

## Gabriel · Naomi Clark

### HIS FAMILY

I was born into a family of freaks. Of them all I was most freak, one of those millions who, save for accidents of sex, body build, height, weight, and physiognomy, are just alike: no horns, no tails, no forked tongues, no two of us joined together, neither flexible as rubber nor petrified.

### HIS FIRST MEMORIES

Down under the circus bleachers where, during the first years after I learned to walk, I spent the hours of my parents' rehearsals and performances, I studied backs: shoulders, torsos, buttocks, calves bulging below the seat's edge, ankles, the heels of cowboy boots and farmers' boots, high-heeled slippers and run-over sandals. I never touched anyone; and no one saw me, even if for some reason they bent over and peered between their feet for a moment. Maybe once in a while a boy of two, from a bleacher above me, after he'd pissed through the gap between levels, peered down to see where the stream had gone, then poked out his tongue or crossed his eyes at me. No one else. And there I had a perfect view of my parents' work.

### HIS PARENTS

Nobody had a name, much less a job, for me. My father was the hermaphrodite, my mother the bearded lady, I so plain they didn't know what to do with me. I didn't have even a legal name. Nobody wanted to admit I'd been born, though, in their way, they often were kind to me. Those around me seemed always to be going away, even my parents; if they looked at me, it was quickly and fleetingly. I longed to stare deep into my father's eyes, deep into my mother's. When the circus workers called me, it was "Hey goon," "Hey grub." Behind locked teeth I said: "I too shall wrestle with the angel. I too shall claim my proper name."

As I watched their always retreating backs, I studied them: how a skull could sit on a neck, the round beads of the spine's rosary, the swell and sway or bobble of hips. I learned to read character from the expression of the back. But I could not remember anything for more than the span of a

few minutes. Language, symbols, whatever was present was almost unbearably vivid; when not present, objects, events, persons—human or animal—disappeared.

#### THE CAST AND THE CREW

Performance was what counted: the circus master carefully chose cast and crew. A Comanche whose people had been driven from Texas to Oklahoma was master of horses, training them from their birth. Sometimes he let me ride the great stallions. A Pecos Indian from the people of the ruined pueblo near Taos cared for the snakes. “Messengers of the gods,” he told me. A Malaysian, the Man with the Magic Humpback, was our chief magician. Our drummers were Japanese, our acrobats from Szechwan. Our roustabouts came from Australia, the Ukraine, Lebanon, Morocco, Angola, Chile, Lapland, Nome, from Maine and Alabama.

#### SNAKES

One way or another, all the animals spoke to me. One morning when I was very young, I crawled behind the snakemaster into the glass-fronted cage where the snakes lived. Until the master backed out of the cage and jumped down off the truck-bed, I hid behind a big fern growing from soil in the bottom of the cage. As much as the patterns of the snakes’ backs—brilliant circles, black diamond shapes, twisting green figure eights, and shadowy infinity symbols—the movement of their supple bodies cast its spell on me, for it was that movement, intensely present, that made their setting live, that made me aware of my own life beating within my every cell.

They, too, however, seemed always to be going away—even if they moved toward me, they were going away from somewhere, as though a ribbon of light and shadow and color moved, a ribbon of leaves and flowers or sand and rock, of the landscape itself. When Father found me, I was laughing, reaching delightedly toward the tail of a diamondback in the next case, a cottonmouth moccasin around my shoulders, wearing necklaces of Louisiana coral snakes. My paternal grandmother, Serpent Woman, laughed too. Later she told me the story as she applied makeup before her mirror. Her spine twisted and swayed, the scales that were her skin glistened iridescent blue and silver in the brilliance from the lights around her mirrors.

“Sinuosity,” she said, for she always spoke to me as to an adult. “That’s what you can learn from such playmates.” She stood, her body undulating. She was never still. Now, from a deeper memory than that of hearing her speak, I feel the cool, silken skins of the snakes as they embraced me.

#### HIS EARLY TRAVELS

Even before the snakes I was aware of movement: the long bump and sway and rattle over the back roads of Texas. Sometimes I travelled in the bed of my parents’ Model T Ford, in a quilted pen protected by braced trunks and boxes. Most of the roads were gravelled and washboarded; that rough cradle became a gourd, and I was the bird bones inside it. I liked the thud of my elbows against the floor of the truckbed, liked the click of my teeth against each other.

#### THE PUMA

Sometimes my parents put me in one of the big trucks, with the scrawny gorilla and her baby or the puma and her cubs. When I was three, the puma, captured in Big Bend country, still would let me suckle. In ordinary circumstances, the circus animals were remarkably gentle; my parents and I often petted them. My parents’ marriage had joined the two most illustrious families of freaks in all the South, perhaps, indeed, in the whole of our hemisphere. But I, inexplicably undistinguished, was born into the Depression, hard times made harder by a religious fervor against circuses, dancing, theatre of any kind. Perhaps my parents are not to be blamed if unconsciously they hoped that in a moment of excitement—a minor collision at a crossroads, a shortage of water as we crossed the Llano Estacado, or of food when audiences were small—the members of my foster family might forget their tolerance of the strangely unnoteworthy guest at those generous teats.

#### HIS MOTHER

Perhaps it was in the Ford that I first became interested in backs. Even at three-and-a-half, when I stood on tiptoe or on one of the many books that my maternal great-grandfather, the Wolf Man, supplied me, I could just see over the trunk and the low metal wall that separated me from my parents. The curls of my mother’s auburn hair, that had reached below her

knees as she stood for her wedding photo, blew then about my hot face, cooling, tickling my skin. As the wind lifted her hair, I saw the lobes of her small ears—I wanted to lick them—and the diamonds dangling from thin golden hoops that grew out of the pale flesh.

She turned often to look at the landscape to the right, dust devils dancing through thin grass, across prickly pear; or to the left, where wooden oil derricks might still stand, to speak to my father. As gusts swirled around us, I saw the curves of her neck, saw soft new tendrils, hidden in still air. I saw her calm profile, a small circle of the smooth, massive cheek, the curl and billow of her full red beard. So strange a mixture of opposites: slim neck, slim fingers, slender legs, tiny thin-boned feet my father loved to caress; massive shoulders, upper arms, and buttocks; small, flat breasts.

Other bearded ladies stood languidly or pranced about exhibiting the curly bushes that hid their chins. My mother disdained so uninspired a life. In spite of her size—she could well have been a wrestler—she was a high flyer, and she excelled on the wire. To see her wide swings on the trapeze, higher and higher, carried audiences into frenzy. No one but my father was strong enough to catch her. Though he did not himself fly, he hung downward from the trapeze to bring her safely home, catching her wrists, their hands clasping in the traditional hold. Mother wore her hair in a carefully bound chignon, but her beard flew free. To see them together, far above us, with no net, their male strength and their female softness accented by the lines and sequins of their costumes, for some seemed to bring an almost orgasmic release. All over the tent, different from the usual gasps, their moans rose.

#### HIS PARENTS SEARCH FOR A SIGN

My father smooths my hair, rests his hand lightly on my shoulder. I feel him touch the skull, the shoulder joint, each vertebra, to test for any change, some indication that, as I grow taller, I will develop a new, unique structure. “Did you have a bad dream?” he asks. He lifts me over the tailgate and settles me piggyback.

Mother looks at us in her hand mirror. She smiles, but her gaze flicks up and down, as though she also seeks some sign. She pirouettes, her red beard tossing like the mane of a stallion. She leads the way uphill, spreads a cloth, lays out food.

## FEASTS

What feasts we had under live oaks or willows, pecan trees or the wide East Texas persimmon tree: the persimmon fruit spare in quantity, rich in the taste I now know came partly through some strange synesthesia in which heat lightning that played around the figures of my parents imbued the food with the taste of love. Afterward, for me it was time for a nap; as I pretended to sleep, I heard from beyond a briar patch or a clump of wild honeysuckle their murmurs, laughter, moans like those from the audience when my mother flew in the cathedral spaces of the Big Top.

## HIS FATHER

My father fascinated me no less than my mother, yet somehow I must strain to recover images of him. He wore his hair—fine, straight, blond—a little long for a man. As it dried after he washed it he pushed it up—almost like the bobbed, marcelled fashions women wore then. Sometimes, he let me lather the shampoo and shape his hair, covered with white foam, into snowbanks and snow castles, later comb it with a silver comb.

He always wore a derby hat in sunshine; he adjusted it carefully over his waved hair. His ears too were a woman's—pale dried peaches, close to his skull. His neck was that of a young *Hercule*, his shoulders and arms all muscle. He could, indeed, have been the strong man—a French circus-master had begged him to take that role. His back, however, tapered to a slim, woman's waist. And even when he drove, if I closed my eyes I could see the full, high curves of his breasts, where as an infant so often I had nestled.

No less than my mother was he content with bare exhibition, all that was demanded of any freak. On stage, he focused all his will and concentration on performance. Reticence, the display without exhibition, the suggestion, were the essence of successful stage presence for him. In the purest of sopranos he sang difficult arias, acting the parts with all the power of those divas who at heart are actresses, with the emotion of those whose love had brought exaltation or grief. As I listened, my heart swelled and constricted with the pain of love, my breath blown this way and that by storms whose source, I now know, was the pull in me of opposites I saw in him.

## HIS GRANDPARENTS

I must tell you of one who lives in my mind as vividly as those I have known in the flesh: the founder of our clan. He was jester to a Spanish king who often beat him, often used him as a messenger in country too rough even for horses. Stiffening his body, he could roll along on five arms and four legs faster, even uphill, than anyone else could run, and he could scale cliffs and walls no one else could attempt. The Spanish gave him the name Jesús José María Aldemarada Rueda: Jesus the Wheel. With so many useful appendages, he was a great fighter and a quick worker. The king at last set him free and gave him a circus, well-endowed with costumes, wagons, tents, and animals. As a child I spent many hours practicing cartwheels in emulation of him. Two arms and two legs have their limitations.

Great-grandfather Wolf Man often walked on all fours. He had fur that formed a mane round his face and rippled all down his long body, and a long tail. His howl was sweet to me as the wind's music. He juggled great burning hoops, throwing them high into the spaces of the Big Top without ever singeing his fur. Once he took to the forests and swamps of East Texas for a whole year. Each fall after I reached the age of four, he sought us out and took me into the woods for a week, teaching me how to live in the wolf's way.

Of my grandparents, I knew three. Serpent Woman was pure Romany Gypsy. Her family, she told me, came from India by way of Egypt, the Adriatic, Romania, Hungary, and France. When now I see blonde women with metallic blue eyeshadow and artificial tans, I know they long for what she had, the colors of her mind that displayed themselves in her iridescent skin as in her movements and her whispered messages: messages from gods, she told me.

A Carolina banker, crazed with longing to hold her close, shot Bird Woman as she flew through the highest reaches of the Big Top. She died the same day I was born. "She was feathered more brilliantly than a peacock, flew with more grace than the peregrine," my mother told me. "She needed no trapeze, not even a partner. Only perches where she could light to wait for the show's end. As she died, she stroked your belly." When I was a child, my mother often brushed her fingers back and forth across the skin just below my navel. Though I thought surely her touch would call them forth, no feathers sprouted.

Bull Dancer was my maternal grandfather. In the American South then, only in the circus and only in the proud company of freaks could he have moved as he did, warrior who guarded the circus, fearless trainer of big cats, husband of a European woman—strangely colored though she might be. His great-great-grandfather, he told me, healer whom the whites called a witch doctor, could change himself into any form, animal or imagined. Captured by slavers, brought to Alabama to work the sorghum fields, he taught his craft to his son and, to be safe in that wilderness of cruelty, to his daughters—all of whom were sold away in their early teens. The son grew to be over nine feet tall: slender, strongly muscled, agile. Whatever gene brought the height appeared again in my grandfather. Not in me; I might be any lanky Texan.

As he danced in the ring with cheetahs and the big Spanish bulls, all perfectly controlled by the messages of his movements, he seemed not the familiar blue-black holy man who licked me with his tongue when I bruised or cut myself, but a great black eagle dipping and swaying in the sky.

#### THE EAGLE

I carry with me a long gourd full of bones and a feathered skin. Sometimes I take out one or all of the bones and look at them, rub them with my thumb. They shine now like polished ivory.

As we bumped down the narrow dirt roads that edged the cedar brakes of South Texas, we saw eagles—golden eagles, they were called, but only their eyes were truly golden, and their beaks, their talons. They soared above the canyons to the north. For a long time our bird collection had included only prairie chickens, buzzards, and roadrunners. Riding far out beyond the trucks, the master of horses found a wounded eagle. I watched the great raptor, his wings slack, his eyes lidded. When he opened them, they burned as though in anguish or madness; before the lids dropped, the pupils turned up till no iris showed. “Your grandfather will heal him,” he told me, but when Grandfather had done so, the circus master had other ideas than to release him.

Long before his first show, men and boys gathered. They stared at him, hunched their shoulders. Some joked obscenely, some shivered, some cursed, believing eagles to be enemies who took their calves and lambs.

Having seen his eyes, even I knew how tenuous his hold on power.

When we headed for the West Texas county fairs, I rode in the truck with the eagle cage. Hour after hour over the sandy roads, the dust flying, I watched the silent bird, but he would not open his eyes. I talked to him, but he would not answer.

When I found the eagle dead, nothing but feathers, skin, bones, jerky, I studied the gift he had left me. Often when I see his bones, I remember the poem of a Kiowa poet in which an old man wanders forever over the Oklahoma desert, the bones of his sons in a bag behind his saddle, bones which from their long polishing gleam like precious stones. These bones, I think, are the bones of my father before he was born; or these bones are the bones of my soul.

#### THE SCULPTOR

“Everyone must have a second art, a secret one,” my father said to me one day soon after my ninth birthday. We’d stopped for lunch and my mother slept. He and I walked through one of those weed-grown South Texas graveyards where clay Virgins, jam jars with dried-up wildflowers, circles of freshwater mussel shells, bits of pearly glass, and wooden crosses with burned-in names provide honor and immortality. At the newest grave, a small one, carefully he unwrapped the load he carried: a pale grey limestone angel. Taking from his belt a chisel and small mallet, he cut, in the space he’d left blank for them, a name and dates. He didn’t remove the wooden cross; the stone went at the foot of the grave. “Your secret and mine,” he said, smiling. “No, I didn’t know her, till now,” he said in answer to my unspoken question. “It doesn’t matter.”

After that I noticed how, in the few hours he had free from other work, my father always was carving something. Like the great artists, he was never as good as he wished to be at it, never satisfied. I suppose that today his work would be considered that of a gifted primitive. He sculpted wooden friezes for the animal cages. From mesquite and pecan wood he made near-lifesize figures of the performers. He placed some for figure-heads on the trucks; to draw customers in towns where we stopped, he set up some in the streets. He carved figures of the Virgin from blocks of the common white limestone of the Austin quarries or from rounded boulders from Marble Falls on the Colorado River, as many as his boss would let

him pack along. One piece of fine white marble came, he said, from Balmorhea; he'd carried it twenty miles out of the canyon on his back.

Often I watched my father work, watched his hands move over the stone, learning every curve and nodule, every seam, healed fracture, burl and bot, watched the flex of his back muscles as he raised the mallet and brought it down powerfully against the chisel, watched the stone dust fall away and the ethereal shape emerge. I listened to him talk to his hands as a master might talk to journeymen or, sometimes, as one might speak to apprentices; listened to him talk to the emerging shape as one might speak to a lover.

Whenever my mother passed where my father worked, I saw his eyes glow, radiant, and his hand shake, then grip the chisel more firmly than ever. As I rode beside the reptile cage or with the big cats, often I fell into a dream in which his eyes sought me and sought my mother. I see the back of my mother's living body as though sculpted in tawny marble, going away down a long aisle toward a lighted circle. Mother shakes me. "Wake up, little goon," she says.

Once the circus ran out of money and three trucks broke down on the same day. For weeks we were stranded in Waxahachie, while performers and roustabouts alike worked in the cotton fields, in garages, chopping wood. My father faced the mayor and made a job for himself. He sculpted limestone reliefs and placed them as cornices on the courthouse. The same woman's face, looking back over her shoulder, occurs over and over, in every possible mood. Hidden among acanthus leaves that entwine her face—to the eyes of Texas farmers and lawyers, indistinguishable from the exotic foliage—I see my mother's beard.

#### THE LEGACY

After my father died, I found in his special trunk a record of all his sculptures and where he had placed them. Only in Waxahachie did his "secret" art feed us; all his other works were gifts: to the circus he loved and its people, to those poverty-stricken even in death, to the inhabitants of small towns all across Texas, sometimes even to the animals and ghosts of the desert places. Following the routes his ledger laid out for me, I found many statues of a woman, pioneer or field worker, dancer, high flyer, all with my mother's face in white marble or black, pale cream or golden

brown. I found them in small bleak parks on the Cross Plains, at the edge of the Caprock, on the High Plains, in the villages of black people on the black bottomland and in the piney woods of East Texas.

#### SCHOOL

What have been the images of my nightmares? After my parents died, a truant officer found me. In one of those schools whose students I had so envied, a red-brick box with separate entrances for boys and girls, I learned to think of my beautiful father and my powerfully muscled mother—of myself—as freaks according to the connotations the other children, the teachers, the townspeople, gave that word. Their influence did not last forever.

#### FEATHERS

Was I in love with my grandmothers, the one I knew and the one I never knew? A teacher at whose heels the children hissed “Humpback, Humpback” helped me in my search. Crow, bluejay, paisano; wren, red-bird, scissortail. I learned that the feathers of the bird evolved from the scales of the snake. So I began a cloak of feathers for myself, and a book of feathers and snake skins.

The rules were these: I must find each feather, each skin myself; I could harm no bird or snake. Paths along the Caprock, through canyons, paths through cities where buildings were growing taller, the long beaches of Padre Island, every patch in the piney woods and the scrub oak forests gave me quills dropped by winged messengers and skins from which, blind, afraid, soft, snakes emerged wiser than the year before. Storms, predators, old age brought me whole wings to form the covers of the book, each spring new skins to complete the cloak. I saw the wheel of time, like my grandfather as he rolled uphill and downvalley, turning faster than anyone can run. My search took me down into the underworld, where the right side of my heart grew twice the size of the left and strangers' blood over and over refilled my emptied veins. When I returned, I could remember.

## THE CAVE

In a cave in Palo Duro Canyon, a sculpture (perhaps — for those who did not know my mother — Mary before the angel came) stands with her back to the viewer, her head turned to look over her shoulder, the front of her body hidden. Her hair is lifted from her neck as though by wind. It streams behind her, a fin or a wing. Near her, on a branch of a precisely sculpted tree, an eyeless eagle stands, its wings spread wide, its head high, its beak open as though words might come from its throat. At my mother's feet, a female cougar nurses three cubs, one human. Around the whole rises a filigree of marble; to see the figures within from the path through the cave, one must lean close and peer through the interstices of the carved marble wire. On the other side, a wall appears close but, as one circles the statue, recedes. The passage, after many turnings, leads to green leaves and blue sky. Toward that blue freedom, in the timeless stretch of the artist who flies high toward the catch, toward her partner on whom depends her life, my mother's hands stretch.

## HIS PATH

I've followed the path my father left outlined in his ledger and I've walked in circles round all his sculptures. Night after night in dreams I've seen my father on the stage, on the trapeze. I've attended every circus I could find. Eventually, I turned to the observation of human beings, and discovered the small differences, the imperfections, that make each a freak, each in some way beautiful.

"The soul does not depend on memory," a wise man said. "It consists of other things." I've found some of those other things. I've kept some few memories, as everything and everyone disappears into the light ahead.

## THE DEATHS OF HIS PARENTS

How did my parents die? Sometimes I reflect that history must have impinged on my childhood, on their fabulous lives; and I think that in the grotesquerie of war they became no longer stars of the Big Top, but — like all those around them — merely the grotesques of everyday life.

Sometimes I dream it was I who killed them; that somehow, though the circus was my school, my kingdom, I longed, after a time, to be like the children I saw along the streets of our parades, in the bleachers at every

performance; and begged my parents — those most beautiful beings, their strangeness given, their divinity self-made, my first and forever loves — to become the prim, conventionally dressed, conventionally shaped parents I saw in banks and stores, entering churches, primly accompanying children to the circus, the women laughing at the clowns only behind well-manicured hands.

Sometimes I believe that on an evening of supreme achievement on the high trapezes, they simply flew out the open circle at the top of the great tent, and away.

I'm an ordinary man. In my dreams, I am that bird in whom the scales of his ancestors evolved to feathers, who first stretched his wings and used them. Each morning, as my mother did when I was a child, I brush my fingers across my belly.