



Nicole Pietsch

SIDESHOW OF MERIT

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Designed by Helen Robinson

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For B.S. and for Ingrid

ME AND JAMES HAD BEEN DEFYING LIFE FOR NEAR FIVE YEARS when we decided to try our hand at defying death.

Defying life as one knows it is a full-time job. But it was in the midst of this worthy vocation that we found the other. We simply went to sleep one rank, muggy night in June and then found our new venture at dawn, sprouted up as though one of God's own proliferating creatures, upon our very doorstep. It boasted a crop of gaudy tents and midway rides, and the swath of lights spattered across it twinkled, even in the first wet breath of day. The fact that we couldn't have *missed* it unless we were struck blind in the night was the drawback. Upon that date in 1966, me and James were spending our nights in a car parked in an empty lot in north Toronto. We weren't making too much money those days, see. As I believe I've mentioned: we already had a full-time job. The following evening, when me and James went out to visit the fairgrounds, we barely even had the dough to get through the gates.

"We could do that," he announced out of the blue as we picked our way back in the dark, at the end of the night.

"Do what?" I wasn't paying much attention to James. I was too busy trying to scope out the car in the dark lot beyond the grounds. Trying to remember where in hell we'd left it. "Where's the car, James? You remember where we parked?"

"*That*," James said. "The sideshow. Those stunts."

He fingered a cigarette butt he'd found lying in the gravel a ways back, and now, impossibly, he'd also managed to produce a working matchbook. For a guy so lucky as to find that kind of complementary shit just lying out on the ground, it was profoundly irritating how we always lost the car. After walking back to it in the dead of night with my feet hurting like they were, in fact, it was galactically irritating.

“Man, I hate when this happens,” I bitched.

James breathed in, his lips pursed around who-knows-whose cigarette stub: disgusting.

“You’re disgusting,” I said. And then: *Pick it up before ten seconds and it’s not dirty!* I thought. *Who taught James THAT one, Tev?* “Give it here,” I said.

James passed the butt over grudgingly and watched me inhale. “I didn’t think any of the stunts were *scary*, though,” he said. “Did you, Tev?”

“Not scary.” I passed it back to him. The cherry was so low I nearly lit my fingernail on fire, a thing my God-loving Pentecostal mother would identify as divine reprisal for the habit itself. “Supposed to be, I guess, but no.”

James nodded and returned the cigarette to his teeth. He sucked away, his eyes slit into a posture of deep, careful concentration: the eyes of a gymnast teetering on a balance beam. A moment or two passed before he spoke.

“What we do looks sort of scary.”

I looked at him. “No it doesn’t,” I said. In the back of my mind, I knew it was a little telling that I didn’t have to ask what he was talking about.

“Yes it does,” James countered.

“No it doesn’t.”

“Yes it does.”

I looked at him firmly: firmly between tired and irritated. “Shut the hell up, James,” I said. I turned my head and spit. “What do you know anyway, huh, James? Dumb nit.”

James, James-like, did not dissent. Instead he spun the cigarette butt out behind him—he’d smoked it until it was a black eyeball, its scope siphoned almost entirely away—and as I watched the fading red pupil upon it fly, I spotted the car. A big ’55 Chevy shouldn’t be hard to spot on a lot. You had to wonder how we could park the thing specifically in one corner, out of the way, and then fail to remember where we’d put it. Sometimes I speculated if James’s dumb-nitness was catching.

James followed a few steps behind me. “You wouldn’t know,” he murmured from back there, as though confident I couldn’t hear him.

I spun around and eyed him. “What’d you say?” Because I *couldn’t* quite hear, though I knew he’d said something. I was beginning to get a little unreasonable in the way I was thinking, and I was wondering if that was catching too. “What’d you say, huh?” I asked.

James hesitated. He drew back, as though I might reach out and nab him around the buttons of his shirt and shake him. “I don’t know,” he began, which is the phrase that prefaces nearly every one of James’s thoughts, a dummy’s idiosyncrasy. “Said you wouldn’t know, Tevan,” he said, finally wagering he had nothing to fear—and in being twice the size of me, he didn’t. “You never see what it looks like.”

He didn’t tell me what *it* was, no, and again I didn’t have to ask him. Instead I stopped beside the car and studied him. James looked gaunt, typically gaunt; but tired and spent and all-around unhealthy, which for us wavered between typical and not, depending on the time of year and the resources at hand. I’d noticed this earlier in the day once already, when I’d taken him for his visit to the downtown courthouse. Paul and Paula had been playing on the radio, the smarmiest of tunes to hit the airwaves since Pat Boone:

True love means planning a life for twooooooo—

I’d cranked it up, James beside me riding shotgun, and I’d lit off on Paula’s solo in a high, wheedling falsetto. It was during the second verse that I thought I heard him laugh. My eyes skirted curiously over at the sound of it, and I saw the way his upper lip was curled, the swift upward rise of his cheek. “Hey, Paul,” I said aloud, impromptu and solely for James’s benefit during the musical bridge, “I really love you in those pants. Come to think of it, Paul, I think I’d like you better *out* of those pants. Hey, Paul, why don’t you come over here and show me what love *reeeeally* means.”

James had laughed even harder. He actually had to cover his nose with his hand to keep from snorting.

“Come on,” I’d said then. “Give me a break. Look at their names, James: Paul and Paula? That’d be like you, James, falling for a chick named Jamie or . . . Jamesette or something. Me, I’d have to hook up with a girl with a name like—like . . . Oh, never mind, there’s no hope for me.” I’d turned my head: and that’s when I’d caught him. Laughing or not, you could not help but see it in him. James looked terrible. I noticed this now, the second time in a day, and it struck me like a needle of sympathy for him. I decided that maybe that was enough for now.

“You think it’s scary?” I said. “Hey, James?” In years of knowing James, I’ve come to understand that he generally responds best when addressed by name. Tricks of the trade.

A tentative smile spread onto his face. “Yeah,” he tried. “Sure I do.” And in that moment we consolidated into a working party again.

I unlocked my door first, then walked around to his. I looked up at him. “You think people would pay money to see that, James?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he agreed, though now I couldn’t be sure if he really meant it. James did that sometimes, like a kid who concurs because he wants to remain part of the team. Kids like James are what made Hitler’s army; kids like James were advancing enthusiastically toward Vietnam as we spoke. It got hard to tell what he thought, and in the moment I found his tendency to agree—usually an underground, useful sort of privilege to me—to be a nuisance.

We got in the car, dark even with the doors open because the interior bulb had been spent for months. You couldn’t read past dark. It was a condition that drove me wild with boredom, and likely why we found ourselves hanging around a carnival midway, monetary resources or not, in the post-twilight of a summer day. A car is pretty dark past sundown. That doesn’t leave a lot to do for a person who doesn’t sleep before the stroke

of midnight. Man, I wished we'd fixed that light. How much could one of those things cost anyway? Ten cents? Jesus.

James settled into the passenger seat beside me. His jacket was unzipped and he stretched his long legs into the footwell as he stared at the windshield. You'd think we were about to drive cross-country by moonlight like a pair of loose convicts or something, sitting there in the dark like we were. But the fact is, we just really didn't have anyplace to go.

A few minutes passed.

"James," I said. "James, you going to sleep right away?"

He shuffled his neck against the headrest. His tangled hair bunched up like a Brillo pad. "Nup," he said. Then he gave a small giggle, like I'd caught him thinking something evil. "Keep thinking of those girls in the tent."

I smiled. "Girls in the tent." Then I added wryly, "Who we never got to *see*."

"We *saw* them," James insisted. "Saw that one in the pink anyways. You know, before she went in."

I smiled again. Girl in pink. She was sitting out back smoking a cigarette in her bathrobe when we caught a glimpse of her, lingering in her imperfect privacy. Before she headed inside and hauled it all off for fifty cents a head and a dozen gawking, hard-up eyes.

"Hmmm," James murmured. "I think pink's my favorite color."

I laughed. I don't know if he was serious or what, but I couldn't help it.

"You ever been with a girl wearing pink, Tev?" he asked suddenly. "Ever have a girl in pink let you get . . ."

I answered him because he was asking, but also because I can commiserate with James's need to live vicariously through me sometimes. Pentecostal mother notwithstanding. On, you know, certain subjects. When the girls let you get funny with them they usually end up not wearing much at all, but I respect James's innocence, so I didn't say that. "Naw, I don't think so,"

I began. There's a fine line between satiating a curious mind and encouraging it to covet. "Oh, wait," I said. "Wait. Well, this one time—"

But already it was too much. He'd been thinking too long, which goes to show what happens when James gets to thinking. "Aw, you been with 'em all, Tev," he said, turning his eyes. "It's not fair. I don't get it, Tev. You've known all those girls and I—and really, I—"

I didn't say anything—it's not like I can apologize for it; shit, it's not like I can even *congratulate* myself for it—until James continued under his breath, but meaning for me to hear: "You got it worse than me."

I flicked him a look. "I didn't get it worse than you."

"Yes you did."

"No I didn't." *Here we go*, I thought.

"Yes—"

I cut him off. I turned right around in the seat to look at him. I don't see the point in talking in circles. And plus, it was obvious he needed to hear it again. James was doing what he did best, which is remembering.

"There is no worse, hear me, James?" I said. "There's no worse. Ain't no difference between yours or mine. It happened, is all." *Which*, I could've added, *is what we already spend enough time knowing*. But I never say stuff like that to James. It isn't good for him. "You got that, James? You got that?"

He didn't reply.

Didn't make a sound for a long time, actually. I hadn't meant to, but it'd come out a little heated, and now as I peeked over to assess the silence, I could see him beginning to crumple. Bigger than me, but Jesus, the biggest suck you ever met in your life. I wanted to roll my eyes, but I never do stuff like that to James.

"Hey," I said to his bowing shoulders. "Hey, James. Come on. You're okay." Already I could hear him breathing, tortured and snotty-sounding. "Hey. Hey, friend." I was doing what I did best, which is talking, and James was doing what he did best.

“James,” I whispered, putting my hand on his arm. “James? James, you want me to—I mean, you want to—”

(Remembering)

His eyes came up then, fast. Fierce and determined. I would have been scared if I didn’t know him as well as I do. *But we’re never doing that again!* something shrill inside of me said—a reminder like a string wrapped round your index finger. *You said we’re never doing that again!* But I knew too well what *it* was, and we’d said this a hundred times before (and likely would a hundred times again, I wagered in my weakness, so what the hell difference did it make?), and I deftly closed my eyes to it all over again.

“Yes.” His voice came low and gnashing. “Yes.”

I let my head back against the seat. “Come on, then,” I said.

I hadn’t even reclined the seat back when he moved his hands up quick and close to my face. But not quite. He seemed to catch himself. He breathed a little, watching my face for any sign that he had gotten carried away.

“Don’t be scared,” James said in a soft voice. “I would never hurt you, Tev.”

I hadn’t begun to be. But with this admonition, I admit he cast one brief quiver across my throat and mouth. For in it I understood that even dumb nit James saw the seam between one place and the other, one time and another.

Perhaps saw, even, one set of hands working, hurting, evaporating over time, and reintegrating somehow as his own.

“I’m not scared,” I returned.

And I never was.

My mother was superstitious as well as Pentecostal. When the carnival arrived in Hamilton, Ontario, each first of July, she would take my brother Kenny and me to watch the parade. *Never look back upon a circus parade*, she’d say, holding our hands to her sides. *It brings the bad fortune of the past back upon you.* My father died when I was less than two years old; Kenny was eight, and my mother just thirty. She wasn’t willing to chance a

glance backward in that direction. No matter how firm she held her eyes to the ground as each carnival thrummed by, Kenny still died a short twelve years later. And so maybe I can be forgiven for taking no heed of her caveat. The day following our night in the parking lot, I turned James and me around and headed straight back to the carnival.

As for James, he opened his eyes that morning as though God's conferred light of day was the searchlights of a UFO. I brought him with me anyway. He didn't say a word, which happens on occasion, and stared straight through me while I gesticulated and pointed and bawled at him to change his shirt. The sun had already burned the dew off the grass, and it began working hard on our backs as we set out walking. I had to stop to make sure James was keeping up. We walked the whole way in silence, one trailing the other, like strangers who just happen to be following the same route. And if you want to know the truth of that as well, I suppose I can allow that that's been known to happen between us in history too.

I stopped a final time when the fairground came into view. The midway itself was a dusty field of color and steel rods. A breeze across it brought a breath of processed sweetness to my nose and a continuous, quivering flap to the sidelong tents. The tents were lined up in rickety rows, their canvas skin heavy and hot. The alien metal arms of rides shot out and upward from the far end of the mix. I pulled my gaze to the fringes of the set-up and spied what I was looking for.

To the left and strategically placed under a row of somber, swaying poplars stood a wide Winnebago. The walls were yellow and cracked in places, and the awning fluttered upward in silky hanks like a shirt that has been through the wash too many times. I cast a glance back at James: he looked like he could've slept in its undercarriage that night.

"Come here," I said.

He shuffled before me.

"Come *here*," I said again. He bent his face in diligently.

He continued to stare at me, tepid and empty, while I swished his hair around trying to make a part. His eyes were listless despite their color. Between my fingers the strands felt heavy and dank, like a baby's with a fever. He didn't say anything.

"That's a little better, huh, James?" He looked back at me and didn't answer. "It's going to be like an interview," I said as I took some of the worse-looking hanks and hooked them behind his ears. "Who knows what will come of it. All goes well, we'll have a room someplace tonight. Hey, James?"

It came out like I was saying it for him, as though I believed this information would please him. In truth, James and me both know it's me who goes flaky without sleep and falls ill easily, growing urinary tract infections and cold sores and fevers like weeds sprouting up in an untended lot. I caught myself turning my head at all angles, as though I could peer through James's forehead and catch sight of what lay on the other side.

"If you're lucky," I said, "you'll even get your own bunk instead of having to put up with me."

The suggestion rolled through him like a small earthquake: his eyes slid forward—a slip, a crack in the glass that was, on a good day, my simply simple friend James—and then away from mine. If I had been in a better mood (*and he, I told myself, a better goddamn conversationalist this morning*), I might have been disgusted with myself for bothering him. Instead, I found I was just getting my engines rolling.

"Hey," I said. In a hard voice this time, a voice that meant business. "When we get in there, James, I don't want you to say one fucking word." This instruction jarred him less than the one directly before, which did not surprise me. For a stupid guy, sometimes he isn't so stupid. "You understand, James?"

I watched the vacant stare. I nodded for both of us: "Good."

We marched up the grass, then took the rickety stairs. We entered the camper without knocking, and as we breached the doorway, one after the other, the heat hit us like a wall. It was a veritable greenhouse in there. Slouched behind a desk and reading

a magazine sat a young man. He had one of those haircuts that only hoods wear: short around the ears but grown out too long in back, like an outdated, unkempt version of Elvis. It looked like he'd tried to neaten it up by tying it back. Red swatches sprouted across his forehead, and his shirt looked well worn. It occurred to me that maybe I hadn't needed to bother with James's hair. And as though he could feel my gaze like a heat on his skin, the guy suddenly looked up.

He jumped at the sight of us. In fact, right then he stood.

"We're hoping to see someone from the management," I said quickly. "Is this you?"

The guy took a step toward us. His eyes looked me over, at once cagey and questioning. I noted he looked a little older than James, and he had an awkward comeliness to him, tanned like a triathlete. He came up in height someplace between us. I thought that all this information might come in handy later.

The guy seemed to be sizing us up the same way. Now his gaze traded between James and me. He looked at James. He looked at me. He drew back to James again, this time taking in his full height and the on-vacation look of him that a person couldn't help but catch. He averted his eyes—as if James might be a loose cannon, and he didn't want to be the proverbial detonator. Finally he spoke:

"There a problem?" he asked. His eyes flicked over me: up, down, up, down.

"No," I said carefully. "Well, yes. I guess—I guess I'm asking about employment."

A relieved, baffled expression overtook his face. Then a look to James, one more time—quick as water bouncing off a hot skillet—for good measure. "Hang on," he said. "I'll see what I can do."

He came around the desk, passed us, and put his head through a door into another room; there, he offered up some low murmurings beyond my range. My eyes traipsed the room, waiting, taking in the rickety table and chair, the cabinet in one corner, and the avalanche of paper spilling across it.

“*Why was the door unlocked?*” a voice boomed from the adjoining room.

When the guy came back a moment later, his brow had furrowed into a wounded, furious little snit. He motioned for us. I followed his signal and James followed me, and then the two of us were in the next room. And there, sitting behind a monstrosity of a desk, was a guy similar to the one we’d just left, only all of him twofold. Twice the amount of sweat, hair, and weight; twice the look of dubious exasperation on his face. You could spot the resemblance at once. I would’ve laid a bet it was the younger guy’s father.

“Tevan George,” I said, putting my hand out.

The man before us didn’t get out of his seat. He took my hand as though accepting a flyer or Book of Mormon handed out on a street corner. *Book of Mormon*, his indifferent expression read. *I’ll throw this out when I see a trash bin.*

“This is James.”

James didn’t offer his hand. James isn’t one to remember small tokens of hospitality.

“Buddy Merit,” the man said.

When I’d stood long enough to understand that he might share James’s perspective on hospitality, I gestured to James and we sat down. The man watched us from behind the desk, his eyes trained on us like a sniper’s scope. It was really hot in there, hot as blazes. I decided it was high time to get to the point.

“You’ve got a sideshow, I noticed,” I began. “We been last night, though it’s not much to spit at. Says Ten in One on your sign out front, but we had to pay separate for each show.” Then, to pique his interest: “Plus you’ve just got nine acts. And you must’ve had ten before. And so I got to thinking—”

The man—Buddy—stirred in his seat. The bolts beneath him gave a rusty squawk. “Nine,” he cut in. “*Nine*. The sign is old, Tevan George. We have a lot of working acts this route, so we’ve changed them all to Single O’s. Costs more to run, of course.” He spread his hands. “Then it costs more to watch. But

more value for your money.” He smiled. “Suppose I really ought to change that sign, though, don’t you think?” Merit watched us, waiting, then smiled again. “And we’ve got a kootch show and a card reader. Not acts, no—but that makes *over* ten, technically, in case you need me to add it up for you boys.”

I didn’t say anything. Me and James had arrived late the previous night expecting to pay one fee for ten exhibits, as the sign indicated, but when it turned out this wasn’t the case, I admit we went ahead and shelled out again anyhow. I got Merit’s point immediately: the “old” sign had been left out strategically, and I, like every other schmuck with fifty cents jingling in his pocket, fell for it. In fact, me and James plain ran out of money before we even *got* to the kootch show, which is why we had to be content with the girl in the pink nightie instead. That was a real disappointment and a bitch, having to tell James, *No, we’re not seeing the girlie show after all, sorry*. The guy doesn’t see much action with a gourd like that. Even I have to admit it.

As if to press the point, Buddy looked at James and spoke so loud you’d think he took James for some old fart with a hearing problem. “Don’t you talk, son? *You born without a tongue or something?*”

“Do you want a tenth act?” I said. “That’s what we’re here for. Do you want a real tenth?”

Buddy’s gaze ran in my direction. Now he looked at once amused and dubious. “That depends,” he said. “I’m a showman. What do you do? You’re obviously not human oddities, which is generally what one finds on a freak show.” He barked a laugh. “Unless you count this one here. Shit, you planning on having your friend here pull a brain out of his ass? Is that where it is, son?” Loud again, to James: “*Is that where you’ve lost all your smarts?*”

I don’t sweat to stand up for James. I was about to tell this guy that if James had his brain up his ass, then at least he *had* one, better than some. But I needed the job. “You said you have working acts,” I said.

Buddy nodded at me, then shrugged, noncommittal. “I do.

Plenty of them. What kind of working act might we be talking about?”

“Near-death,” I said.

There was one horrible moment where I thought he might laugh out loud on what had been planned as a very serious note. This moment passed gracefully.

I motioned to James. “He puts me unconscious. I stop breathing. Then he brings me back.”

Merit frowned. “Well. Now how would he do that?”

I hesitated, my eyes pulled toward James. I considered using a literal term. I thought about what the cops, or a court, or even a doctor, might call it. I decided I didn’t like any of these. Finally I just went with my instincts.

“He chokes me until I drop,” I said.

Buddy’s eyes drifted to James, packed and unreadable in the little office chair. He looked down at James’s wide hands and then up at his brow, furrowed above his eyes like an angry watchtower. I saw Buddy’s pupils rise, taking in James’s full height, and then sink down to his big, black engineer’s boots. I have to tell you I’d thought twice about it all: but now it occurred to me how wise it was to bring James in there with me.

“Until you drop,” Merit repeated. “Until you *drop*. What a feat.” He paused. “Well, of course you would—*look at him!*” he exploded. “And then what? Your friend here sues me for a million bucks? Sure! You’d be *dead*, for Christ’s sake! If he chokes your breath, *damn right you’ll drop!* Getting up again would be impossible! Even for me, it’d be impossible!”

I began to shake my head. “No,” I said. “No, please, it’s not *impossible*. Hey, no, I can really do it—” But I understood that Merit was right, to some extent: stopping breathing generally means you’re dead. So I added, for good measure: “Please, there won’t be any accidents. No accidents or—funny business, or anything, if that’s what you’re suggesting. I mean, there hasn’t *ever* been any—”

Buddy’s hairline climbed his head. “No funny business.” His tone touched on disdain. “Is it fake?”

“It’s not *fake*,” I said. “I mean, you can’t fake it. I would never—”

And Merit caught my statement for more than I’d meant it. “You ever done this before for show?”

I slid my eyes to James, caught myself doing it, and grew thankful that he wasn’t lively enough to have exchanged me a look. “Yes,” I said slowly. Because Buddy hadn’t specified side-show, just show, and heaven forbid we discount the time when some punks paid James fifty dollars to knock out that pretty boy sitting at the bar and he’d actually taken the money and done it. *If I came and warned you, they’d a known we were friends*, he’d told me days later. I was still rubbing my throat even then, my chin feeling like a caustic lump and my glands beneath, a row of hot marbles. *I’ll give you the money, Tev. Here. I did it to give you the money. Take it, please, take it.* He kept saying it until I did. I took it and we walked into another bar the very next night (we weren’t allowed back into the first one) and spent it on . . .

Well, I don’t recall, exactly. Who cares anyway? I do recall getting sick to my stomach later that night, but that’s about as far as my wits will take me.

“Yes.” I watched Merit hopefully. “Yes, I—”

“You’re saying,” he cut in, “that it’s been done before, then.”

My eyes bounced to James again. “Yes,” I said. “Yeah, loads. I mean, tons of times.”

“And so how long have you been doing this”—Merit spun a hand through the air—“particular stunt?”

Nobody had ever asked me such a question. So I raised my eyes to the ceiling. *Well, let’s see now, then*, I thought. *Hooked up with James in 1961. Then there was ’62. ’63, ’64, ’65 . . .* Merit’s eyebrows lifted as he watched me. And what came out next was a lie that I never intended:

“Five years,” I announced. “I’d say it’s been five years now.”

“Five years,” Merit remarked, impressed. “With who?”

I blinked, bewildered. For a moment I had no idea what he meant. In the next, I understood what he was asking for—a

verbal curriculum vitae. I didn't have one. I didn't even know any shows circulating the province. But as luck would have it, all of a sudden I didn't have to. In that moment, Merit the Younger burst in.

"He's here!" he yelled. Buddy popped from his seat, flying out from behind the desk. I turned left and then right; then I jumped from my chair to press my face against the window. It all happened so fast that if James, deaf-mute to the world, had blinked at precisely the right moment, he might have opened his eyes an instant later and wondered where everyone had gone.

A loud ruckus had erupted outside the wall of the trailer. Outside stood a man, bald and hefty in appearance, banging his fists into the front door.

"*Open up in there, Merit, you goddamn con sack of shit!*" he screamed.

My eyes stuck upon him through the screened window with a horrified attraction. The fellow's colorful address emitted from a mouth that was a near-empty socket—three or four yellowy and tenuous remainders clung to his top gum line like spare parts, but this was all. The visual effect was of a man with fangs. Jesus, no wonder Merit wanted the door locked.

"Give me my goddamn money or else I'm gonna—"

Merit, purported con sack of shit, did not wait to hear the rest. The door unlatched with a thick snap, and he released his progeny into the wild.

The Younger stepped out of the office, and his voice boomed above that of the fanged man: *He*, the fanged man, had nothing on them, the Younger professed at high volume; *he* was full of it. *He* could go tell his problems to Jesus if the need should take him, but *he* wasn't getting a cent more than he'd already been awarded.

A crowd of young men had slunk out from all directions to watch. Now they collected at the foot of the Winnebago. As this goon squad closed in, the fanged man backed up. He was smart to do so. He shrank into the parched grass with Merit's son on

his heels, and the band of cronies, on the heels of this. I watched in awe.

Buddy Merit reappeared in the inner office a moment later, smiling broadly.

“Sorry, boys,” he offered, as if returning from the call of nature. He spread his hands. “Okay then. How does this work?”

I was momentarily tongue-tied.

“This giant chokes you, you said,” Merit put in, his finger toward James. “You ‘go unconscious.’” His round eyes narrowed as he grew speculative. He raised them to the ceiling, nodding.

“Yes,” I put in quickly. “Near-dead.”

“*How* near?”

“Well . . .” I made a face. “Not breathing. I mean, people will pay money to see that.”

“Maybe. But how do we know it’s not gaffed?”

A pause.

“Gaffed?” I said.

“*Gaffed*, son! *Fake*! How do I know you’re not shamming me, breathing through your nose or your ass, say, while I’m standing there in the front row?”

I looked at Merit. “There’s no trick. You’ll be able to tell I’m not breathing,” I said, “because I’m not.”

Merit shifted in his seat. “You’re able to show this? Then how does he bring you back?”

“A.R.,” I said.

Merit leaned in. “What’s that?” The incident with the fanged man had left him not only unscathed but focused, and now he was genuinely curious. Propitiously, the only thing that he seemed to have forgotten was the issue of references from my previous employers. I was only too happy to forget them along with him. And I guess I forgot all about the way he’d treated the fanged man, too—because the next part came out without a moment’s hesitation, and I almost cost us the whole deal.

“Mouth-to-mouth,” I said.

A long silence stretched out between Merit and me. Suddenly

his eyes swelled in their sockets. His forehead crept into a sky-scraping posture. And then his mouth opened into a snarl that I never expected.

“What is this, some kind of a homo thing?” he roared. “What are you guys, a couple of homos? One cute boy and one bull, you think I can’t figure you two out! What kind of a show do ya think I’m running here, kootch or not—”

“He can really do it, you know,” a voice said.

Buddy Merit heaved in his seat. The sound seemed to catch him off guard.

It came again: “He can really do it.”

I turned my head toward James. I’d told him not to open his mouth; in fact, I’d told him not to open his *fucking* mouth. Buddy stared too. He blinked—one slow-motion, staggered signal. And then, for some reason, he paid James a little courtesy. He kept watching James; we both did. And in the humid, shocked silence, James continued to speak.

“I drop him and he goes out. He lies there for a while looking like he’s dead. Then I bring him back.”

“You bring him back. How do you do that?” Buddy asked.

“Like he said. A.R.”

Buddy’s expression contorted. He spoke as though he were chewing glass: “You put your mouth on his.”

James looked momentarily confused, then broke to complete honesty. “Yes. Yeah, I guess I do. I breathe for him and that’s how I bring him back.”

“How long’s he out for?”

James’s chin fell into his hand. He leaned back and gazed at me for a long while. I gazed back, uncertain. I couldn’t answer the question. If Buddy was asking how long I go down for, personally I’m never around to time it.

“Two minutes,” James said finally. “The longest I’d say is maybe two minutes.”

Two minutes? Man, even I was impressed.

“But I start breathing for him before that,” James went on.

“If I wait too long, he throws up. And it’s not good to go long without breathing.”

Merit’s mouth bowed into a frown. “Two minutes isn’t very long.”

“Yes, sir, Buddy Merit,” James said, “it *is* a long time. When I drop him I have to count, and it’s a long time.” He paused. And then as if no one had heard him the first time: “It’s not good to go long without breathing.”

“You drop him,” Merit repeated. “How exactly do you do that?”

James turned in his seat again and fixed his eyes on me. I watched him back without moving. It reminded me of a bad experience I’d had at the barber’s once. The perilous moment when I was in the chair, committed, and hair began to fall about me in suspicious, unconsented-to quantities: *Oh Gawd, where is this going?* I recall thinking in frozen alarm.

I kept sitting there watching James, James watching me. And then, just as I began to think that James wasn’t going to do anything at all, that he’d turned hollow and glassed-off again right before our eyes, that I’d get the chance to pick up the reins and recover us, James moved. Like a hunter striking with his bare hands—casting his shadow across the pool, waiting long enough to allow the fish to skitter, linger, and then grow lazily unconcerned with his presence—he snapped his hands outward.

His right hand landed at the base of my skull; the angle between thumb and pointer met the soft spot under my chin. I didn’t even get a chance to draw a breath. I managed one startled declaration before I lost my air completely.

My eyes went wide, popped outward like kernels fired in a pan. They fixed upon James, but in the periphery all I could see was Buddy Merit. He began to rise from his chair like a child leaning in to watch the first pitch of the baseball season, or to see polar bears swimming in the aquarium at the zoo. His jaw unhinged and his eyes went wide. And in this instant, even though me and James had done this countless times before, I

believe I saw for the first time what it was that we were doing.

I saw how James was twice as big as me and twice as ugly. I saw his hands, sprung and loaded, with me caught inside them like an animal in a trap. I saw how the determination in his eyes could look like something else, something less benign. I saw this all in Buddy Merit's face.

I looked at James and he looked back at me. My back straightened and my nails began to claw at the crummy varnish on Buddy's chair. Me and James knew each other very well by then. But now, just like that time in the bar worth fifty dollars, a prize so intoxicating I don't even remember it, I was startled by the dive inward. I became aware of a temperature change in the seam of my pants. If James didn't let up soon, Buddy wasn't going to be the only one rising to the call of the wild.

This all passed in seconds. Before such events could evolve, James released his hand from my chin. "Like that," he said. "Only longer."

My lungs reached hysterically and I flopped forward onto the desk. My shoulders heaved up and down.

"Do it now!" Buddy shrieked. "Can you do it right now?"

James drew his gaze to me. He watched for a long moment, taking in my tearing eyes and my mouth, frosted with spit and gasping for air. His eyes held a strange combination of malice and apology. And just as I started clenching up for round two, James spoke.

"No," he said. "I'm not going to do it now."

"Do it now!" Merit cried.

"*I'm not going to do it now,*" James said, getting loud. "He's tired. He's tired and he hasn't eaten in almost—"

I put my hand out and clapped it across James's wrist. "Talk fast," I said at Merit. "And soon enough you'll see the whole thing."

Merit turned to survey me. It was the first look I'd gotten from him since James opened his fat mouth. He looked me up and down, his slow, even respiration a terrible contrast with my own. He cut me an equally terrible grin. And in it, I understood

that he and I both knew there was little room for bargaining. Between Buddy's enthusiasm and James's and my dire straits, whatever came next would be mostly lip service.

"I just lost my geek," he announced. "On account of that, you see where this places me." His eyes panned thoughtfully over us. He paused at James, raised one contemplative finger. "I do have a little test I give my employees. A few skill-testing questions, let's say. Are you up for that just now?"

James'll never make it through this, I thought, pained. And just as though he'd heard me, Merit flashed his grin.

"Oh, it's not hard, don't worry. You can answer together. Do you have social insurance numbers for me?"

"No," James said with an immediacy that I couldn't have competed with. That was *my* answer; but like I told Merit, James had been with me for five years. He knows the rules. For a stupid guy, sometimes he ain't so stupid.

Merit's grin bloomed. "Good. Then we're off to a good start. And do you know who's the boss around here?"

James frowned. "You?" he offered.

"Right again!" Merit clapped his hands. Then he sobered. "But if you break your neck or kill yourself, or your little ditty here fails to do its job one day on my stage, who's your boss then?"

Nobody answered as me and James exchanged glances.

Merit's tone grew strident. "*Who?*"

"Not you," I said.

Merit's eyes switched between us. "That's right. *Not* me. And what with my offering you the kind favor of your entire gross pay—not a penny for this fine government of ours, that is—we'll have the paperless kind of arrangement that, if you should change your mind, you'll find confirms this. Yes?"

"Yes," I said.

Merit nodded. "And finally, boys, while I'm on the subject—do you have any idea how much minimum wage is in this country of ours?"

“Yes,” I said, and witnessed the slow rise of Merit’s eyes upon me. “No?” I revised.

“That’s right.” He flourished a hand. “You don’t! Forget you know a thing about it. We pay a flat-rate weekly round here, the specs to be worked out between you and my own kith and kin.”

“What do you mean?” I said quickly. “Is that more or less?”

Merit smiled. “Well, that depends on the worth of your trick, son. Your following, how well you can gut the marks. Like I said, Single O’s cost me more to run. But if you play your cards right on stage, I wager you’ll work strong. Am I talking too fast for you, son? I said we’ll take you on.” He tapped the desk as though to signal the end of the discussion. “Any questions?”

“What’s a geek?” That was James, and so my fingers tightened across his wrist in a silent, preemptive wring of forewarning.

“Geek’s a sideshow performer,” Buddy said. “A loser. Nobody. A person no one will miss. Someone whose ass I just fired.” He looked at us meaningfully and I thought I understood. James had been destitutely underemployed the first summer that we lived together, and the only work he’d been able to find was at a campground, shoveling shit into the honeydew wagon. *Don’t ask, James*, I thought, looking at Merit and remembering this indignity. *God, don’t ask. Probably the crummiest job on the whole damn fairgrounds, by the looks of the guy. And the sound of it.*

Merit’s brow danced upon his forehead. “Anything else?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You got anyplace for us to stay?”

Merit bared his teeth. “Sure do.” He shuffled a hand through his pockets to produce a set of keys. “You can stay at the geek’s, if you two don’t mind sharing. He was renting from me.” He slid the keys across the desk. “He certainly won’t be staying there anymore.” The message here—as with that buried within his game of Twenty Questions—was somewhat ominous, but I admit it wasn’t one that I cared to wrap my head around. I snapped the fob up as if Buddy had just handed me the key to the city: no reclined car seat tonight for me, no siree Bob.

“Come round the sideshow tent tomorrow morning so we can stake out your routine,” Buddy said. “Practices are free, boys. You should know you won’t see a cent until after your first performance. Again, my son will see to all that.” He nodded toward my hand upon the keys. “And don’t get to thinking those come for free.”

“I can’t pay you,” I told him. He answered me just the same.

“You will.” He stood then, and as he did I was reminded of his son’s sudden pose when he believed that me and James had arrived to stir trouble. “Any questions?”

I shook my head. James and me stood. Buddy waited until we were nearly out the door, his eyes on our backs, before he let fly with one last proclamation: “Hey, I have one.”

I turned back, meeting his gaze.

Buddy smirked. “I just can’t help but ask,” he said. “How in hell’d you boys figger out you could do this trick, anyway?”

In the moment Buddy put voice to the puzzle, I saw James rising to the challenge. His lips parted with impossible confidence. After all these years of studying James, I was glad I’d made that investment.

“*James*,” I charged, swinging my head in his direction. “I thought I told you to *shut it*.”

I witnessed a certain bewilderment cross Buddy’s face. It was as if, among those rusty cogs turning in his head, he considered for the first time that he’d read the two of us all wrong. His look was one of combined apprehension and confusion, and it left me feeling pleurably self-righteous. This time it was me who grinned.

And then I gave him the line.

As truthful as James’s would have been, but a little less detail-oriented. After all, me and James had been running through the part for almost as long as we’d known each other. Or—let’s not argue semantics here, my friend—maybe even before that, if we count the time at Mount Rosa’s.

“Lots of practice,” I said. “I guess.”