

I had nothing left, unless you counted the gray sky above my head or the cold, frosty ground my feet could feel through the threadbare soles of my only pair of shoes. My car broke down several months ago, and I had no savings to fix it. I had spent those on the funeral of my wife, Helen, and a graveyard plot for Rachel. At thirty-five years old, I had never expected to need to pay those expenses—and never the expenses for my daughter. Even my wife's death had been a shock, but when the officers informed me of Rachel's death... Well, I never expected they would have gotten her, too. I just assumed she'd have survived the accident. Still, this was more or less the hand life had dealt me. I stared up at the sky, the first flakes of winter spiraling down toward my open eyes. One hit my eye in the very center—the pattern was visible for a second before it melted.

There was only one reason left to be alive, and that was the Circus. It had come to town several days ago, and I'd seen posters as I wandered aimlessly around the town. I had begun wandering, no aim in sight, no end to the path I tread, my eyes focused on the sky more often than not, until I had seen the poster. The raw pain of their deaths still cocooned me like a cold, rough blanket, but the poster had stirred something within me. I had been to one of those as a child. I made up my mind to go, and after a bit more indecisiveness, I began to talk in the general direction. It must have taken me a day at the very least to reach it, on the outskirts of town, near the railroad tracks.

Finally, there it was. I stared at the gates, erected high with pillars on each side, foreboding yet welcoming in equal measure. "The Circus Carnal" was what the sign displayed, raised in an arch above the pillars. I walked toward the entrance, my eyes still focused on the sign. Only when I stepped on the crunchy, fresh snow directly beneath the sign did a noise stop me. A man spoke—a man I had not noticed before, standing by the gates.

"An' what do you want? Aren't you a bit old for a circus?"

"I feel too old. One ticket please."

"I won't ask your reason, but no funny business."

The man handed me a ticket only seconds later, and I walked through. I could feel his eyes on the back of my head as I entered, staring at the sky again as I did. The sky was dark. I walked along the path slowly, worn bare by presumably the feet of many children—children like my lost Rachel—until I came to the first tent. It was here that I lowered my gaze, looking at the tent. It had a number one prominently painted on a wooden sign, hanging roughly at an angle above the parted drapes of the tent. I entered, shrugging off the drapes as I did.

The room was gloomy, barely lit, and seemed to have the smell of smoke, though it was faint. I glanced left and right throughout the tent but did not notice many visitors. There were a few stray people wandering aimlessly through the tent, but I wasn't focused on them. In the very center of the room, roped off by some red wire, was a beautiful miniature castle. It was created to be dilapidated, clearly a relic of its former self, but I could tell that each broken stone and mossy vine had been crafted with immaculate care. I took a seat in front of it and watched. As I did, a man entered the room, and the lights were dimmed. He wore a red tailcoat and a red top

hat, and waved a beautiful lion-headed cane in the air loftily. As he did, he announced the exhibit.

“Here, folks, we have the ever-moving castle. Legend has it that this castle was shrunk by a jealous god during a fit of rage, and still holds the lost souls of those within. If you look closely...”

The man droned on, and I leaned in. I could see the castle, every detail intricate, and within one small room, I noticed some motion. I peered closer, and for a second I thought I could see a man standing in front of the window, his chest bare, his ribs visible through his sallow skin. When I blinked, however, he was gone. I stood and left the tent, shaking my head.

The next tent, in the same pattern, had a green number two written on a sign above the entrance. The moment I entered, I saw crowds—this was clearly a favorite among the guests. There was no room to sit, and so I stood and watched. In the very center of the tent, there was a ring, and within it sat a conjoined twin. The two men stared at one another, connected at the waist, and yet their faces were each distinct. One had his head shaved, and the other had long, matted hair. As they stared, a woman behind the two poured oil down upon them, dancing as she did. And as she danced, the entire tent began to shake violently, the banners lofted in the sky by the rafters shaking in tune. I watched, but as the two began to kiss, I left, shuddering. I didn’t want to know how this act would end.

Words couldn’t describe the third tent. What I saw there was unnerving, to say the least. As I watched, a man entered the room to introduce the spectacle. He was a chubby barrel of a man, his coat popping at the buttons and his grinning face wide and welcoming.

“Hello, my friends. I have a story to tell you! A story, you say? Yes, a story, so hold onto your seats.”

He waved his hands, and to the center of the ring walked another man. This man made the presenter look thin. He was at least seven feet tall, and with each step, the ground shook. Old Saint Nick would have been envious of his size. He took a seat in the very center of the ring.

As he sat, I watched the cracks of the floorboards as the darkness poured forth. From within the cracks came crawling not hundreds but thousands of maggots, flies, and roaches, crawling toward the man as fast as their little legs could move. As they did, the announcer climbed a ladder, his feet resting upon the very top before he stopped. Heaving a bucket down upon the man who sat in the circle, he poured a tremendous amount of a dark, slushy liquid that smelled of feces and something rotten upon the fat man’s head.

“What the hell...” my voice echoed in the silent room as I watched, but nobody turned their eyes from the spectacle. Retreating quickly from the tent, I walked to the next—this was nothing like the Circus I had visited as a child.

This room seemed more akin to a gladiator’s arena than a circus attraction. In the center, though there seemed to be no clear ring, several men swung large, golden dumbbells at each

other. These weights seemed heavy, and each one was a varying size. What was the purpose of this? It seemed a bizarre attraction, and I waited to see what would happen.

With a sickening crunch, one of the men swung his weight against the head of another. I watched as his head caved, seemingly unable to resist the weight of the object thrust against it. But the victor didn't stop there. He bent down, lapping eagerly at the man's broken, bleeding head.

This stirred some reaction in me. As disassociated as I had become from life, I felt a rising disgust in me and bile in my mouth. I bent over and vomited. Wiping my mouth, I turned to another man who was watching eagerly.

"What the hell are you staring at that for? This is no attraction fit for a circus."

The man stared ahead, unresponsive. He did not even react to what I had said, and instead stared at the event, his face split into a wide smile as he watched, his eyes glimmering in the low light. I stepped back, the hairs rising on the back of my neck. I had suspected it, but I knew now. Something was seriously wrong with this circus. Still, I couldn't help but have a sick fascination with the whole ordeal—and it was making me focus on other things than...them. I wanted to see what was in the fifth tent. I finally wanted something.

The fifth tent was much like the fourth—a battleground of sorts—but different at the same time. This time, however, the battle took place in the midst of an oily pool, some sort of tar of sorts, where naked men and women clashed. In this fight, there were no weapons, but it appeared to have no rules or limits as to what could be done to claim victory, and there seemed to be no time limit. The thrashing limbs hit, kicked, poked, and gouged, the mouths bit, and even the heads of each fighter were put to use, butting into any opponent they saw.

I shook my head. Though equally disturbing, this one was much the same as the last—only the weapons used and the battlefield on which they fought appeared to have changed. Instead, I walked toward the sixth tent, entering through the draped doors. Here was where my shock at the past few tents faded. A man stood in the very center, on a stone platform. He waved his arms this way and that, and on his face was a grin. It seemed he was the presenter for this tent, and yet he wore no rich outfit, but the rags of a broken man. Beneath him, there were open caskets, where bodies lay. What made me exit this tent double quick, however, was the fact that these men were alive. Their bodies were bound with ropes and had seemingly been drenched in oil and gasoline. They had been set on fire, and writhed in pain, their faces in anguish, and yet their mouths were bound shut. They could not scream, but instead thrashed violently, tears streaming from their eyes. No matter what, they seemed to resist the flame, avoiding every inch of their body that burned, squirming away as the flame met flesh.

I walked out of the tent ready to leave. I turned from the continuing path and around, toward the exit. It was here, however, that a little boy stood, his hat on his head and round glasses over his eyes. He was short and seemed to be only six or seven years old. Wearing a