

Neighborhood Walk

Best rolled onto his side and laughed. He laughed nervously, as if to save face. Certainly, the essential events conformed toward some glimmer of humor. Nor was Best so pedestrian as to snub a good joke when it made him its object. On the contrary, the potential for gaiety indicated the seriousness, and with it the reality, of his accomplishments: without some foundation of grandeur, frivolity would never follow. Or would it? Perhaps Best had gone further than he thought. He gazed up at his tight rope and wondered that momentarily he could not distinguish it from the distant orange and yellow backdrop of the circus tent. Colors throbbed in his eyes like internal police sirens. He heard midgets in song. As he lifted himself from the mats, his strength abandoned him, and he fainted onto his back.

When Best awoke, he felt an abrasive scratching against his head. Given his dizzy spell, he had reason to believe the unpleasantness was physiological in origin, but qualitatively it hinted at an external agent of some kind. There followed the remarkable speculation that a chicken was in the process of laying him as an egg. Slowly, Best raised his eyes and perceived a bulbous green nose. Eyelashes batted, but did not belong to Best. He saw an elevated chin. The chicken's behind appeared to be a bare spot between two tufts of pink hair. It had vibrant blue

lips. Best uttered the name Presto, unleashing the same force of transformation the word carries in magic shows.

At once, the clown abandoned his pantomime game and leapt to his swim fins. Plugging his loose electrical tail into the outlet on his stomach, he faked a prolonged electrocution, involving whoopee cushions and pratfalls. After the last, he turned into a chicken and to Best's expanding horror, pecked a territorial circle around him, occasionally penetrating it to ply the tightrope walker with wet, fertile kisses, which resounded from suction. Next, Presto removed a drumstick from a cavernous hip pocket and gawked at it to caricature Best's facial expression, which responded with warmth. His smile appeared on Presto's lips, too. The clown stretched forward a hand in a gesture of reconciliation. Best met it halfway for the shake and it pulled free of its wrist, self-inflating into a large white balloon that in outlined white letters read "METHINKS MECRAZY MELITUS," and popped. When Presto extended another hand from the same sleeve, Best paused a moment, but eventually grabbed it. Either the tightness of his grip or the looseness of Presto's associations or some combination of both or of neither or who really cared, the clown was inspired to hoist Best onto his shoulders above strong horizontal arms. Together, they buzzed the arena as an outgunned B-10 on its heroic last flight--but in the hangar.

At the sight of a cannon, Presto banked hard right, dipping Best's head toward the floor, where the sight of Presto's unconcerned, plodding swim fins filled Best with an opaque envy. Then he was lost in the leopard-skin skirt of the human cannonball's assistant, Marie, who screamed two high-pitched objections, while locking her legs around Best's neck. Presto flew circles indicative of a wounded, spiraling nose-dive. As its radial center, Best blindly groped Marie's breasts, which were firm and had no nipples, but rather an overall puckered texture, like an orange cast in bronze. The two large ladders used to mount and ignite the cannon got kicked away from their perches. The stage wall that breaks away at the cannon's report fell forward, shattering on Presto's skull. The stripped frame from the wall rested on Best's torso and legs, an inch too narrow, on account of Presto's head, to slide free at either end. Marie grabbed one side of it and pummeled Best's shoulder blades with it, but with little effect. Marcel, the human cannonball, from inside the shaft, peered over the elevated rim like a reluctant wad of sperm, berating his colleagues in a combination of French and backyard rocketry jargon. He waved a fist. He waved another. He waved them both together and lost his grip, sliding slowly down the tube until it belched a faint thump and Marcel himself farted, or so it seemed. The party at ground paused in shared amusement. With the last of his oxygen, Best offered to call Marie "for a

bite of lunch," he proposed. Was it delight? Disgust? Distrust? Distemper? She discharged his head, and away flew the fighter, framed by a crash wall, with goggling eyes.

At the poodle-training ring, Presto initiated another reconnaissance by banking hard left. This time, Best's feet neared the ground, and he tried to test their supportiveness, stirring the air. However, there wasn't much time. The poodles, shaved into seven coriolis-corrective missiles, were at his ankles at once, as if directed internally by homing device. Among unsynchronized yapping, they leapt for bites of Best's slippers, one of which they pulled free. "Hey," Best shouted, but the dogs followed the orders of only their trainer, Haiku, who stood primly by a blackboard, chalking three-line seasonal maxims in large, Japanese letters, and making saliva bubbles. Unimpressed, Presto veered toward the string of dangling neon hula-hoops, through which the poodles jumped for their act. One by one, he speared the plastic circles with his head, pausing after the last to shake his hips, as if indulging the latest craze. But the hoops were around his head, resting on Best and the wall frame like a vaudevillian circling of the square. Presto ignored the impediment and carried on. Inexplicably, the poodles gathered before him in a steep triangular formation and then took off for the human cannonball's station, growling. Presto sputtered away with wobbling wings.

The time had come for a drawn-out ending. Head lurching forward, Presto threw himself into a precarious balance, in which his feet raced to keep up with his torso, and lost. The clown dropped to his knees. He turned his face skyward and gesticulated fervent prayers, which sacrificed Best's rigidity as a wing. The tightrope walker drooped over Presto's shoulders like a wilted spandex flower. His hula-hoops and wall frame slid onto Presto's calves, which responded with a flutter. Tears streamed down Presto's cheeks, as if here were the sweetheart of the dying pilot, empathic. He clutched his chest, tugging the baggy material of his costume to simulate a forlorn, wrenching heart condition. As the final beat occurred, Best fell from his shoulders among the wreckage, rolling safely away. Presto lurched to his feet. Blind, he groped the air with outstretched hands. His flippers slapped loudly. At length, he pulled large handfuls of confetti from his pockets and tossed them upward, dying beneath a full color spectrum of paper exhaust fumes and debris.

In the interim, Best rolled to a nearby ring, containing Haji, the elephant trainer, and forty piles of shit. To Best, who viewed them from eye-level, within the low retaining wall of the ring, the piles looked like immense macarons of dubious solidity. He avoided them as nimbly as possible, given his mode of transportation. But that made him wonder why he was rolling in the first place. Or more precisely, why was he rolling in the

second place? In the first place, he was walking, or walking without success, only to be fainting and then rolling, which was the third place at best. It was a lot to consider, and straighten out, and Best needed to concentrate on his feet, he believed.

By means of the retaining wall, he pushed himself first to sitting, and then to standing. He felt uneasy, uncertain, as if the more ridiculous it seemed that he, of all people, would lose his ability to walk, and for no particular reason, the more irreversible it would prove as his condition. Yet he needed to walk, to try. He extended his foot. It took to the air like a bird, glided toward the floor as if alighting on a lone mahogany branch. But where exactly should it bind? The floor wasn't a branch. It was bigger, immense, a veritable ocean. How was Best supposed to know where his foot ought to go? It could go anywhere, everywhere. This wasn't a tightrope. In fact, it wasn't a decision--not in the authentic sense.

Theoretically, the foot and the floor had no overriding commitment to each other. The one and the other were a pair in the sense that two arbitrary snowflakes are a pair in a storm. The selection of one or two different flakes instead changes nothing. The season remains winter. The storm remains anonymous. So it was with Best's predicament. Walking contained no precise measurements. It made no tangible demands. In comparison to

Best's delicate scampering on a telephone wire, it was peanuts, and so baffled and eluded him.

Haji approached as Best lay on the floor. Best's cape was stretched over his head, cocooning him. Haji observed it with a smirk and the cracking of a peanut. With one hand, he separated the husk and flesh, and peeled the brown filament into a portable bucket. The peanut crunched loudly between his teeth, which were predominantly gold. He surveyed the big top for a while, and whistled over his chewing. When this action failed to effect any movement in Best, Haji scampered back to his garbage basin and withdrew from it a short-handled broom. He returned to Best and prodded him with its bristles, which held globules of dung, some worthy by their ages for museums of natural history. Best responded with a groan that suggested the disturbance of unconsciousness.

"I will give you an elephant," Haji said.

"What would I do with an elephant?" asked Best.

"Remember?"

"I'll take one." The little Pakistani assumed a regal posture, snapped his fingers, and froze, hand in the air. Nothing happened. The vibrations of the echo gave way to silence, which gave way to deeper silence, which gave way to deep deep and then profound silence, which resolved into the wedding march of the midgets, who were rehearsing for a real marriage between Shlomo

and Pete, whose romance had been discovered by many of the troops unperturbed taller members as they searched under their trailers for the cat making all that racket or a runaway coin or a place to stuff these old newspapers and found the ceaseless engine of love, pistons afire, limbs tied in knots.

"I don't see anything," Best mentioned.

"Behind you," Haji smiled, unfolding his hand into it a gesture of demonstration. As directed, Best turned around. Looming above him, as if materialized by a breeze, on its hind legs, stood an elephant with a rolled trunk, no tusks, two enormous fluttering ears, a distended belly that threatened to drop like a bulging bead of water from a faucet, a pink ballerina's skirt beneath the belly, and a pair of capezios, size 412-EEE for the larger woman. Best watched as she twirled a delicate pirouette that again made no sound.

"Her name is Gracie," Haji said.

"I couldn't," Best deferred.

"You must."

"I wouldn't dare."

"You do."

"I shan't." With the subtlety of a boa constrictor, Gracie's trunk crept around Best's abdomen, lifting him skyward to a perch upon her back, where he stuck with surprising tenacity.

"A honey glaze," said Haji. Best slid his finger into a layer of goo that glistened like moist shellac. Shrugging his shoulders, he brought the finger to his mouth, trailing a harp string of glaze, which he plucked once to break. The mouthful was sweet, and settled comfortably into his stomach, suggesting he was hungry. As he reached for another one along Gracie's upper vertebrae, he incited an unsuspected forward march. He was overcome with an old fear from his childhood on a farm, where he battled with tractors too large for his age. Then, his forehead leaked great salty beads as levers and pedals did nothing to stop his painfully slow incision of diagonal scars across whole fields of parallel furrows carved before sunrise by his father. With similar drudging stubbornness, Gracie dislodged the ring's retaining wall, wet two of her slippered feet in the high diver's small pool, mangled a rack of vintage clown bicycles among the duckfarting complaint of their horns, and finally pushed a slow suspenseful big top exit through the resistance of canvas and fanged iron tent pegs, her trunk swatting obstructions like flies.

Meanwhile, Best wondered how in the world to control her course, and derail it. By present coordinates, the duo was due to punch a giant second doorway in the circus manager's trailer, from which an inauspicious blare of television commercials emerged. Manic, Best scratched Gracie along the entirety of her spine, but to no effect. He kicked into her sides, equestrian-style. At one

point, he leaned entirely forward and covered Gracie's eyes with his sticky palms. She marched dauntlessly forward, the trailer a growing windmill on the immediate quixotic horizon. To save at least himself, Best sought to dismount, but he was stuck among the glue of Gracie's ointment. He dropped his chin between her ears, which he gripped to withstand the crash.

At once, Gracie responded to the stronger tug on her left ear by turning toward safety in that direction. However, her turn continued in this manner until Best realized to ease his tug, so the team wound up moving toward what was originally their right, a 270 degree maneuver. Before them lay an overflowing dumpster, around which were hundreds of banana peels and discarded diapers. In this instance, Best's attempts at steering were again useless, as Gracie wanted to arrive at the dumpster, and so would. There, she flipped back the lid with her trunk and a great wave of stench escaped like a genie, refracting light. Silently, Best wished for his quick departure from the area, and the recovery of his feet, which suffered intense pins and needles from dangling too long without support. Gracie plucked a sealed bag from the bin, flinging it to the ground, where it split open, revealing a pineapple head, two stale loaves of bread, and coffee filters full of moist, ground beans. She ate the foodstuff, and hunted for a drink. Best explained that the high diving tub still held some

water, and she marched onward, responding to ear tugs in the direction of the big top.

It seemed to Best, in this relatively quieter moment, that he ought to consider his options as an acrobat mysteriously on the fritz. Of course, he could try to walk again, simply walk, away from clowns and elephants and secondary threats to his life. But he knew he would fail, as if his feet were talking to him in unequivocal terms. They wanted the wire or nothing. In fact, they preferred the omission of the ladder as a means to get to the wire. But how would Best get there? Why did he need to? Do you need to if you stay there? Take it as a promise from your feet that for an uninterrupted life on the tight rope we will never let you down. Is that a promise or an ultimatum? Is there really any difference? What if promise is the left foot and ultimatum the right foot in a set that must have both to have a value? The human body requires its symmetries. Contrast is how life has meaning. Get off your high elephant and subscribe to the human race ha ha haaaa.

A faintness overcame the tightrope walker. As if his mind also contained hands, he gripped the one idea that, circled by the shark dance of his feet, made the most rational sense: he would visit the trapeze artist, after whom he had modeled his career in its earliest stages and whom he admired most in the company.

Franz was an anomaly in that he stayed on his trapeze all the time, as Best was soon to do regarding his tightrope. Yet Franz was prepared for the lifestyle, having read about it in books. For one thing, he employed an amiable group of attractive assistants to bring his meals and mail every morning in exchange for the previous day's empty Tupperware and outgoing letters. The job was a light one because it divided among five apprentice acrobats and also because Franz, over the years, had found an inexplicable means for surviving without food and no one wrote him even on holidays. Further, Franz never stopped swinging, which action facilitated transfers of material objects by allowing the assistants to incorporate the trade into daily rehearsals. In this manner, Franz was never neglected, nor did anyone have to attend to him. His swinging measured the time that passed in the isolated circus world, and barred most verbal communication on account of its incessancy.

Importantly, it also contained a pendulum's hypnotic predictability. For Best, this feature was critical in that he needed to solicit Franz's opinion in regard to his upstart feet. Sitting on Gracie, he gazed upward at the trapeze artist's lithe swing, counting on his fingers the number of manual seconds involved in the passage from one of the arc's extremes to another. Additionally, he employed a personal logarithm to factor for the definite lag time that occurred at these extremes as the kinetic

energy of the swing diminished into pure frozen potential energy and then suddenly melted into kinetic energy again in the opposite direction. It was a mesmerizing transition, over which Franz seemed to exert a seasoned wizardry for dragging it out. In his moments of reversal, he hung like a sculpture of a carriage driver flicking loose reins to drive an invisible team of horses, which floated toward heaven, as did Best's daydreaming thought processes.

But Best needed to concentrate. More precisely, his attention needed to fasten itself on a different aspect of the swing, because verbal communication with Franz depended on that instant, or less than an instant, when the trapeze artist traveled closest to the ground. At that pinpoint, as Franz sliced through the absolute center of his straining trajectory, a word or two from ground level might stand its best chance of penetrating his reality. For it must be remembered that Franz lived in a world of vertical opposition, on account of which speech came to him as manifestations of the supernatural and thunder. As it happened, his deep piety discouraged response to these imaginings. Nor did his piety grow more lax as his life grew more ascetic. On the contrary, his solitude guarded itself, and granted rewards. Within the disciplined parameters of a personal faith, Franz discovered a richness of worldself that divided and flowered into reproduction's asexual infinity, and he seeded this region with

every thought in his head, to which the blood rushed and rushed and occasionally made swim.

On the ground, Best cupped two enameled hands to his mouth and called upward at what he figured the best time. From his lack of effect upon Franz, Best concluded he had flubbed attempt one, and barked a long train of greetings at each reversed acme of the trapeze artist's passage. He felt he was shooting lucklessly at ducks in an arcade, and hunkered for an automatic weapon. Instead, Gracie's trunk swung wildly around her ear and slapped across Best's chest, where it paused momentarily to poke him in the ribs. When it returned to its forward station, Best noticed its synchrony with the swing of the trapeze artist. As his movement reached its terminus, so exactly did the trunk's. As it retraced its course, so exactly did Gracie mimic the direction, speed, and tautness, which third component struck Best as possibly gratuitous. In fact, upon reflection, he wondered how the reflection sponsored by the elephant would serve his purpose. To use it at all, he had to keep his eyes perpetually downcast, while his potential interlocutor was perpetually above him, genuflecting between circuits. The elephant was leading a goose chase of sorts, and Best would not have been surprised to see Presto step out of her skin as her skeleton collapsed into pick-up sticks.

"I'm having trouble with my feet," Best squeaked, gravely aware of the circus ears all around him, hungry for poop. "Do you

think you can help me walk on the ground?" From exasperation, his delivery disregarded all preliminary calculations for successful discussion. Ironically, Franz twirled upon his bar in an uncharacteristic and hopeful way, waving a gloved hand like a small flag of surrender. His response, after several swings for processing, suggested partial and horoscopic comprehension, and fell with full doppler anticlimax. Upon receipt, Best was reminded of childhood allowances squandered at the arcade to make the dispensed chits of his fortune match his dreams a single time.

"Keep on . . .

. . .your toes!

Hot romance . . .

. . .p e n d i n g . "

At this news, Best experienced a surge of animosity toward the trapeze artist, and prolonged a chilling observation of his swing. Oddly, the monotony of it had a soothing effect, overcoming Best's attempts at resistance. Soon, his head became limp on his neck, and fell into step with Gracie's tail and with Franz. The three performers swayed gently back and forth, scything long channels through fields of looming stress. In the distance, Best perceived a sudden, resplendent landscape, into which he had access at the price of his overalls and hoe. Long

rays of sunshine stroked the hills, gleaming. Formations of geese twirled gentle spirals within the sky. Best was naked, dashing through wheat as tall as his knees. His arms flailed at his sides. In his eyes glittered the reflection of a boy's stake in paradise.

He arrived breathless, aflame, eager. The landscape was even more beautiful than he thought. Sixteen white trailers, like boxcars, sat in four perfect lines upon a parking lot of dirt, strewn with rocks. Puddles formed near many of the doors, and moated the trio of port-o-potties beside the dumpster. In a musty window of the furthest trailer, blowing kisses, stood a woman dressed in a pink chiffon blouse and feather boa. Her smile disclosed a tremendous gap between the teeth of her lower jaw. Occasionally, her tongue emerged, hunting a dentist. Best ran through the assembly of trailers, which presented an amorphous labyrinth. At every turn, he lost his bearings, catching abrupt glances of the pink woman as her home somehow tossed at sea. He reached her door spent of energy, and declined to push it open. Petrified, the woman yanked him inward by the shoulder, insisting he soak his feet in a putrid, opaque solution. She forced him into a chair, straddled him. He was amazed to discover he was wearing his circus costume. The spandex felt especially tight around his groin. When he looked into the foot basin, he saw a floating breach birth, which then turned into a howling, healthy

baby. As he lifted it between his feet, the trance released him, and he gasped.

"I've just had a vision," Best said. But the world returned him its usual indifference for such low-grade pronouncements. On a nearby reinforced platform, greater miracles balanced on a sagging Olympic barbell above the straining biceps and pectorals muscles of Hercules, the strongman, whose last meal removed the sandwich and entree sections from a local diner's weekly menu. On an adjacent runway, Sergeant Cleopatra, the ManWoman, modeled a custom-girdle made of burlap and taffeta. In her audience were four drunken monkeys whose exceptional arm span allowed them repeatedly to goose the ManWoman despite her heightened vigilance, the whole affair accompanied by simian labial raspberrying, and snorts, and the licking of fingers. Further away, a thick squadron of ducklings trailed the Fat Lady, whose heaving gelatinous ass suggested a waddle. On the periphery, a group of roadies played dice.

With sinking spirit, the tightrope walker encouraged Gracie toward the big top's main exit. On their way, in the corner of his eye, he noticed a metallic-purple Volkswagen bug, covered in giant painted daisies, a twirling pinwheel as its antenna, the clown funny car. Despite its veering course, Best knew it was headed for him, or rather that no one could escape the radius of a snowballing prank. The car plowed through the ducklings,

scattering feathers. Its storage hood opened of itself and ingested the hapless Fat Lady like a zeppeli. Horn blasts sounded a dissonant triumph. As it drove up beside Gracie, Foofhand, the driver, ground the gears, decelerating. At the slower pace, the doors and sunroof popped off and clowns burst out like endless popcorn. In waves, they gathered around the trunk, where the engine belonged, removing cream and mince pies, which they threw with wasteful aim. Before long, Gracie wore thick dangling sideburns of whipped topping, like a confectionery Hasidim. Best pulled raisins and diced apples from his eyes. He scraped suet from Gracie's back and volleyed it downward in retaliation, hitting Pete and Repeat, who pantomimed mortal wounds, from which they promptly recovered to act like mice at Gracie's feet. A fourth clown, Fast Eddie, rolled out of the Volkswagen in wide, trick water skis, which were actually skateboards. Grabbing hold of his Gracie's tail, he yanked himself too enthusiastically beneath her tail, and she shat on him, in bulk. In fact, she overcame the clowns in toto, assailing the funny car with her trunk, until among the countless arms, legs, and joy buzzers within, she came to Presto, the leader, whom she extracted like so much hay. Holding him airborne, her trunk at once in the crapper flap of his jump suit, Gracie inflated him into a giant, white schmoo, whose career as a bouncing ball ended on word one, Krr-Splat! Melodramatically horrified, Presto's cronies scraped him

from the ground, and given his flatness, flipped him once as a flapjack before climbing back into the funny car, which took off for further antics among the midgets.

In their wake, the sole straggler, having accomplished the (next to) impossible and dislodged herself from the luggage space, was the Fat Lady, whose face registered exhaustion, and possibly hunger. She stood among an orgy of scattered deserts, and all at once began crying, dropping to her knees to salvage something. Gingerly, Gracie approached her from the side, but stopped within trunk's-length to observe. Uncertain, Best sat motionless above. It seemed to him the elephant was sizing up a parallel fate in human form, equating. He felt reverberating tremors pierce the surface of her hide, as if stirred by some expansion of her great mastodon heart. Humbly, he bowed his head to respect the moment.

Below his eyes, on Gracie's back, Best noticed the fine graining, like fossilized lifelines beneath Haji's yellow glaze. The patterns wove together and apart in alternating pure and printed sections, all emanating from the spine as proximodistal growth. And Best crowned the spine, a reverent spider within the web of an African heritage. Gracie undulated her trunk before the Fat Lady, who put a hand upon it, stroking her, maintaining constant contact. Gracie smacked her lips, as if speaking. The Fat Lady expressed delighted surprise.

"I know," she comforted. "I know. You're a big girl, aren't you? And that's a very pretty dress. My name is Loretta. Do you know in my dreams I appear as one of your kind? I swim all day long. There, I know. It's a funny dream. There isn't any time for swimming when you have work to do, is there? But dreams persist." After a period of silence, Loretta hoisted herself to her feet. She finished a last, longest stroke of Gracie's trunk, and plodded away, emitting motherly duck calls. In her absence, Best sat perfectly still, staring at the vast, absolute nothing of sight without mind.

Shortly, Gracie began a slow grind forward, heading through the exit of the big top without any instructions from Best, who seemed not to notice her movements at all. At the opening, the overhanging canvas dragged against him, and he dug through it with his arms. Outside, four lines of trailers, four trailers apiece, sat in the parking lot among the puddles and rubbish of their own maintenance. At the furthest, Gracie knocked her trunk against the door, which crumpled open, fastened by only one of its hinges.

In the exposed kitchen area, a sea of Budweiser cans licked every shore. In the middle, an empty gallon of Jack Daniels posed as a translucent whale among the waves. Its tail was missing the cap, and sported messy, pink lipstick. On the stove, a lidded pot belched gusts of steaming chowder, portions of which drooled to the burner and hissed like snakes. When Gracie transported Best

into the room, his first action was to turn down the heat. Next, he flicked his hand lightly to request of Gracie that she back up a little bit, beyond eyeshot. He turned toward the musty, darkness of the trailer's furthest recesses and waited for his eyes to adjust.

Before they had, he heard a voice. Pandora, the troop's reclusive soothsayer and contortionist, sat in the shadows among tarot cards and hen's feet. Her breathing percolated within her lungs before escaping, conjuring images of smoldering nostrils and dragons over gold. Slowly, Best advanced, his feet far from his thoughts. At each step, he kicked an aluminum can, still unconscious of his ability to walk.

One by one, the darkness served crumbling morsels to his eyes. On the far wall, he saw a young man, sitting at a cafe perhaps in Antwerp, enjoying coffee. The image faded. To his right appeared the same young man on a subway in Manhattan, a briefcase clutched to his chest beneath stricken, grieving eyes. Darkness resumed. Again on the back wall, in the original site of the cafe, a fun house materialized. Waiting on line to go in, a small boy stood hand-in-hand with presumably his father, who was the young man. On the left wall, a zoo revealed a cage in which the young man was frozen in mid-pace, concentrating. As the image scattered into blackness, Best made out a dragging tail. Next, he

saw the young man pulling dental floss between his toes, smiling. At last, the darkness obeyed him, and he saw Pandora.

She sat in a position of advanced yoga, her crossed legs pushing her upward onto her knees. Distributed around her, on a platform of knotted wood that appeared in the dimness to possess eyes, was a vagabond's model of the big top's main attractions, and several charred areas. Best noted a Corgi version of the funny car, hard rubber elephants and ostrich, an Evil Knieval action-figure on a blue, mangled chopper, two inexplicable frogs that could hop at the squeeze of a trailing palm-balloon, upward of a hundred plastic army men perhaps to portray Presto's gang, a spilled set "Barrel of Monkeys" by Parker Brothers, a Barbie and Ken doll stripped of their clothes and made to exchange heads (and possibly phone numbers), and archangel Gabriel, reminiscent of Christmas. Above Pandora's head hung a life-size trapeze, but this addition seemed less to involve the troop than facilitate yogic manipulations. After Best conducted his inventory, he looked again at the walls.

The original images were gone, but not their theme. In tarnished black & white, the young man roamed through the rectangular vistas of the overlapping candid and portraits along the three walls and ceiling. Although his expression was generally congenial, he seemed physically lost, out of place. Throughout the collage, his body weight remained disturbingly

consistent, as did his height, as did his age, as though the great wealth of film covered only one period, one day, a single instant during which a whole lifetime somehow bloomed. In the specifics of these consistencies, the young man bore a striking resemblance to Best, who remembered next to nothing of the shoots or their locations. The rest was coincidence? What else could be made of one man's recognition of a few scattered places and events for which all travelers have ample affinity and budget? Should he trust a shut-in like Pandora not to foresee and doctor his arrival?

"I came to walk, and I have," asserted Best.

"You want to fly," remarked Pandora, aside. Her hands rested on an orb of crystal within her legs. She rubbed and gazed into it, vocalizing Best's secret wish to use thinner and thinner tightropes until one day he was not walking on one at all, but rather thin air.

"I want only to walk."

"You lie. Even the trapeze man's idea of romance appeals to your puny, shrunken heart. Do you not see the shrine I have constructed in your honor? Yet you strut your false confidence. When did I gain the power to control your worthless mobility?"

"Since I realized I love you?"

"Weakling! I made you say that."

"Yes, by making me love you."

"Don't be coy. Your attraction to Pandora is a craving for tyranny, nothing more. I have no use for your verbal gymnastics. The body is all I require of you." Pandora paused to arrange her hair, the loose serpentine wisps of which emulated Medusa. Her ballooning sleeves and silver, circular bracelets slid down her wrists, revealing porcelain, sinewy forearms. Between her breasts hung a pentagram pendant, upon which stretched a small iron figure posing as Leonardo Da Vinci's geometrical rendering of man, with two sets of arms and legs. The two eyes glittered like red sapphires.

"Will I continue to walk?" Best asked.

"You mistake me for the lion-tamer." Maybe so. But what exactly did that tell him? Best imagined the remark told him to visit the lion-tamer, not Pandora. Perhaps he had bungled his interpretation of Franz in the first place. If so, Franz might not be the charlatan this first response to his message suggested. On the contrary, his message might possess a doubled wisdom on account of its preliminary resistance to activation by Best, as if tribulations sweetened any imminent reward. Besides, the lion-tamer had been the object of his most secret heart since her arrival to the company. It was witchcraft that guiled him into cooing over Pandora. Oddly, he lacked gratitude toward her, also. In fact, he greeted his returned power to walk with only an indifference he declined to question.

Obliged by sturdy footwork, Best arrived to the trailer's front door, where he had a thought. Outstretching his arm, he summoned Gracie close enough to wind into her trunk, and let her raise him. On her back, he steered her toward the Big Top, and then the lion-tamer's ring, where six cats received a grumbling lesson in obedience. For the lion-tamer, Best had decided to arrive in regal jungle fashion: atop an elephant, arms folded across the chest.

Marla, the lion-tamer, was a thin woman, whose upper body commanded authority on account of its exaggerated latesius dorsi muscles. At times, when viewed from the right angle, during the right demanding activities, such as brandishing a chair or doing pull-ups on the bars of the cathouse ceiling, she appeared to have compact, budding wings, for which Best had an especial weakness. Furthermore, her spare figure, a sort of companion piece to Best's, continued the fantasy of flight by grounding it in some semblance of aeronautic plausibility. For Best, the synergism of these bodily traits often resulted in a tense enthrallment over Marla's act, which seemed to involve the pursuit by lions and tigers of a cunning, resourceful tweedy bird, for whom he rooted devoutly. In fact, what few prayers Best uttered, late at night, within the candlelit confines of his shared, decaying trailer, invariably bargained for the prolonged success of Marla's daring.

Secretly, he defined this concern as love, the only voice by which prayers found an ear, or got repeated.

Engaged in rehearsal, Marla stood in the center of the lion-taming ring, which had a round wall of ten foot high bars as a perimeter, giving it the appearance of a giant hamster wheel turned on its side. Seven Bengal tigers, four lions, and three black panthers sat on equidistant stools around the edge, at which distance they received only the wind of Marla's whip. She cracked it constantly, barking orders mostly to crouch or pay attention between its reports. Often, the cats yawned, in response to which insolence Marla advanced the needful stride in the relevant direction and frayed an ear or two, depending on personal histories. At Best's arrival, the tiger in question lost four adjacent whiskers and a tuft of fur on one protective paw.

Best reached his hand into the immense cavity of Gracie's ear and somehow inspired her to stand on her hind legs, gripping the upper edge of Marla's cage with her tail. Carelessly, he sprung to his feet and scale over Gracie's rainbowed neck, up her skull, across the tightrope of her trunk, and onto the bars themselves, where he turned nimble, unhurried cartwheels, and mimicked Charlie Chaplin. Encouraged by Marla's captured attention, Best exploded into bounding strides that carried him through ten revolutions of the ring. Next, he sunk to his knees, hands clasped over his heart, and facing entirely inward, inscribed an eleventh circle he

would have called The Wedding Ring. A mild gratitude for his time among the clowns rose within him.

Also, Marla seemed to understand, and practicing a girlhood cat's-cradle, coiled her whip into what looked like a configuration Best knew as the Rock-A-Bye-Baby. He gripped the side of the hamster wheel with his hands and turned a forward somersault, entering the ring. He alighted on the head of the sulking tiger, who yawned despite himself. His neighbor, a lion, assumed a battle posture, front paws aloft and splayed. Quickly, the whip kissed his nose. He sat primly, licking his chops. Best stepped off the tiger, and advanced. At him too the whip lashed, igniting his nose like a pile of coals beneath lighter fluid. He grabbed his whole face. He reeled. The staggering chaos of his steps was met at every pivot by Marla's whip, which created a ceaseless dance. Guided solely by instinct, Best skittered between balance and imbalance, uprightness and fallen. Like a weak glint of lightning, he perceived his ignorance in that gyration as to whether he was following or leading, inventing or obeying, yet cared neither way. For the first time in his life, he was questionlessly happy, and music sounded in his head. Gracie departed, followed by voluble ducklings.