

JEN FAWKES

REBIRTH OF THE BIG TOP

Miranda the Elephant Girl was the first of them. Trevor hired her to work concessions on Fridays and alternate Wednesdays. “I cannot cook, and I don’t do windows,” she’d joked in halting English. “Anything else, I’m your girl.” Trevor guessed she was pushing forty. She wore a pair of cut-off dungarees and a half-shirt, making no attempt to hide her condition. From a distance, the skin of her arms, legs, and torso looked filthy, or like the spotted pelt of a jaguar. Close up, rough, gray scales leapt into focus. Trevor perched on the edge of his battered desk, watching her stare down the box fan that circulated stifling air through his office, words like *armored* and *stegosaurus* and *parched* scuttling through his brain. The skin of her back resembled a relief map of a locale he’d never imagined.

Gill Nathan’s World Famous Carnival and Sideshow had been touring the Southeast when an aneurism erupted in Gill Nathan’s brain, killing him, stranding his employees outside Atlanta. Trapeze artists and lion tamers. Strongmen and acrobats. Bareback riders and clowns. A whole slew of human oddities.

“I cannot tell you how much appreciation I feel,” Miranda said as Trevor showed her how to load and operate the popcorn popper, how to change the soda syrup and deal with the sticky drawer on the cash register. “Most of us have never known any other life. It would be nice if you could hire more of my colleagues.”

But no one came to the drive-in. Trevor couldn’t even afford the Elephant Girl. He wasn’t sure why he’d hired her in the first place.

Cassie hadn’t had the strength to see it through. Trevor had read as much in a note she’d affixed to the white door of the Frigidaire on a Monday morning in April. Joshua had just turned twelve. When Trevor touched the sleeping boy’s shoulder, Josh’s sunken blue eyes snapped open.

“She’s gone?”

Trevor nodded.

Josh struggled to a seated position. “Where do you think she’ll go?”

“California? It’s where all the beautiful people end up.”

That morning, Trevor quit his job in order to take over the boy's schooling. "Are you crazy?" Nick Peterson said. "You're the best we've got. You were born to do this."

Trevor had always had a knack for turning failing businesses around. When he was eight, the addition of fresh lime to his lemonade made his the busiest stand in a twelve-block radius. At ten, he'd suggested that his uncle Carl knock a hole in the south wall of his casual dining restaurant in order to install a drive-through window, and sales at Carl's Cozy Corner had tripled. And for his father, who hawked the pelts of small, defenseless creatures—sables, rabbits, minks—in the viscous atmosphere of north Georgia, Trevor's myriad suggestions—layaway, soft lighting, comfy chairs, cool drinks—added up to pure profit. As a consultant with the Atlanta firm of Dowd, Dowd, and Blessing, Trevor had traveled the country for ten years, studying business plans and cost analyses, telling people from all walks of life how better to run their businesses. On average, he increased profitability by an astounding fifty-seven percent—twice the percentage achieved by any other D, D, and B consultant.

2 "We could go under without you," Nick Peterson pleaded.

"Sorry," Trevor said. "My priority is the boy."

Cassie had been gone a month when Josh announced that he might like to see California. Trevor had just finished stirring pure Vermont maple syrup into Josh's oatmeal. When he lifted a napkin to wipe a glob from the boy's chin, an unexpected sob tore from Trevor, like pressurized molten matter escaping an active volcano.

"Shh," Josh said, placing a withered hand on his father's arm. "We're OK."

In terms of hair, Josh had only ever had a thin fringe hugging the outside of his enormous cranium. His body was the most brittle thing Trevor had ever touched. The wrinkling of his skin had started a couple of years earlier. Sometime in the next year, he would most likely suffer a fatal heart attack.

That afternoon, they studied geography. Trevor spread a map of the United States across the kitchen table, and he and Josh pushed Matchbox cars from state to state, memorizing capitals. Each state was a particular shade of blue; these tonal variations roiled over the map like ocean waves. Josh had spent his entire life in Georgia. Trevor decided what he and the boy should probably do was travel.

After the Elephant Girl, Trevor hired Neil, who'd accompanied Miranda to a Wednesday shift at the concession stand. The hirsute young man closely resembled post-transformation Lon Chaney Jr. in *The Wolf Man*.

"You do not mind if he just stands beside the counter, Mr. Trevor?" Miranda had said. "Neil has nowhere to go, and he is crazy for American movies."

Trevor, too, was crazy for American movies. He figured that this was why, after returning from his cross-country travels, he hadn't gone back to the consulting firm of Dowd, Dowd, and Blessing. Why instead he'd scraped together the remainder of his savings and purchased the Big Top Drive-In, an establishment on the brink of foreclosure and collapse twenty miles south of Atlanta. When he was a boy, his parents had often taken him to the Big Top; the cinematic outings had given his family a much-needed break, releasing the tension that forever charged the air of their home. Nights at the Big Top were organized by genre: Western Wednesdays, Noir Thursdays, Romance Saturdays. Trevor knew he'd seen *Arsenic and Old Lace* on a Tuesday, *Now, Voyager* on a Saturday, *Destry Rides Again* on a Wednesday. The taste of popcorn and fountain soda, the tinny sounds that burst from the metal speaker hung on the window of his father's Buick, the sticky sensation of bare thighs against leather, the sight of his mother resting her curly head on his father's shoulder—these were the bright spots of boyhood.

When Trevor took over the Big Top, he screened the films of his youth. He reintroduced genre nights. The public stayed away in droves.

"Perhaps you should try showing something modern, Mr. Trevor?" Miranda suggested after she'd been working at the deserted drive-in a couple of weeks. "Shirley MacLaine and Steve McQueen. *Bye Bye Birdie*. Warren Beatty. Then the people, they might come."

Trevor set Neil up in the booth, teaching him how to run the projector, how to spot the white circle that heralds the reel change, how to load the heavy spools of black film. "Where you from, Neil?" he asked.

"Upstate New York," the young man replied.

"Cold up that way."

"It's good for my condition. Better than this heat."

"What about Miranda?"

"Oh, this is the place for her. Swampy. Cold dries her out something terrible."

"You two together?"

Neil shrugged. "Sort of."

“Ever think about shaving?”

“Sure,” Neil replied. “I used to. But it just keeps coming back.”

Trevor had gotten his first tattoo in North Carolina. On the lower-right side of his back. “Cool,” Joshua had said, running his fingers over the saran-covered Tar Heel State, shaded the same blue as its counterpart on their U.S. capitals map. “I want one.”

“You’re too young.”

Josh looked thirty years older than his father. The absurdity of Trevor’s statement wavered between them.

“Come on, Dad. What are you afraid of?”

He feared the pain that streaked his son’s face as Tiny, the tattoo artist, injected subcutaneous ink. The burly man had hesitated for several long seconds before agreeing to tattoo Josh. “You sure he’s old enough?”

Trevor looked at Josh, who peeled off his striped shirt to reveal skeletal arms, a shriveled chest and back. The boy nodded enthusiastically. Trevor turned to Tiny and did the same.

4

Mingled with the discomfort on Josh’s face was evidence of the boy’s particular and serene strength—fortitude bred from a lifelong battle with agony. As they ambled back to the Mountaineer Motor Court, something swelled inside Trevor. He swung his son high in the air then hugged him to his chest. In cabin twelve, they stood with their backs to the mirror, shirtless, peering over their shoulders, studying their matching modifications.

“Cool,” Josh said again, softly.

The plan was to hit every state in the nation, driving the Chevy up the east coast to Maine, making their way down to Alabama, then back up to Michigan, and so on. They’d set out in May. The weather was fine in Pennsylvania and New York, in Vermont and New Hampshire. They didn’t spend long in each state, just time enough to see a couple of sights and add a tattoo to their burgeoning body maps. Trevor estimated that it would take three months to reach California.

“It’s nothing like home,” he told Josh. “The trees are different, and the flowers, and the animals. It’s almost like another country.”

“What do you think she’s doing?”

Trevor couldn’t imagine. When they’d met, Cassie had been an aesthetician with aspirations. She loved musicals—*The King and I* and *Kiss Me, Kate* and *Gypsy* and *Dolls*. She belted out numbers in the shower, and while wash-

ing dishes, and behind the wheel of the car. Occasionally, she would cradle Trevor's head in her lap, ruffling his thinning hair with her nervous fingers, singing softly, her eyelids low. She was too pretty for Trevor, who'd never been more than average-looking. If she hadn't gotten pregnant with Joshua, Trevor doubted she would have married him. He'd been working for Dowd, Dowd, and Blessing just over a year, building his unassailable reputation, when the boy was born.

"No," Cassie said after Dr. Derringer sat them down, after he attempted to explain Josh's condition. "I don't believe you."

Their son was two. By the age of seven, he would appear to be fifty. It would be a miracle if he saw thirteen.

"That's not possible," Cassie said, turning to Trevor. "Tell him Josh isn't sick. Tell him we can't watch him die. That we won't."

Dr. Derringer's office was flooded with afternoon light, but Trevor sensed a shadow creeping through. He thought of Max Schreck, of the eerie, jagged shade he'd cast on the walls in *Nosferatu*. The shadow of the vampire had heralded death; if it fell upon you, you were done for.

"Trevor," Cassie said, but Trevor was afraid to lift his eyes. He didn't want to look at his wife. He reached for her hand, which lay in his palm like something cold, scaly, inanimate. "Please," she said.

"Maybe she's working as an extra on a musical," Trevor said to Josh as they zoomed from Kentucky into Tennessee. "Maybe she'll get picked out of the crowd when the star breaks an ankle, and she'll take over the lead."

"Are you mad at her?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

Josh was eating animal crackers from one of those red circus train car boxes. He held up two elephants. Sitting on his knees, he walked them slowly across the dashboard of the Chevy, scooting closer and closer to Trevor. Just as the animals crested the rise over the instrument panel, Josh snatched them back and crammed them into his mouth. He pressed his heavy head into his father's upper arm.

"Yeah," he said when he'd finished chewing. "But I think I forgive her."

After Miranda and Neil came Julius, the Lobster Man, whose hands were shaped like two crustaceous claws. Conjoined twins Sheila and Shirley shared an enlarged heart. Duane had no arms, and Ruby, no legs. Gina the Giantess stood nearly seven feet tall. Bertram's parasitic twin dangled from his lower

spine. Trevor gave each of his employees a shift a week in the concession stand or the ticket booth. Sometimes he paid them to pick up trash that nonexistent customers left in the lot. Even when they weren't working, his employees gravitated to the Big Top, where they hung around, chatting with one another, watching the movies Neil projected onto the screen. *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet. The Man Who Came to Dinner. Force of Evil.* One night, Trevor was awakened by a light scratching on his bedroom window. He rose and stumbled to the front door. His battered cottage stood on the back side of the drive-in and had been included in the asking price. On the tiny porch, he discovered Miranda, wearing her customary cutoffs and half-shirt.

"Why won't you show the modern films?" she said. The scent of whiskey wafted from her curling lips. "Why do you insist on showing movies no one wants to see?"

"Does Neil know you're here?"

She shrugged. "Neil does not own me."

Trevor seized her scabrous arms near the shoulders. She smelled like the desert. Making love to the Elephant Girl was like going to bed with a belt sander. Marvellously painful. Trevor wished that her warm, moist interior were as desiccated as her exterior, that her mouth and vagina would abrade him like the skin of her chest and legs. Cassie had been as pliable as room-temperature butter, and she'd smelled of new-mown hay. After Josh's diagnosis, she'd started slinking around Trevor, dim and silent as a shade. When the time came, she announced that she would school Josh at home. Trevor was both relieved and ashamed of his relief. "I know kids can be cruel," he said, "but the boy doesn't have long. Should we really isolate him further?" Cassie bared her teeth. She slapped her husband's face. She moved her things into Josh's room, sleeping in the extra twin bed. From then on, Trevor caught only glimpses of his wife. Impressions of her. She spent nearly every moment with their son, but Trevor knew nothing of what she taught him.

"I know how to make a business turn a profit," he said to Miranda as they lay sidewise across his rickety iron bed. "That's not what I'm after."

"What are you after?"

"I don't exactly know."

She placed a coarse palm against each of his cheeks. "You think you know pain," she said. "I see this. Something claws at your insides. But listen to me, Mr. Trevor. Pain is skin so dry it cracks when you smile. And you don't know shit about it."

The following evening, a small crowd of teenagers showed up at the Big Top around ten p.m. *Key Largo* had started at nine. They parked their cars in front of the screen but didn't remain in them. They got out and swarmed the concession stand. Bought popcorn and Sugar Babies, nachos and sodas from Miranda and Gina the Giantess. Rather than returning to their cars, the kids settled on the pavement. They sat munching and slurping, pushing hair out of their faces, watching Miranda and Gina talk with Sheila and Shirley and Julius, who carried legless Ruby in his arms. Just for fun, Bertram started juggling, and Duane ate popcorn with his feet. The teenagers applauded. They tossed coins, which clanked loudly against the concrete.

Trevor and Josh saw the Grand Canyon and Mount Rushmore. The World's Largest Ball of Twine and Little Bighorn Battlefield. They explored deserted mining camps and ghost towns of the Wild West. The geographic pictograms on their backs grew, filling out, moving toward completion. They ate at greasy spoons and bar-b-que restaurants, hot dogs stands and hamburger joints. They stayed in motor lodges, motor courts, motor inns. Even when he grew exhausted, which happened more and more often, Josh emitted a steady stream of commentary, speaking in a breathy rush, not only to Trevor but to anyone in earshot—vacationing families, truckers, melancholy drifters. Trevor had never seen the boy so animated. His conversations weren't the stilted exchanges one might expect between complete strangers and a kid who's spent his life in solitary. Josh was achingly genuine. He tore at Trevor's heart.

Occasionally, someone would ask, "Is that a kid or an old man?"

"He's my son," Trevor would reply.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing," Trevor would say, or "I don't know what you mean."

"He has a degenerative condition," or "It's just that he's going to die soon."

As they cruised the Vegas Strip, sliding past the Tropicana and the Stardust and Circus Circus, Trevor snuck glances at the colored lights playing over his son's crumpled face. Josh kept coughing dangerously, but he was grinning like a madman. In Oregon, Trevor took him to a shaky, bandy-legged MD, who said the time had come to make the boy comfortable. Trevor had to practically force the pain pills down his son's throat. As they crossed the border into California, Trevor and Josh cheered, high-fived.

"How will we find her?" Josh asked at a diner outside Cupertino.

"I don't know," Trevor said, eating french fries the boy had drowned in ketchup. "I don't know if she's here."

Josh's wrinkled brow furrowed further. "Why did we come?"

"I thought you should see it," Trevor said, his hands rising from the Formica tabletop to carve a sphere in the air.

In Los Angeles, they visited Universal Studios and the back lots at MGM. They toured the La Brea Tar Pits. They took off their shoes, cuffed their trousers, and strolled along the beach. They scurried into the surf, dashing back as the tide chased them in. Trevor watched the sun's light diffusing softly, flowing around dunes and sea grass and side-stepping crabs, illuminating Josh with an impossible halo, one that made him look like a holy relic, a shriveled Buddha. Trevor couldn't stop crying. He wanted to take his son's hand and walk into the ocean, to keep walking, just the two of them, to tromp all over the sea floor, to find sunken ships stuffed with pirate booty, to commune with dolphins, tiger sharks, killer whales.

"Don't worry, Dad," Josh said. "I never believed it."

"What?"

"That I'd be OK."

"What else did she tell you?"

"That no one can hold a candle to Gene Kelly."

"What else?"

"She said you know how to bring things back to life."

"You believe that?"

Josh didn't respond. He slipped his cold hand into Trevor's.

They'd almost reached the Georgia border when Trevor tried to rouse his son and found that he was unable. He pulled off the road and parked on the shoulder. He studied Joshua, who lay across the front seat as though lost in slumber, his heavy head resting on Trevor's thigh. Trevor slid out from under the boy, stepped from the car. He staggered along the gravel edge of the highway, blinded. Pontiacs and Fords and Buicks whizzed past. Horns honked. The quality of the light knocked him off balance. The sun burned unbearably, like a thousand-watt bulb without a shade. Trevor shielded his eyes with both hands. He stumbled, falling to his knees. Motorists rolled down their windows and shouted.

"Watch it, buddy!"

"You trying to get yourself killed?"

An older couple pulled over. The man caught Trevor under the arms and eased him toward their convertible sedan. He opened the back door, sat Trevor down on cream-colored leather, handed him a clean, pressed handkerchief. Trevor mopped his brow and cheeks. The couple looked at him with concern. He told them about Josh. Everything. From the beginning. He started with the day his son was born, with the way the light in the maternity ward had coiled itself around the boy, illuminating his particular serenity. Even as an infant, Josh had rarely wept. There had been no fixing him, no way to understand his pain. Trevor envied Cassie her ability to deny. He wondered if, wherever she was, she sensed the shift in the natural order of things. If she noticed the way Joshua's passing had altered the sun.

"I wish you could have met him," he said to the couple. "I'm not sure how I'll go on."

He wrote to Cassie's parents. They flew in from Michigan, but there was no sign of Cassie. On the day of Josh's funeral, the U.S. map etched across the boy's back was nearly complete. Trevor drove down to Florida and had the Sunshine State's blue shape added to his own map. On the way home, twenty miles south of Atlanta, he passed the decrepit remains of the Big Top Drive-In. He pulled over. He studied the sagging screen and the listing concession stand—landmarks that, like his son, had aged before their time. He thought of the bright spots of boyhood. Gary Cooper in *The Pride of the Yankees*. Margaret O'Brien in *Little Women*. Characters who'd faced death with a stoicism that had once struck him as pure fantasy. Trevor wanted to cry, but he was out of tears. He decided to buy the Big Top.

9

Less than a month after the first gawking crowd of teenagers showed up, the drive-in was crawling with customers. Not just high-school kids, but their parents and grandparents, their younger brothers and sisters. Whole families. Out-of-town guests. People came from Atlanta, then they started coming from Savannah, from Charleston. Neil projected movies onto the screen, but this wasn't what drew the crowds. Most nights, every parking spot was taken; those who couldn't get a spot parked in a nearby field and walked over. They milled between cars and around the periphery. Many brought blankets and picnic baskets. On a stage Trevor and Neil had erected in front of the screen, those employees who weren't busy serving popcorn, pouring sodas, or tearing tickets did what they did best. Put their perverted bodies on display. Showcased that which set them apart. Miranda roared and stomped her scaly

feet. Ruby walked on her hands. Shirley and Sheila sang duets, songs straight from the heart. Bertram performed feats of magic, making his parasitic twin disappear and reappear. Customers thronged the stage and the concession stand. It was all the employees could do to keep up. Money started pouring in. Trevor kept only enough to maintain the facilities and equipment. The rest he divided evenly among his employees.

“Mr. Trevor,” Miranda said as she mounted him in his rickety bed, as they bobbed together like buoys on the swelling surface of the sea, she sliding her abrasive skin across his, “how can we ever repay you?”

On a bright fall day, they stood together outside a silver trailer that housed an Atlanta tattoo parlor. “You do realize the pain will be only temporary?” Miranda said.

“Which is worse,” Trevor said, “pain or humiliation?”

The Elephant Girl laughed. She shook her head. “I cannot say. These have been bound together since I was a child. What I find most unbearable is indifference.”

10 Four six-hour sessions were required to coat Trevor’s skin in tattoos that simulated Miranda’s gray scales. He’d never planned to convert his business into a carnival sideshow, but the progression had been inevitable. This is what Trevor told the reporter from the *Atlanta Star* who came out to do a feature on the rebirth of the Big Top. After a photographer snapped photos of Trevor and his employees artfully arranged on the stage, Trevor and the reporter retired to Trevor’s office. The man’s tie fluttered in the box fan’s sticky breeze.

“This place was dead,” he said. “Like Lazarus.”

Trevor shook his head. “Not dead,” he said, “just sleeping.”

Miranda and Trevor billed themselves as The Elephant Couple. Trevor relished taking the stage with her night after night, drinking from the sea of emotions that flowed from the audience to lap at his tattooed feet—delight and horror, pity and shame. When he turned to the screen, exposing his backside, and stood gazing up at twenty feet of Marlene Dietrich or Tyrone Power, a whispering rush sounded, a collective intake of breath followed by a weighty silence. As the crowd gaped at his geographical hieroglyphs, at the forty-eight continental United States spattered in varying shades of blue across prickling human flesh, he swiveled his head toward Miranda, who smiled, lowering her scaly lids. The Elephant Girl’s belly swelled, its skin taut and crackling with life, and Trevor’s fingers trembled, aching to stroke its splintered surface.