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## **Studies in the Novella**

LB Kovac

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Studies in the Novella

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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# SWAMP DEVIL



A NOVELLA  
By LB Kovac

I think it's rather funny when someone says they've lived in a spot for too long. They've lived in this neighborhood for too long, like it's old milk. It's out of date, gone bad, passed expiration. The house over there has been there for much too long. How can it be too long? Does that mean it can be too new? I must've been here too long. Longer than I can really remember, that's for sure. Time has a way of escaping me. It comes and goes as it pleases. Never in one place for too long, if you will pardon the pun. I've been here since before Syndicate. I think it used to be all farms. Wheat was big for a while in this county. Oats, too. The farmers didn't know enough about farming to think about rotating their crops, though. That's why Syndicate bought it. The topsoil got taken with the bread crops.

Way back before that, before even the farms, this used to be a circus stop, too. There was a big clearing here, all the trees around it, and all the carriages and tents would come and park it here for a couple of days. People would come from miles around, Braxton, Sicily, even up in Vermont, to see Winky's Three-Ring Circus, featuring acts like Fat Kimber, the lady who sweat gold, or Lady Lioness, the woman who sprouted a mane around her neck. They'd pay a nickel, later a quarter then two dollars, to go between the candy cane-striped curtains and see the show. Those were the days, before circuses had all the clowns in those incessant little cars, honking their horns.

Out here, now, it gets kind of lonely. I have this place all to myself, these four walls, stove, and books. Mind the squirrels, if you will, they must smell bad. I'm able to get most of what I need from the land. There's a nice squirrel population living in those trees, and I'm alright at shooting, as you can see. And there's plenty of wild oats and other vegetables from the old farm days out past all the musty water. And, when I need to, I can make it all the way into town.

Buy my books and other things that I need. I spend most of my time writing about pretty much anything that stirs my fancy. The best place is right here, at this old table. I found it at the dump, actually. Pine, it is, and I stained it myself. It's a little chipped, if you'll pardon that. But I want to tell you story about someone. He was in the circus for too long, as one is apt to say. His name was Johnathan Lipman, although most people who know of him know him as "Lizard-Man." He was with the circus for much longer than any man should have been. Almost a hundred years. It's a powerful feeling that still comes over a man when he walks into a circus tent. Maybe it's the music, the shouts, and the laughter, and but it's hard not to feel like is missing on the outside of the tent, and you can find it inside.

But this isn't about the circus, though a lot of it happens there. It's about the man, I guess, or even an animal, you can figure all that stuff out. Johnathan Lipman the Lizard-Man.

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# 1

Johnathan was born to a very young woman and her husband, Gregory in the bedroom of a nice white house on the edge of Braxton County, West Virginia. It was in March, not too long after the Great War between the states, but not so soon that the fight had fell from everyone's eyes. Johnathan was the fifth child, a brother to four sisters who had all passed before they left the cradle. He came out of his mother and into the arms of an old country doctor, but neither of the new parents took him. He was beautiful, too, with blonde hair and strange yellow eyes, but they wouldn't touch him.

"It's only a yellow bile problem," the doctor told the tired parents, his own beady eyes and flat nose peering at them over the rim of his glasses. He fussed over the baby with various silvery instruments, one of them long like a fire poker, to reassure them. Johnathan cried.

His mother wedged up against the oak headboard of the old family bed made an attempt to sit up and hold him, but she could only squeeze her husband's hand. The effort nearly made her pass out.

"He's going to be ok?" Gregory asked, careful not to brace himself and not to sound too concerned or too attached. He squeezed his wife's hand back, and some of the color returned to her pale cheeks.

"He is too young to bleed, so I can't say. Tell the nurse to try to get him to suck a little

extra, and, if he gets worse, let him suck on a carrot and call for me.”

Gregory nodded. The sharp angle of his chin traveled down his neck and across the sack coat he was wearing, making him look like one stern line. He quickly scribbled this into his notebook. He hadn’t looked for a nurse yet, hadn’t thought it would be necessary.

“I haven’t found one yet,” he finally said to the doctor.

“Very well. I have a recommendation, then.”

Charlotte, a very round woman, mother of four children who had all made it well into adulthood, was at their stoop by the afternoon. Her blue crinoline made her even wider than she already looked. She filled up the whole doorway as Gregory let her in.

“I’m here for the baby,” she said, adjusting her bonnet with a small stroke of her fat fingers and pushing past him. He did nothing to stop her and stepped slightly to the side.

“The baby is upstairs with Jenny, our servant girl. Second door to the left,” he yelled. She picked up the hem of her dress between the fat fingers as she attempted to tiptoe up the stairs.

“This is his nursery?” she bellowed once in the room. Jenny was holding Johnathan in a straight-backed Captain’s chair. A few blankets and cloths, some of them pink, and various glass bottles and rubber nipples were strewn on the top of a mahogany desk in between two stacks of ominous encyclopedias. A large blanket hung from the gold spindle of a hand painted globe.

“It will be. We haven’t finished setting it up yet,” he said.

Charlotte snatched the baby from a very surprised Jenny, who was then shooed along with an also surprised-looking Gregory out of the room. She held Johnathan up in the air in front of her. He was barely an afternoon old but didn’t scream or fuss as his legs dangled. He might have even looked her in the eye, though I don’t think babies that young can really see. She looked back at him.



“They think you’re gonna die,” she said to him. No one had said this out loud. I don’t know if they even dared. But she sensed in the way her new master had opened the door. Sunlight was streaming now through the open window, casting shadows the color of her skin across the desk.

“I think you’re gonna live forever,” and she ripped her breast from under the neck of her dress. He latched onto her, and she smiled.

Besides his eyes he seemed in most respects like a normal baby. He had ten fingers and toes, a symmetrical face, legs and arms in the right places. He weighed eight pounds and ten ounces and stretched twenty-two inches long. After he was fed, he ate some more, and he started to grow. He even lived well past the few weeks Gregory had written and nearly everyone else had silently predicted. The nursery was built, the crib and toys and books added accordingly, and for a while everything seemed quite normal.

Charlotte looked after him, raised him, played with him, fed him most of the time. The mother did not recover well from the pregnancy. Arsenic, I believe. It was in her makeup, and it made her thin and frail and very sickly. Not purposefully, at least, not in the way that you might think, that someone was poisoning her. It just made her sick. She would spend her days laid up in the old oak bed, wearing only a chemise and coughing into her closed hand. Some days, her strength would come back, she would get dressed and stiffly hold and play with Johnathan, ruffle his hair and call him her little kitten. He would nuzzle her hand as she did this. But most days she was confined to her bed and nearly all days, Gregory left the house early in the morning, notebooks in hand, for “business.”

Every night, when Charlotte pushed the covers under his shoulders catching his body like a fly in a web, she would touch his nose and ask him which story he wished to hear. The old

stories, perhaps? About men who would ride horses thousands of miles across darkened deserts to save white-capped ladies from great monsters?

“They’ll make you grow up right,” she would tell him.

Some nights, she thought he did. He’d clap his hands to see her contort her face into that of an old, tired dragon. Some nights, he’d always grab for the green and gold-gilded cover of Henry and James See Different Boys with open fingers, and she’d read to him of the two friends living near a port who looked wide-eyed at the different boys from foreign places.

Even with the aid of the stories, he grew very little. By the age of five when most children were running around at the towering height of three feet five inches, Johnathan was only a foot longer than at one. His hair grew about his shoulders, but his arms and his legs didn’t. He couldn’t pick up his teddy bear or pedal himself on his horse tricycle, though when plopped atop it he would shape his face and try with everything he could muster. He had a few pointy teeth but he still only nursed and sipped and runny watery foods.

“He’s just taking his time growing, that’s all,” Charlotte told the parents, but the mother felt these were signs that she would surely lose another child. She cut herself off from him again, while her husband continued to only tip his felt hat at the boy.

The doctor was called again, and he spent several minutes in silence tugging on little Johnathan’s hair and skin. He used his crumpled hands to pick up each of Johnathan’s arms and legs, moving them in every direction at the joint and feeling all of the individual sinews running up and down the child’s anatomy. Johnathan didn’t much like this but he could not fight it. He just sat there limply as the doctor did his work. He then grunted and pulled an aging, leather-bound tome with intricate gold lettering from the depths of his bag. He slid his gold-rimmed glasses over his pinched-in nose and carefully flipped through the pages.

“HMMMMM,” he grunted again. He carefully flipped through all the pages, spilling them out in a great white arc. “Well.”

“Well, what?” the mother gasped. She kept her hands firmly on her husband’s shoulders.

“Well, he seems to be fine. Very healthy lad, good color in his cheeks. He might have a vitamin deficiency, perhaps. Tell me, what are you feeding him?”

Charlotte raised her hand. “He still tries to suck me, but I’m managing to get in him more solid foods. Mashed potatoes, cornbread and milk, maybe a nice pea cake from the cook. He’s also to sucking bread soaked in milk.”

The doctor was ruffled at this comment. “He still sucks? He’s all of six! He should have been weaned years ago.”

“Well, that’s all he’ll eat without his teeth.”

The doctor looked at the mother and Gregory. “I don’t know where you find your help...”

Charlotte moved her whole body right into the man’s face. “I’ve been doing this for years, you ol’ goose. I know what’s good for kids.” Her hips nearly toppled him over.

The doctor backed away to the bed, closer to the baby. “Well, the problem, I think, no offense to you, madam, is that you’re treating him like a baby.”

“What do you mean?” the husband asked.

“You remember when you turned four, began to walk, and your parents took you out of your infant clothes? You were given trousers instead, am I correct?” The doctor straightened his tie.

“Yes.”

“That’s the problem. He doesn’t know that he’s a boy yet. He still thinks he is a baby.

And, as long as he thinks that he is a baby, a baby he will remain. I'm recommending a diet of solid foods, pants, shoes that tie, maybe a little wine or sherry and some polite, stimulating conversation. School might be a good decision, too, once he begins to walk and talk."

The doctor pushed his book back into his bag, removed his glasses, and grabbed his coat, and, on the way out, in a hushed tone, to the husband only, "And I'd think about getting some new help, if I were you."

He then bowed to the wife. "Good day to you, Madam Lipman."

She managed a weak curtsy to him in return. "And you, also, sir."

The doctor smiled at her. "Just keep doing those exercises I showed you, dear. That fever should clear up quickly. Mr. Lipman, I leave you."

That night, the cook set out an extra plate at the family's dining table, and little Johnathan was propped up on volumes H-K of the family's encyclopedia set and tied to his chair with gentleman's pocket scarves, unable to support himself though boy he was. In front of him were the pieces of a full dinner setting: fish fork and knife, salad fork and knife, steak fork and knife, soup spoon, cocktail fork, butter knife, dessert fork, place plate, water goblet, and a napkin folded in the shape of a swan. They skipped the sherry glass for him because, despite what the doctor had said, he was a little too young for alcohol. The cook served succulent duck with a salad and sides of roasted carrots, mashed potatoes, asparagus, and wheat dinner rolls.

All of this must have smelled quite delicious to little Johnathan. In fact, he was so overpowered by the smells, he spent no time worrying which fork went with asparagus or which knife was used to cut the duck. He promptly dug his hand into his plate and scooped up mashed potatoes.

The mother dabbed at her lips with a white cloth napkin and politely attempted to excuse

herself from her end of the dinner table.

“No,” her husband barked, pressing his hand into her waist. “He must do it on his own.”

She remained seated, but she could not eat any more herself. Johnathan flipped his salad plate into the centerpiece, decorating the flowers with green lettuce and purple radishes. The place mat ended up on the floor beneath his chair, safe from the rest of the mashed potatoes and carrots that fell to the floor around it. He did have some initial success with the roast duck, as part of it did end up in his mouth. The rest fell down the collar of his new shirt.

“See, honey, he can’t do it. Please, let me help him,” the mother pleaded. But her husband’s hand stayed at her waist.

“No, he will not learn if we coddle him. You heard the doctor. Jenny, try to clean some of the food off the floor.”

Jenny moved quickly, placing the bits of food in her unfolded apron. Johnathan continued to try to eat the duck, forcing more of into his mouth and shirt, but there was a bone, must have been somewhere, and he began to cry.

Gregory wouldn’t allow anyone to comfort him. He was locked in the dining room until quit crying. Nearly three hours after dinner, he was walked, really drug, to his own room, where he was made to sleep in his filthy clothes but he could not remove them on his own. When the wife and mother began to cry begging her husband to let her help her only child, the only one of five children to have made it past the cradle, Johnathan was almost helped. But he stayed by himself all night.

“Shhh,” Gregory whispered to his wife until she finally fell asleep.

Three weeks of this treatment saw little improvement in Johnathan’s physical capacities, though his mind was getting stronger every day. Charlotte was called back, and she appeared at

the front door of the Lipmans with folded arms.

“I told ya I knew what I was doing.”

But Gregory did not fully relent. Johnathan was made to wear pants, which were made of this itchy, hemp-like fiber, and terribly stiff church shoes. Charlotte taught him to tie the laces in a bow, a process that took him nearly three months to master. You could tell by looking at him that the gears were spinning up there, he knew how to do it, but his chubby fingers didn't respond fast enough. Patience was the key in this period of his life. He would poke his lip out between his lips and watch as Charlotte held her forks in the proper place, folded the warm towels from the clothesline, calligraphied the family's name on the outside of their envelopes. So, by the age of ten, though he still looked about five, he was able to do almost anything a boy his age should do.

There was something else, though. His age and his yellow eyes, those were the traits the whole family knew about. But there was another quality that made the name he earned in his later life -Lizard-Man- seem very appropriate. I think it started when he was about ten and maybe even a little older. I doubt even he really remembered because at first it was just dry skin. It peeled away, but that seemed very natural. He thought maybe all little boys when they were angry or scared or hurt or confused began to peel away their skin. Maybe just scratching an itch often brought rather large swatches of the same skin. And maybe as everyone grew older, larger, stronger, the swatches got bigger. And they would peel off the skin and feel strange ways about it, like it might be delicious, if only they took a bite.

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# 2

He was scared the first time that it really happened. Charlotte had left him for the afternoon with a casual comment about needing milk for the cook's flan. He was alone on the floor of his new room. The doctor's orders had included a decoration change. Gone were the powder blue paints and off-white painted geese for simple dark red colors. His crib had been replaced with a simple wooden toddler bed. The comfort of his teddy bear was now replaced with a nasty pile of cold tin soldiers. He picked them up and put them down over and over again. He hated them.

He was by then, still small very small. His blonde hair had grown around his temples to offset his bright yellow eyes. When his parents or Charlotte them out, the few times in his eight years that had happened, people always looked at his eyes.

"Bile problem," Charlotte was always quick to step in. Her size and folded arms were always to silence further inquiries, although anyone could tell Charlotte didn't believe what she said. A bad liar, she was. Even Johnathan knew it.

He knew enough, too, to not ask. He could hear it in his father's voice the way he could see it in Charlotte's eyes. He was different. He was different in the way that the characters of his favorite book, Henry and James, saw the boys at the dock. People would point. Charlotte was the only one of the staff who didn't point at Johnathan when he entered a room, didn't cover her

mouth and turn her eyes away.

He was scared at first, looking at the skin. It peeled back and fell away in a huge swatch that let the sunlight through. He had never seen it happen to anyone before, not his mother or father or nurse or any of the servants. He'd never read about it any of his books, either. That's when he began to feel that maybe it wasn't so normal. Maybe something was more wrong with him. Boys his age didn't do things like this.

Charlotte had left him with the pile of soldiers, and, as he moved to the window, he stepped on one. The tin man's tiny bayonet advanced the front line into Johnathan's foot. He shrieked. What would anyone else have done?

But the servants, those who were there, covered their mouths. They didn't want to help the boy with yellow eyes.

He screamed again, quite loud. He was in just the right circumstance where no one in the neighborhood was home, no one walked outside the door, and so his screams drew no one that could or even would help. He continued to scream. He flailed his arms about, jumping on the other foot, trying his best to shake away the soldier or the pain, whichever came first. It was the soldier. He fell to the floor in front of his closet door.

And then, at that moment, something different happened. He reached his hand down to his foot, to see the damage the enemy had done. He pulled his foot up to his eye ignoring the pain for closer inspection. And, as he peered at the hole the tiny soldier had made, his foot changed. The skin began to peel off. It pushed away from the foot in one large translucent piece and fell to the floor.

Screaming had done him no good up to this point, but he screamed some more. Still, no one passed or ventured into the house, and all the servants were surely snickering in the kitchen.



He finally stopped and just looked at it. The piece still had the shape of his foot, but it crumpled and then flattened against the dark wood of the floor.

He looked again at his foot. Where there had been a mark, the sign of a deep wound that possibly cut into the muscle, there was only flat bottom-of-the-foot skin. A moment later, he found, too, that like the fact that there was no scar to remind of the wound, there was no memory to remind him of the pain. The whole process had calmed and soothed him. In a way, it felt kind of good, like drinking a cup of hot chocolate. He had actually liked the skin leaving him.

It was extraordinary, his ability. He could tell. But, he was in no position to share it with anyone. He was a different boy, and he knew that part of being a little boy is keeping secrets. He kept them behind his teeth. And so he developed habits, habits very normal for a boy his age if not his size, of waiting until he was alone in his room, unwatched by his nosy nurse or sickly mother or obtrusive father, to do the things he most desired. He learned to keep his face blank when the skin began to peel, when he wanted, fiercely, desperately to get rid of all of it. He learned to lie. He became very good at it. Still, even with all his learning, his constancy, he was quick to conclude that eventually, he would slip up. And he did.

Johnathan spent about two years in the backs of dusty closets, on the floors of bathrooms, inside the wooden bellies of empty wine barrels, waiting carefully for the arching sounds of footsteps to pass all the way by. When they had faded from clip-clops to faraway pads, slowly, he would allow the itching feeling to overtake him. It always began with him scrunching up his face and feeling the tightness of his skin everywhere, on all the tingling surfaces of his body. He would curl his fingers into his palms, almost through them, and squeeze his fists with all his might. Everything in him would build, pulse, and, just when he thought he might make his very being explode, he tensed his muscles and imagined pushing out against the very air around.

There was a faint, pop, not quite inaudible, and then a rushing calm. The sudden release would actually make his arms and legs float up, which was a little unnerving in the small spaces he was usually confined to. It was a bit like the walls were closing in around him. The sensation would unnerve him, and he would open his eyes.

This moment was always different for him, no matter how many times it happened, even a hundred years later. Floating was weird enough, but he also had this forgetfulness. It was like his body was so confused by the process, it forgot how to function. His mind, trying to compensate for the overload of feeling, shut down. Time meant nothing to him. He could be in the closet or barrel for hours, even days, and not feel it in any way. It was a strange, stupefying effect.

On a particular occasion, only a few weeks after Johnathan's twelfth birthday, Charlotte found him in this exact moment. She had actually gone to find some of his old clothes, not him, and had opened the door to the closet of his room to check the top shelf. And there he was on the floor, towards the very end of his process.

"Johnathan!" she yelled. "You scared me."

He was coming off the release, and his senses were a little muddled by the feeling of it.

"What are you doing in here, boy?" she demanded.

He looked up at her. The sudden addition of light to his surroundings hurt his eyes, and he held up his hand to shield them.

"What in God's name is that?"

The skin from his wrist had begun to fall away from the rest of his arm. A big sheet of it hung away from his body.

Her reaction, of course, was to scream. It wasn't as loud as it could have been, though.

Johnathan was just rather unfortunate in that his father, looking for his copy of the annual Westleby Almanac, was in the next room. He was the first to respond to Charlotte's screams.

Imagine this, if you will. You are in your house, a very cozy, comfortable place. You're wearing your house slippers, and you're sitting on your, in a particularly warm but not too sunny spot, reading the newspaper. There are some rather boring stories about the rain coming in the evening, a squabble between two farmers over a pig, raise in taxes on imported silk, the usual, nothing too compelling. You sip your tea, because of course you're drinking tea at tea time, and flip the page. The next page is the usual stuff, too, except for this one article towards the bottom.

**THE END OF THE WORLD** the title screams in dark, bold letters. It goes on to tell you that you, YOU, are in peril, because this world is coming to an end. The recent funny clouds, the sudden inexplicable rains, the fact that cherries this year bloomed a full month early this year, A FULL MONTH, all of these signs point to the world's timely demise. And, why not? It's full of thieves, prostitutes, and Muslims, just like your mother told you. You should have been expecting this.

But, wait! Suddenly, you remember another article, this one in your Almanac. The almanac, a time-trusted authority on matters such as these, had a different prediction for the end of the world. It said, if you remember correctly, that the world would end thirty-two years from now, not this year, not today. Isn't that right? Aren't you sure?

Well, the least you can do is go check. I mean, your comfortable morning has already been spoiled, might as well confirm it. So you walk up the stairs, still in your house shoes, to your study, where you think your copy of the Almanac is stored.

While you're moving around all sorts of papers - there's something for a case you're on, there's a few receipts from repairs you had to your roof, here's a slim volume of prayers and

hymns that you had as a boy – and really, where is that damn almanac, you hear a scream from the next room.

What do you do? Why, you run over to the next room, of course. It could be your wife, who has a very temperamental condition, or your boy's nurse, or even one of the house maids. That gardener gets a little handsy every-now-and-again. So you run to the next room, house shoes flopping at the bottom of your feet, and throw open the door.

And the scene before you is rather amusing one at first. Your rather large nurse is red-faced, breathless, and clutching her breast. She's standing at the foot of your boy's closet with the door wide open. In the bottom of the closet is your boy, looking rather sleepy. He's scratching his eyes, maybe to get away the sleep, and he seems to have grown a third arm.

But, wait, a third arm? Dear, sweet Jesus, what the hell is he doing with a third arm?

"What in God's name is that?" he, not you, says, and he points at the piece of skin hanging from Johnathan's arm.

He thinks back to the almanac, to the article he had actually been reading only moments before. The end of the world.

"Charlotte, you stay in here with him. I'm going to lock the door behind me. I'm calling a priest."

He ran down the stairs, out the door, and grabbed the first boy he found.

"Here's two pennies. Two more when you bring Father Brissel, the priest for the church at the end of Stanton street. Tell him it's urgent. It's about a boy."

"Is he dyin'?" the little lad asked with a kind of glee.

"It might be worse. Hurry."

Jenny, up on the second floor washing baseboards, overheard Gregory's words. She ran

to the wife, who had been laid up in bed the entire day. When she, the wife, knew, she ran to her child's rescue, not even taking time to change out of her chemise.

"Sarah, I won't let you go in there," Gregory said, pressing himself against the door.

"He's my son! I need to see him."

"No. Charlotte is watching him, and that's enough. He'll be ok until Pastor Brissel gets here."

"Pastor Brissel? But, I thought you said he was sick?"

"He is."

She opened her eyes wide at this comment, then fell into her husband and his coat. The tears came, streams of them, and loud sobs as well.

"We raised him right," she managed to say hoarsely, "and we never left him alone too long."

"Sarah," he said softly, grabbing her wrists, pulling her in closer. He pulled the strands of her hair now sticking to her face and looked her straight in the face. "The Pastor might be able to help."

She continued to soak her husband's coat until they heard a knock at the door. The maid let the Pastor in, and they heard light footsteps up the staircase.

Pastor Brissel was a rather slight man. He had spent many years, more than Gregory and his wife's lives combined, worshipping God. He looked tired and thin, features the sharp starched lines of his robes seemed to heighten. He carried with him a brown burlap sack that barely cleared the floor.

"Lord and Lady Lipman, I presume?" he said, and he sat the sack on the floor so that he could grasp their hands tightly in his shaking hands.

“Yes, Pastor Brissel. Are you fair today?” asked Gregory.

“Aye, I am fair, though I have come on such unfair business. Where is the boy?”

He pointed at the door. To him, it seemed to shake.

The wise pastor nodded.

“And for how long have you thought a demon was in him?”

“Charlotte found him this morning, peeling...” He clutched his wife’s head. “Turn away,” he whispered to her. “He was peeling off his skin. And Charlotte thought he had eaten some of it or was about to.”

Pastor Brissel seemed unphased by this comment. He simply continued to nod, occasionally glancing back at his sack.

“And anything before that? Any symptoms? Signs?”

“Well, he has never really grown right. He’s always looked and behaved much younger than his age. Right now, he is on his twelfth year. But, he is the height and build of boys about five years old.”

Gregory said this as if it were a quite grave, akin to announcing the death of a well-liked aunt, but the father just continued to bob his head in his peculiar manner.

“I have seen a hunchback before,” he offered. “Dreadful thing to look at, though a really kind and gentle spirit.”

“Yes?”

“Oh, yes, very nice. It was almost a shame we had to put him down.”

The pastor clutched the door knob and walked into the room, Charlotte slipped in between the door and frame and out again. She clutched a white handkerchief to her face and seemed to be red and crying, but she stopped to speak to no one, didn’t even look at anyone, as

she ran down the stairs.

Johnathan was sitting cross-legged on top of the covers of his bed. He had his old worn yellow and green copy of Henry and James See Different Boys open just below his feet, but he wasn't reading it. He was much too old for that. He had been staring out the open window at the street, the train-patterned curtains parted just a little, but he turned towards the door as it opened. The father recognized something in Johnathan from that first look, but he pushed it aside. That might be the demons playing tricks on him.

“Good evening, Johnathan.”

Johnathan nodded his head slowly.

“Is that really you, Johnathan, or a demon?” With this comment he opened up his burlap sack and drew from it a gold-painted lead cross.

“Demon?”

“In the name of God, speak to me!” The pastor inched from his place beside the bed with the cross in hand.

“Speak to me, demons!” He shouted again, pointing the cross towards Johnathan. “God and his son, Jesus, compel you!”

Johnathan jumped back, almost into the headboard of his bed. He picked up Different Boys and used it to shield himself from the pastor's cross, which looked more than sharp enough to tear through his chest and give him a new hole to breathe through.

The pastor was not convinced. He circled around the bed, brandishing the cross like a sword, parrying closer and closer to Johnathan's heart. When this seemed to have no effect, he scurried back to his sack and pulled out a small glass vial stoppered with a steel, heart-shaped cork. Holy water, blessed by the local bishop, and laced with a gratuitous amounts of arsenic, as

was the strange custom in those days. He carefully laid the cross on the floor, careful to keep an eye on Johnathan, pulled out the stopper, and sloshed the contents on the boy.

Johnathan saw the action coming, and he pushed the book out to guard his eyes. It still fell on his forehead and chin, and his hands as well. With a hiss it began to eat through the first layer of flesh and threatened to eat through several more. Johnathan screamed and dropped the book.

The pastor pulled the lines of his face into a smug grin. The corners of his lips curled up. Finally, after more than fifty years in the service, ten years of training, at least two false possessions that had left him red-faced embarrassed, he had found a real demon. A real one. In a breathing boy. Since demons were actual things, this confirmed other parts of his faith. This realization was stunning. He could go to mass on Sunday and say confidently, strongly, that there was a God, that he did care, and this God would give him his very own place in Heaven complete with gilded front steps and jewel-encrusted goblets.

His theology was only a little confused by Johnathan's sudden shedding. To save himself, the boy began to release the top layers of skin. They peeled off in big white sheets transparent like Bible pages and fell to the bed. The most startling one was from his face because it looked like he was taking off a perfectly-formed mask. The white impressions of his nose and eyes and wrinkled forehead came off in one piece. It fell to the bed, too, crumpling under its own weight and flattening on the copy of Different Boys.

Johnathan looked at the pastor, then down at the shed pieces of his skin. On the forearm piece were these little dimples where the holy water had almost burned through to the second dermis. His own forearm was fine, though a little pink.

"That," was all he said to the pastor at first, but things were circulating in his mind. He



had been hiding the shedding for a long time now, almost three years. It was a difficult secret to keep. Charlotte lived in his shadow whether by favor or design of his parents. Sometimes, he was so angry about her being there that it was hard not to react in that moment. It felt good for people to know. But he couldn't pretend that this didn't change everything.

"Goodbye," he said, waving to the pastor, and smartly climbed out the window, down the wall, and into the street.

The pastor stood there for more than a few moments. He walked over to the edge of the bed and reached out a solitary hand to the skin that was still lying. He expected it to burn. He wanted it to at least feel like dried mashed potatoes or crusty stale bread but it was soft and smooth and slightly cool. He picked up the sides of the face and gravity pulled out its features again. There were two eyes and a nose and lips not too unlike his own, except they were younger than he felt like he ever could have been.

The sunlight that had been shining brightly was now beginning to fade, and the room around him was getting darker and smaller. All he could see was the face skin, the mask, and as he held, his slowly floated up, and, he felt with all his being, that he wanted to wear it.

He collected his cross and the now empty vial and put them in his sack. The mask he put under his robe, beneath the sash, so no one could find it without undressing him. Outside the room, Sarah and her husband were still waiting, she no longer sobbing into his coat.

Her husband pulled her away.

"Pastor? Is everything alright?"

The pastor continued past them, reaching the edge of the stairs with a heavy sigh and then dropping his bag.

"The child is gone."

Sarah screamed. “Gone? What do you mean?”

“He slipped out the window. I couldn’t stop him.”

“We must find him! Where is Charlotte? She can help! Pastor, will you help as well?”

Pastor Brissel was already walking downstairs, not to help but to go back to his cell. He needed to pray.

And Johnathan? They wouldn’t find him. He knew well enough not to linger around. Even if his parents found him, what would that mean? Exorcism? Such practices at the time too often lead to death. Would they send him away? All too possible, and to goodness knows where. No, Johnathan knew that he had to go. He stood in the middle of the street for only a moment, casting one more long look at his window, and he thought of the way his mother would sometimes ruffle his hair, rubbing it back against the grain, how nice it felt, how she smiled. But he could do without these things. He would have to. And, once he had shed his skin again, perhaps he could do without her.

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# 3

He really could have fared a lot worse on his first night alone. He had the sense to hide out behind a bakery for a bit, attracted to the sweet smells, and the baker was kind enough to throw out a couple of burnt rolls and such that he couldn't sell. He had a full belly at least. The shelter part was a bit harder. There weren't homes for him to go, and he had no money for a room. A lot of children who are left alone disappear in the night, sold downstream or upstream or across the street.

The orange light of the afternoon turned grey, then dark blue, and the cold started to fall. He had made his way somewhere downtown. There were mostly houses, with a few shops, maybe a butcher's, sprinkled on each side of the cobbled road. That was the first time Johnathan thought that he might turn back. As he pulled his arms into his sides, hiding his fingers beneath his shoulders, he wondered if his might have sent someone after him. Maybe Charlotte was in her ugly overcoat at this very moment, shuffling down his street and calling his name. As the candles were lit in each of the windows, the little white dots appearing around him, he wished someone, anyone, might whisper his name.

Beneath the street line, he found an open sewage pipe that drained into the canal. The smell from it was horrible. He stuffed his nose with two rocks and trained himself to breathe slowly through his mouth. It should have scared off any who would think to rob him, though he

didn't have anything of value besides the clothes he wore, and it had small ledges, made for cleaners, if there were such people, on the side that were wide enough to be slept on.

He climbed down from the street. There were rocks and bits of wood, and, underneath a few of pieces of broken glass, he found a newspaper. **50,000** the front page roared at him, and there was a stark lithograph of a pen-line hill covered in hundreds of tiny scribbled bodies. He covered himself with the newspaper, carefully turning the men away from him, and he turned on his side. And, when the water from the lip of the pipe dripped on him, the old sensation began to creep up his arms and legs. The skin came off him and grated against the newspaper. It was a rough, unpleasant sound, but he didn't care. It all fell to the ground, and his tears and the water mixed, soaking the newspaper through. The men's faces slowly disappeared into one dark blot.

He woke up the next morning stiff and damp. As he rolled onto his hands and knees, the skin and newspaper slid off him, the skin slapping against the concrete ledge before slipping into the sewage water. He had forgotten about the rocks in his nose, and they popped out as he yawned. The smell crept in. It was horrid, and, yet his stomach gurgled.

Standing on the pipe, he could look over the edge of the street and get a cut off view of the world. Brown nobly knees dragged hooves to clip clop by. Groups of black leather boots, shined to wear, marched. A pair of satin heels with gold buttons led followed soft brown boots. Down here, in the pipe, he wouldn't be able to find food, but, up there, on the street, maybe someone could spare something.

He went back to the bakery, but the baker did not seem as gracious as the night before. He was shooed back into the street with an empty belly. The growls grew louder. He tried the butchers, the pastry shop, the café, any place with strong, sweet smells, but he was met with similar louds shouts and pointed fingers.

Out of the corner of his eye, he started to see this man. He was as short as him, although he appeared to be much older. He carried a hat and wore a purple jacket. He wasn't following, per say, but Johnathan could see him appear and disappear in the background of his wanderings. And, while the growling in his stomach got louder, the man's features seemed to get sharper. He had a thin face, and brown, deep set eyes. His forehead was a little too wide, and he seemed to be surprised, though nothing was surprising. Johnathan was just hungrily stumbling from shop to shop, begging for any scrap, anything they could spare.

Night came, and Johnathan thought to go back to the baker. Perhaps darkness was tied to graciousness. This wasn't so. The large man with an apron tied about his middle was careful to throw all his loaves into the dog's pen, where it was quickly torn to bits. Johnathan thought he could see the man smiling as he did this, he knew Johnathan was nearby, watching, but Johnathan couldn't really be sure. It might have been the hunger talking at that point. He trudged back into the main street, wanting to try one more place. Surely someone would have a roll or a bit of carrots that they might give to him. But everyone's hands were empty and pointed. He leaned against wall, wanting to support himself, but he slid to the cobbled road.

"Hello," said a voice, a pair of eyes appeared in front of his face. If he had the energy he would have jumped. Instead, he whimpered and hunched his shoulders.

"You're ok, my boy. I won't hurt you. My name is Winky. How do you do?" He put his hand into Johnathan's limp one and shook.

"It's very nice to meet you. As I said, my name is Winky. Now boy, I have something to show you."

He rubbed his fingers together, then undid the buttons of his purple jacket one-handed. The other hand was firmly pressed into his cane, which he used to pull from the depths of his

jacket a limp thing that could have been a dead jellyfish. Johnathan recognized it as his dead skin.

“I know a little bit about your secret. I’ve been watching you for a while, and I’m interested in some of the things you can do. And, really, I’d like to share it. I would like to talk about hiring you to be a part of my company. The pay is not great, but you will be provided for, and we have a regular company whom I am sure will be delighted to meet you. But that’s something we’ll decide a little later. But, right now,” he said, and he replaced the skin in his jacket and planted his cane back in a groove on the street, “I think you could use some soup.”

He held out his hand again, open, in front of Johnathan’s limp one.

“What do you say?”

“Soup?” was all he could say.

“Yes. Soup.” He reached out a small hand, a hand that was just the size of Johnathan’s.

Johnathan really had no choice but to go. He grabbed Winky’s hand and followed him around every corner and down every alley way. He went further than he had ever been, passed any recognizable shop or bakery, until even the eaves seemed to hang a different way, Winky never once looking back to see if he was still behind or ok, Johnathan began to lose his sense of place. He hadn’t seen the inside of a shop or the markings of a bakery he knew for a couple of streets now. And the sun seemed to be setting faster than they were walking.

“Where are we going?” he finally asked, the words coming out in a croak, he was so thirsty.

“To my place, I told you. We will have some soup.”

Another twenty minutes and Johnathan wasn’t sure if they were even in the same town. The houses here were somehow worse than the ones on Law Street, the roofs even more sagging

and inexplicably standing.

“We’re almost there,” called Winky.

They met the edge of the wood.

“I’ve never been in there,” he said back. The trees seemed to climb higher and higher.

“Well, there’s a first time, right?”

And with that, he pulled him in.

Suddenly, everything was red. It filled up Johnathan’s sight and pulled around the corners behind his ears. He looked up and it stretched as far as the sky, even higher than the trees had. It almost swallowed Winky, only a thin stick pulling him ahead.

“What is it?”

“You’ve never seen a circus tent before, boy? Well, you’re in for a treat.”

Winky reached out with his arm in a great sweep, something that must have been like Moses’ motion as he parted the Red Sea, and pulled apart the red. The lines of the fabric moved together, starting at the bottom and shimmering all the way to the peak of the tent. It split down the middle in a big gape and swept out to the sides, opening and opening and drawing Johnathan in towards it with all its force. He could feel his breath stop, his heart even, and he tried with all his might to pull back against it. He ground his feet into the dirt, but something besides Winky was pulling him along. The air was sucking him in. The cool of the inside blew against him, sliding around him and banishing the warmth of the outside. He shivered uncontrollably. He couldn’t stop. He was pulled forward, and his arms and his legs ceased, and he was in.

There were three rings, as in any good circus, splayed across the floor of the tent, that were painted a bright red and decked with stars. The sides of the tent went up, up, ending in red and white fabric that billowed out like clouds. It was supported by several poles, each long and

slender and very solid. Near the top, Johnathan could see, were two platforms, joined by a single rope, what looked like a gold chain from where he was. Swings too hung above the chain, and they seemed to sway in rhythm with his heartbeat. Below them just a few feet above the rings on the ground was a huge net with loops much too big to be any use for catching the fish Johnathan knew about. Fanning around the rings were huge risers, empty now but able to hold hundreds maybe even thousands of people. Directly in front of Johnathan and Winky in the center of the fan was a stage. A simple wooden structure, with purple curtains hanging on each side, able to be opened and closed by a few pulleys that no one really cared to hide. The whole tent was empty, save for one slender woman with red curly hair that seemed to sprout from her neck and shoulders as well as head. She was pedaling a unicycle around the center ring. As Winky and Johnathan approached, she opened her mouth and spit fire from the wand in her hand.

“Brilliant,” said Winky, and he clapped for the lone woman. Johnathan stepped as far back as he could.

“Johnathan, I’d like you to meet fair Alicia, also known as the Lady Lioness. Alicia, this is Johnathan.

She jumped off her unicycle and curtsied to Winky and Johnathan with her wand and hand.

“It’s a pleasure,” she cooed. Her lips slid up into a smile. Her nose moved close to Johnathan.

“How do you do,” he mustered. Her hair seemed alive. He began to shake.

“Well, we best be off,” Winky decided. He continued to drag Johnathan, all the way across the tent and out the back flap. When they emerged, there was a sea of tents, each smaller, shabbier replicas of the great one behind them. The largest man Johnathan had ever seen, far



taller than even the roofs of some houses he had stayed in, walked by. He called down at Winky, “Hey boss,” and, even though he was standing close, his voice sounded distant. Winky waved at him, but he did not stop. He led Johnathan to a tent, it like all the others in every way that he could discern, and pushed him through the front.

On the back wall was what appeared to be a large smiling mouth, some type of Zulu mask Winky had received as a gift for his birthday one year. Underneath it was an old student’s writing desk that had been painted a particularly loud shade of green, and it was bursting with crumpled and half-crumpled sheets of papers. To the right of this way a tree stump, not in the ground – it had been removed, and Winky carried with him from site to site as a kind of armchair. Around this and the desk and all along the side of the tents were bottles upon bottles of glass bottles, some big, some broken, a few with labels that had tiny, discontinued prints.

“Sit down, Onion,” Winky said to Johnathan, pointing at the stump. He picked up a large bottle that had been sitting on a makeshift fire and began pouring its contents into another bottle with a very wide neck. He handed it to Johnathan.

“It’s soup.”

Johnathan held it in his hands. It felt warm, and it didn’t smell terrible. He took a sip.

“See? It’s not poisoned.”

He grinned at Johnathan, meaning at as a bit of a joke, but Johnathan but the soup bottle down.

“Thanks,” he said to Winky, rather too politely.

“Ok, boy. Well, I have a proposition for you. See, I was watching you while you were alone in your pipe house, and I noticed that you have quite a remarkable ability. I don’t really know what that is, per say. I just know that you can take your skin off like a loose jacket. To

some people, that would be a problem, but I feel like, in my line of business, anyway, that this could be a profitable problem, if you will.”

Johnathan stared up Winky with his wide yellow eyes. This made Winky slightly uncomfortable, and he drummed his fingers on his knee before continuing.

“Well, what I mean to say is... I want to give you a job. I think we can brand you as a Lizard-Boy. You know, the whole skin thing can be like those lizards in Spain that’s skin can’t grow as fast as them, so they take off. I think it would be great. I can see the posters now. ‘Lizard-Boy’ across the top in maybe a green lettering with gold outline, and Bill, Bill’s our poster man, he can draw a nice picture of you. Maybe you be putting out your hands like claws, maybe, you know, and opening your mouth to show your teeth. Can you do that? Can you like make claws? Just imagining you’re squeezing oranges in your hands.”

Winky showed him the motion, but Johnathan did not move. He felt bolted to his tree stump. He had seen pictures of circuses before. He might have even seen one in a crowd, far off. Maybe they came into town sometimes, he wasn’t sure. But this, all around him, a living, breathing circus, was a lot. It was everywhere.

“Well, Bill’s got a good imagination. I’m sure he won’t need you to do it. But, like I said, I’d like to offer you the position of Lizard-Boy. I’m always looking for new acts. We have Strong Legs, a Lady Lioness, a woman who sweats gold, the World’s Oldest Man, you’ll meet them all in the next couple of days, but I’ve never had a Lizard-Boy. I think you’d fit it quite nice. Something new for the spectators, too. Now, you’re kind of young, so I’m going to offer you less than what everyone else is getting, but if you stay on a while, and people like you, I’ll give you a raise. We can set you up an account, too, with a bank around here, so you won’t go wasting it all. I’m pretty cheap, but I’m fair to the people who work for me, and I want you to do

well in this life. You can ask any of the people I just listed. Now, what do you say?”

Johnathan didn't say anything. In the past few days, he had been accused of sorcery, kicked out of his house, forced to live in a sewer, and now, a man was offering to pay him money to be in a circus as one of the acts. And he didn't even know what an act was. I'd say he was scared. Nervous. Terrified. He had never really done anything on his own. But, maybe, he was just a little excited. A quiet excited, reserved excited, one that came from deep within you and was hard to let out.

“You know what? You need some time to think about it. And you look really tired, maybe you could use some rest. I'm going to put you up in one of our performer's carriages. We're going to be in town until next Tuesday, so you have at least until then to think about everything I just said. In the while, just hang out, maybe come to a show. I'll set you up with George. He's a little thick sometimes, but I have this weird feeling that the two of you might get along, and I like to trust these weird feelings. But let me show you the way to your carriage, and where the mess carriage is, in case you get hungry. Of course, this is completely voluntary. You don't have to stay at all. But, I would like you to say. Again, I get these weird feelings, and there's one that's saying that this is just where you're supposed to be. I really feel like that. You seem like you'll fit right in here. I'm sure everyone will love you.”

Winky continued to talk as he led Johnathan out of the tent again. There were a sea of tents coming out from this one, it seemed endless, but it began to thin towards the east. There, at that end, was a clearing before the edge of the trees, and a great arc of carriages, at least thirteen of them. Each one was decorated in a different style. One was Parisian and painted in pink and white stripes. Above the door on the side were silver letters that read, “Lady Lioness.” A little further down was a wider carriage painted an obtrusive shade of yellow. It was dubbed, “Fat

Kimber.” More carriages followed, and Johnathan could only guess the inhabitants of the towering black one or the one the enormous fan perched atop. Winky opened the door to the carriage next to Alicia’s, which was red and blue and had a faded, crossed-through sign reading, “Genesis.”

“Inside, my boy,” said Winky. “This is all yours.”

And, his second night alone, Johnathan fell asleep in a wooden L-shaped bed, under a handmade blanket patterned with snakes.

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# 4

The next Tuesday morning, the sky was blue, not a single cloud. It was rather warm weather, though nice. It was one of those days where your biggest deliberation is whether or not to bring a jacket. It would be cool enough for it in the morning, but you always know, by the time the afternoon rolls around, it'd end up on the floor or rolled up somewhere. Spring was like that, way out there in the east. I always feel it, when the days start getting longer. I just want to pack up everything and head east. Forget about the firm and the filing cabinets and the days and days with my fist pressed into the glass of my window. It's not the same. And I've got to imagine it was something like that for Johnathan, too. When that Tuesday came around, I don't think he was thinking about his parents or anything anymore. He was on the back of a carriage, ready to go.

Winky found him a spot for the time being, helping out some of the hands. Gordon, a crinkled snap of a man who had come out of the suburbs of Detroit, showed him how to roll a tent. That was his first job. Since it was time to move, he couldn't really do his own show. So he helped. He learned what it was like on the other other side of the stage. He pulled down the poles, folded the corners, and used his fists to roll the candy cane stripes evenly, in straight lines. Gordon stood over him, and he spit a yellow shot of tobacco as Johnathan did it right.

The circus was headed north. Heat was creeping up from the far south, from cousin

Mexico, and it was rising across the states. Winky wanted to escape this. Seats didn't get filled when the days were hot and the nights were hotter. People needed the cool night. So, after all the tents, mules, elephants, hands, performers, and little Johnathan were packed, the circus headed out. A long line of carriages trailed away from his hometown, until the only trace left of them were the ruts in the road.

He wasn't really scared. He cast a few peaks through the blinds of the carriage he was in. The one he had slept in, the one with "Genesis" scratched out on the front, was given to him. It was his and his alone. Winky promised him that once they got to the next site, a place called Granger, they'd fix it up for him. They'd paint it green and yellow, his colors, and put "Johnathan" on the face. It was hitched between Margaret and Jerry's, about mid-way through the train. He'd also received a costume.

A tall, thin man who was bent into a half-moon shape came and measured him. He pulled the thin tape this way and that way, and, the next day, he came back to Johnathan with a suit.

"Your Lizard-Boy suit," he said.

He hadn't tried it on, but Johnathan knew that it would fit. It was green along the back and arms, and yellow on the belly, like an alligator. It was for the show, but he wasn't quite ready for that. It was folded in the bottom of his trunk in his carriage at this very moment. But he wasn't with it. Right now, he was at the front of the line, where the wind blew fastest.

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# 5

There would be a show, and Johnathan would be meant to perform. He would stand on the stage and listen to the hisses as he peeled back a loose white sheet from his arm, maybe a larger one from his stomach, and dangled them over his mouth. Then, gasps and screams as he, bite-by-bite, met hand to mouth. Winky said he didn't have to actually eat, if he didn't want to, but the idea of him eating it would be best for the show. It would add drama. Johnathan was new to it all. He didn't know what to do, and so he felt he should do everything. He would try it.

He didn't immediately jump in. That would have been a bad idea all around. And he didn't start out working with George. Winky had said he would, but it didn't happen at first. There was a small fight, not anything to get too upset over. There were a couple of loud voices drifting through the night, some storming out of carriages, what not. George didn't want to babysit anyone, especially not some freak baby, or so I am told.

Strong Legs was the next obvious choice. Winky hoped something of his French-style of showmanship would rub off on him. Strong Legs was, of course, strong. The suit that he often wore, something between a men's one-piece bathing suit and an old wrestling uniform, appeared to be holding him together. There was a line across his waist where the man seemed to end and the muscles seemed to grow. His legs were as big around as tree trunks. He could not walk in the normal manner because the muscles of his enormous thighs would rub together.

“Jason, my boy,” he introduced himself. He took one of his comparably small hands and placed it in Johnathan’s.

“Pleased to meet you,” managed Johnathan once the man had released him.

“You’re going to be my assistant. My legs are strong, but I have trouble lifting with my arms. I’ll need you to move them onto the gaffe so I can press them with my legs. Let’s ease you into show business.”

Strong Legs walked him through the steps of his own production. He had about three parts to his act. First, he appeared on stage, where he would show off his enormous legs bursting out of his tiny shorts.

“See this, boy? This is how you put on a show! Show them what you got!”

The second part was the proof.

“This is the harder part,” he said to Johnathan. He picked up a box and placed it carefully between his legs. His face turned red as he squeezed his legs together. The veins in his muscles began to throb. Johnathan heard a pop, what he first thought was the man’s back or another important muscle, but was actually the box beginning to splinter. The planks collapsed. The ruins fell to the floor.

“That’s just the first one,” said Strong Legs.

Strong Legs broke six boxes, each one bigger than the last, and by the end of practice, his thighs were riddled with red marks and just a little blood. He bent at his waist and wiped it away with his tiny hand.

“It’s nothing,” he sneered.

The final part was revelry. He had already proven his strength. He had a few moments to enjoy the adulation of the crowd. In this part, he would lay on his back and use his legs to press



enormous weights. He threw back to see his admirers and either clapped his hands or attempted to juggle.

The night Johnathan was finally ready to face the crowd, The World's Oldest Man act went before Strong Legs. Johnathan and Strong Legs were standing just off stage, in the back. From there, Johnathan could see the back of the World's Oldest Man. He had a curious show. He claimed to be nearly three hundred years old. He lived here before America became a country. He had a horrible hunched back that poked through his clothes and red, bloodshot eyes. Most of his teeth were either missing or falling out. When he spoke, all that came out was a cackling sound. The words were shaped weird around the cackle. He leaned everything on a cane he had, so overused that it's every surface shone. The best part of him, perhaps, was the beard. It was a magnificent white curly thing that took up almost all of his face and hung to his knees. From where he was standing, Johnathan could see the man's back, his skinny legs poking out at odd angles and framed by the sheet of curls of his beard. For his act, he told stories of the old. Indians, buffalo, hard winters in holey cabins, skinning rabbits and eating the flesh raw to survive. The man on stage was from a bygone era. The men and the women in the audience would gasp and cheer.

Strong Legs began to do jumping jacks, although his were a little different than the normal ones. His tiny arms seemed to flap about his head while his giant legs pressed into and out of the earth.

Johnathan looked to Winky, who was leaning against the back of the stage.

"What is he doing?" he asked.

"Getting sweaty."

When the Oldest Man's turn was over, he hobbled across the stage to the back steps. He

was bent over, almost in half, and his cane almost moved on its own. When he reached the back steps, his posture straightened a little. With each step down, it got straighter and straighter, until he was standing upright again.

“Good show,” Winky said to him.

He nodded his head.

“That thing get hot?” Winky asked.

He nodded again.

“Ah, well. Part of the trade, I suppose.” Winky turned and looked at Johnathan. “You ready, Onion?”

That night, he strutted proudly onto stage. He was wearing the old wrestling uniform of one Strong Leg’s previous assistants, a boy who must have been at least a foot taller and at least fifty pounds heavier. He and Strong Legs had pinned back some of the loose fabric, which added to the overall impression that he had wings. The arm holes drooped to his belly button, and the pant legs trailed under his shoes. Still, he tried to remember what Strong Legs had taught him. He was as helpful as he could be. Strong Legs began by flexing each of his muscles, standing under the brightest light to catch reflecting off the sweat. The women in the audience oohed and aaahed. He lunged to show off each of the muscles of his legs. He then asked Johnathan for the first box. It was small, just large enough to hold a baseball. He wasn’t sure how much it weighed, but it seemed very light. Strong Legs crushed it with ease. Johnathan grabbed another. Boxes 1-4 were of no consequence to him. Then came Box 5. It was much too heavy for him to lift, though, and so he just pushed, his own, scrawny biceps jumping from the effort. As Strong Legs struggled to press his enormous knees together, Johnathan moved back off stage. He liked it there, under the lights. He could see out into the audience, see the tops of hundreds of heads.

Some were black and brown and yellow, even red. A few people wore hats. He could them all from here. And, when they started to clap or laugh, he felt his heart pound. He felt something for them. He wanted those heads to laugh and clap for him.

Strong Legs motioned again to Johnathan. He wrestled his hands under Box 6 to the left of the stage. His arms were still thin, so he managed to slide them all the way to the other side of the box. Just as Strong Legs had instructed, he pulled back his tailbone and pushed off with his knees.

Poor Johnathan rammed his head into the crate and knocked himself out. The audience whooped and hollered and whistled at the little boy even as he turned purple flat on his back on the stage. Winky managed to pull off and motioned to Strong Legs, signaling with his fingers to continue his own act. Strong Legs walked back on stage with three balls, laid on his back, and juggle them with his feet. The audience was more than delighted to see a man to return from his own failure. They jeered and jibed at him that he was too weak, that he had no spunk, that he would drop one on his head.

“Onion, my boy, are you alright?”

Winky tried to shake him awake.

Shapes moved through his head. Big grey ones, dark smears, and smaller ones, black circles. For the first time in a while, Johnathan could see his mother.

George had seen it happen, too. He stood just at the edge of Johnathan.

“Give him some room to breathe, Lee. He might have a concussion.”

“A concussion, George? Really? He hit his own head! It’s not like it fell on him.”

“It’s possible for a man to do that. You can give yourself a concussion.”

“He’s not a man. He’s just a boy. A stupid boy.”

“I think he’s a little better than you think. Look, he’s coming round. Are you alright?”

Johnathan was surrounded by bright gold and green smudges. He opened and closed his eyes, hoping to make the brightness go away.

“I don’t know. It looks funny.”

“Johnathan, this is Winky. I’m going to lie you back on the ground, alright? When Jason gets done with his act, we’ll take you back to your wagon.”

Johnathan vaguely felt himself being lifted, and, when he opened his eyes, he could see the gold peeking out of larger smudges of green. It was almost sunset. He closed his eyes again and drifted off.

The next morning, he had begun to shed his skin again. He could feel it when he went to rub the sleep out of his eyes. His eyelids came off in coin-sized swatches, and he couldn’t help but look at them in his hand. His head still hurt, but it was a distant throbbing, and he easily ignored it. He could hear sounds outside, a few squeaking wheels and the horses neighing. They would be moving today. Time to go to another place, another town, and set up the tents again.

“Hey, Johnathan, are you alright?”

There was a voice on the other side of his wagon’s door, Winky.

“Yes,” he finally managed to say. “I’m doing a lot better.”

“Can I come in?”

“Yes.”

Winky’s head appeared through the door.

“You took quite a hit on the head last night. Is everything alright?”

Winky ran his hand over his forehead, touching his thumb to the exact spot he had been hit.

“Does it hurt?”

“I feel fine,” Johnathan said, brushing it away.

“Well, that is good. You do look quite pale.”

The pieces of Johnathan’s eyelids lay on the bed sheets in front of him. He simply moved his head up and down.

“Okay, well, if you need anything, please do not hesitate to call me.”

He left again, and Johnathan was alone. Outside, though, he could hear someone call to Winky.

“Is he alright?” the voice said.

“Yes, I think he’s ok.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, he seems to be pretty resilient. And why are you so concerned? Care about the little freak baby now?”

The voice didn’t answer back. Johnathan did hear a hmph after that, although it could have come from Winky or the other voice. There was no way of telling.

With a rag he found in one of his trunks and the washing water left over from the previous day, he was able to scrub off his face. It came off in chunks, each one indented with the spider webs of his veins and hairs. After that, he did his neck and his hands, until anything that would be visible was clean and new. He could himself a little in the water of the basin, and there was an odd pinkness to his face. It set off his eyes, making them more yellow than usual.

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# 6

The next show wasn't as bad, nor the next one. Johnathan developed an ease about him on stage. He stopped trying so hard to lift the crates and allowed Strong Legs to kick some about himself. He tried to lift them on his own before the crowd, much to the crowd's delight. The crowd laughed. He smiled. He liked the laughs. He liked the stage, more than anyone could have guessed or would have hoped for. Winky saw it, the way he tensed up his muscles and pretended to pull at Jason's weights, how he would mock fall, tucking one leg under his body to catch his weight while flailing the other out, slamming it against the stage, making a big act of falling to the ground. The crowd roared.

"I think you're almost ready," Winky said one day, not six months later, as he came down the steps.

Johnathan nodded.

In his spare time, the time not spent with Jason or packing or unpacking the circus, he had been practicing. By now, he had gotten to where he could shed his skin on command. He knew it was connected to strong feelings. Sadness, loss, despair, those made him shed it the most easily. He would spend time thinking about those things, about miserable things that happened in the world, things that he had never seen but supposed that could or even had happen. Death was an easy one, but it was hard for him to imagine. Loss was much easier. He just thought of the day

he had left his parents. He thought of looking at the window and wanting to see Sarah in the reflection. His skin would start to peel off. It would bubble up to the surface and pop off. He practiced this so he could do it on stage, in front of everyone, for their entertainment.

It was a strange feeling, being up there. He wanted to hear laughs, but he had to think about sadness. As the audience members eyes came to him, he could see his mother, her shape. The soft gowns she always wore reminded him of tablecloths, with the ornate lace they had running up and down the sides. He thought about her moving away from him. He couldn't feel her arms anymore. He couldn't smell her. She walked further and further away. And as she did, the skin rose to the surface, and a woman in the audience screamed. She threw up her hands and slumped into the body of the man standing behind her. The skin came up, and he shoved a sharp fingernail under it and peeled it back. Slowly. He pushed his whole finger between the dead and the living skin. He could see his finger under there, outlined by the translucent dead skin. He could see it when he wiggled it back and forth to loosen the piece on the arm. And, with a faint, sickening pop, he pulled the piece completely from his arm.

More screams, louder this time. More swoons. Even the men seemed appalled by this. Johnathan held the skin out to everyone, for them to see in the harsh lights of the stage. It dangled. It was touched lightly by the wind. He held it over their heads, for them to look at and see.

Then, he held it over his open mouth. He did not eat it, but he liked the way their muscles tensed as he moved. They expected him to eat it. But he was not there to give them what he wanted. Johnathan was thirteen, but he was in command. He was the Lizard-Boy. He did not follow their rules.

He came off the stage after that one, his first lone performance, and smiled. Winky was

standing there, as usual, leaning against the stage in his purple jacket.

“You liked that?” he asked Johnathan, swinging his cane casually.

Johnathan moistened the edges of his dry lips. “Yes.”

He did more, dozens more. The circus moved across the North, going from state to state as the summer waned on. The heat flooded the South, but they were kept away from it all.

There was something about these performances that still made him uneasy beforehand, though he had done it so often, now. It wasn't the crowd, whose sunken faces and careless jibes he was used to. It was the way he forgot who he was on the stage. He would sometimes stand behind the rotten back steps and wonder if this was beginning or end of the performance, if the claps were his cue to enter or exit. Winky was always there, standing behind, and Johnathan could see by his face whether it was time to come or go. Sometimes, too, the Oldest Man was there as well. He'd stand upright, cane dangling at his side, his red eyes peering over the waterfall of his beard.

Over the past weeks weeks, though he and Winky got close, and Johnathan often looked to him as something like a father, Johnathan never told him all that he could do. Namely, that his powers didn't stop at the hanging skin or yellow eyes. He had no idea that Johnathan, still looking the part of seven, maybe eight, was actually much older.

One day, Johnathan grabbed one of the axes from behind the Strong Man's trailer and headed off into the woods where he knew the bark of the trees was dry. He figured he could get away for a little while under the guise of collecting fire wood.

“Johnathan? Onion?”

He heard voice call from behind him after some time. He had let his mind wander back again. The sharp yell brought back into the present.



“Johnathan? Boy? It’s George.”

He turned around to see a man in crisp pinstriped pants and shining black leather loafers traipsing through the leaves. He kept his hands deep in the pockets of his pants.

“What are you doing out here alone, boy?”

Johnathan held up the ax. “I’m trying to chop up some wood.”

“Oh.”

They didn’t speak to each other for a moment, and Johnathan took this as cue to go back to chopping. He found an old tree, one that looked to have been felled by a storm. The top was rotten, but some of the wood in the trunk looked to be dried and good. He picked up the ax and began to hack at it.

After a moment of this, George appeared again at his back.

“Do you mind if I help?”

Johnathan shrugged his shoulders. He chopped again at the tree. It began to give way to smaller pieces. George collected these, careful to avoid the swinging of Johnathan’s ax. Working together, the two were able to gather the wood quickly, but, even in that short time, Johnathan could see that George was holding something back. The tense shoulders, the hackneyed movements, the way his fingers didn’t quite reach the things he wanted him to, like the branches or the ax.

They headed back to the circle together, each hand full of wood, but still George said nothing.

“What’s eating you?” Johnathan finally asked.

George looked at him over his own pile.

George and Johnathan’s relationship moved as slowly as the hour hand on a clock. It was

another four or five years before George even attempted to answer this question, and it was apparent by then to everyone in the troupe that there was something different about Johnathan, besides the way he reacted to things and such. They thought he was twelve, maybe thirteen, but he'd only grown a few inches in that time. By anyone's accounts, he should have been in his "weed" stage. But he looked seven at the oldest. He had the mind, though, of a sixteen year old, and more than one worker felt odd about the way he looked at them or the acuity of his words. Terms like "old soul" were thrown around.

But George and Johnathan became close. I think the both of them knew, well before either of them would even say, that they had something in common. See, George's roll was quite unique in the circus. George was the World's Oldest Man. But not just in name. George's part in the circus was a strange one, even as so far as freaks go. His billing was as the World's Oldest Man, and this he was. Even George wasn't exactly sure when he was born. But he could remember things from years before the First War, which he fought under Colonel Brant for a time, and took a bayonet in his shoulder for his people. He was a good-looking man, seemed to be in his early thirties, with high set brown eyes and a thin, clean mustache that curled over the corners of his mouth. He had tried to do his act like this a few times, and, eventually Johnathan had even saw the posters of him from this time. The painter had put him in front of a giant pocket watch, his own hands providing the time of about 9:45, and above him, in gold letters, "Over One Hundred Years Old." They didn't put three hundred because they thought no one would believe it. But no one had believed he was even one hundred. He was just a man who had listened to his grandfather's stories. He was a liar.

He wasn't a liar, but he became one. He sent off to China and got a magnificent human hair beard. He ran it through the dirt a couple of times to give it that mean, weathered look. He

traded his suit for some worn-out canvas pants and a hand-sewn collared shirt that was falling apart at the stitches. He stopped drinking anything, even water, before shows, so his face would sink in and his voice would sound like he was swallowing rocks. That was the Oldest Man the audience wanted, and that was what he gave them, though it made a liar and a thief out of him.

“What’s wrong with you?” George finally asked Johnathan.

Eventually, they both knew what was wrong. They both aged at different speeds from everyone else. Johnathan, all of fourteen, looked six or so. George, all of three hundred and fifteen, looked forty.

But they didn’t know this about each other yet. They only suspected it. And George, long accustomed to human life passing in and out in the blink of his eyes, didn’t know how to try with Johnathan. He didn’t know what to say.

And they didn’t say anything to each other yet. Just kept carrying the fire wood. They carried it all the way back to the carriages, where they sat in the piles by the tents. Winky saw them together, the two of them, but he didn’t say anything either. He just swung his cane and disappeared into his office.

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# 7

When he was seventeen, Winky came to Johnathan and told him it was time. The advertisements were drawn up, the ones that Winky had dreamt up all those years ago. A snarling Johnathan, with wild yellow hair falling down the shoulders of his hunched costumed body, stood in front of an enormous gold L. “Lizard-Man,” it read above his figure, and, underneath, “You have seen nothing like this.”

“We paid extra for the green paper,” Winky told Johnathan as he presented with the flier. He elbowed him the ribs to prove it.

“Wow.”

“You’re going on next week.”

Johnathan slicked back his hair and began to pick at his wrist. The skin there was a little loose, but he resisted the urge to pull it down his arm to his elbow, watch the track form behind it as he pulled it up and away, and dangle it in front of Winky. He had waited for years for this, for his own show, without anyone else. He was excited. He would stand on the stage by himself in front of all of the world.

It started that night with the suit. He went into his carriage and pulled off the button up and trousers he wore for work and pulled on the Lizard-Boy costume. It came in two parts. He ran his fingers up and down the sides, feeling the seams of the fabric run around the lines of his

body. He stood up in front of the mirror, then slouched, then stood up again. He brought his stomach in as far as it would go, then let it out again. He spotted a folded shirt near his bed and had an idea. A quick change and a few more moments of fussing and he had “abs,” so to speak. He liked this. He was ready to leave his carriage.

He walked out of his carriage to the back of the main tent. He could make out around front the outlines of a few wagons, a couple of horses, even an ox or two. Most people walked to these sorts of things. He tried to forget them the moment. He concentrated on his feet and the way his muscles formed around the grass, sticks, rocks, fliers, whatever was on the ground. He couldn't think about the audience at this point. He had to concentrate on himself.

When he got to the stage, Strong Legs was still on. Winky had done this intentionally, a throwback to Johnathan's first days at the circus. Strong Legs had a new assistant, a squat man named Jameson. Johnathan couldn't see them up there, only yellow lights and black faces and the rather green rotting stairs of the back stage. The lights spread out everywhere and picked up the corners of the back and made it bright. Johnathan couldn't see the ground. He could hear Jameson grunting as he moved the weights into place for Strong Legs' press.

“Nervous, Onion?” Winky asked. Of course he was there.

“No,” Johnathan replied, like always. He was still a pretty good liar. But his mind wandered back to old Pastor Brissell. For a brief moment, Johnathan could only see the Catholic ordinate clutching the white mask Johnathan had shed from his face.

“Ah. You're just thinking about the past, not the future.”

Johnathan looked up at Winky. Johnathan hadn't grown that much in his years here. His first uniform still fit. Winky, though, had grown in a number of ways. His jacket was wearing at the elbows and the pile of the velvet didn't stand up quite straight.

Johnathan climbed into his Lizard-Boy cage.

“Go get ‘em,” Winky said, and he threw a blanket over the top.

From inside, Johnathan could hear the squeak of the wheels, the growing hum of the audience as he was wheeled from the back of the stage to the center stage.

“Ladies and gentleman,” Winky’s booming voice leaked through the weave of the blanket, “all the way from heart of the Amazonian jungle. I trekked for two days, only enough food for one, until I found this next act. The locals called him... THE SNAKE DEVIL.”

Screams. Johnathan could make out the voices of several women, even a man or two, and dozens of children. They clutched their faces at the thought of the Amazonian Snake Devil. If only they knew the Lizard-Boy had once been a sewer rat.

“I give you... THE LIZARD-BOY,” Winky said, and he threw the blanket from Johnathan’s cage. Johnathan was prepared, and he began to claw and bite at the sides. A brown-haired lady in the front row, less than six feet away, began to swoon.

“No, no,” Winky assured everyone, “he is tame. He will do as I command. Lizard-Boy, get out of your cage!”

Johnathan easily moved the clasp on the side and opened the door. He followed the lines of the cage with his body. He pulled each of his legs out and stood up in front of the cage before the whole audience.

There were hundreds of them, big black shapes, and, for the first time since he’d started performing, he could see a few faces. Maybe this was the first time he had actually looked. The black lump began to take on gradation. There was a redheaded woman in a pink dress. Over there were a brother and sister sharing an ice cream cone, the brother older, the sister’s hair tightly curled. Near the top of the seating against the red and white stripes of the tent were a

couple, a man and a woman, neither of them over twenty. He could see faces. Eyes, even, and flat noses.

He pushed his legs together and raised his arms above his head.

“I am the Lizard-Boy.”

They erupted in applause.

The sound did something to him. He could feel wash over his body and go under his skin. It was easy to shed at this moment. It felt good and right. He started with his fingertips. They came off like the fingers of a fitted glove, and he held it up for everyone to see. He then pulled off his wrists and arms up to his costume, tearing the edge away like it was cri-cut. He had all of this skin, and, in the lights of the circus it seemed to take on a strange glow. Even he didn't know what to think of the pile that was growing beside him. The audience yelled and pulled off his toes, his ankles, legs, knees, and he stood before them pale, pink, new. He had shed all of his skin for them, and they rewarded him was deafening applause. He could even make out a bearded George among them, clapping along.

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# 8

Winky broke the news to everyone about Alicia, Lady Lioness, very gently, because of Gina. She had stayed with the circus even when her mother had decided to marry some high class man who had served in the Senate and moved away from West Virginia. But Gina didn't seem at all phased by her mother's death, and Winky had a time convincing her to go to the funeral, even though it was no too far away. Only when everyone in the circus had agreed to go that she finally relented.

Her service was held in a white chapel connected to florist's shop. The florist said that his shop had once been part of the church, but the church had lost some money and sold the baptismal wing to pay off the debt. That meant flowers, though, were in ready supply. Lots of red tiger lilies everywhere, her favorite of course. George had known her the longest out of the congregation, longer than even Winky, and so he was naturally asked to speak. But when it came that time in the ceremony, after the hooded preacher had said his prayers about the sheep, George was nowhere to be found. There was a huge painting of the beautiful woman from her first days of performing with wide red eyes that looked down the congregants, but if she could see him, she certainly wasn't saying anything.

George wasn't in the main chapel at least. Winky was standing in the pew next to Johnathan dressed in an uncharacteristic brown suit. It gave him the washed out appearance of a



wet dog. He must have been uncomfortable there in the house of the Lord. He made eye contact with Johnathan as he swept across the room.

“Onion, you find him.”

“I don’t think he likes me, sir.”

“He just needs some time. You two have a lot in common.”

Johnathan sighed, nodded, and made his way out of the chapel. He overheard Gina laughing about some joke as he walked through the back door. The front lot was empty, save for the couple of horses tied to the front posts. They looked at Johnathan.

He then went around the edge of the building, passed the jut of the flower shop. He could have spent hours in the building itself, going up and down the old halls and stairwells of the ancient little thing, but he bet on George being outside. He got lucky. George had taken refuge in the nook created between the back doors of the flower shop and church. His back was planted against the flat stones that made up the back of the building.

“Hello, Onion,” he said as Johnathan appeared around the corner.

“Hello, sir. Winky sent me after you.”

“He did?”

“Yes. They’re asking for you to say something on Alicia’s behalf.”

“Are they?”

“Yes.”

“Something about Alicia? I doubt I can say anything that hasn’t already been said. She was a pretty girl.”

Johnathan began to twist his feet. George had a way of looking at him. It wasn’t like anyone else’s look. Everything seemed to press down on him under George’s gaze. He seemed to

know everything.

“How long have you been here, Onion?” he asked.

“Long, sir? A couple of years.”

“At least eight, right? And you tell everyone you are eleven.”

This lie had passed surprisingly well in the circus.

“How old are you really?” he finally asked.

“Eighteen.”

“Ah,” he sighed. “I’m used to people growing up in the blink of an eye. I’ll turn my head to peel an orange, and, when I look back, they’ll have white whiskers. You, though, haven’t seemed to grow more than a couple of inches.

Yellow eyes, peeling skin, and slowed growth. Anything else?”

He was a little confused by the man’s forwardness. No one in the circus had ever lingered on his differences.

“Not that I know of.”

“So, what’s up with you? Birth defect?”

“I don’t know.”

“Shaman? Did someone speak foreign words over you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, what’s wrong with you?”

Johnathan began to wheeze. He simultaneously felt his hand ball into a fist and the skin on his arm to prickle. The prickle traveled up into shoulders, but the fist stayed at his side.

“I’m sorry, Johnathan, I’ll stop. I was just curious. Here, I want to show you something.”

From behind his stiff back he pulled a long paper-wrapped package. He carefully peeled

the paper at the top back to reveal the ornate head of a cane.

“Is that Winky’s cane?”

“Yes.”

“You stole it?”

“My boy, I did. But don’t be offended. I’ll give it back to him. In a little while.”

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# 9

Winky tried to move the circus into the new age with railroad cars. He had heard, along with the rest of West Virginia, the telegraph beep that signaled the Last Spike being driven. He didn't want to be behind everyone. He bought six rail cars off a cabbage farmer and set everyone to making the transition. Of course, the carriages, the ones that had been in the circus for the past twenty years or so, were hardly worth saving. Some of the axles were being held together by rusted nails and miracles.

George decided he wanted to burn his. He invited the whole circus to come. He wanted this to be a show as much as any. Someone had asked what it was like, being the world's oldest man, and he had decided to explain.

"This," he said, holding a match from a box of dozens in his hand, "is the average man's life span. About sixty years, as science tells us, maybe even longer. Maybe seventy years, or even as long as one hundred. Birth, life, job, taxes, death, all contained in the length of a single lit match." He circled around to allow every eye, one by one, to peer at it.

The fake George, the one with the silk beard and the stories about his Grampy, was whispered and laughed about after every show. These eyes out here, the ones watching him, they liked to imagine that was the real him. He really was just a man in a beard making up stories.

"And this is me," he said, pulling out a beeswax candle and plopping on the shelf outside

of his own carriage. He flared out the audience, allowing himself an even larger arc. He dramatically struck the match against the box, drawing a thin orange line that grew into a flame, and lit the candle, cupping his hand around the tiny thing. It grew taller until it licked over his fingers. Meanwhile, the match began to burn down. It traveled the length of the stick, almost touching his thumb, before he threw it away. He grabbed another match and lit it, allowing this one to burn down the stem. Then another, this one burning almost to his fingertip. Another, and another, another, twenty, thirty, maybe hundred matches, only the barest splinters of wood falling from his hands.

“Each of you is a match, a single match. Matches are good, they are important. Without them, we could not light candles or fires. We would have no way of creating warmth. But a match is gone in a matter of seconds. Candles, however,” he said, pausing at this moment, drawing his hand to the still burning thing on his shelf, “last hours, even days.”

This was by far the best description he had given of it, the way he and Johnathan were a little outside everyone else’s timelines, but it was not met peacefully. He saw it as a metaphor for his life in the world. Others saw it differently.

The Amazon-Os, the harem of acrobats that traveled with the circus, the kinds of people they were, looked at the matches and saw tight wire ropes or snakes. Fly bars. Chalk. Cuts. They saw themselves reaching out, their fingertips stretched far in front of them, reaching for the bar. It was their life, dignity, and profession, and, while in the air, moments lengthened longer than miles. They could walk the tight rope of time back and forth, carefully keeping their center of balance over the wire. One match? The length of one match? It was lifetimes to them. It was thousands of breaths, war and humanity and everything in the earth in it. And they hated how he burned each one to the nib, so careless, and threw them to the ground.

Gina, daughter of Lady Lioness, standing left of the acrobats, in front of his own trailer, saw in the flame the great mouth of her mother. Her tongue licked back and forth, beckoning. The gentle crackle of the match sounded like rasping breath, in and out, in and out, her mother only waiting a moment to chide her performance. Flames were too much like teeth. It didn't really matter how long her life was – she probably wouldn't make it a hundred years or even fifty years. She would never escape the woman who had given birth to her all those years ago.

Kimber, the Fat Lady who Winky prized because of her opulent sweat, was more watching than listening to the events around her, sat inside her own carriage. She could see George waving his arms and thought of the arms of a lover. Violins sounded as he lit the match, a harsh tuba came as it caught fire, melancholy oboes and bassoons played as the nib floated to its grave. The light looked all too much like the gold that oozed from her pores. Gold sweat was magnificent, yes, and it brought her her livelihood. But it was so unladylike. She had never wanted to sweat on stage, no, her parents would have never approved. But she had to. Without it, she was just another lady, one who's lovers never liked her.

Johnathan was about twenty at that time, though he still looked about twelve. He was watching from the side, behind the bearded lady and a few of the acrobats. He wasn't sure what he saw in the stick or the flame. He hung his head low when George swung the match around.

The rest just stared at him, maybe nodded their heads, if they could remember to. George stood in the middle of the crowd with an empty match box and a burning candle, the flame rising higher and higher in the darkness. And, when he thought the effect had sunk in, he threw the candle on his own carriage. It took a moment or more, even though he had poured naphtha on many of his effects. Then it caused and blazed in the night.

Later, George walked into Johnathan's carriage, hoping the boy would be able to explain

what had gone wrong. He saw the boy's quill furiously flitting over his hunched shoulders.

"What are you doing, boy?"

"Drop that, will you? You know very well how old I am."

"It is habit, my boy."

Scribbling sounds.

"I am sorry. Nothing is meant by it. But I will do better to correct the behavior. Now, will you explain this to me? I just showed everyone why we don't like their prattle, and they showed me off."

"I can't right now. I'm writing."

"Writing? What are you writing?"

"Things that happened. What I did this morning, what I ate, who I saw and talked to. The events of the day."

"The events of the day? I already told you about this, there is no point. This day is just another burnt match. It doesn't mean anything."

Johnathan continued writing, scratching word after word across the white of his diary.

George snatched at the quill. "Give me that!"

Johnathan stopped and lay his quill across his paper. He swung his chair around and looked at George square in the eyes. His fingers together under his chin, his eyes still, he stared into George, maybe through him, in the way that only the Lizard Boy was able to do.

"George, I want to remember."

"You want to remember? What?"

"Everything. I want to remember every detail, every burnt match, every falling leaf, every incredulous laugh of the Mr. Tibbles. I want to write them down so that I don't forget

them.”

“Forget them? You can just remember them. Just think. See? I remember the match. I remember the eyes. I remember you looking twice to see Annelise’s rump...”

“But I will! As soon as it happens again, if something happens, they will go, just like last year, and the year before, and the year before that. They’ll all become vague shapes and weird smears in my head that mean almost nothing. Do you know what I remember of my father? He’s a black square. I know that I used to feel something, there’s like this vague sense that I get for the square, but he might as well be a circle or a line or a goddamned rock. There’s nothing left of him. And my mother? I only barely remember her! I have written what I know. But, one day, she’s going to be a square, too, or maybe a nice yellow splotch. And what the hell am I supposed to do with a yellow splotch for a mother?”

His chest heaved up and down as he finished. George was looking at him, but he turned away. His skin felt loose, but he didn’t want it to happen right now, not yet. He breathed in and out through his nose, in and out, feeling his chest expand, allowing the tightness to squeeze in his ribs.

“If I don’t remember, or at least try to remember, I will have nothing to show for the years that I lived.”

He forced his palms into his eyes.

“Oh,” George came back, dropping his head and hands back. He sighed. A silence then passed between them, one the held the years that they had lived apart and together. George broke it.

He pulled out a photograph. It was completely yellow, the edges were worn, and there deep creases that divided it into four. In it was a smiling George, his hair shorter and combed to



the side. He was well-dressed in a suit, though without the pinstripes, and there was a small flower in his pocket. Next to him was a rather plain-looking woman. She had a deep forehead and small eyes that were set much too close together. Her smile, though, was lovely, infectious even. It overcame the plainness and lit up the photograph. It came through the veil perfectly.

George paused while Johnathan stared at the photograph.

“I can remember a lot about her. I remember the color of her hair, her favorite pink-and-green dress, her insistence on calling dandelions ‘gentle dandies,’ even that she hid her diary between the cushions of the parlor sofa because she thought I wouldn’t find it there. She loved baking, and she made the most delicious cinnamon sour cream cookies and blueberry rhubarb pies. She liked to call me Archy, after Archimedes. I would read to her in Greek and Latin after dinner. I would laugh. We lived in Lancaster County in a big white house before moving to Gregory, and, there, the neighbors brought us jars of honey wrapped in bee-printed cloth as housewarming gifts. She hated sweeping because she would find dead spiders and weep for them.

I remember all of this about her, but I can’t remember her name.

I can remember the day it happened. Well, not the day it happened, but the day I realized it had happened. I was drinking a pint at the Green Horse with this completely forgettable, insipient creature named Max. Max told me this stupid story about a man, some tonic he bought from a fella with one eye, and a blister. I don’t know why, but something about the way he told or the laugh made me think of her. I could see her in my mind. I could see the creases around her eyes, the line ran across her cheeks, the scar she got from trying to make candles. I don’t know. But I couldn’t remember her name. I can’t. I never will. It’s gone. Squeezed out of my head.”

He straightened out his fingers and beat them against his pockets.

“You know, too, I can’t remember her name, but, in a way, I can’t forget her. I’ve spent so much time retracing her in my memory. I feel like she’s there for good. It’s kind of like I’m keeping her with me. Sometimes, I’ll ask myself what she would have done for such thing or so and so. She always brings gifts to people, and I try to. She always smiles, and I try to do that a lot. She hated killing spiders...”

Johnathan stood up and tried to pat the man on the back, although he didn’t feel that he was doing it quite right. It felt cold and odd to him, like the things George had shared were so obviously emotional that they required some sort of response. He felt with George.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“How could you? I don’t go around talking about stuff I can’t remember.” He picked up his head and cracked a small smile. “There are thousands of things I must have forgotten. More things than you could have remembered. You know how old I am?”

“No, not exactly.”

“Over three hundred years old.”

He smiled for real this time, a wide toothy smile that tugged at the scar around his lip. Johnathan smiled, too.

“I don’t know the exact date. In the year of our Lord 1640 or thereabouts. I’ve tried thinking about calendars or newspapers or things from my boyhood, anything that would have a date. I can get back to 1643. There was a receipt that hung in the wall of our cabin for two mules that were traded for a man’s life. My daddy used to throw his hunting knife at it after dinner.”

He winked.

“You know, I like you, boy,” George said, and he slapped the back of his head.

Johnathan just nodded.

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# 10

The next few years or so passed like this for Johnathan, with summers fading into falls and the northern cities of West Virginia passing into smaller southern towns. Everything was being rebuilt. Farm houses were going up again. Store fronts were being patched over, the bullet holes hidden beneath new wood and paint, and the people outside tried to forget. He paid little attention to those changes or the changes in himself. After twenty years or so in the circus, he had grown about a foot taller, and he became less Lizard Boy and more Lizard Man. Winky though could see this, as he remarked one afternoon.

“I think you’re getting a bit big for that costume, Onion. It might be time to peel.”

“Very funny, Winky.”

George was helping him rig some moorings for a new banner, and he glanced at his apprentice. That glance turned into a stare, and he took in all the details of Johnathan’s appearance. He was taller, a little fuller, and his face seemed sharper. His eyes, too, seemed to have changed. They were yellower, even a little wider. He always seemed to be contemplative.

And that night, when he went into the coach he shared to scrub the day’s dirt off his, he saw his reflection in the wash basin, and he knew that Winky was right. The few hairs that had been on the bottom of his jaw had now grown around his lips. It still wasn’t as dark or as full as someone who looked his age might have, but it was something.

And so ancient Margaret, whom it was to anyone’s guess how much time she had left,

was summoned, and she swished her tape measure around Johnathan's arms and legs and hips and up into his crotch and down to his toes. And a week later, he was given a new outfit, made of something he thought was called "nigh-lon."

He was presented with the new costume, which, when unfitted, was about four feet long.

"I thought you were going to make something to fit the new me. This is a child's costume."

It was green and yellow and shiny in his hands, and the head stopped about a foot before he did.

Winky laughed at this remark.

"You really don't know anything about the world, Onion. You're too wrapped up to see what's going on. Try it."

He returned to his wagon, now dusty and dry and creaking, with paint peeling off the edges, and put one foot in it, then the other. It stretched around his foot, and he could trace the skin of his toes as he pulled it on. He pulled it up his leg, then around the other. When it got to the torso, he grabbed the neck hole and ripped it up with all his might. It did not tear, as he had thought would, but continued to grow. It grew around him until he was snug within it, except for at his back, which felt airy and cool. This wasn't an all unpleasant sensation. In fact, it felt nice in contrast to the warmth of the surrounding fabric.

He walked back outside to show it to Winky.

"What do you think?" He turned around with his arms out. He heard a few snickers coming from Margaret, as well as one of her seam girls, who had come to help with the fitting. Winky jumped up.

"Boy, you forgot to zip yourself up." He fiddled with something at Johnathan's back,

until he heard a metallic sound and felt the fabric tighten.

“Your butt was hanging out.”

“What?”

“You didn’t zip yourself up. There’s a thing on the back, a zipper. You have to use it to close your costume.”

“Oh.”

That was the same year the circus got a completely new act, a robot. It was delivered to Millsbury, Tennessee, where they had finished one of the last shows of their season. It arrived in a box all the way from Japan, a place Winky described as “far away and full of slanty Chinks,” and, when they opened the box, its eyes lit up.

“What does he do?” asked Johnathan, the first of a group of workers crowding around Winky. George didn’t even bother to come out of his wagon that day.

“Not he. It. It’s a robot. And it does a lot of things.”

“Like what?”

Winky reached around its can-of-soup head until he found a switch and flipped it on. The eyes began to blink, and the robot lifted its metal claw hands up and down.

“Nice,” Johnathan quipped.

“Hold yer horses, Onion. I’ll get it moving.”

He found an owner’s manual stashed among all the crumpled papers around the foot of the thing and began to flip through it. Black and white figures showed a man pushing a button on the side of the robot, below his left arm. The real Winky carefully reached around the swinging arms of his robot and found a similar button.

There was a horrible creaking sound, and the robot lurched out of its box, crumpled paper

scattering to the ground around him. Everyone in the group scattered left and right as the robot made its way across the clearing.

“Stop him!” yelled Winky, his short legs and cane struggling to follow the rampaging device. It bolted passed the jumping bodies and into a coach, where its height stopped it from making it through the side door. It bounced off the coach and landed on its side on the ground, where its legs continued to kick furiously, trying to push against the air to take it somewhere. Winky caught up with it and flipped the switch on its head again, and it shuddered and stopped.

“Well, he needs a little practice before he’s ready for a show. You want to teach him a thing or two before he goes on, Onion?”

Johnathan shook his head.

Winky laughed. “I didn’t think so. Who wants him?” Winky called to the workers, some of them hiding behind barrels and pallets. No one answered.

“Well, we’ll figure it out.”

Winky had signs printed up, and the next show, the last one for the season, had the best turnout of the year. The seats in the big tent weren’t quite filled, but Winky’s smile showed he was pleased. He had to raise prices again – admission was now almost two dollars – so the take would be tidy that night.

At the beginning of the show, Winky had Jeff roll the robot across the stage under a sheet. The wheels in its feet bumped into the edge of every plank, and everyone in the audience turned their heads. After Jeff had settled it two feet to the left of him, he ripped the sheet off with a wild wave and hit the switch. Its eyes lit up, and the audience oooed and ahhed.

“This is the Amazing Robot! He does as I command!”

The robot’s arms lifted up and down.

Winky walked around it, his velvet coattails swishing behind him, and stopped to stare at it. He then waved his hands in front of the object's eyes, slowly, methodically.

"You... will walk!" he screamed.

Jeff was hiding behind the curtains, and he will able to quickly, without the raise of one eyebrow, press the button beneath its arm. This time, though, it walked slowly, calmly, instead of jumping into the stands.

Suddenly, the air around them filled with clapping.

"That's amazing!"

"I'll say! Is it a man in a suit? What is it?"

Winky held up his hand. "It's a robot!"

The robot continued to walk across the stage, taking short, jaunty steps. As he neared the edge, Winky quickly walked up behind him. Just as he was about to fall off and onto the dirt ground below, Winky slipped his arm around it, almost as if he were hugging an old friend, and press the button one last time. Its eyes went black, and its body fell forward into what the audience recognized as a bow. A man in the front row whooped and hollered and whistled.

Next up was Jeff. The curtains closed and Johnathan and Winky moved his boxes and weights into their proper places. Johnathan had no trouble with this, lifting each of the weights, even the ones reserved for the "World's Strongest Man," but Winky slumped under a small dumbbell.

"You want me to get that?" Johnathan offered.

Winky curled his fingers under the dumbbell, his tips pressing into the metal itself, shook his hips, and then heaved with all his might. His muscles tensed, his jaw tightened, and Johnathan even heard the pops and cracks of bones moving. But the dumbbell didn't budge.

“Onion, you might get that. I’m going to go find George.”

And he exited the stage, the white tips of hair peaking beneath his cap being the last things Johnathan saw.

He came back a few minutes later, looking tired and rather haggard.

“I can’t find George again.”

No one could find him until that night. Johnathan finished his show and that set off for him. He wasn’t in any of the normal places – his coach room, the cook’s car, the clearing in the woods he sometimes went to. Johnathan couldn’t even find him out in the woods around the clearing. He had a habit of going to find a brook or a stream and getting lost in himself for hours at a time. When life is thousands of years long, I guess a day or two isn’t really that long. He would usually turn up. Johnathan had given up when he found him in his own room, lying in his bed. He had his journal in his hand, and he was tossing it up and down.

“Winky was looking for you, you know.”

“I heard someone saying, that, yes.”

“You missed another show.”

“Another one? How many is that so far?”

“You know. Four,” he said, anyway.

“Well, four in over sixty years isn’t too bad.” There was some truth to that comment.

Johnathan pulled up his desk chair beside the bed. He slicked back his hair carefully, feeling the sides lay flat against his head. He then began to pick at his forearm, a few loose pieces of skin still dangling off. It was a habit he had picked up long ago, possibly before he came to the circus, but it still soothed him.

“What’s wrong with you, George?”



George continued to toss the book up and down, up and down. It flipped sometimes in the air, sometimes it plummeted straight down.

“I’m in love.”

“What?” Johnathan pulled back in his chair, his forearm flying to the side.

“Her name is Rosemary. I met her when we were doing that show back in Kanawha, I think.”

“When was that?”

“Back in August.”

“And you’re in love?”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like that. She was just another girl. She wasn’t there in the morning, just a note with her name and number. I usually throw them away. I think I did, actually. But I couldn’t stop thinking about her. I found it again in the trash, before it was taken out. I called her. We’ve been talking a couple times a week ever since.”

“So these disappearances as of late?”

“I’ve been sneaking into towns to find telephones. Her family has a party line.”

“Telephones? Family?”

“I’m going to go meet them next week.”

Johnathan sighed and brought his fingers behind his head. Playing with his skin wasn’t enough. It wouldn’t relax him right now.

“Does Winky know?”

“Not yet. I was hoping you would tell him.”

“That you’re going away for the week or that you’re quitting?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play with me George. I’ve known you long enough to know this won’t end here. You want to move to Tennessee with her, don’t you?”

“I had thought of it, yes.”

“Goddammit, George! Why? I thought the point of doing things like this was to remain detached! She’s not like us, is she?”

“No.”

“Have you told her?”

“No.”

“Are you going to?”

“I don’t know.”

“So, she’s going to go through her years wondering why, as she gets older, her husband stays so young. At first, it will be miracle. Then, it will turn to bitterness and jealousy. Isn’t that what you told me?” He caught the journal in midair above George and threw it at the nearest wall. It smacked the wall before sliding down and laying against the floor.

“I thought you were going to be happy for me, boy.” George walked over to it and picked it up again.

“Happy? And I’m not a boy. Get out! I’ll tell Winky, but you get out. Leave for good. Now.”

“Johnathan, don’t do it like this. I wanted you to come to the wedding.”

“Out!” Johnathan began to shove George out the door. He picked up the collar of his suit and beat him towards the door. He pushed his head and neck down and out and slammed the door behind him. And he stood there breathing, trying to slow it, trying to force his anger out his nose for some time.

He laid down on his bed and let the emotions overtake him. He pushed his feelings through his muscles to his skin, where it began to pool out his pores. His skin lightened until it was see through. He scratched at it furiously, letting his nails claw into his skin, drawing blood in some places, and it began to come off. Huge chunks of it at a time.

# 11

Everyone could feel it after George left. Even the hands so foreign to all the performers, they acted differently. George hadn't been that friendly to them, but there seemed to be something about the way they pulled away the support poles and rolled up the tents that was kind of dreary and halfhearted.

Johnathan had trouble sleeping at night. He tossed and turned around, trying to find sleep. When he found it, it was full of hot dreams that crept in and out of his head. He saw shapes, the black squares and the grey ovals and some purple and blue ones, too. They all crowded around the edge of a stage much larger than Winky's. Their lines and colors were just visible over the wooden planks of the floor. He was there, too, at the back of the stage, and he could feel himself walking up the steps, one by one. He stretched out his arms and could see the rough-spun fabric of his costume.

"I am the Lizard-Man," he bellowed to the audience, his feet planted in a v.

The shapes began to bounce and wiggle. They jumped up and down in front of the stage. Then, they began to blend, all the colors smearing and merging into one brown putty blob. It towered above the stage, hundreds of feet high. Its surface was smooth and shiny, and it began to absorb the stage. The ends of the planks started disappearing, getting closer and closer to his feet.

Johnathan couldn't move. His feet were sinking into the floor. The blob was engulfing the stage, almost at his feet, just inches from his toes. He threw his hands out, hoping to stop it. But it began to fall. He watched as it leaned over the stage and fell towards him. It jumbled

through the air, and he could see the splinters and pieces of wood on inside it. They poked out at odd angles and threatened to stab him. A whole opened in the blob, a mouth, and it was lined with the splinters, and it was aimed at his head. It could feel the hot, sticky warm air blowing on his head. He threw up his hands, and he could feel the warm cake batter of blob run down his arms and neck.

He woke up to the smell of smoke. It was leaking through the window of his carriage, billowing in the air, but it also seemed far away. Johnathan rolled out of his bed and landed on his feet in one motion. He could see smoke outside his window but beyond that an orange flame of fire.

He bolted out the door and ran across the field they were parked in, ignoring the sticks that were pressing deeper and deeper into the soles of his feet. He could see it from there. The top spire of the big tent was on fire. The candy-cane stripes of the fabric swirled around the base of the tent leading the eye straight to the top. The flame ate up the stripes as it spread. All of the hands were moving around the base. One of them had a small bucket he was using to throw water on it. The water got about six feet up the tent, nowhere near the raging fire at the top. But it continued to spread down and down.

“Is anyone in there?” he heard someone scream. Dennis came into view.

Johnathan had no idea who he was talking to, and he wasn’t sure of the answer. The fire had eaten away at the support poles, and the middle of the tent was beginning to sag. The curtains were open, and the tent looked empty. He thought about running inside. As he turned into his foot to press off from the ground, a pole collapsed, and stripes and fire came crashing to the ground.

Over the flames, across on the other side of the tent, Johnathan could see Winky. His

eyes were wide, and, even from a distance, you could see that they were wet. The man was moving about, pushing some of the hands. He found Dennis and asked a few words, surely something like, Is everyone alright? Winky finally saw Johnathan across the tent as the fire burned away the last of the stripes, and he tried to nod or smile. Johnathan didn't want to nod or smile at a time like this. He raised a single hand in the air.

No one really knows how the fire started. It seemed strange that it would begin at the top instead of near the base. The only people who got that close to the spire were the acrobats, what was left of the original Amazon-O family. But no one could figure out why they would want to do it, even if they did. The next day was a bleak for Winky's Three-Ring. The show was cancelled. A few splinters of the stage were found smoking in the debris. None of the members of the troupe were hurt. It could have been a lot worse, but no one said that out loud.

# 12

It took Johnathan by surprise when one of the hands came to tell him Winky was dead.

He was lying on his bed and staring at the grain of the wood. He had done this so many times over the forty years that even the little knots in the wood, the curves, the splinters, they all seemed familiar. He heard the knock on the door but didn't answer immediately. Why bother? It wasn't for a show.

An older looking fellow was standing at the bottom of the steps. His overalls were long past blue. Bits of tar stuck to the corners. He waved his hand.

"Johnathan, Winky's gone," he said simply.

Johnathan knew that Winky was getting older. Even could see the changes. It had been nearly sixty years since Winky had found him on that street corner. His hair had greyed, his teeth had yellowed, his cane had become less of a prop and more of a necessity. Sometimes, it would take him twenty minutes to move from car to car, each moment or so stopping for a breath. And, of course, he'd took the fire hard.

Johnathan had known Winky the longest. He was the obvious to be put in charge. But he had never really planned a funeral, or even been to one, and things didn't come out quite right. Daisy ended up finding the funeral home, a little place called Knocker's outside of Petsofa. And she was the one who suggested Winky be shipped back to his hometown on the circus' train. She even made hired a poet to read a few verses as he would be lowered into the ground. So Johnathan's sole job was to make calls and send out invitations.

He sent him four invitations. George, I mean. Johnathan spent the better part of a day figuring out where he was. Most of that time was spent at his desk, tracing the outline of the crank wheel with his finger.

“Hello? Is this the Westover connection station?” he said, and he heard a smooth voice on the other side.

“Yes. May I connect to you someone?”

“Actually, I just need an address. Does George Lazlo still live in the area?”

“The George Lazlo?”

“What do you mean the George Lazlo?”

“The World’s Oldest Living Man?”

Johnathan laughed a little. “Yes.”

“Just a second, I’ll check the books. Cheryl? Can you hand me the listing for District 4? Cheryl, girl, stop that! I’m trying to find the address of the Lazlos.”

He could hear them talking about George, but it didn’t feel real for him. He had dreamt something like this, he was certain. George had been long enough that even his name felt like a shape.

The girl finally gave him the address, and he sent him four invitations, one to each of his properties in his town. In each one, he included a calendar of events, so to speak, detailing where and when Winky’s wake and funeral would be held. He signed each one, “Your friend, Onion.” And he still didn’t come.

Winky was laid to rest in a new velvet jacket, his own worn to shreds, a cane carved to look just like the one he used in his shows. His casket was carried from Knocker’s to the train by Jordan, Job, Joseph, and Scott, four of Jason’s six sons. The car was filled with lilacs and



chrysanthemums, and it sped from Petsofa back to West Virginia. A real automobile was used to carry the body from the train to the grave.

Johnathan dressed in his best suit, and he stood right beside Gummy during the graveside service. Gummy looked to him a few times, once with tears stretching down his long face, and Johnathan knew to nod and smile weakly. Four little girls Johnathan had never seen, all in matching dresses, brought bunches of roses and set them on each corner of the casket as it was lowered into the ground. Johnathan couldn't stop telling Daisy how beautiful everything was, how nearly everything had gone, how Winky would have loved it so much. She smiled and squeezed his arm and knew when he said, "nearly perfect," it wasn't an insult. Johnathan just missed George.

After the funeral, all of the performers kind of stared blearily at each other. There were a bunch of broken bodies wandering about the green hills of the funeral home. They had blank faces because they didn't want to ask the obvious question, even of the oldest hand. Johnathan stayed for a long time beside Winky's grave staring at the flowers. Daisy had done a nice job finding velvety looking purple trumpets and roses. They reminded all too much of dear Winky's favorite jacket. The man had pulled him out of a sewer, and now he had to put him in the ground. Finally, he looked up to see everyone crowded around him: Daisy, Gummy, Marco, Dennis, all that was left the troupe. The few hands that had made it through the rough patches were there as well, including a mean-looking fellow Johnathan was sure had been in the circus as long as him, but they all looked bored. He might not have realized it in that moment, but he was all they had left. Though people like George, Kimber, Alicia, now Winky, had gone, he had always been there. And he had nothing else to do, so he would still be there.

"I'm not sure what to do," he said aloud to know one in particular. He leaned against the

base of an oak tree. The bark felt like rough skin under his fingers, and he felt that familiar urge creep up his fingers.

Daisy came to the front.

“I’ve been in the circus all my life. Even when Mom left, I knew I couldn’t. I don’t really know how to do anything else.”

A couple of people nodded.

“We’ll figure something out. Maybe not the tent any more, but I’m sure we can find something.”

The hands looked down at their feet. The mean-looking one spoke up.

“I’ve been here for a while. Winky was great. Best boss I ever had. But...”

“But nothing. He was. He still is, wherever he is,” Daisy interjected.

“But, I have to have something to send back to my wife. I can’t wait around hoping to get booked again. The last time we had a show was almost four months ago. I think it’s about time I retired.”

That seemed to be all he needed to say, and he turned away from Winky’s plot, walking across the green grass of the cemetery, back to the lot where the few cars had parked. Johnathan watched him cross the path and go through the ditch to get back. The few remaining hands watched him, too, and, one by one, they turned in his direction. They followed him like stars to the sun. Meanwhile, Daisy was left looking at Johnathan.

“Are you going to give up, too?”

The man who made him the Lizard-Man was gone. The circus was gone. All the tents and carts, the stage. Gone.

“I can’t.”

She nodded.

“Jim? Marco? Dennis?”

They nodded, too.

“Ok,” she continued, “well, I’ll see what I can get us. There’s got to be something around here. We don’t have the train anymore, so we can’t go too far. I mean, we could all pile in the back of my car, I guess. But I’ll see.”

That night, Johnathan went to back to his carriage and cried a little. The tears rolled down the front of eyes without him blinking. It had been so long since he had done it that he had forgotten how it felt or how to even do it. It felt like water running on sandpaper. He shed everything. He tried to forget. He shook the walls of the carriage. The train hadn’t moved in months now, rust was building around the wheels, the boards creaked, maybe were beginning to rot. It stayed there in the rain and the wind, not moving, not caring, or at least trying not to, just like Johnathan.

# 13

Johnathan didn't leave the train in the month it took Daisy to find them a job. It seemed like he couldn't. He got as far as the dusty road that ran parallel to the tracks, but something drew him back. He turned around and saw the outline of the engine against the sun and couldn't bring himself to move any further away. It was his home, had been for a number of years at that point. It was empty but it still held something for him. When he got hungry, he went to the mess car. There were cans and plates on the tables like someone had just left for a break, not forever. Peas, one of the cans read, a food he could stomach. There was no cook, there, though.

He walked for the first time into the kitchen. The smooth countertop felt under his hands. He carried the can with him to find the can opener, a tool he had seen the cook use several times before. He found knives and spoons in his rummage, pocketing one of the spoons in hopes for later use, but no can opener. It was hidden at the edge of the sink, beneath a pile of cardboard boxes.

He tried placing it against the lip of the can like he had seen the cook do, but this didn't quite work. It kept sliding off as he moved it along. He finally got it to stay, and he triumphantly began to turn the knob on the side. It creaked as it moved, a few months of rust grating between the wheels, but it did move, and, after a few seconds of effort, he had made a whole circle around the can.

The lid stayed on. He picked it up and shook it. The lid stayed on. He turned it over and beat the bottom with the palm of his hand, but nothing came out. He ran his fingernail along the

lip. Maybe the lid was simply stuck on. Was he missing a step? He banged it against the counter, but no peas came out.

He lobbed it at the sink and sank to the floor. His stomach grumbled again. It got louder. He retrieved the can of peas. He would try it again, if he had to. He positioned the can opener again and squeezed the handles firmly together.

This time, there was a faint hiss as air escaped from the can. He nearly dropped it in surprise, but he managed to keep one hand on the can. Looking down, he could see the faint green of peas showing near where the hiss came from. This must be how it's done. He began to turn the knob again. The green grew out longer into a line that circled inside the can until, finally, the lid fell into it. He grabbed a bowl and poured the contents, peas and lid together, into it. Grabbing the spoon from his pocket, he began to eat. He didn't even mind the scraping sound made by the spoon flashing against the metal.

When he got bored, he explored the other cars. Kimber's had been empty for a few years. It seemed that when part of her leaving was not taking anything with her. A trunk had her costumes, the seams around the armpits carefully stitched, and the top drawer of her bureau had the creams and colors that she had painted herself nightly with. A blanket of dust covered the tools of her vanity. He picked up a brush, and its perfect outline was black beneath it like a shadow that didn't need the sun.

As much as he missed the screams and laughs of the audience, he liked it there. It wasn't so bad being alone in his favorite place. He had lived off the rations left in the mess carriage for a while. After Winky's funeral, no one seemed to care about the old train anymore. They had all left everything in. Canned peaches and peas and bits of dried beef eventually became an easy meal for him, though he knew that store wouldn't last forever. He of course searched all the cars

except Winky's. That car was left closed, locked up.

Daisy finally came by. She knocked on the door of his carriage in a smart yellow dress nearly a month to the day after Winky's funeral.

"I think I have something for us."

She drove him to her apartment in Kanawha County, about twenty minutes away, in a little city less than a hundred miles from DC. It was small, cozy. On the walls were a few pictures of her mother, even one with a young Daisy dressed as a lion. Jim and Dennis were there, squeezed into a small loveseat.

"Marco's in the bathroom, so that makes everyone," she said. The way Jim and Dennis looked at Johnathan, he realized he must have smelled bad or at least looked bad. He'd been alone in the train for a while.

When Marco came back into the main room of the apartment, Daisy began to talk.

"It's a place called Shady Acres, not too far from here. I spoke to the director last week. They have a big auditorium with a stage, not as big as the old one, but definitely plenty of room. We can some of the supplies off the train, and it'll be just like old times. Except I'm going to play the piano."

Daisy beamed at everyone.

"Well," Marco said, "I have all my supplies, so I don't need to go back to the train. Sounds kind of nice, though. How many people?"

"Eighty or so. They'll have to see who's in the right condition to be moved that morning."

Johnathan realized what she was talking about.

It was a nursing right off the main highway. A big stone structure at the front proclaimed

“SHADY ACRES: Where you want to go,” as they drove up the steep driveway.

“See that the big building over there? That’s where we’ll be.”

The home’s director, a slick used-car salesman type with teeth that seemed to go passed his nose, greeted them inside. Several white uniformed staff members had already begun to roll in the audience. Some of them were confined to beds. Several had oxygen tanks. Against the far wall sat a man that had sat in his wheelchair so long that he had started to grow into it. He was a wheelchair as much as the plastic and rubber were.

“Thank you so much for coming,” he shook Daisy, Marco, and Dennis’ hands. He held out an open palm to Johnathan, which Johnathan looked at.

“You must be Daisy! We’ve spoken on the phone?”

Daisy tried to brush off Johnathan’s rude behavior.

“Yes, nice to meet you in person. We’re very excited.”

“As am I. We can’t wait to see what you have in store for us.”

Daisy nodded.

“Ok, well, you all take as much time as you need to get things the way you like.” He backed away from the group and into one of the corners of the auditorium, pulling a cigarette from his pocket.

Marco and Dennis lugged a few trunks from the car. They didn’t seem to need Johnathan’s help, so he just stayed in the auditorium. The wheelchair man stared at him, and he stared back. He realized that he might look a little different in his old costume. It still fit him, but it certainly wasn’t anything like the slacks and shirts and dresses everyone here was wearing.

After a few moments, the director came to the front.

“We’re all very excited to have some members of Winky’s Three-Ring Circus here

today,” he clapped. Johnathan looked to Daisy. He didn’t realize she had planned to keep the old name. Everyone in the audience was silent. The director continued, “Yes, and I can see all of you are inside-excited. Well, I’m going to let them on without further ado.” He stepped off the stage with his wide arms pointed at Daisy. She began to play a slightly out-of-time ragtime piece on the home’s piano. Marco got up. Apparently, they had been practicing this without Johnathan.

Marco was dressed in a neat blue tux, and he pulled the black hat off of his head. He rubbed his white fingers around the rim of it, reached inside and pulled out a stuffed bear. He held it above his head. A few people managed to laugh or wheeze into their ventilators. Daisy picked up the speed of her tune.

After Marco did a few more tricks, Dennis came on. He did a number of card tricks which were not to Johnathan’s liking. He tried to watch the man move the red and white cards in and out of his hands, catch him shoving one in or out of his sleeves, but he could never quite see it happening. Just black and white and red flashes in his vision. The audience didn’t seem to mind. Maybe they didn’t care. It’s hard to believe that even with a pair of coke bottle glasses they could see the man moving his cards at the top of the stage.

Daisy poked Johnathan in the back. It was his turn.

She continued to play the music, slowing down to a more somber piece. Johnathan walked to the center of the stage, carefully feeling his foot muscles form around the wood grains. It felt good, cool, and he could feel the skin sink into the spaces between the boards.

“I am the Lizard-Man,” he said to the crowd. The lights beamed in his eyes, but he could still make out the wheelchair man in the back. He didn’t have his cage like old times, so he had to skip that step. He went straight into peeling. The skin on his arm bubbled up, big white circles forming around his wrists, until he had a large piece of loose skin. He pricked his nail under it



and began to peel it back slowly, gently, until he had a whole bolt of skin. He held it in front of him.

Everyone heard the heart monitor flatline. Mrs. Robinson was sitting between to nurses, never a better position for someone who might have a heart attack during a sideshow performance. They jumped on her, pulled her from her chair, and laid her on the ground. The director flicked out his cigarette and ran to the center of the room. He then started directing some of the other nurses to wheel the other patients out. The wheelchair man was pushed through the back door just as one of the nurses tried to give Mrs. Robinson the breath of life. Daisy stopped playing the piano and put her own hands at her mouth. Dennis and Marco backed away. Johnathan was left there on the stage, beneath the hot white lights, as the nurses tried to resuscitate poor Mrs. Robinson. A faint breeze that had found its way into the auditorium ruffled the skin still dangling beneath his fingertips. He could see the nurses pump furiously at the old woman's chest, covered only by a quilted sweater.

"She's gone," one of them finally heaved. Sweat was pouring down her back and shoulders. "Time of death, 10:38AM."

"We're not doctors, Marlene," the other said, "we don't get to pronounce death."

The director walked over to them. "There's nothing else you can do?"

"No," Marlene said.

Needless to say, Winky's four-act show was not asked back to Shady Acres.

# 14

After that fiasco, Daisy drove Johnathan back to the train, and they gradually lost touch. I think she felt obligated to come by, but her visits got fewer and fewer until they altogether stopped. Johnathan was left alone in the train. He didn't leave. He sorted through the rest of the train, ate all of the cans of peas and peaches one by one. He found an old bow in one of the back cars and tried to use it. There were enough woods around here. Maybe he could get a few rabbits or squirrels like George had taught him. As with the can opener and the other new things in his life, it took him a while. He spent a couple of nights only licking the insides of a few cans. Eventually he got a squirrel, a tough little thing. He cut away the skin, separated it from the muscle, and put it on a spit like George had done. Fires were no problem for him. That was one of the lessons George had made sure he didn't forget.

A couple of cars drove by on the old road. It wasn't terribly far from town; there was just nothing at the end of the road. Johnathan could see them from the woods or from his train car. He always tensed up when he heard the engines. He knew enough to think that someone might want something in the train, if only it was a look. But sometimes as he saw the black rubber and red lights of a car speed away, he asked silently for them to come back.

As the time away, his routine making one day bleed into the next, so did more of his memories. His body couldn't hold everything that it had collected over the years. The first to go of his childhood was most of Gregory. Really, though, the black rectangle that replaced him in his mind seemed to fit him, all right angles and sharp straight lines. He had been rather distant,

and who could blame him? Johnathan was the fifth child, the only to make it past a few weeks. Gregory had little idea of what to do with a child. His own father had been a contracted biologist and was gone for months at a time, returning haphazardly with gifts of seaweed and dried coral. Gregory would look at his own son, babbling mindlessly and clapping his hands, and climb further into his armchair behind his paper.

The next of the faces was Charlotte. She had been kind. He was the fifth living child for her; she had four of her own. She was paid to be nurturing yet strict, warm yet nurse. She woke him up and poked his arms and legs through his jumper and fed him his breakfast. Her yellow curls and wide body became a shade of blue, maybe the color of one of her dresses, in his mind. Sometimes the blue would sharpen and he could make out the sides of her full arms or the line where her dress ended and her ankle disappeared. He had spent most of his time at her feet, so it stands to reason her ankles would be rather defined in his mind.

And the last of his childhood, the most dearest, was his mother, and he held onto her much longer than he thought he would or even could. Hers was also the hardest. He didn't feel it coming, as he sometimes did. He didn't even realize when it happened. He just woke up one morning, one hundred and seven years old, put his hand to his lined forehead to block the yellow sun, and realized that he could no longer tell what she had worn in her apron or what book she always read or even what colors her eyes were. Her nose and cheeks and arms and elbows smoothed and receded until there was nothing left but a grey oval. It was curved and blank, and it burned in his mind. When he thought about it, he could faintly remember something of her warmth, the lingering feelings of a hand on his shoulder, fingers against his cheek, maybe lace-covered arms around his middle, but nothing of the woman who gave them.

Over the years, he lost others. Some of them didn't matter, people like priests and nuns,

shopkeepers, men he passed on the street, ticket takers, train conductors, bakers, menders. The washers and hunters and horkers could all wash together in his mind. But some did matter, and he found himself going back to George. Everyone would blur in his mind, but he would trace the outline of George in his mind. The mustache, the hair, the lines around his eyes, the lines in brow from the furrows. But soon, he was a nearly empty man.

# 15

One of the cars finally stopped. It sat on the road in front of the train for a while, not moving. It then turned across the muddy field and parked in front of the passenger cars. A man climbed out. He wasn't very tall or extraordinary, but there was something about him that kept sticking in Johnathan's mind. He didn't think he knew the man. He had dark brown hair combed back and brown eyes, and he wore a neat suit, navy. He had brown loafers.

He stepped in the mud, but he didn't seem to mind it getting on his shoes. He made only a small shake to get it off. He walked over to the car, up the steps, and knocked on the door.

Johnathan was just lying on his bed staring up. The wood was now full of nails, and the bodies of squirrels hung from a few of them. He couldn't see their beady eyes. For the first few knocks, he thought it might be his imagination. Maybe a woodpecker was closer than he thought. Maybe a small storm had formed outside his home.

Then he thought to ignore the knocks. Perhaps they would go away. He couldn't decide. He hadn't talked to anyone in so long. He wasn't sure if he could.

He finally opened the door and saw the odd face. The man looked at Johnathan, not in the eyes, but at him, but he didn't nod or say hi or anything. He pulled out his hand and held it in front of the dazed Johnathan. His hand just lingered there for a moment. It was a rather bright day, only a few fast-moving clouds in the sky, and, as he stood, the light played white lines across him.

Maybe he was lost. Johnathan could tell him that town was just back up the road. Maybe

he had broken down, and Johnathan didn't have the tools to help him. Maybe.

The man was staring at Johnathan like they were both supposed to be there. This was how things were supposed to work out. His hair was a little out of place and his jacket was too far open. Johnathan made no move to shake the man's hand, but his other hand, the one not meant for shaking, drifted down to his coat pocket, and Johnathan could see it rest there for a moment or so.

Johnathan finally shook his hand.

The man managed a small grin. "I'm Maxwell."

"Johnathan," he grunted.

"Lipman?" Johnathan hadn't heard that name in a number of years.

"Yes."

"Johnathan, may I come in?"

The man ducked his head under the hanging squirrels quietly sat down at the small table across from Johnathan. He flared out his coat jacket and sat with his knees together. His thumbs twiddled.

Johnathan sat with his head in his hands, his thumbs wrapping around to his ears. If he held the lobes down, over his ears, everything around him sounded dense and soft. The man tried again.

The man watched Johnathan do this, then coughed into his hand.

"Well, I guess I'll get started. My grandfather, I think you knew him. His name was George. He worked with you, when ya'll were in Winky's, I think."

Johnathan pulled his lobes down further. They almost touched the outline of his jaw.

"He... He died last week. He killed himself. A gunshot. I don't want to go into it too

much detail about it. But, after he died, I found his journals.

He wrote about you. A lot, actually. He'd said your name more than a few times, too, I just didn't realize it. But he really liked you. You meant a lot to him, I think. I know you must not have seen him in a while, but I think you should come to his funeral."

Silence.

"I was really surprised, actually, when I found out that Winky's was still going. How long it's been going, wow. I mean, I knew Bubba, but I didn't know there was anyone else like him. You, man, wow."

If he pushed his bottom lip, too, if he pushed it out and up, he could cover his whole mouth. And he could bring it all the way up to his nose. Then he wouldn't have to talk about anything. He would have a reason to be silent.

"Well, I just wanted to give you this. It's an invitation. The wake and service is tomorrow. I think you should come, maybe say a few words. No one alive knew him in his circus days. Granny died over almost twenty years ago. I'd love to hear about your time... together."

More silence.

"I'll just leave this here." He pulled a small off-white envelope from his coat pocket and laid it on the table in front of Johnathan. He didn't see until that moment how close to perfect the face was in front of him.

"Have a nice day," he said, and he let himself out the car door.

The envelope lay next to him on the table at an angle, tilting into the wood grain. He put one finger under the flap and let it fall open. The card inside was the same off-white, lined with green foil that followed the shape of the card. "Stockert-Gibson," read the front in fancy lettering, and, beneath that, "Honoring Life."

The inside had a well-meaning invitation, something like, *Your presence is respectfully requested at the funeral of...*, and then, on down, it listed the living. *Survived by his son, Cyrus, his daughter-in-law, Margaret nee Phillips, and his grandson, Maxwell.* In the middle, *George Richard Henry Lazlo*, in dark, bolded letters. Johnathan traced his fingers around the elegant curves of the script.



# 16

He found an old, wrinkled button-up in the bottom of some box at the back of one of the cars. He tried to iron but couldn't figure out how to work the iron. He just handled the weight of it against the shirt, hoping that the effort he put into it counted. The invitation said 2:30PM. He began walking to the place well before noon. He didn't even look back to the train as he got on the road.

There were hundreds of cars lining the driveway, which circled around a water fountain and settled in front of an upkept plantation home. *Stockert-Gibson* hung over the door in foot-high gold letters. Johnathan went through the dark green double doors and felt underdressed. A gloved man in a dark tuxedo greeted him at the door.

"No thanks," he said, pushing the hand away. "I'm here for George."

The man nodded his head.

"The room on the left, sir."

Ahead of him was a long hall lined with hundreds of blue roses. They crept up the walls and formed arches across the ceiling. He traced them as he walked down the hall, weaving in and out of the way of the other guests. He didn't know it, but these were some of West Virginia's finest. The lady in the midnight blue floor-length dress, her mother's pearls, and tight blonde hair was the head of the Blue Hat Ladies. Her husband was the owner of a string of car dealerships in town. The woman not too far from her, holding black umbrella at her side was the wife of a state Senator. Down the hall, right before the bannister, was a buyer for Homebrew Computers,

invested in the fledgling Apple, Inc. back when they sold computers without monitors. The lady to his right was one of the decade's most powerful feminist writers. But he didn't recognize any of him. He politely excused himself between them and around him until he got to the room.

It must have been the library or study of the house when it was still a plantation home. The walls were really bookshelves, and the proprietors of Stockert-Gibson had chosen to keep the books and knick-knacks on the shelves. Dusty volumes of books, some as old as Johnathan, were up there. In the middle of the room, though, was the casket. Big. Dark cherry wood. Silver edgings and corners and handles. It had a nice shine to it, a little glint that caught the afternoon sun and warmed the color. Made you forget what was inside.

Maxwell was there, sitting on the window ledge. He was wearing the same suit and shoes he'd had on the bus, only now, he had a single blue rose planted in his coat pocket. His elbow was on his knee, and he was looking out the window. He turned, though, as Johnathan came in the room.

"You came," he said, and he moved from his spot on the ledge to hug Johnathan. Johnathan curled up at this. It felt odd to touch someone else.

"I'm glad you're here. I have something for you."

From where he was standing, Johnathan could see the edge of the casket, not into it.

Maxwell returned with two small books, and he placed them in Johnathan's hands. The first was falling apart. The corners of the cover had fallen off, and there were pin holes where threads used to be. The pages were yellow and brittle, and as he tried to turn one, the half of the page came apart in his hand. The other was a little newer, though not by much. It was covered in a deep purple leather.

"This one," he said, pointing to the purple book, "was my grandfather's. As far as I can

tell, he wrote it in every day for a number of years. But, this one,” he said, pointing to the other, brittle one, “I think, is, or maybe was, yours.”

Johnathan looked down at it. He rubbed his fingers against the spine, moving into each groove.

He walked over to the casket and looked in. There was George. His eyes were shut. His face was clean-shaven. He was in a dark navy suit, not the pinstriped one Johnathan had always seen him in. His skin had taken on this odd translucence, almost like he was about to molt. Johnathan took an uneasy hand to his friend’s arm and felt the same cold sensation he sometimes got when he felt the urge. But he knew it wasn’t the same. George was no longer the World’s Oldest Man.

“Can I ask you something, Johnathan?” Maxwell said, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“Ok.”

“What was he like?”

“What do you mean?”

“Near the end, he couldn’t remember much. Names, places, words, even, were hard for him to remember. Mom said it was because of his age. Four hundred years, and everything just kind of pressed down and condensed in his brain, maybe leaked out his ears or something. He called me Winky a few times. He was the ringmaster in the circus, right?”

He looked up at Johnathan.

“Well, do you remember anything at all? I know it’s been a while since you’ve seen him, but I was just wondering. Anything. Any detail. He’d lived a lot of life by the time he got to me. I always felt like I missed out.”

Johnathan was looking down at George, and, though his eyes were closed, he was

imagining them open. Or he could see through his eyelids. Either way, he imagined George with his eyes open, and the rest of his face covered in the Chinamen's hair beard. It fell to his knees and danced a little when he walked around on stage.

"Your grandfather, he was great. He was great as the World's Oldest Man."

"Oh?"

"Yes. George was amazing. He could get up on stage and be an entirely new person. The whole crowd loved him."

"Ok."

"Listen, thank you, Maxwell, for everything," he said.

"You're welcome."

# 17

Johnathan had a lot of options after this. His best friend had committed suicide, and it seemed like an easy choice. And I'm not going to say he didn't spend a few hours with a knife over his own arm. It was a serious deliberation. He could've done it. He was there, sitting in chair at his table, and the knife was hovering just a few inches above his median basilic.

He had brought the diaries home and read them on the same table. He had seen George's heavy, compact writing for the first time. It took up most of the page. There was little white space in between the scrawled loops. He wrote about everything that he could remember, starting at the beginning. When he was a boy, his father and mother, both farmers, growing up in the wild new country. The Great War between Britain and the colonies. A strange medicine man who saved him from . Coming home to a burnt house. Marrying. Cholera. More death. Whole lives. When it began to catch up with itself, the words got heavier, more scattered. The white space began to creep across the page. George wrote about a militia foundry and his backyard as if they were the same place. It eventually stopped, and all that was left in the diary were blank pages that stuck together.

He sank into the chair. He hadn't lived half the life George had. He was one hundred and twenty-nine at the moment. He laughed at the irony. He, Johnathan, was now the world's oldest man. He had the body of a thirty year old.

He could live another hundred and thirty years, maybe more. Maybe he could make a run at the title of the oldest man ever. Maybe he could be like George and have a wife, or two, and a

son. And a grandson. But that would mean waiting and forgetting. Slowly. Things would be squeezed out of his mind, and places would always be the shadows of other places.

He picked up his own journal to read, and he realized, in the lines written in his own tiny hand, all the things he had forgotten. How his mother's name had been Sarah.

And he began to molt. He could feel it coming his fingers and passing down his hands, arms, up his shoulders into his spine. It vibrated him. He shook. And he peeled back the white strips of skin and underneath were thousands of tiny scales. They were diamond-shaped, each ending in a softly rounded point, all brown with a slight shine and kind of terrible. He pulled all the skin away from his arm and the scales traveled up and up, and, when he felt his neck, he could feel the sharp points there, too. The skin fell away from his knees, and the scales were there, bigger, a little softer and smoother. Even down to his toes. He threw himself from the table, knocking over his chair, and ran to the rusted wash basin. He filled with water, he stripped off his pants and saw them peeking out from on the tops of his thighs. The shirt came off, and he could feel them sticking out from the sharp angles of his shoulder blades. And, when he finally looked in the water, he could see they covered the face in the reflection.

Before the skin was completely gone, he ran to the diary and scrawled himself one note:

“You are Johnathan Lipman, Lizard-Man.”

And he could see they had covered his hand, too, peeking in and out of the skin between his fingers. His nails were gone, replaced by long and sharp scales that curved down and bit into his pen. When he turned his hands over, they were smooth and yellow.

He had options, but he stayed there, in the cabin. When the plain flooded that September, it felt even more like home. The walls of the cabin started to mold and rot, but he never left. He would go out into the marshes and catch fish or rabbits or whatever he could find. His new claws

made this job rather easy. He had a stove, and, at first, he tried to cook them, but he found himself liking the taste of them raw. He could kill a rabbit and sink in his teeth into the soft flesh, blood dripping down his neck, and not notice the fur. He would sometimes give in to these tastes, and this would make the days go by. If he didn't have to think about George or the circus, he didn't care. He would run across the marshes, rabbit to rabbit, sleeping in little bits that he hollowed out in the mud. Sometimes, he could see people, maybe hunters or researchers or who knows what kinds, but he stayed far away. He felt like even where he was, even on the edge of the marsh, behind the trees, the eyes were on him, just like they had been in the circus, and those days were over. He would bite into the rabbit and blood would rush over his chest and stick in between his scales but the feeling wasn't so bad.

Sometimes, though, he tried to remember. He would pull the journals off the shelves and carefully place them on the table. He curled his fingers, his nails resting in his palms, and fumbled his knuckles between the pages, slowly turning them as they hissed and popped. And he would try to remember.

And, when the pages weren't quite enough, he would try to do other things. He tried to connect with people. It was lonely out there in the cabin, even for someone who had been alone most of his life.



THE  
END



# STUDIES IN THE NOVELLA:

## INSPIRATION FOR SWAMP DEVIL

I began the project now entitled “Swamp Devil” in a very predictable way – I looked up the word “novella.” I had an idea that a novel was longer and perhaps more complex than a short story, yet shorter and less consuming than a novel, but I wanted a more finite idea of what literary wall I was up against. However, Merriam-Webster did little to clear up the ambiguity surrounding the novella. The technical, hard-nosed definition, places the novella at “any work of length greater than 25,000 words and less than 50,000 words,” but this seemed rather confining. As Good puts it, “there is no magic number of words which constitutes the minimum for a novel” (197), and, though he later argues against this designation, settles on a novella as being something of a “short novel” (197). He does end up quoting Fetherling as saying that calling a novella a short novel “is like calling a pony a baby horse” (201). So, it seemed like this confusion about a “novella” was somewhat universal. Some works – Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad, Anthem by Ayn Rand, Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe – readily fall under the heading, but there are still several outliers that toe the line between novella and novel. Good finally decides that “novella” and “novel” must be both adjacent and opposed (197).

It was with this confusion that I decided to begin my work. With little idea of how my own work would fall in with other “novellas” most respects, I started realizing some of my ideas for “Swamp Devil.” I have taken both short story and novel-writing classes, but, owing to the length, I approached “Swamp Devil” as I would have a novel. I began by doing lots of research on traveling circuses, 1800s culture, major events in American History, etc. I also read other works, works either by design or later stamping are referred to as “novellas,” to help my ideas

flow. In all, the works of four authors – Stephen King, Isaac Asimov, Denis Johnson, and Daniel Wallace – inspired me the most. “Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption,” “The Bicentennial Man,” “Train Dreams,” and “Big Fish,” all made an impact on the final draft of “Swamp Devil.”

Since I loved the movie Shawshank Redemption so much, I thought the novella it was based on, “Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption,” written by the gifted Stephen King, might be a good start. What really helped me attach to the world in “Shawshank” was the narrative voice. King seems to be breaking a lot of rules with Red; he has his narrator admit in the second paragraph to the murder of two women and a baby (1). I have never seen myself as the type to identify with murderers, but Red’s honesty and blunt handling of rather unsavory subjects – theft, gang rape, murder, the smuggling of objects in body cavities, etc. – is somehow charming. By the last page, I found myself wanting nothing more than the freedom from institutionalization that Red so desperately sought.

I also admired the self-awareness of “Shawshank.” You as a reader know that this is Red’s chronicle of Andy Dufresne; that much is made clear in the beginning of the narrative (5). But the story is unfolding as it is being written, and, when Red makes the decision to stop writing, the narrative stops (76). It breaks from the normal narrative arch in that the plot relies not on the sequence of events but on the narrator to tell it. You have the sense that the story is very fresh, new, but also fragile and tenuous, because, as soon as the narrator decides to stop writing, wherever he may be, the story will be over.

I really liked this tension, and I wanted to emulate this in “Swamp Devil,” though not to the extent that King does it with Red. As I was writing “Swamp Devil,” I had it in my mind that the character Johnathan was reading a version of “Swamp Devil” that he had written but could

no longer quite connect with because of his memory loss. In order to make this work effectively, the story needed to be aware that it was a story, in much the same way that the reader was aware Red was writing “Rita.”

I read “Bicentennial Man” because I was having problems with aging my characters. George and Johnathan are both much older than anyone else in “Swamp Devil.” They are aging more slowly than other characters, like Winky or the Bearded Lady, but they are still going through the same stages of life. They must grow at their own pace, but they must interact with characters that are growing and expiring more quickly. It was difficult for me to comprehensively show their growth contrasting the growth of secondary or tertiary characters. Asimov’s central character, Andrew Martin, is a lot like Johnathan and George. He is a robot packed with the potential for eternal life, yet he is interacting and developing relationships with people like Little Miss and Sir, each who don’t make it past their ninety-fifth birthdays (10,15). Asimov tackles the uniqueness of Andrew’s growth by contrasting his clothing to the fashion of other characters. When Andrew meets someone new – for example, U.S. Robots Director of Research Alvin Magdescu – Asimov takes time to describe the clothing of the character. Alvin was “[wearing] a little pointed beard.... [and] nothing above the waist but the breast band that fashion dictated (23).” The “fashion dictated” line implies that the “breast band” is extremely fashionable, which contrasts quite well with the button up, trousers, and tie that we know Andrew is wearing (16). The suit also seems very modern day, the breast band futuristic, and the former idea helps situate the beginning of the novella in something like modern day reality. Rather than tackling the emotional or other physical characteristics of aging, Asimov using clothing to give us the when, for Andrew, demonstrating his age.

Inspired by Asimov, I used clothing, as well as other physical objects, in a number of

passages to help situate Johnathan and George and clarify the periods they were in. I tried to give “Swamp Devil” a fairly firm timeline without always resorting to exact dates. In the first Chapter, I tried to linger on Sarah, Gregory, the doctor, and Father Brescoll’s attire, in order to reaffirm the 19<sup>th</sup> century setting. At other points, I use trains, robots, and reading glasses, in the hope that these items would visualize the progression of time Johnathan and George’s bodies do not show.

You would not know from reading the first sixty pages or so that “Train Dreams” is about werewolves. Johnson focuses on the confliction, tragedy, and loneliness of his main character, Robert Grainier, only hinting at the supernatural elements. It starts with Robert observing and somewhat participating in the attempted murder of a Chinaman (1-8). The Chinaman escapes, but not before rendering what Robert sees as a curse (7). He is deeply affected by the event, and he “carries” the Chinaman with him, seeing him “in the trees” (6). This opening scene evokes a sinister tone for the rest of the novella, and, in a quite vague manner, it anticipates the tragedies – the fire, the loss of his wife and daughter, the interaction with the wolf-girl, etc. – that make up the rest of the novella. So, when the wolf-girl finds her way into Robert’s cabin, though the rest of the work seems to be quite realistic, she doesn’t quite seem out of place (63).

I wanted a similar setup and climax in “Swamp Devil.” Johnathan is going through changes throughout the novella. He grows up and begins molting. But I wanted these smaller changes to anticipate the larger physical change that he undergoes. And, though it is a “fantasy” novella, I wanted something more human to be the focus. For Grainier, it is dealing with tragedy. For Johnathan, it is finding humanity. Though the fantasy themes are more overt in mine, I wanted to emulate Johnson’s restraint. Fantasy can quickly become overly ornate, focusing more

on world-building and strange characters and resolving unrealized plot points than characterization. “Swamp Devil” is supposed to be about one man, a real man, undergoing strange changes.

I wanted to take from Big Fish Daniel Wallace’s heightened, epic tone. Edward Bloom, from the perspective of his son, is astoundingly ordinary: he worked most of his life as a traveling salesman (12), married a woman he met in high school (36), had a son (72), and does laps every day in the pool (14). But, through the stories that Edward fashions about himself, he becomes a modern Greek or Roman hero. He conquers giants, saves the lives of his townspeople, has run-in with a mermaid, even travels through the underworld. Since we get both present-day narration about Edward and the stories first hand, both seem real, and there is a certain amount of conflict between these two ideas of Edward. In the now of the novella, he is ridden with cancer and expected to die any day (111). In the “past” life, Edward is elevated, “god-like,” possibly even immortal (128). These two ideas about Edward converge in the chapter labeled “Big Fish” (175-180). Edward’s son places him in the river, and he turns into a large catfish. He becomes the literal “big fish” of his stories.

The ending of Big Fish is absolutely beautiful, merging metaphor and man, creating a powerful emotional message about humanity. Since “Swamp Devil” has a similar flamboyance, I had hoped to bring the elements together in something like the “Big Fish” ending. It’s difficult to make people sympathize with a man who is a lizard, but, by playing off the themes of loneliness and desire for humanity, I meant to bring Johnathan to a more human level. By making him turn, even more so, into a literal interpretation of his moniker “Lizard-Man,” he could become something greater than lonely circus freak.

Though my initial approach was to make “Swamp Devil” something of a short novel, as

I worked towards the end of the project, I wanted it to be more like a short story. In its longest incarnation, “Swamp Devil” was about one hundred and five pages long, about thirty-five thousand words. The draft now is much leaner, only eighty-five pages. I found myself stripping away plot points, secondary characters, different settings. Johnathan and Maxwell were intended to have a much more intimate relationship, but this took away from Johnathan and George and just Johnathan. Eighty-five pages is perhaps too little space to get into multiple complex relationships, at least in the way I wished to render them.

I cut a lot of things, characters, scenes, etc., in the hopes of getting the story back to Johnathan, the Lizard-Man, the man that inspired the Swamp Devil myth. This is, after all, a story about him and his struggle to find himself in the world.

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