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EDWARD HOAGLAND

**THE
DEVIL'S TUB**

collected stories



The Devil's Tub

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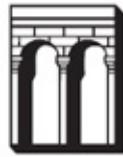
—Memoir—

Compass Points

The Devil's Tub

Collected Stories

EDWARD HOAGLAND



Arcade Publishing • New York

*For Joe Fox,
Rust Hills,
Ileene Smith,
and Lilly Golden,
editors supreme.*

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The Devil's Tub

JAKE THIBODEAU, also known as Grandpa Harley, or Pappy, had been a Wall of Death daredevil for more than thirty years, from the end of the good times—the era of Speedy Babbs and Speedy McNis Joe Pelequin, Lucky Vinn, Elmo Ballard, the Kemps, the Hagers, Earl Purtle, and their sundry ilk, who still wore leather football helmets then—and was now about a month into working on his sixth marriage, when he booked himself and his motorcycles for a series of pumpkin fairs in northern New England with Smoky Miller's little carnival. Small-time, shit-kicker fairs, and Smoky operated out of his home in central Maine, not Florida, but he was in his own way a pro and knew all of the county officialdom.

It was late August, not a terrible time to be sleeping in your car in Vermont, but a tearful disappointment to Vickie, needless to say, who was a Philly girl, twenty-four, and “the oldest old lady” Jake had ever had, as he liked to mention; thrill riders of any age do get a lot of action. But that meant Vickie's six-year-old daughter, Elizabeth Alice, came along with her. The child had been a good traveler so far, so busy adapting to the zany changes in her young life that she was no trouble except in the sense that her mother and Jake sometimes argued about how she would be schooled. She spent much of her waking hours searching the midway for coins, though the concessionaires fed her on fried dough, candied apples, and cotton candy—for free, naturally—and was so small that she could stretch out in a sleeping bag on the floor of the Plymouth pretty comfortably. On warm nights they had the floor of the Motordrome, roomier, slatted wooden quarters, but shared with the four motorcycles and Cliff, the second rider, and his tough-mouthed, bleached-out, short-haired girlfriend, Charlene. (Cliff, whom Jake billed as “Flash Michaels —One of the Top Riders in the World,” though he was a beginner, just a dirt biker, and a stiffie, went in for women of his own age but didn't marry them.) Right now the cool night had driven Cliff and Charlene to the back of his station wagon, with the Maryland plates and a tawny ribby dog tied to the fender that would jump and bite you in the chest if you stumbled near, and then again in the ass when you fled.

Money was the problem. They had no talker. He'd left when Jake couldn't pay him enough any longer, so Jake had to do the spiel on the bally platform himself when he wasn't riding on the inside, which was exhausting and also left a terrible silent gap while the show was in progress, when ordinarily you could build another tip from the loads of people wandering the midway who wanted to be told, or assisted to anticipate, what was happening in that big, round, roaring, silo-shaped drome. The banner adorned with painted skulls and Indian arrows and feathers, read: “The Race for Life. The Dips and Dives of Death. Free-Hand Trick and Fancy Acrobatic Riding Featuring Indian Scout Motorcycles of the Devil's Tub. The Circle of Death.” But you needed a strutting loudmouth with a mike on the outside to draw them in and explain the history and the risks and the connoisseurship of using antique Indian Scouts, the most delicately balanced, maneuverable cycles ever made, for this dangerous job, where you doubled your tire pressure but left your tank unfull because too much gas sloshing around might throw you off the wall.

Jake dressed both Vickie and Charlene, brunette and bottle-blonde, in glittery shirts, bare midriffs, leather pants, and high-top boots, so that the tip would think that they were going to see the girls go on and ride, if they paid to get inside. It was like a fish trap. Once each new batch of marks had swum in, they couldn't leave without forfeiting their money and, penned there, listened in frustration to the

midway's siren songs till Jake decided that he had captured enough more to strut his stuff. Vickie sold the tickets, Charlene collected them, and a boy named Angel, a gofer Jake had recently taken on, sat on a Harley Davidson that they had on metal rollers on the box outside and raced it as tirelessly as if he were crossing Minnesota. He was sleeping with a harelip girl in one of the grab joints Smoky owned, so he always smelled of onion rings in the morning, and he traveled with her, driving the grease joint to the next town for Smoky, till he could buy a two-bit Honda to ride.

Cliff was thirtyish, a journeyman mechanic, and so stolid he had taken only a month instead of two to conquer his dizziness going round the wall. Not a bad guy, though, true to his word when times were pinched, and energy in the bank for a twelve-hour day. But Jake had served *his* apprenticeship riding on the handlebars of Goldie Restall, one of the legends, from the age of twelve, and then when he could legally drive, jumping a motorcycle over rows of cars on the Joie Chitwood Show. Of course, *these* bikes were stripped down, no headlights, seat springs, and so on, for a different purpose, and he liked to boast on the box that he was "The Doctor of Thrills."

Jake was slim, lightly built, twitchy and boyish in his bad posture, with a boomeranging sort of strength and a thin, browned, pockmarked, croupier's face, alert like a marten's and wrinkled concentrically, though his chin was receding, his undersized mouth lacked several teeth by now, and his nose seemed lengthened, as another effect of aging. He would lose about thirty-five pounds every summer, and when rounding the wall, his thin rigid frame and scraggly long hair flung out behind his balding head made him look like some South Asian holy man on a vision-seeking ordeal. He was cocky in his patter, however, though off-putting and confrontational in his naked yearning for the public approval, but never a bully or abusive to his women: easy in a divorce. Split the money, didn't fight about custody, signed the papers, "Just leave me my Scouts." It was usually the classic problem of "in-laws versus outlaws," and "I didn't promise you a rose garden," he would say, "I'm the best drome ride left. That's what you wanted and that's what you got," even without the extras the oldtimers had had, like a lion riding perpendicularly with them in a sidecar, or chasing them across the floor of the drome and them with a piggybacked blonde.

He was foxy in manner, and for the best crowds he'd still try a "money run" after a sidesaddle stunt on the crisscrosses he and Cliff had performed, round and round inside the "wine barrel," as carnies called the silo drome. That meant he would simply circle the rim, next to the safety cable that protected the customers, as slowly as centrifugal physics permitted him to, and snatch bills they held out. And if he was between marriages, he'd coast down and straddle his bike on the floor in his epaulettes and Sam Browne belt and admiralty cap and other glitz, looking up at the spectators' faces on the round walkway and point at the cutest one that was smiling and ready, and say, "Come see The Doctor, Luv," while his boyfriend perhaps turned beet-red. A rider in his prime, at least in the old days, he could stack 'em up in different motels around town until maybe he'd get so tired that one day after the last show, he'd just have his grease monkey—his Angel—boost him over the twelve-foot-high wall when no one was watching and slide down the guy wire in back and sneak away to a hotel where nobody was waiting for him, for a night's sleep.

Vickie had come to his show—although he didn't own it at that point—on the Strates midway in Philadelphia this spring. Elizabeth Alice's father, never married to Vickie, had scrambled, and she was grateful to Jake for tying the knot, as well as excited to split from her irksome kin—hillbilly transplants and binge drunks for a life of bright lights, constant movement, and showbiz folk. It had appeared to be a child-friendly atmosphere too, until Elizabeth Alice mentioned that the other carnival kids "showed n their knives." Jake was always solvent in May because he was a pipe fitter for General Dynamics in the winter, building ships, with a union card—that's how he'd made a down payment on the drome when

the owner wanted to close it up, the same week they got married. Vickie was a gentle, rangy girl with fluffy hair and a carny's owl feather tied in it, and bold, malleable, vulnerable features, a low forehead, clown's personable nose, of the kind carnies want, but was aloof with the towners, and competent with the money box or driving the rattly Plymouth between dates while Jake piloted the tractor trailer that carried the drome. Jake had been a commercial driver for Mayflower Van Lines in the off-season as well, but had drawn a suspension for the sin of having a tail light out when he'd had a drink in him: which suddenly required that their hops be hired out at two hundred-fifty dollars a pop, on top of the second drome payment, and the big Strates organization, a railroad show, dumping their contract because of the ownership change. Jake had been riding this drome, and often driving it, for more than seven years, he wondered if "management" didn't agree with him.

Vickie was not a quitter, and lacked other options anyhow. She was touched by the twin tattoos he had bought for their right wrists, *I LUB YOU*, and the slight middle-aged waddle he was developing in his fifties (though he claimed he was only limping from shitters), and the way that his eyes often roamed above other people's heads, as if calculating or conceiving stunts they had never dreamed of. He occupied the saddle of a cycle as another man might loaf in an easy chair, or fixing the motor, was patient, even methodical, as if following a set of written directions in his head. Now he was squatting on his heels at the bottom of the firwood drome, twenty-four feet in diameter, passing a cigarette back and forth with Cliff before they *vroomed* their machines and hit the jumpboards for the performance. The intimacy of sharing a bit of spittle was negligible, next to trusting his life to Cliff's timing soon after. Stringy arm and gray ponytail and all, Jake could lift as much as Cliff or Angel when setting up the huge wooden section and the steel backframe. He'd described to her the thirty-six or fifty-foot outfits with three or four riders where he'd learned his craft and had had more fun, steering with his feet on the handlebars, and stuff like riding backwards, and a lion roaming the floor under you to chase you.

About every April Fools' Day, he said, the light in the sky would change and he wanted to put his lunch bucket down, grab the phone, and call a carny, or check *Billboard* magazine's placement ad. Vickie kept Elizabeth Alice out during the show, but sometimes stood underneath the whirlwind herself—by the center pole that held up the canvas that kept out the rain—to watch. It was safest there because "if somebody takes a shitter and falls, you can dodge," Jake said. Angel polished the machines and kicked the crank of Jake's motorcycle before each act. His most tedious task was washing the drome's interior with a sponge on a pole each morning so no shards of debris would cause an accident, and mopping the stairs and walkaround that the spectators used. And he was supposed to gas up. Jake nearly punched him once, when Cliff's tank went empty on the Wall. Cliff was low down at the time, so it wasn't a disaster. Angel was now begging to ride the silo too, but even Cliff had frozen on the midstrip one night—blind and deaf to Jake's shouted advice—too panicky to go up, down, or alter his speed in the slightest, till you wondered when simple giddiness would bring him crashing. Jake was circuiting above, near the red line and the safety cable, trapped in orbit. Not that he couldn't have ducked past by slowing or accelerating, but doing so might have triggered a jerk of Cliff's hands that might have dropped Cliff on top of him. Cliff, having put in the weeks of acclimation necessary to overcome a normal person's sense of vertigo, didn't get dizzy and tumble, but some Hell's Angel Hawgmen in the crowd who had spotted the trouble were hooting at him in the meantime. Jake swerved repeatedly in loops toward where they were standing, jutting his right boot out (he always rotated counter-clockwise as if to clip their noses off or pulverize their chins.

Hecklers, in their Nazi trinkets, he generally dealt with by inviting them to try the Wall on the Electro Glides or Sportsters. "No, not on my bike, on yours! Be my guest. I got no insurance anyway. You'll puke your guts out and black out and lose a yard of skin."

That's what you lost in shitters—mainly skin—if you were catlike enough when you landed that there were no bones broken. Once his oil pan split, spewing goo all over the wall, which sent him into a skid and he fell, and the cycle landed on top of him, the wheels still spinning, which cut off the end of his boot and part of his big toe. It looked like a red balloon that had popped, and he lay looking up at the flames licking the wall and catching the canvas on top.

Jake was training Cliff to tense his torso periodically to force a blood supply back near his optic nerve. Jake himself had gone around the barrel as many as five times blind, then slowed to the point where his sight returned, not counting the stunts when he was a young hotshot and wearing a blindfold. The jumpboards took you to seventy-seven degrees; then the slope became ninety, and you had doctors burn your tires to hug the wall by burning a roughness onto the rubber that edged the wood, because although the wall was at right angles to the floor, you were not quite perpendicular to the wall and parallel to the floor; you were a bit angled.

“If you don't want to whiz, don't do it,” he said to Cliff, after that episode, while obligingly scorching a grip on his tires. But Cliff of course did.

Unluckily, there was an individual who didn't, right on the midway: namely Jake's creditor, Phil, the son of the family that had sold him the drome, who had sunk that first payment into a grab joint where he seared sausages for the marks for a living. “Would you like the hot kind, Sir, or the sweet kind, Sir?” How could he bear it? A dozen years ago or more, they had ridden on this self-same Wall together before Phil's brother got killed on it. But recently Phil didn't think Jake was earning well (Strates hadn't either; that's why they'd canned him), whereas Phil, when the hour got late, left the grill to his wife and was out with a beat-the-dealer craps board fleecing the drunks who'd swilled too much beer, with a cozy trailer to sleep in when he got through.

Two hundred-fifty a pop for transporting this rig? And the re-welding and lumber and paintwork? Jake would need to refurbish an oldie—shouldn't that come before paying off his debt? Nobody quibbled with his expertise on the ride, just his crowd-control. And who cared about crowd-handling? Well, Phil the Sourpuss did, and Smoky, the boss, who took a fourth of each ticket, but was quite close-mouthed, like most Maine-iacs. Too much time squandered on the “Come see the Doctor, Luv,” teasers between shows, or whatever he'd replaced it with since Vickie had joined him? Yet the truth was, you couldn't turn out one crowd and fill up with another, and risk your skin, like a metronome, without winding down in between. Phil knew that. You'd think he'd at least pitch in on the bally box for the show, now that Jake had lost his talker. He was not a bad talker, or a bad rider either: better than Cliff though with none of the flash of his parents. His dad had stood up on the saddle, going round the silo for a deserving crowd, and his mom bottle-raised a series of cubs to be a “King” or a “Queenie” so affectionately that they weren't terrified in the sidecar, like other people's lions, but had laid their throats on the vibrating metal, as if for company, when they roared.

Patty Conklin, up in Canada, had the only other drome still operating. “So let's make this one sing,” Jake wanted to say. Phil, his once-upon-a-time mate, had never possessed Jake's panache, but on the other hand had never married a couple of strippers and been “twice burned,” as Jake liked to kidding himself. Stick to the amateurs, he'd resolved. Vickie didn't know he was a super-rider, on a scale of one to ten, but did guess that he frittered away time temperamentally, from the behavior of the crowd. Didn't know that a cheap, light, little, brand-new Yamaha might have served the bread-and-butter purposes of the show for these yahoos as well as the purist, antique Indians Jake persisted in using, but recognized that a creditor like Phil must be the enemy, like the fuzz. Her young heart would never be content with a hamburger-flipper; plus, with Jake, there were no black eyes to hide, unlike with Elizabeth Alice's dad, and if any creep had molested Elizabeth Alice on the midway Jake would have “ripped him

new asshole.”

Cliff was loyal, too, like an auto-shop mechanic with a nest egg in the bank, out to see the world. He was a hero was Evel Knievel, or other people from *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*, not knowing about press agencies and yet he reminded Jake of those white horses in the circus that when you stuck them inside a ring they galloped round and around. Phil was built like a fireplug and was a one-marriage man, while Cliff was a dorkier physically and probably too in-drawn to spin the wheel and marry Charlene or anybody else. But he claimed he wanted to go on from here to the Globe of Death, which was a more popular and more dangerous reinvention of the Wall of Death, and for which a latticed steel ball hung over the crowd and motorcyclists sped vertically around, or every possible way, in tight tandem inside, with no floor and no escape to if the signals went wrong. Split-second timing was required that would be suicidal for Cliff, but it also needed a young man with reflexes quicker than Jake's had become. His eyes were weak from pulling so many G's, his knees shook, and his hands trembled when he got very tired. So Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey would have to wait. Meanwhile, he liked the homey hubbub and fewer moves at these country fairs, and doing what he knew.

Cliff's Charlene was somewhere between Cliff's age and Jake's and had knocked around enough that Jake sometimes felt he had more in common with her. She was sisterly with Vickie but mildly bored by her, and when she found herself sleeping in the back of a station wagon, she offered to work for Smoky if he had a slot for her, going to his office wagon to ask. She “liked sitting around talking to grownups” as she unguardedly put it. Smoky was a rotund, poker-faced, muscly, cold-weather fellow with burlap hairy fists, though not as hardbitten as the real carnies, who had Florida or Alabama license plates (Alabama being the only state where you could register your car from a P.O. box). He always liked a good story, and would hear you out while nursing a mug of coffee, though seldom offering any to a drop-in or committing himself unless he needed something, until he spat out the window to tell you to move on. He could glance up and down the midway as he did so and estimate how much business every joint, large or small, was doing, and therefore his take, and kept a riot gun in his closet to protect his safe. In a friendly territory like this, where the “lucky boys,” the gamblers, were permitted to emerge from the shadows of the woodwork after dark and the girl show got wet, he might tell the sheriff, whether it was true or not, that he had been in Corrections himself.

He turned Charlene away, saying what he owned were the big metal rides—the Octopus, the Scrambler, the Tilt-a-Whirl, the Roll-O-Plane—and needed men for setting them up, tearing them down, and pulling the levers, but to try the concessionaires. Because he recognized her as already with Jake—Jake's ticket-taker—he laughed and added that even if he didn't pay them off, the cops would love him because he “swept up for them. Every jailbird and loose woman in town wants to join.”

“Thank god gas guzzlers are better than a new car to sleep in,” she told him, not minding somehow that she knew that she'd lost her apartment, as well as her previous live-in boyfriend, before throwing her lot in with Cliff.

He wasn't rumored to be a chaser, and glanced at Charlene dispassionately. “And then you cut your hair off. Not smart. Not good.”

It was true; she had lost her go-go gig in a club immediately. Smoky spat and fluttered a finger to dismiss her.

Without trying the kiddie duck-ponds and bottle-pitches, the balloon-darts and airplane-swings—and disliking the smell of carnival food, she skipped those booths, too—she walked past the Tip Top and Sky Diver rides to the back end again, where the motordrome was sandwiched between the mud wrestling tent and the girlie show, and presented herself at Jake's friend, Abe's, who presided over the latter.

He shook his head without even suggesting she peel, however. She wanted to regard this as solidarity

with Jake, but in honesty she couldn't and found there were no recriminations from Jake or anyone else who had watched her job search down the midway when she reappeared at his act. Cliff understood that she'd been after income, not deserting him, and Vickie felt affronted on her behalf that their neighbor Abe, had so summarily decided against her. For a moment she wanted to present herself for rejection, but Jake said no.

"Why not?" Vickie demanded in sisterhood.

"Because it's a wet show. They'd lick your pussy."

He mounted his bally platform, grabbed the microphone, straddled the gaudy chrome Harley that was stage-set on rollers and gunned it, ignoring both Vickie's and Charlene's astonishment. Then, "Why do you think people drive for an hour or two to this fair—to see us?" he asked.

Pissed off because Phil, down the dirt strip selling sauerkraut, still wasn't helping him, and his women were restive, he launched his pitch: "This isn't a pie plate, Ladies and Gentlemen. We climb the Wall. This is the last Thrill Drome in the US. We go round like the planets!" Maybe it stung Phil, he thought, that Phil's parents had always recognized Jake was better on the Wall than him, if not of course as good as them, with a blonde maybe piggybacked, and a lion in the sidecar.

Inside, after the tip had been gathered and coaxed to buy tickets, he had to deliver the ding pitch—"ding" because the coins dinged. Standing humbly with Vickie, Cliff, and Elizabeth Alice in the well of the structure looking up at the circle of strangers (the "sucker net" that was supposed to protect them from falling into the drome had been lost when they left Bridgeport), he intoned in solemn, not gravel-voiced, tones: "Ladies and Gentlemen, before we go to *the Wall*, I must ask for your brief attention. You see us here as a family." He had a hand on Elizabeth Alice's six-year-old shoulder. "That no insurance company will cover. You can imagine their policies do not apply to the dangers we face for your entertainment. And so we have established our own Riders' Accident and Hospital Fund for obvious reasons. We will take nickels, dimes, quarters, pennies, or anything bigger that you can spare to contribute, except for your mother-in-law. Please keep her up there with you!"

A patter of coins rained down, and Elizabeth Alice scurried about, giving her mother what she picked up. Logically the appeal should have been made after the performance, but people wouldn't pause in filing out, and Jake shrugged off the humiliation of being hit by pennies (he'd *said* pennies) like a spatter of flies. The procedure was great fun for Elizabeth Alice, whose natural enthusiasm for such a game was increased by being useful and seeing the change often transformed directly into supper afterward, whereas the dollar bills and ticket sales went mostly to Smoky or Phil, she had been told. Then she and Vickie left, and Jake hollered out, gravel-voiced again, "*I'm Doctor Harley and this is my living room*." He roared up the Wall—blackened and resilient, "all rubber and oil," as he liked to say—and soon was steering with his feet in the gritty wind, hands clasped behind his neck, or just by swiveling his hips, but as if he were about to fly right out of the bowl. In fact he'd once done that. His throttle wire broke, he lost control, hit the safety cable, and flew right over the spectators' heads, popping through the canopy rain covering and out of the drome, only being saved by happening to hit one of the swinging chairs of the Octopus, high up, next door.

Other carnies, like the semi-dwarf who had run that particular Octopus, could strut the ground wearing brass knuckles and swinging their hands like pistons, but Jake didn't have to trifle with playing tough. He knew all kinds of carnies' revenge, including the best, which a smalltime big shot like Smoky from central Maine, had probably never heard of, but which Jake himself had once wreaked at a state fair in the Middle West when an amusement park owner had gyped him. In the wee, windy hours when all the patrons had gone and a gale was brewing and the place was deserted, you picked a high ride that was stacked domino-like next to a million dollars' worth of other rides and, wearing gloves, you

unscrewed a certain key number of bolts and went home to your hotel. And that was the end of a very short season for that bastard; even the Ferris Wheel fell down. Jake's ponytail was thinner and grayer than Vickie's ("Only one wife at a time," he had promised her at the Registrar's, with Elizabeth Alice holding the bouquet), but his moves anywhere at all near the bike were direct and assured.

With dancers prancing in their skivvies on the bally box only a stone's throw away, Vickie had been watching Jake's wandering eye a bit apprehensively, but it was not drawn to the girly show. He seemed more interested in the local girls with pretty blouses who had paid three dollars to see him ride from up on his own walkway: which was how she had met him, after climbing those stairs. Nevertheless, she forbade Elizabeth Alice from hanging around the front of Abe's tent, gawking at the feathery costumes and mascara the showgirls came out in. Jake suggested there was no harm in her "learning some of their moves" she was imitating that they did out front with their clothes still on. But Vickie was scandalized. "This is not going to be her life."

Jake didn't argue. He didn't want that fate for her either, but didn't think strippers were created in such a way. He was rehearsing Cliff in memory devices for the crossovers they ought to begin using, their show was not to go stale. People could watch the merry-go-round if that's all a drome became. He granted him a grin afterwards and patted his shoulder; their lives might depend upon whether he had actually learned. And Angel, whose legal name nobody remembered because he wanted to be called Angel, "because I'm not one" (he claimed the chicks liked that, but so far Jake hadn't seen any who weren't harelippped that did), of course wanted in on the lessons.

It was lonesome, when Jake had off-time, looking down the midway for carnies who were for real, not the man-and-wife thirty-mile-wonders who had remodeled their vans so that they could flip up a flap and sell corn dogs and egg salad at auctions, fairs, ballgames, close by, as a summer hobby and drive home to sleep in their own beds at night, or else put up a pup tent behind the stand. Other locals paid the entrance fee for their vehicles, and then simply camped at the fairgrounds, cooking over a Coleman stove for the cheapest of all change-of-scenes. The horse pulls, oxen pulls, and dairy competitions were old home week, but if a character like Jake approached to chat, it became like a foreign country for them and as alarming as if some gypsy might steal their pots, pans, and babies.

Then there were itinerant guys working a little pokerino booth, or a high-striker where the marksman swung a sledgehammer to ring the bell, or else guessed ages and weights, but who never slid south of New Jersey for the winter, where the heart of the business lay. Smoky had no Fire Eater, or Guillotine, or Headless Woman, or Fiji Mermaid, or Two-Headed Exhibit, or waxen Hitler or Torture Show, or Swallow Swallower, or pickled punks. There was a House of Mirrors, from Memphis, with papier-mache ghosts hanging in it, and a taffy booth presided over by the wife of the Hall of Mirrors owner. Also a strolling clown on retainer from Butler, Georgia; and Phil, who knew everything; and the light man, who was from Coney Island and had carried around a Half Boy on the Royal American Freak Revue, and catered to Fat Ladies and Bearded Ladies. He'd sewn dried monkeys onto dead carp to simulate The Seventh Wonder of the World, and replaced the plaster fittings in a curving framework that women lay in to be sawn in half ten times a day. But he was a solitary—unbending if you tried to strike up a conversation. Here today, gone tomorrow, was his motto, which was true but also self-defeating. He'd been a utility man on many carnivals, oiling tattooed individuals and overseeing snake-eating geeks, and now that Thalidomide Babies, pickled in jars, that you bought from a hospital, were a no-no, he was just the light man.

So, Jake walked behind the banner line of the girl show during the 5 PM break—when so many of these farmers went home to have dinner—after prudently asking Vickie whether she'd like to come along, so as not to arouse her suspicions. Abe worked out of Birmingham and, behind that, the Big Ea

milieu of New Orleans. He was mellow, vaguely chubby, always in a clean print shirt and khaki pants, smiling readily at anybody, unlike Smoky, and with money in his trailer too, but no more of a weapon than a billy club and an iron tent stake. "Bandits are scared of girls," he liked to say, although he did employ a roughie, not just to help put up the tent and tear it down again, but to protect the girls from rowdies in the crowd, if necessary, with help from the deputy that a sheriff would usually provide, if he was being paid off. "Audience participation" kootch shows were the wildest kind, and only allowed in the same venues that still welcomed a Wall of Death, so Jake and Abe crossed routes at several engagements a year.

"You break your neck," he warned Jake affectionately, again. "An old geezer like you," he said in his Cajun accent, from a boyhood spent in Lafayette, Louisiana, where his father had bought furs from the salt-marsh trappers and managed a rice farm. Otherwise his watchwords of advice were to "Negotiate from strength; the little fish gets eaten up," and "I was a nice Jewish boy who learned one important lesson: beautiful girls need company too." Not in high school, they didn't, but later, in a modeling job after the photo shoot was over and the gay guys said goodbye, assuming that they already had some other date. If you escorted them to a party, held their purse, shielded them from unseemly propositions, but cleared out of their way whenever they wanted you to, you'd become an agent in a year or so. And further down the road, if you didn't get all huffy at bedtime at the sound of an occasional vibrator in your motel room, you could find yourself sleeping with three or four eye-popping pusses, in all the extra beds the manager could fit in, and topping off one or another, as needed.

"*Compadre*," Abe repeated, nodding with amusement at the stilted step of Vickie—who to him was just Jake's newest, but was approaching out of curiosity or jealousy, with her arms crossed, rather than though Abe possessed x-ray eyes that saw straight through your clothing. "You, the holder of a Bronze Star for heroism, come to see this old 4-F?"

They laughed. It was their joke that though the army hadn't wanted him, Abe had lived almost everywhere since surrounded by nookie, except during the winter, when he liked and even insisted upon being alone. Had never married, no children, but enjoyed them, and, noticing Vickie upset that her daughter had followed, he said, "No, no, no, it never hurt a little one to see how the big girls can wind a man around their pinkie. The mystery of women."

He introduced her to Sheba and Carmen, who had emerged from their dressing room for money to buy softie cones and boats of French fries and sloppy joes, in their high-heeled slippers and fishnet stockings, but sweatshirts and cutoffs, with hair tattily scarved, as a street disguise. Yet, spotting Elizabeth Alice, they ducked back inside, wailing for lace and ruffles to dress her in, and brought Samantha out as well. Ignoring Jake, they soon had Vickie, too, feeling proud and mollified. Abe had a canvas chair for visitors, and signaled to his roughie, a leaden-faced bouncer type, that it was okay for him to eat now. A deputy in a comic uniform loafed nearby.

"You know, I've known this guy for what, probably ten years?" he told Jake, meaning the sheriff, not the carny workhand or the lunk who was the deputy. "And he says"—Abe, sotto-voiced, raised his eyebrows for emphasis—"he gets his money now from letting a certain plane land once a month from Canada at the airstrip. So he doesn't need us anymore, and just gets in trouble from the Christers at election time. So this may be our last gig here. I'm going to do a good blow-off."

The dancers returned with subs, and Vickie left with Elizabeth Alice. Sheba was actually a Sally, but had ebony (or more than ebony) long hair to fit her African name, as Carmen's was fluorescent blond and Samantha's flame-red. They were all tall, which made it easier for them not to have to watch their weight: which was a benefit of stripping over modeling. In the flesh, people weren't as particular about a dab of flab, even a love handle, if you remained indoor-white. And unlike some of the Southern girls

Abe said, these Northerners didn't chew and spit tobacco.

~~When Angel tried to peep around, Jake shooed him away. But Sheriff Leroy showed up, with eyes~~ pouches as dark as a raccoon's rings. Though not as weighty in the community as a Southern sheriff could have been, he might still be intent upon soliciting more of a kickback, if this was going to be the last go-round. They felt antsy; Jake had had to pay up too, a hundred smackers, because of "safety concerns." Leroy's livelihood and merriment was measuring degrees of illegality, and the three ladies, despite their legerdemain in appearing quite shapeless in sweatshirts, quickly withdrew after a chorus of Hi's to him.

Leroy had chimp-like arms like a dairyman, but Abe's smile merely widened. "Leroy!" he welcomed him hospitably; it was impossible to prevent your own mouth from twitching a little. And Leroy's visit turned out not to be mercenary but sentimental. He hunched comfortably over where they were seated, leaning on the trailer's bumper with the insinuating manner of a highway trooper looking inside a driver's window.

"You know, I was remembering that I saw my first cunt right here. Most any man my age probably did. It was a public service because we didn't get to see it anywhere else. My father took me—it was cheaper than going to Montreal. And you gotta see it before you know what you're gonna do with it, don't you?"

"I'll use that on the box if you want me to," Abe said with a grin. "And if your daddy was a widower when he got bald-headed, I'll bet you he kissed his last pussy right down here too."

That startled the sheriff, but, knowing Abe to be an alien from deep Dixie, and having been acquainted with him for a decade, he had to actually agree. They talked about trailer tires and hitchhikers and crooked salesmen, and scanner frequencies, until Jake neglected to reopen his own show on time and he could stick around with the sheriff and hear Abe's opening spiel. Abe was quiet-spoken, economical with his energies, relying on the mike instead of shouting, and never strained his memory trying to bring in the name of the particular town he was in. People didn't pay to be flattered at a girl tent. They came for only one reason, and he was in it for the long haul.

"Gentlemen, this is the Fish House. We give you the hole show. You can smell it. We leave nothing out. You'll either go home and enjoy the pleasures of your fist, or else your wife will thank you because we've primed your pump. We have Carmen and Sheba. See whose dimensions you like best. And also our redhead Samantha, who swallows silver dollars, if you know what that means. If you don't happen to have one on your person, we'll sell you one for five bucks."

Laughing, the sheriff left inconspicuously. But when Jake emerged from backstage, he noticed Phil, the urgent fireplug figure, beside the grease joint down a ways, wondering why the drome had not been up and running to catch the girl show's marks before Abe had started his pitch, not just the stragglers who were now arriving late. Cliff and Charlene dimly perceived that they had missed a phase, too, and Elizabeth Alice had resumed scouting the midway for coins, brooches, barrettes, medallions, or whatever had been dropped, while drinking a chocolate milk and chewing an onion ring Angel's girlfriend had given her. She was having fun, trying to get ahead of an old guy who was searching for change, waving the wand of a metal detector, so Jake didn't call her back for the "Riders' Accident and Hospital Fund." The screams from the Scrambler no longer frightened her, and the pitchman who ran the water-pistol game, which was her favorite, let her play, gaffing it so that she won.

Jake was surprised, therefore, to find her crying after his blow-off. She said she had wound up, on her way home, at the mud wrestlers' tent, adjoining Jake's drome on the opposite side from Abe's show. Three young women performed—high-school classmates on Long Island a few years ago, and still friends—who knew who Elizabeth Alice was; and after signaling their intentions to Vickie, in the ne-

ticket booth, they had invited her in. They were doing this stuff partly for a hoot, but the experience of seeing women fighting each other in a tub of black muck terrified Elizabeth Alice. She ran bawling out, not realizing of course that they were faking and much less likely to get hurt than Cliff or Jake. Vickie, comforting her, explained that like the Scrambler, it was only pretend, so she wouldn't have nightmares about which she was prone to.

After a while, Vickie carried her back to meet the mud wrestlers: whom she wanted to be friends with anyway, certainly more than with the strippers on the other side. Jake resented the wrestlers a bit, First-of-May triflers—not carnies at all, but exploiting a fad—whose act would wilt in the autumn rains and maybe never come back on the circuit next year, although he was glad to tap into the extra customers they brought. Vickie didn't share that opinion. In fact, the organizer of it, named Alida, told Elizabeth Alice she had a little girl herself, who was staying with Grandma in Bayside, while Mammy was away. And Alida's husband, who was their manager and also about Vickie's age, was a building contractor, working for his father in his regular life. So he could afford to take orders from his tombstone wife, and the summer off. He'd jury-rigged a shower from the fairgrounds' hose and a portable water heater he had brought along, and they were now kind enough to let Vickie or Charlene use it, even though they weren't covered with mud.

Alida was a ball of fire who knew how to control her money (“very tough on the customers,” a bookkeeper for the construction company, her husband said), as well as her diet, and owned a split-level ranch house in the suburbs that she showed Vickie pictures of. Indeed, they wanted a fourth woman for tag-team wrestling or just to spell one of them off—but not to “pick up some unknown girl with a social disease,” as Alida confided. She promised no rough stuff, though her nose looked as if it had been broken (she claimed a car accident); and what with this terrible pinch for money, Vickie was tempted but didn't know how to broach the idea with Jake.

Jake called them one-season wonders, and they told her that his motordrome looked ramshackle—but also that you had to pull each other's T-shirt off in the middle of the tussle, or nobody would come. It wasn't advertised, but word-of-mouth promised the customers that you were going to; and possibly as a result, a snide feud had developed, these last two days, between the girl-show strippers and the mud wrestlers, as to whose stunt was more demeaning, dirtier, more disgusting, the mud fight or the mud peddling.

“Cunt-lapping,” the mud wrestlers called it, when Alida shouted at Abe's Sheba or Samantha, walking by. And if she did, “Eat mud!” Sheba yelled back.

Jake sided with his friend's girls, naturally. No real carnies would waste their energy starting a spat like that unless it had been set up beforehand, building toward a “grudge cat fight” with an extra admission fee, in front of the grandstand. Which was a great idea, come to think of it, except you couldn't trust “the mud people,” as he called them—resenting Vickie's needing to shower there—to go easy on Abe's girls. The staging would have to be cautiously done, and he didn't even believe they had the split-level house and their boasts about a construction business back on Long Island. Otherwise, why eat dirt? Their credit rating was probably zilch.

“Like ours?” Vickie asked.

“Yes, like ours!” he'd muttered in anger; and that was before she ever proposed going next door to try working with them for five bucks a minute, while in the ring.

That night it was warm enough to sleep inside the drome on mattresses, with plenty of elbow room and some reefers to cheer everybody up. By the next noon, Vickie found Jake, as he pulled on his stunt pilot's barnstorming costume, in an approachable mood, and once he had absorbed the news, he surprised her by simply saying, “If the suckers want it, and you want that. They'll body-slam you

though. You'll be black and blue." Neither bossy nor pleased, he looked to Charlene to dissuade her. But Charlene didn't oblige, though, being ten years older than Vickie, she didn't seem miffed not to be considered, herself.

"That's all I'd need," she said. Yet she was sometimes so puzzlingly aloof with Elizabeth Alice that Vickie was uncertain about bringing her into a conspiracy to conceal from the child what her mother was planning to do. Who else was there, however, to help while Jake was inside on the Wall? When she asked Jake what he thought was wrong, he suggested Charlene might have given up a kid for adoption. He'd seen that reaction before.

"They don't get over it, but they can wiggle around it." He didn't believe Vickie would be at this foolishness for long. Thus the lying could be over in a day or so. "That butch stuff," he added. "You think they're your friends, but they'll hurt you."

He didn't spell out that he thought his Vickie was rather physically frail, compared to this new well-fed threesome trading on a fad, who no doubt had eaten cereal and milk every morning through the toddlerhoods, while she was being fed potato chips and Pepsi Cola, and who'd never had their daddy belt buckle permanently scar their breasts at fourteen, or been screamed at as a "shrimp," punishment that didn't make you serviceably tough, just wary and pessimistic. Also he didn't voice his opinion that whatever the sins of the elegantly milky-clean Carmen, she would be a more feminine influence on little girl Elizabeth Alice's age than those dykes. He knew Vickie didn't consider them bull dykes, but "liberated."

Hoarse, and feeling nausea on the Wall from doing both the talking and the star turns for his act, Jake wanted to be able to get on the bally platform and simply tell the crowd the truth—then be done with it—saving his poor vocal cords and resting a bit while they filed in. To be able to simply say: "I'm the best there is at doing this, the best left who's still doing the stunt. If you want to watch, pay your three bucks." And in fact he liked having Elizabeth Alice around. More than Cliff's predictable company going round and around like a circus horse underneath his own looping orbits, she furnished a kind of focus or center of gravity for him, although she was never in sight during the show; she couldn't be allowed in the drome while they rode, of course. But he would fix his mind on her. He wanted to talk her out catching frogs in the field afterwards, with some water in a little coffee container.

What happened, however, was that while he, Cliff, Charlene, and Angel were busy at the drome Elizabeth Alice went peering behind the scenes for her mom, and, from the back of the next tent, she witnessed Vickie, half-naked, calf-deep in muck and splattered all over with black, being toppled again by Alida tugging at her hair, while five dozen men were hollering for the other two young women to show off their boobies and mix it up dirty, too. Elizabeth Alice sank into desperate hysterics that lasted for over an hour.

"This isn't solving anything," Jake protested, during the five o'clock break, after Elizabeth Alice had been extensively hugged to calm her down. Meanwhile, he had already gone to Phil's grab joint and asked for some decent assistance from him, on the bally box, for instance, for old time's sake—but maybe too aggressively, because Phil's normally mousy wife helped Phil respond by stamping her foot on the idea. "No more motorcycles! Isn't it enough that your brother died on the Wall?" Phil and Jake—who had been gingerly workmates even when they had ridden together—looked at each other quizzically, and Phil told him to cool it and take his time, skip a month in paying his debt, if he wanted to.

It was good being married—not just because at Jake's age, your ulcer might burst on you, or your eyes might red out from pulling so many G's on the Wall, and who else, dude, would ever take care of you then?—but to have people to protect. Yet with such limited options, he ought to search for a bigger carnival for them to join. But when he went to Smoky's trailer to ask for either a financial incentive

stay on, or the loan of a talker from another attraction on the midway, Smoky's small eyes twinkled bluntly. His lips bulged like a boxer's with the mouthpiece in.

"If every single one of your customers doesn't have a ticket stub of mine in his hand when they go to your place, I'm going to boot your butt the hell out of here."

When Jake expressed total surprise, he said that a spotter of his had told him that "that kid"—Angel—had been letting people in if they slipped him two dollars in cash when he manned the door. If it were Vickie or Charlene, Smoky added, he would have assumed Jake knew, but, "Punch him out," he suggested. "That'll solve your money problems."

Of course it didn't at all (although Jake did split Angel's lower lip) but was a diversion, something Smoky, like any carnival owner, was expert at, whether with a town's Fire Inspector or Sanitation Department, or merely a carny like him.

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Vickie was bruised yet not grudging about how the wrestlers had treated her. Alida had given her some motel money for a sound sleep tonight, and she felt like such a conscientious mother, compared to her own, that she needn't fret that too much damage had been done to Elizabeth Alice, assuming her dreams turned out okay. Vickie explained to her that it had been make-believe so they could sleep on regular beds and use an indoor toilet and so on. Jake's pride was injured, then. Needing advice, in any case, he moseyed over to Abe's to lounge in a camp chair behind the banshee banner line, not out of horniness but loneliness. Similarly, the three strippers were too played out to care how macho Jake was. The tranquility Abe could conjure up was more attractive to them.

Abe chuckled at Jake's account of Smoky's imperviousness: not that he himself would really have been less. And he could remember Phil's virtuoso parents in the motorcycle drome, with their lions shitting and spraying urine during the show, sometimes fearfully, sometimes territorially, but smelling worse than the bikes did. They laughed about it together, and living dangerously by the prowess of your body was a bond with the girls, as well. Yet the work did burn them out. Abe would start from Birmingham with three second-string tits-and-asses club dancers, and finish in Florida after Thanksgiving with none of the originals, or the first substitutes for the originals, either. In Memphis, Knoxville, Lynchburg, Pittsburgh, or places in between, he might lose a girl and pick up another one—always pros; he didn't train them. And it was like handling Amazons, he said. Like soldiers, they tended to prefer each other's company to any alternative, and needed their rest and recreation, such as going to a movie collectively, a swim in July, a visit to a pick-your-own apple orchard later, a kitten in a box in the dressing wagon, or enjoying a cry in common when the customers got brutish. He'd give the weeping one her money, and she'd climb onto the Hound, while he phoned the nearest agency, in Boston, St. Louis, Louisville, Buffalo, or wherever, until by and by a new six-foot "bombshell" would arrive, hair-coloring and sexpot pasties and all. If she didn't yet know how raw this hayseed outfit that she'd jumped onto was, Sheba or Samantha—or somebody like Sheba or Samantha—or else Abe himself, would demonstrate to the new girl how to grab a guy who was going down on her by both ears in a manner that let him know he was going to lose them if he so much as hinted at a nipping. And if this discovery revolted her, it was a matter of price with Abe that she could still leave with a little money tucked in her bra.

"Negotiate from strength" was Abe's advice again, after hearing Jake gripe. He had a beer in his hand but, unlike Jake, had not been a drunk. "You and me are about the same age, but we're pretending the gravy train isn't going to end. We can squeeze it out, but pretty soon every high school kid is going to be looking at what I'm charging for on his computer at home or his girlfriend will be giving it away for

free.” He motioned toward the stage. “Girlies are girls. You’d think even the bald-headed guys would know that.”

Vickie stopped over to check on Jake, then left Elizabeth Alice with him while she went back to the wrestlers’ tent to chat with her friends. Abe said he had enough to retire on, but, like a good carnival operator, he omitted asking Jake how he stood for the winter; just suggested he ought to put Vickie to work.

“Right?” he asked Carmen—who had the biggest bouffant, black at the roots, iridescent-honey on top, and was now grooming Elizabeth Alice’s hair with a comb as long as most of her arm.

“That’s how they do it,” Carmen agreed. “My poppa used to put his hand in my dress every week to see how mine were developing. He thought he could live off of me, but I’ve never sent him a dime.”

“Hey,” Jake interrupted for the child’s sake.

Elizabeth Alice had a sort of primary animal energy that put the adults to shame, and maybe was what she lent him that sense of focus when he was on the Wall. He studied his blotched, blurry agglomeration of tattoos for a bare space on his arm where he could have one engraved for her. But she needed more protection than Vickie, and he meant to be faithful to both of them in their separate ways. Having grown up fatherless, but slated to work in the Navy Yard like his mother’s in-laws, he was tender on that subject. Although he’d loved his mom, he had taken off when those whirling, flashing wheels and vortexes of light, embellished by sirens, of the World of Mirth show and Goldie Restall its Wall of Death impresario, *vroom-vroomed* into town. His mother’s tenement windows looked out on the carny lot, and when he hit twelve he didn’t let them leave without him. He was perched on Goldie’s handlebars as “The Youngest Rider in the World,” until he became immunized to dizziness and, turning sixteen, could legally drive alone. Their team played the Steel Pier in Atlantic City, Palisades Park, the Santa Cruz boardwalk, Soldier’s Field in Chicago, The Cow Palace in San Francisco, and Rocky Dell’s Great American Shows. Jake learned short-cut auto mechanics too, so you could buy a heap at a junkyard and make it run for a week or a month, with the doors tied shut if you had to. At that one stage in the twenties he’d crewed with the Chitwood Thrill Show, jumping cars over a row of junkers, then rolling them, and stepping out with chesty panache. But that didn’t have the intimacy of a Harley Low Rider balling into the wind, not to mention an Indian Scout climbing the Wall “like a bug,” as Goldie would say, before he retired to driving a tramcar for gimpy tourists half his age on the boardwalk at Wildwood, New Jersey. As Goldie, his foster father’s, longevity showed, it wasn’t so much the shitters that were going to wipe you out. Once Jake’s drive tire burst, and his knee went right through the floor when he came down. His whole leg was oozing blood and bodily fluids and he had needed a hundred-for-stitches on his face and head. But Jake had had two heart attacks, more recently, since turning fifty (although before he’d met Vickie, so she didn’t know), and now carried nitroglycerin tablets buttoned into his shirt pocket, even on the Wall. He’d tried driving a bread truck and working in a loblolly pine sawmill down South afterwards for a spell, but the spinning lights that could still entice a smooth-skinned young lady like Vickie pulled him back. Hugging a perpendicular wall at thirty or forty miles an hour concentrated a grandpa’s brain cells wonderfully, and if the pennies raining down on his head shamed him, he pretended they were for Elizabeth Alice.

Yet how could he hustle a gig on a better carnival than this one when he was pinned down to his impossible schedule? Abe shrugged sympathetically. Abe had traveled with a Mermaid presentation, and an Iron Lung exhibit—another grind where you employed a young broad, undressed, to hold still endlessly, while cramped in claustrophobic quarters for many hours—and had toured with Medic Curiosities (your basic Two-Headed engagement) in a trailer. But he preferred a free-standing, live act, and not just a Fat Lady, but the coziness of trouping with a trio of lively showgirls, who for their part often preferred the companionship of a dork like him to all the men they’d known that they had been

scared of. Abe was backed by a moneybags in Gibsonton, Florida, who owned his equipment, but otherwise operated independently, hiring his girls, or stable of fill-ins, plus the roughies, and negotiating with every county sheriff as to whether or not “lunch” could be served, which boosted the receipts considerably and thus the lawmen’s too. In the winter he retired to his secluded hotel and got a good rest, without needing a crutch such as AA, or anybody else.

“No, I wouldn’t trade with you,” he murmured to Jake, watching his girls groom Elizabeth Alice’s hair and ruffle her dress. In the morning in the motel room, he would hand Samantha the telephone to call her children, if she woke up early, before they set off from her sister’s house for school. (“Mommy’s working, darling. Mommy will be home soon.”) Carmen had apparently stashed one or two in foster care, but didn’t or couldn’t contact them, which made her jumpy during Samantha’s conversations and yet doubly so on her behalf if she didn’t call. Those mammary organs that paid the bills did have a bedrock purpose, and Jake, to his dismay, didn’t disagree with Abe about a trade, because, after all, after six marriages, he didn’t even have Elizabeth Alice in the sense that she would acknowledge him as her brand-new stepdad. She enjoyed chasing the coins rolling across the floor of the drome, or would follow him where she wanted to go anyhow, if he had sided with her against her mom, but wouldn’t take his hand as they walked, or emotionally give him an inch.

Observing the changing hydraulics of the crowd, Abe got up and mounted his bally box. “All alive,” he said, parting a curtain to show the strawberry-haired Samantha. “The Inner Sanctum of Mystery Gentlemen. See the Cleft That Shelters and Divides Us. We illuminate the female body for you, Gentlemen. Most of you already know what you are going to see. (And if you don’t, you better hurry in!) The Hole Show. I don’t need hyperbole. Nature doesn’t exaggerate. These ladies display the attributes God gave them. You or I may wear blue jeans or a tuxedo. They wear their birthday suits. Feast your eyes, Gentlemen. It’s cheaper than a marriage license. We have it for your pleasure for the price of one blue ticket. We do go back to good old Dixie for the winter, but we leave you warm with memories!”

The tip was so anemic, however, that Abe left Samantha out there as a come-on—Samantha, the surfer and good sport, a California girl in Pan-Cake makeup, who used a special antiseptic to wash herself when she came offstage from the show, and often muttered the doctor’s mantra, “Do no harm to herself, as she worked.

A mark who should have been hospitalized approached Jake and Abe, as they sat together. He talked past them irrationally for a while, until Jake pointed at Cliff’s yellow mutt, tied to the station wagon a dozen yards away, and said, “He bites.”

Then they had another visitor with a funny grin, this one supporting a duffel bag slung over his shoulder. But it wasn’t stiff like a gun, and Jake and Abe, from their decades of sizing people up, recognized that, as odd as he was, he was not a nut.

“No job,” Abe told him, as they waited for him to reveal his shtick.

“No, no, no. I’m giving you a present,” this character, sandy-faced, an enthusiast, replied. “You couldn’t buy this for less than, what, a thousand dollars?”

“How much you gonna pay us to take him off your hands?” Jake asked, who had seen the satchel move as the guy set it down.

“My bad luck is your good luck. It’s outgrown my house. I would have had to give it a room of its own.” The guy raised his eyebrows to indicate how sincere he was.

Jake glanced toward the motordrome. Vickie was stationed in her bathing suit on a stool on the ball platform, as he had asked, so that people idling by would notice the place for later reference in their mind’s eye. Abe’s bevy of strippers were re-coating themselves with sunscreen, and showing Elizabeth

Alice how. It wasn't uncommon for a boa fancier to try to unload his snake on a carnival passing through, but Abe had told Jake that only Sheba had previous experience of carnary life. The other two had been hired out of Boston's Combat Zone.

"Sheba," Jake called, after checking with Abe. "Gentleman has a gift."

She strolled over, handsome and tall, sashaying even though it was not yet quite her working hours with her Cleopatra-sheeny hair, and her legs promptly assuming a stocking-ad posture, but marred overall by a certain horsey contour to her nose, which she had never found a sugar daddy who was willing to pay to fix. She held out her ring finger kiddingly, while her savvy eyes registered the slow churning sack.

"A freebie? How heavy is he?" she asked, in that high, phone-sex voice. "You're stuck with him, hey? Can't sell him to save your blessed life? My limit's fifty pounds."

"Fifty's the same as seventy-five," suggested Jake, who hadn't realized she had experience of this kind. Abe, her boss, by his silence suggested agreement, but Sheba was a flamboyant woman. Nobody could give her orders. They both rolled their hands, signifying to her, don't worry about it, but the townsfolk mistook this for a go-ahead and unzipped the golf bag. He lifted out a Burmese python twice as long as he was.

Sheba turned out to actually like snakes, and stepped closer. She didn't touch it, but didn't jerk back when it protruded and flicked its forked tongue to scent her. Jake called to Angel, who always hung around the girl tent if Jake's presence created a pretext.

"Go down to the farmer barns and get me a chicken. Alive." He waved aside Angel's question about how to accomplish this.

"Who would replace me?" Sheba asked. She and the snake were looking at each other. It was so big, well as so habituated to captivity, that neither fear nor an attempt to escape were its primary reactions. It was a creamy color mottled with reddish brown, and Sheba—making a snake of her black thick whip hair, holding this across her chest, then flipping it over one shapely shoulder to hang straight down her glorious back—felt no inclination to put more daylight between herself and the snake. The man who had raised it hefted the forward end, while the python kept its tail snugly anchored around his midriff.

Could Vickie, Jake wondered? Not fill in for Sheba with the dirty stuff, but could Vickie handle the python to bally his own show, perhaps? People might think he or she was going to ride with it, and come on in. He wasn't afraid of snakes—he knew them as he knew lions, as a drawing card, and had been acquainted with half a dozen midway snake charmers—but stability was the one thing even the tamest of them required. If thrown around, they automated their tightening mechanism. That was why the individual was receptive to Sheba's stare and her tentatively outreaching hands: because it sensed confident reliability there.

"Tell you what we're gonna do," Jake suggested, when Angel returned with a chicken that he had borrowed. The sudden flapping and the manure smell had aroused the reptile to center its gaze and prick its tongue, which flickered out like a flame. Jake recognized Sheba's intensity or empathy, too, and Abe smiled at him, because they didn't tell you everything, did they, these kootch girls? And she might be the true type, who would tell a crowd of men that she preferred its hugs to theirs, which was good for the office, and weep at the end of the season, when the snake caught pneumonia from the cold and contracted a killing fungus in its mouth.

"Tell you what we're going to do," Jake repeated. "Lay him on the ground, and if he eats the bird we'll take him and only charge you for the wood for a cage."

Everybody watched in mild surprise, as the snake looped into a jumbo coil in the grass, although some of them already knew there was no point in accepting a snake that was going to starve itself to death.

which could be the case. Angel gazed toward Vickie, who was sometimes his protector in strange situations, but who was oblivious, and Jake told him to go fetch Smoky, who might have some advice. Elizabeth Alice was drifting toward her mother, but slowly, because she was fascinated.

“It’s a girl, don’t you think?” Abe remarked to Jake and Sheba, who, unlike Carmen and Samantha had not crossed her arms self-protectively or stood up on tiptoe as if about to scoot. Her legs were out of range of a strike, but she leaned forward sympathetically. Her brother had kept king snakes, she told them. She tried a kind of Statue of Liberty pose, as if the python’s head would be her torch.

In his unhurried manner, Smoky arrived. He had booked several such attractions over the years and they did draw, for a grind, he agreed. You taped a spiel, and some bozo sold the tickets. But he glowered at Angel, with the bandaged lip.

Arms akimbo, provocatively statuesque, Sheba disclosed that at an Atlanta nightclub she had once presented a Venezuelan red-tailed boa constrictor, and had liked him better than the hairy rednecks who reached for her here. Sally being her real name, she wanted to call the snake that. They had given it a generous circle of space in the warm sun, and, when Jake swung the chicken in the air until it beat its wings, then tossed it out, the spear-shaped head reared abruptly a couple of feet and grabbed it in midair—gripped and clenched it to limpness within the moiling coils in about four seconds—and began to snarl and slather it with saliva, and stretch and lengthen it with strategic squeezes in deliberate preparation for swallowing the bird. The people watching dispersed a bit, not in tact so much as in awe of these specifics of swallowing the meal, imagining a larger one. The novices gasped.

“She’s a hot one, huh?” Abe told Smoky, who surveyed every problem that arose, or any event, with the same level, skeptical equanimity. Exhibitionists were his wage-earners, but he booked shows, he didn’t own them, and so he could afford to be dispassionate.

“Where’s that going to sleep?” Vickie asked, in Jake’s ear. He was remembering a mark who had tried to give him a lion that the guy had bought as a cub for a hundred dollars, but couldn’t keep in his garage any more. He hadn’t had it in the car with him, but described the mane, and Jake suggested he give it a chance—just let it go in the woods.

“It’s better than a lion,” he told Vickie. “And it could sleep in the generator wagon, where it’s warm.”

Smoky, when consulted about this, nodded neutrally, though they were all going to separate fairly soon: the iron and paraphernalia of his amusement rides, from Abe’s Girl-o-rama, and Jake’s Motordrome.

“I want her tonight,” Sheba insisted, staring persuasively for support at the other dancers, who were exotics too. When they didn’t speak in opposition, Abe grinned. “But I always wear a bra, with a snake,” she informed him.

“So would I,” he agreed, and assisted Jake and her to convince the python that the golf bag was its familiar lair to be zipped back into to digest its meal.

“I love nature,” she said.

“Porn is nature,” suggested Abe.

“Not so much as the jungle.”

“Porn *is* the jungle.”

Since they seemed on the verge of arguing, Jake snuggled an arm around Vickie who at least hadn’t evinced an active phobia about snakes, and walked away. She’d gradually admitted that she was never going to be able to ride with him, even as a passenger, on the Wall, so he felt in a stronger position.

“We need money, and snakes suck it in. And snakes are deaf. They don’t go into a stink from their roar.”

“I tried the wrestling,” she pointed out. “And I’m worried about Elizabeth Alice’s ears.”

So, when he had a spare minute, he fixed the child a temporary pair of plugs from candle wax. But she wouldn't wear them unless her mother did also. And Vickie wanted Jake to, but it was hopeless coaxing him because he thought it was bad luck for a drome rider: plus might prevent him from hearing engine subtleties that he ought to know about, or where Cliff was. He'd lost considerable acuity, but would rather get clipped by a car on foot somewhere because he didn't hear it coming up behind him than miss a motor click or a tire sound that earplugs would block out, but might have saved him on the Wall. Your act was your life.

The plugs had the unexpected effect of causing Elizabeth Alice to take a nap, whereupon her mother snuck over and spelled Alida in a match again, "for motel money," as she muttered to Jake. "And she must be sleep-deprived. Why don't you teach Cliff to ride better, instead of trying snakes?"

Again, he was touched rather than angry at her, but answered that the wrestlers were slummers and would beat up on her. He went over during an interlude to talk with Alida's husband, however, and gathered the impression that it was a serious if half-assed venture. Supposedly they were tired of working for this guy's buzz-saw of a father, and a school had been started in West Virginia to exploit the fad and coach women in how to mix it up better in mud, which they wanted to go down to attend.

Angel drove Vickie and Elizabeth Alice to their night's sleep early, while Cliff and Charlene helped Jake milk the crowd for whatever he could. He baited several biker-clubbers in the crowd by sticking his boot out, going round at the safety stripe on top, as if to clip them if they leaned over, and got them howling mad. His right wrist held the reins of death, and his left the reins of life for himself, and thus he constantly twitched these two, as he swerved in breakneck vertical cloverleaf patterns on the rumbling wood.

In the meantime, over on the girl show, whenever a tip collected, Abe would bring out Sheba in a negligee and shorty nightie, with tan-toner lending a gloss to her yummy skin, and the ravishingly docile, Oriental, ruddy-and-heavy-cream-colored python slowly exploring every crack and cranny of her body with its flicking tongue. Jake was hoarse and coughing in exhaustion on his bally platform, but Abe was introducing "Tarzan's Jane." He'd shake his head. "Oh boy, Guys, I truly hate to tell you this, but there's no accounting for taste. She prefers him to you! And so did Eve. We tell it like it is on the inside. We go ballistic at every show. That's why I have to send my girls back to Boston next week to recuperate."

Sheba was wearing stilettos, and Abe squatted to stroke her leg and put one ticket under her heel, stroking the languid python's twitching tail, as well.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do before we move right on and take it all off on the inside. The first admission is free to the man who's brave enough to come up close and ask the lady nicely to please lift her shoe."

As was usual, a bald-headed gent with gums for teeth, who already knew the drill, volunteered.

"He's saving his three dollars to spend on the inside!" Abe crowed. And Sheba, who liked the toothless part for the cunnilingus, said, "You be right up front now, Sweetheart." She also waved a sweet and silly drunk on through.

"We're not going to hurt him, Ma'am," Abe explained to his wife. "We're only borrowing him, and we'll return him to you a better man."

Jake's place benefited from Abe's charged-up patrons, when they left. He roared the chrome-slutt Harley on its rollers, while Cliff donned a silver helmet, as if they were about to hit the Wall—Cliff was gifted with an imposing frame, at least—and Charlene, perhaps goosed on by Vickie's absence, began to taunt the crowd from her ticket booth, in her spiky, punky haircut and back-street Baltimore accent, about whether she was lookin' at he-men or wimps, in a way that piqued but didn't offend them. "Show

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