pack to me.

I started to feel my fingers, and reached for a cigarette. He lit me. Etta pulled over a crate. Ambrose passed her a cigarette too. We sat in silence, smoking at each other. The rain pat-patted against the canvas.

“Police will come soon,” Etta said.

“Come for what? We’re too far from anything. Bugs et up half this town tonight. We won’t hear from them till dawn,” Ambrose said.

He leaned back in his chair, blowing smoke into the shadows.

“But we need to figure out this thing,” he said.

The smoke was calming me. I coughed, hard, and spat something from inside me onto the ground. Ambrose and Etta looked over. Outside, the sky arced.

Around us, the tent began to warm. The heat from the lamps was doing its trick, and I adjusted to the tent’s insides. For the first time in many days, I felt as my heart began to slow.

“I’m gonna need some help here,” I said.

Ambrose breathed out, and leaned on the table. “Now he asks,” he said. “After he dug up every corpse.”

“Hush,” said Etta. She looked at me.

“Police *will* come. We have to get straight our stories,” she said.

“I don’t know what the story *is*,” I said. Etta nodded. I looked at Ambrose, playing with his hands. The silence stretched.

“All right,” I asked.

“Who killed Frank Colt?”

And Ambrose smiled, angry, incredulous. Etta looked away.

“Did you not see him hung, Sue?” he asked. “How you think a man gets hung?”

“You’ll need more than that for what I saw up in that room,” I said.

“Let me tell you something about Frank Colt,” said Ambrose.

“No,” said Etta. We both looked at her. The rain was rising again. It ran down the inside folds of the burlap, thinning it. The lights from the boardinhouse across the street began to glow through the fabric of the tent.

“I will tell you something about Frank Colt,” Etta said. She dragged her cigarette, then crushed it on the table. Looked at us.

“Frank Colt was an insane old fool,” she said.

Her voice shook, then hardened. Her face was cast in black.

“Not always,” she said. “But very scared, he was.” She swiped her hand across his chest. “Scared take him over.”

I looked at Ambrose. “I saw you,” I said. “I saw you hit him in that field. You and that Lindsay Nelson. You two had some kinda hold on him.”

“Hold *shit*,” Ambrose said. “Goddamn it, you’re so busy bein’ nuts you don’t see a thing for what it is. Frank owed money on this sideshow. Same as every year. I’d planned to meet him to collect.” He tapped his cigarette.

“Same as every year,” he said again. “Just a damn businessman.”

He stood, walked to the flap in the tent that looked outside. “I’m so tired of explaining myself to you people,” he said.

I looked at the two of them. “So what?” I said. “You were squeezing him?”

Ambrose guffawed, and looked back at me. “Christ, the things you say,” he said. “I told you, Sue. Frank’s been paying off a loan for this circus for years. But that is *all*.

You think I'd come alone if it was more than that? Me?" Ambrose gestured to his own thin frame.

"I work for fearsome people, but fearsome people don't do only fearsome things. Mostly they the same as you, with longer teeth. *Squeezing him*," he said. "You're as bad as Frank."

I licked my lips. Ran tongue along my teeth.

"Frank said things," said Etta. "Saw things. Said he wasn't safe."

"Safe from *you*," I spat at Ambrose. Ambrose rolled his eyes.

Etta's chin went to the side. "Frank saw things that were not there." She looked at me. "He had got sick inside. He tried to keep it in. But he could not."

The words slid through. I thought on the man I knew, then past it to think on the man I'd known. Frank frantic, unslept, unkempt, weeping. Drunk but not drunk always.

"He begin to hire people," Etta said. "Bad people. No good for circus. He had no need for them."

I thought on the giggling Tillinger. I thought on Nick Owens' greasy smile. I thought on bandits, on the strange carnies joining our crew. I thought on Serry too. And on freaks that looked like ghosts.

"Frank was set on shitcanning his own circus, Sue," Ambrose said from somewhere. "We looked through what was left of those burned-out trucks the morning after the storm. You know what we found? Dynamite sticks. Like some cartoon. Had a truck loaded with 'em. Could have gone up anytime. Who knows what he woulda done. How you think a truck explodes in a lightning storm, Sue? What do you think that would take?"



The world, once partially revealed, began to expel itself. The truth unfurled sideways and strained to translate. I thought of meteors and falling stars. My head rocked back and forth like a capsizing boat.

“I saw a newspaper,” I said. “They said it was meteors the night of that storm.”

“Goddamn meteors!” Ambrose said. “Use your sense! Frank paid off the paper to cover things. Got that oldtime fuck Nelson to help him too. I heard ‘em talking down the score the morning after them lions got hanged, Sue. They couldn’t see me in the mist and they talked the whole thing out. Frank was already half-gone. That’s when I knew.”

Ambrose sighed. “Couldn’t be bothered to pay off a damn circus,” he said. “but he could pay off some hick sap to run a scam.”

I rolled through one thing and then another.

“What about them lions,” I said. “Who got ‘em killed? Who strung ‘em up? Why not just tranque ‘em when they got found?”

“Frank hired bad people,” Etts said. “Bad people. Messes lead to messes.”

I thought on Serry being barely able to find the tranque guns. On Nick and Mutt and Jeff, slinking through the bogs beyond the boardinghouse, drunk and ashen.

Etta’s face was hard. I saw the Russian in her now.

“So they shitcanned a circus,” I said. “And ended splattered across an attic across the street,” I said.

Ambrose watched me, and I saw him again like an eel. “I’d found out what was what, and threw Frank and Lindsay in that attic the night before. Told some t’others they was up there, that they needed to cool off till we got outta this shithole town.”

Etta nodded. Where had I been? Up in mountains. On vision quests. Abandoned.

“Why not just leave?” I said. “Why set up another show?”

Ambrose and Etta looked at me both.

“You never understood old circus, Sue,” he said. “We needed that show now.”

“Even without the man that owns it,” I said.

“Please,” Etta said.

I turned to her then, and through her. Past her hardness. I saw her face, her body struggling. The way she looked to want to crumble.

I thought on men when they got scared. I thought what happened when scared got angry too. They piss to mark they land. They eat other and know no better.

The rain pit-pat across the canvas.

Behind Ambrose I saw a wooden throne, with a wooden Indian upon it. His arms and legs criss-crossed with concentric, glowing circles that sizzled in the dark.

I looked again at the two around the table.

“No one’s gonna believe you,” I said. “You can tell ‘em what you want. But after them lions killed the man who lived here, they won’t let you go. Jail up half, send the rest packing. They’ll see same as we do,” I said. “There’s something rotten here, no matter what that something is.”

“We know,” said Ambrose. He blew out smoke, and looked at me.

“We got one more thing,” he said.

SEVENTY.

The house burned and the bodies burned. We stood outside, our shadows growing long.

I hadn't forgotten how a thing was done. How to sabotage a place and make it look like nothing—bad wiring in an old house in a rough storm during locust season. We got the carnies out. Only the corpses stayed.

As the fire rose the carnies split off in ten directions, over backroads as they could make it, by whatever means they had with them. The bad ones and the good ones both. I watched as Omar and Mei Shen held each other, shirking darkness, piling into Cook's old pickup. I said goodbyes to some of them. Most I just let go. Serry might have glanced over one shoulder. The freaks I'd thought were Puzzle and Mr. Shift just blended, a crowd of freaks.

There'd be too many gone for folks to track us. Too many without real names and faces in those simple times. Soon it was just Etta, and Ambrose, and me, sat off in the fields beyond the fire.

"You two won't need to stick around," Ambrose said. "The mess is something I can manage now."

"Still looks like a question mark," I said. "All you burned was what was obvious."

Ambrose looked at me. "Trust in fearsome people," was all he said.

Etta stood then, and looked at me. We looked a long time.

"I ain't comin' with you," I said.

She nodded. Something shook within her. She leaned down and kissed my forehead, and a calm went through me. By the time I opened my eyes again, she was gone into the dark. A minute later I heard her truck under the crackle of the boardinghouse. Then nothing. She would find her way, I knew. The circus folk was soup

of connected knowledge, and Etta had history. Maybe Ambrose might find her. Maybe she'd take on what Frank Colt never could.

“You better get gone,” Ambrose said. “More you stay, more a way I'll find to pin this all on you.”

I looked at the fire, and saw every fire before it. All of me was drained and tired.

“Maybe that'd be better anyways,” I said.

Ambrose shook his head, and laughed low.

“There ain't no one here to save, Sue. This here's a matter that just sorts itself.”

I turned, my limbs clay and hardened, my body one thick wall of paste and gloom. Alphonse stood in front of me, as I looked at him, and smiled.

“Sue,” he said. “I'll tell you something it took years for me to know.”

He reached for me, and with clever fingers found for a hidden fold underneath my neck. I swore in all my years I'd never known that it was there. But he unhitched it, and I felt somethin' peel away. Lookin down, I saw white ribs poked from beneath my breast; I saw him lift my skin and muscles off, like a heavy cloak.

“There's a buncha shit you done,” he said. “That every man has done. An' those things ain't wrong or right an' you can't fix them. They ain't ever gonna change or resolve or nothin' else. They just is. The same way you is.”

And he pulled away and there I stood, only bones and teeth and eyes. No body held me up. I looked and my arms were there and like a sunburn now, smooth and only a little raw. And I looked up an he'd was holding up my skin. I watched him finger the bad ink, the tattoos that pulled at me.

“Was a fine tailor stitched you this suit,” he said, and looked at me, and there was a endless hallway in his eyes.

“Get the fuck out of here, Sue,” he said. “I ain’t got room for you. There ain’t no punishment suit to fit the harm you done.”

And he sat back down, and it was over. As I watched he drew backward, cast in the strange shadows of the blaze of that old house. He grew small and smaller, as the darkness round him deepened. And he, or I, were there till we were gone.

My arms were still my arms, my ink still sat there, stained on me. I felt them crawling quiet over me.

I decided I would begin to look for you.

I hoped to find you here.

SEVENTY-ONE.

I have realized now there is no story worth telling after that—I have thought on describing to you what that next morning light was like, or how cold I was in the days after.

I could tell you how I traveled, to provide you some small comfort, to put these constellations together in some way might please you.

But what came next ain’t strange nor special. I returned to life.

In truth I think, for a little while, that I was more myself than I am even now. But what’s real ain’t always what can be sustained. I remember sitting round one dim campfire, singing songs to you. That’s when I knew no matter else that I should come to search for you.

But I tell you always, ask me no more questions of them dark times. I will always tell you different, using wilder ideas, till neither you nor I will know the tongues I speak in. Best to keep somewhere in the middle as the closest to what I can tell you true.

You sleep now, child. Know that I have come through much to find you. Know that I will be here when you wake. I can't promise you more, nor should I, in this silent shifting world. I have spent my whole life searching for this place to rest here.

Now let us sleep. Let us talk no more on these sad things, lest they live on in dreams of wheat and sorrow.