

"A gifted stylist with a truly original take on things."—THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

—The—
**BLOW
-OFF** ★



A
NOVEL
BY

JIM KNIPFEL

Author of SLACKJAW and THESE CHILDREN WHO COME AT YOU WITH KNIVES

MONSTER STALKS NYC

When a local drunk is mugged near the toxic Gowanus Canal by “a hulking, hairy beast who smells really bad,” Hank Kalabander thinks nothing of blaming the assault on the legendary Bigfoot. His sardonic crime blotter for *The Hornet*, a local Brooklyn rag, often gleefully recounts the tragedies that befall the borough’s dimmer residents. But when an upstart reporter from *The Eagle*, a tabloid paper, lifts his piece and implicates Bigfoot in two more attacks, the crimes become local news fodder and the hunt for the “Gowanus Beast” takes off. Pretty soon the G.B. is to blame for everything from murder and robberies to playground scuffles and a pie’s disappearance—and neighborhood watch patrols have taken to the streets. Alarmed by the populace’s response, Hank decides it’s his responsibility to disprove the existence of this menacing beast and, with the help of an old carny colleague, put an end to the growing hysteria.

In *The Blow-off*, acclaimed writer Jim Knipfel has crafted an astoundingly funny send-up of our current times—an intoxicating blend of sharp cultural references, wildly comical scenes, discerning commentary, and unforgettable characters.

“His artistic vision is as stunning as the sunset over the Brooklyn Bridge.”

—LISA SCHWARZBAUM, *ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY*

“A born storyteller . . . [with] an amiably deranged sense of humor. . . . Long may he continue to astonish us.” —THOMAS PYNCHON, *ON SLACKJAW*

“His prose . . . is graceful, unpredictable and truly, darkly funny. Knipfel knows how to pull a reader into his orbit. His writing has a hard-boiled magnetism.”

—EMILY WHITE, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*

“You read [Knipfel] for the spell under which his prose can place you. At this, he has only gotten better with time.” —ROY EDROSSO, *THE VILLAGE VOICE*



JIM KNIPFEL

JIM KNIPFEL was a longtime columnist and staff writer at the *New York Press*. He is the author of three memoirs, *Slackjaw*, *Quitting the Nairobi Trio*, and *Ruining It for Everybody*; the novels *Noogie's Time to Shine*, *The Buzzing*, and *Unplugging Philco*; and the collection *These Children Who Come at You with Knives*. He lives in Brooklyn.



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Jim Knipfel

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For Dave Read, who knows a thing or two about our monsters

A man could spend the rest of his life trying to remember what he shouldn't have said.

—John Garfield, *Force of Evil*

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The Blow-off

“Inside this tent! You will SEE... before your very eyes! This beautiful, luscious young lady transformed into a snarling, hideous, three-hundred-pound gorilla!... ALIVE! ALIVE! ALIVE!... You will SEE the clothing fall from her young and supple body! You will SEE thick black hair sprout from her tender bare flesh! The long black hair of a GORILLA covering her entire body! Her teeth will grow into dripping yellow fangs! She will—before your eyes!—become a BEAST of the jungle! But don’t worry, folks. All the while she will be confined within an iron cage lined with reinforced steel bars! Only the bravest of the brave are invited inside! So step right up and buy your tickets... ALIVE! ALIVE! ALIVE!”

The recording started once again from the beginning.

“No,” was all she said.

The limp and faded banner hanging over the entrance to the tent featured a screaming bikini-clad beauty held loosely in the clutches of what appeared to be a twelve-foot-tall gorilla who, likewise, was screaming about something. His (as promised) wicked yellow fangs were dripping blood. Behind them, for some reason, stood a single palm tree.

“C’mon,” he said, his voice distant, his eyes fixed on the crudely painted banner. His legs were already moving toward the tent, and he was tugging at her immovable arm like a Jack Russell terrier who’d just spotted something in the gutter. A slice of pizza or the severed wing of a pigeon.

“No,” Annie repeated more firmly. She leaned back, digging her heels into the blacktop which had softened in the unbearable heat of the past three days. She wrenched her arm free from his sweaty grip. There was no question or hesitation in her tone, no opening for negotiations. She folded her arms and waited for him to turn around and meet her unwavering gaze.

The heavy air around them reeked of burnt sugar and sweat and howled with a collision of warped calliope music, classic rock, and screams. Where they stood, they were hemmed in on all sides by thousands of dancing and whirling and throbbing pinpoint lights.

Hank’s eyes snapped away from the banner and back to his wife, his confusion deepening. “No? Whaddya mean no? It’s a *Girl-to-Gorilla* show.” He spoke the term as if merely uttering it aloud would clarify everything.

“No.”

“Look, sweetie—Annie—like the tape says, there’s nothing to worry about. It’s in a cage. I’ve seen this show a dozen times and it gets me every time. Great little trick. It’s done with mirrors, you know.” He stared at her expectantly.

“That’s great, Marv. Really. But no.”

“Marv was your first husband,” Hank gently corrected. He bit his lip, his eyes drifting involuntarily back toward the ticket booth outside the *Girl-to-Gorilla* tent.

“I just don’t see the attraction.”

“Fine, I can accept that,” he said. “But would you mind if I went in? You can wait out here.”

and I'll be back in ten—”

~~From inside the tent came the squeal and crash of a metal cage door torn from its hinges~~ and tossed to the ground. Annie jumped a step closer to Hank as, at that instant, the piercing shrieks of half a dozen teenage girls erupted inside. One of the tent's nylon side panels billowed outward, went taut, and focused nearly to a point before a small, almost delicate black fist punched through the orange fabric. The screams from inside the tent were growing more frenzied. There was a tearing sound as those same girls, blind with panic, ripped their way through the tent wall and poured out onto the midway, stumbling over one another, still screaming and laughing, before scattering in half a dozen different directions. Hank watched a few of them go, shaking his head in quiet, resigned amusement, knowing for certain there was now no way in hell he'd get Annie into the show. “They're a superstitious people,” Hank explained. “They always overreact to these things.”

“*Shhhh.*” His wife glowered at him and pinched his arm for the third time that night. There was nothing playful about it.

Hank winced and pulled his arm away. “All right, then. Let's move on. We'll see the gorilla show later. Great show. Trust me. Used to see it when I was a kid.”

She took his arm and they moved down the midway away from the ripped tent, weaving their way through the thick Jersey crowds, trying to avoid the dropped ice-cream cones and puddles of cotton candy vomit as they went.

The rides they were passing grew more rickety and treacherous with each passing year. Or maybe, Annie sometimes thought, she and Hank were just getting older.

“Why do you suppose they call that one the Black Hole?” Annie shouted into his ear in an effort to be heard over the tedious, thumping rhythms of the ride's soundtrack—some insipid pop tune or another—blasting at jet engine levels. The “ride” itself appeared to be nothing more than a small wooden shack capable of holding no more than five or six people at a time, so long as none of those people moved. Yet there was a line of ticket holders twenty or thirty feet long, eagerly awaiting a chance to step inside.

“You'd be surprised,” he shouted back.

The Saturday night crowd was a swamp of hairy arms and soiled logo T-shirts, wailing children, haggard sundresses, drooping bellies, body odor, and cigar smoke.

“What's with you, you hit your head on something?” Annie asked once the noise had faded to tolerable levels. She'd noticed his face and it worried her. At first she thought he might be having a stroke.

“What's wrong?”

“You're *smiling.*”

Hank stopped walking to assess what his face was up to, examining it with his free hand. She was right. The smile dropped away.

“Sorry,” he said. He looked around. “C'mon, let's find a beer stand. Maybe that Chinaman who was here last year's still around someplace.” She twisted the flesh of his upper arm again. She wasn't fooling around.

“*Ow! Christ,*” he yelped, yanking his arm away and rubbing the point of assault. “Why do you keep doing that?”

“Don't use that word in public.” Her whisper was fierce. “Take a look around you. You shouldn't even use it at home.”

“*What* word? That's the fourth time tonight and I don't even know what I'm saying.”

Despite the repeated attacks, Henry (“Hank”) Kalabander was in his element. It might have been his second or third element in terms of priorities, but it was without question one of the top five. He brought Annie to the Meadowlands Fair every year. Before Annie, he’d brought his first wife. And before his first wife, he brought whoever was handy. Or he came alone.

Annie had caught him smiling the first year he’d brought her here, too. It was the first time she’d seen him do that in public.

“But you hate crowds,” she’d pointed out back then.

“Yes... yes I do. But I live in New York.”

“And you hate New York. So why do you like it here? It’s more crowded than Midtown, and you haven’t been to Midtown in seventeen years.”

“I’m not so inflexible that there can’t be exceptions to the rule.”

“Bullshit.”

“Okay then, I’m not so inflexible that there can’t be this *one single* exception to the rule. More going on here than in goddamn Times Square.”

“I might almost accept that,” she finally conceded.

That was some seven or eight years back. He knew in his heart it wasn’t a real explanation that nothing had been settled, and that he’d be back the following year and the year after that (as he had been ever since), trying to figure out the answer for himself.

“Where’s that fuckin’ Chinaman?” He was swinging his head from side to side, peering through the crowds, the rides, the game booths with each futile pass in search of a beer shack.

Annie refrained from pinching him this time, afraid she might do some real damage. “Hank, we talked about this a few months ago, remember? It was on the news. They don’t sell beer here anymore. Some kind of statute—like they did in the city with the street fairs.”

His head stopped swinging and he stared at her with deeply saddened eyes. “You’re kidding?”

“I’m pretty sure it was passed. Too many people were getting shot. Or having fun, something like that. If we see one, we’ll stop. I just don’t think you should get obsessed with finding one if it’s just not here.” She looked at her watch. “They close in an hour and a half. What else do you want to see?”

He gave her a weak smile. “You’re right, kid,” he said, lightly crossing her chin with his fist. “Let’s see what they got at the back end this year. Maybe we’ll grab a couple corn dogs on the way. I’m trusting they haven’t banned those yet.”

She raised one eyebrow. “You know what your doctor said.”

He took her arm and headed toward one of the far corners of the midway, past the balloon race and the Billy the Drug Addict exhibit. “My doctor says a lot of things, most of them involving the terms ‘heart attack,’ ‘stroke,’ and ‘death.’ Which is why I prefer not to talk to him much anymore. C’mon, let’s see if we can find a Chinaman who’ll sell us a couple corn dogs.”

Ten minutes later they turned a corner and Hank slowed to a stop. In front of them was another orange and yellow striped tent. Hanging along the side were ten fifteen-foot-tall banners, obviously painted by the same artist responsible for the Girl-to-Gorilla banner. In this case, things were a bit harder to figure out. There was a banner for Zumelda, the Egyptian Mummy Princess, and another for Monster McGee, King of the Sea, featuring a giant, snarling polar bear snatching up a paw full of tiny Eskimos. At the bottom of each were two round logos promising that the creatures in question were both “Real!” and “Inside!”

The banner that caught Hank’s eye was to the far right of the line. The central image was of a hideous creature, part ape, part wolf, it looked like, with shaggy hair, pointed ears, a long

snout, and dripping, bloody fangs. In one bloody claw it clutched a disemboweled sheep. The legend across the bottom identified the horrible beast as Giles Goat Sucker.

“Oh, that’s too good for a place like this,” Hank said with quiet admiration.

Another warped tape loop was blaring a pitch through speakers poised above the entrance.

“... collection of marvels will astound you and confound you! Confuse you and amuse you! And they’re all guaranteed one HUNDRED percent real! Get close enough to touch Monster McGee, King of the Sea. IF... YOU... DARE! You will never be the same again! And if you can prove beyond a doubt that any of the wonders you see inside this tent aren’t as REAL as YOU and ME—I will personally pay you ten THOUSAND dollars in cash! So come inside folks, and SEE the Egyptian mummy! SEE the world famous CHUPA... CAAAHBRAAA! THE terror of Mexico! SEE—”

Hank’s eyes drifted down to the ticket stand and focused on the short, bald man who ran the show. He wore a glittering purple vest and red and white striped pants. To take a wild guess he might have been in his late fifties. Or he could’ve been a lot older or a lot younger. It was hard to tell with someone that short. The face was squashed and heavily lined, and the nose flat and askew, seemed to have been broken more than once. He was chomping on a long black unlit cigar.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Hank said. “I thought I recognized that voice.”

“You know him?” Annie asked, moving closer, casting a doubtful glance at the little man.

“Fortunately or unfortunately, yeah. Name’s Rocky. Rocky Roccoco.”

“Why does none of this surprise me?”

“His real name’s Archie but he’s gone by Rocky for as long as I’ve known him. Ain’t seen him in years. Eight or ten at least. Always figured he was dead.” By way of explanation, he leaned down and whispered into Annie’s ear. “He’s not really a midget but he keeps trying.”

“Isn’t the more correct term nowadays ‘little person’?”

“Yeah, probably. Something like that, anyway. That’s why he’s trying to be a midget.”

Annie looked up at Hank, trying to read his face. “So is he someone you want to say hi to or someone you’d rather avoid?” With Hank, she knew, it was usually the latter, but it was always good to check first.

He paused a moment in deliberation, considering the banners. “I can’t honestly say that you’ll *want* to meet him yourself? But I think he’s someone you *should* meet. If that makes sense. He’s... yeah, he’s really something.” She saw a mysterious and mischievous flicker in Hank’s eyes, and that always worried her a bit. “Besides, I really want to see his show. C’mon, we’ll help him turn the tip.”

“We’ll what?” She hesitated.

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “No gorillas’ll grab you in here. It’s a museum show. C’mon.” Before she could ask what a museum show was, he took her hand and began dragging her through the smelly, slow-moving crowd toward the ticket stand.

There’s that Jack Russell again, Annie thought. There was nothing in his mind or his field of vision but that tent, and nothing was going to stop him from reaching it.

Above them, the recorded pitch rolled on. *“... will make you quiver and shiver and shrivel your liver! You will SEE!”*

They joined the drunk, the bored, the nostalgic, and the merely curious and took their spots.

at the end of the line. Hank winked at Annie. "I wanna see how long it takes him." Annie looked at Rocky, ~~who didn't seem to be looking at anyone. His eyes were on the till and he chewed~~ furiously on that cold cigar while mechanically repeating, "Two George Washington dollars for you folks, that's all it takes... Two George Washington dollars..."

When it was their turn Hank slid four singles toward the short bald man. "That's exact change there, stubby. You can try that drop counter on some other sucker."

"Never heard of such a thing, officer," Rocky said without looking up. He snatched the bills away. "I run a straight-up operation here."

"Aw, c'mon there, short stuff, you ain't run a legit operation since before you was swimmin' around in your daddy's balls."

Rocky looked up only when he noticed this jackass wasn't moving. The gnarled face squinted at the man who was grinning down at him like some godforsaken half-wit. It took a moment before his eyes widened in recognition.

"Why you yellah rat bastard," he said, removing the cigar so he could sneer. "Whaddya dirtyin' up my air for?"

Hank hissed out a small laugh. "Don't want to hold up the line, newtling. We'll be inside. Po in, you get a chance. And if not, go fuck yourself." He turned to Annie and pointed her toward the tent flaps.

"Don't count on it, asshole!" Rocky shouted behind them.

Annie had never seen Hank in this mode before. It was a little disconcerting.

"Should we be sticking around here?" she asked. "He didn't sound too happy to see you."

"Just wait," Hank replied as he led the way inside.

The interior was illuminated by four overhead strings of bare incandescent bulbs stretching the length of the tent, together with a handful of small spotlights trained on the individual roped-off exhibits. The floor was covered with an inch of sawdust. The moist air smelled of mildew, urine, and popcorn. Fifteen other curiosity seekers milled about, younger couples mostly, thin, rodent-faced boys with halfhearted mustaches and blank-eyed, gum-cracking girls clutching small, cheap stuffed animals. They were shuffling slowly through the sawdust from exhibit to exhibit, saying little, their expressions impassive. Too young to be that dead, Hank thought.

The sides of the tent were lined with meager displays, mostly poster-sized black and white photos of classic sideshow freaks of yore: Johnny Eck, Chang and Eng the Original Siamese Twins, and Percilla the Monkey Girl. One glass case held a stuffed perch covered in rabbit fur. Another, according to the hand-lettered placard next to it, held the three-thousand-year-old mummy of an Egyptian princess named Marcella.

"Was that the name on the poster outside?" Annie asked. "It isn't, is it?"

"Dunno," Hank replied. "But Marcella was the name of Rocky's second wife." He leaned closer to the glass, trying to get a better look at the face. "With all that makeup, can't tell if it's really her in there or not."

Annie took a closer look herself. "Not unless his second wife was plastic."

Next to Marcella was a six-foot-tall stuffed polar bear, looking only vaguely ferocious. The once white fur was yellowed and reeked of cigar smoke. It was thinning in patches, leaving the stitching down his belly and around his mouth clearly visible. Next to him was a sign reading simply, "Monster McGee, King of the Sea."

"I don't get that at all," Annie confessed.

“Ah, very simple,” Hank said, turning to her. “Let me try to explain. Now this guy here, see he gestured at the bear, “~~this guy here is Monster McGee. And he’s whatcha might call King of~~”

“All *right*,” she cut him off. “Just shut up.”

Hank glanced around again and saw what he was looking for on the other side of the tent. “C’mere,” he said, taking Annie’s hand and leading her through the sawdust.

The posterboard legend on the easel next to the aluminum cage read:

GILES GOAT SUCKER

(Chupacabra)

This legendary beast has terrified farmers and ranchers in South America for generations! For killing and eating livestock and devouring the blood of animals! Scientists say the monster never existed, but this one was captured in the Yucatán in 2001, while eating a live sheep, but it soon died in captivity!

Inside the cage was propped a department-store mannequin draped in a shabby, ill-fitting gorilla suit that gathered at the elbows and ankles. In place of the head was a stuffed wolf head, its lips stretched back to bare the fangs. Strapped to each of its hands was a leather glove equipped with four long blades—a favorite Halloween costume accessory in the late 1980s.

Hank shook his head and sighed.

“What,” Annie asked, “you expected them to have a real live monster in here?”

“No.” His voice was oddly sad as he scrutinized the piecemeal creature in the cage. “No, really. Suspension of disbelief problems, I guess. I’ve always been a sucker for sideshow banners. They promise so much, and they get me every single goddamn time. Ever since I was a kid.”

The tent flap flew back and an unmistakably nasal voice burst in their ears. “Well, if that ain’t the home cookin’! As I live an’ breathe, it’s ole Hank Kalabander-Rhymes-With-Salamander!”

They both turned and saw Rocky Roccoco marching toward them, cigar in hand. “Hello Salamander, you ole so-an’-so. You with it and for it?”

“You know I am, Rock.”

Rocky drew within a few inches of Hank and glared up at him as all the good humor suddenly drained away into the sawdust. “No, you’re not,” he scowled, replacing the cigar in his mouth. “You’re just a *chump*. A lügen. Come here every year, get your fill in a couple hours, then go home to the suburbs with your lawns an’ your clean sheets. You’re no different from the rest of the townies.”

Annie looked at Hank, nervous, not knowing what to make of this. She saw the hurt pass across his face, but it was gone in an instant. Hank took a step closer to Rocky and bent down, grabbing the front of his shirt.

“Better watch your step there, Rochester,” he said. “Remember, I can still pick you up, turn you upside down, and shake you like a fish.”

“I wouldn’t suggest it,” Rocky shot back, removing the cigar again, drawing out a thin string of spittle from his lower lip to the stogie’s slick, well-chewed end. “Not with your back, ole man. Liable to land you in traction.”

Hank cocked his head slightly to the right and released Rocky's shirt. He turned to Annie. "I think he has a point." He straightened himself. "Rock, want you to meet my wife, Annie. We got hitched... ah..."

"Six years ago," Annie said.

"Yeah. Like she said."

Rocky stuck out a rough hand. "Annie, pleased to mee'cha." His bloodshot eyes scanned her up and down in an obvious and less than gentlemanly fashion.

"Roccoco's the name, and any wife of Hank Salamander's a wife of mine. But I'll tell you toots, you're wastin' your time with this mug. He's old and he's slow and he's a *nasty* bastard."

"I know that already," she countered.

"See that Rock? She knows already." Hank was beginning to recall why he hadn't bothered talking to his friend for almost a decade.

More rubes were drifting in through the tent entrance, and as they did most cast Rocky a curious look before moving on to Marcella.

"So," Hank said, "I had no idea you were with this outfit. Haven't seen you here for the past few years. Last I saw you, you were with Serpentine Brothers, weren't you?"

"Probably." Rocky was keeping an eye on the newcomers just to make sure none of these damn kids started messing with his attractions.

Guessing it might not be the time to push for details, Hank moved on. "Nice show you got here—and I gotta hand it to you on this." He waved at the sign next to the Chupacabra cage. "Very literary of you. Postmodern, even."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Rocky looked at the sign, then back to Hank.

"Just the name, I mean."

"What about it?"

"Well, there's a novel by..." Then he thought better of it. "Yeah, never mind. Kind of a shoddy job on the presentation, though, don't you think?"

Rocky's face tightened. It was apparently Hank's turn to jab a sore spot.

"What the fuck do you expect? Three days before season opens, you got a banner, you got a legend, but you got no Chupacabra. Let's see *you* pull something outa your ass, Einstein. I had to improvise. Still got you in here, didn't it?" He glanced at his watch. "I gotta get back on the front, make sure that pinhead ain't pocketing too much of the take. But hang out for a while if you like."

"Maybe let's grab a drink after you close up?"

Rocky nodded. "Solid, Jackson. Gate closes at ten. I could be outa here by ten-thirty. We go cut up a few jackpots."

As he turned to leave, Hank stopped him. "Heya, Rock. What's your blow-off this season? It's Miracle of Life, I'll save my fifty cents."

Rocky looked confused for a moment, then the contempt returned. The cigar came out again. "Only get blow-offs with live acts, *dummy*," he said, before adding, "With it and for my ass." He turned and stepped through the tent flaps, out into the thump and scream of the dark midway.

So what's the scoop, Winnie the Poop?" Rocky asked as Hank set three drinks on the glass-topped table: Annie's gin and tonic, Rocky's Grant's double, straight up, and his own Whatever Lager They Had on Tap. They were seated around a front table in a blessedly quiet lower Manhattan bar called Hanuman's. Strange to find a place so quiet on a Saturday but they'd done it. None of them had ever been to Hanuman's before, but it seemed almost empty from the outside and that was all they needed to know. A few silent eyes turned to consider them (especially the bald man in the purple vest) but soon gave up and drifted away.

"I'm sorry sir," the stiff young bartender had said when they entered. "But there's no smoking allowed in here."

It took Rocky a second to register what the hell the kid in the bow tie was talking about. He removed the limp black cigar stub from between his brown teeth and waved it about. "The thing look like it's smokin' to you, chum?"

With a resigned grunt, he nevertheless tucked the stub safely away in his vest pocket.

Upon first catching sight of all the brass, glass, and abstract art, Rocky and Hank shot each other a glance and mouthed the words "fag bar" (well, at least Rocky mouthed them), but they decided to stay anyway.

"You first, half-pint," Hank insisted, holding up his glass in an implicit toast. "Last time I saw you, you were running a ten-in-one with Serpentine Brothers. That was some flea bag outfit, by the way. Now you got a museum show with some other flea bag outfit."

Rocky took a sip of the whiskey and gave a small shrug. "It's Fielding Blount's operation. He's a screwhead. Wish it was a better story. Moved from operation to operation as each one folded. Flea bag or not, Blount's about the only one left nowadays—at least on this scale. This is our first season at the Meadowlands 'cause nobody's left who could fill it. And I'll tellya, it's a helluva lot cheaper running a museum show than havin' to pay fire-eaters and keep Willy the Human Whale in spareribs. A lot classier than runnin' a flat store. So I run a museum show, and you should just shut your big yap about it."

"Hey, whatever happened to Willy anyway, now that you mention it?"

Rocky rolled his eyes. "He kicked. Funny story, though. After Serpentine folded, doc told him he's gotta drop six hundred pounds or he's gonna die. So what's the stupid fat fuck do? He can barely stand but decides to start *jogging*. First day, right? Steps outside and *boom!*" He clapped his hands. "Gets hit by a fuckin' cattle truck."

"Oh, that's terrible," Hank said. "That poor man." Then both he and Rocky roared with laughter. Annie couldn't understand half of what they were saying but said nothing. Hank seemed almost happy, so she figured it best to let him be.

"You still live in Gibtown?"

"Off season, yeah, but even that's dying. Everyone, I mean. Trailers emptyin' out, no one around to fill 'em. I'm a youngster in this business, remember." He shifted in his seat. "So what about you? Last I saw you, you weren't doin' much o' nothin' at all."

Hank's laughter dwindled. From the speaker mounted near the ceiling came the sound of

bleating tenor saxophone, giving the bar that film noir air, in spite of all the polished brass. ~~Drinking in Manhattan at midnight with an aging, near-midget earny didn't hurt.~~ Through the plate-glass window behind Rocky, Hank could see clots of sweating youngsters out in the streets in a desperate search for *fun*, hooting and barking and playing grabass as they went. As each group came into view, Hank squeezed his fists beneath the table, praying they wouldn't come in, replaying images of a distant and frightening world he wanted no part of.

Annie noticed his sudden silence and the increasingly malignant look on his face. This wasn't the carnival anymore. "Oh, Hank's been up to plenty in the last few years," she told Rocky to break the silence. She nudged Hank under the table. "Haven't you?" She knew that look. It always came on quickly. If Rocky hadn't been there she would have assured Hank that he was safe. She knew he hated coming into Manhattan and avoided it whenever possible. But it was Rocky's suggestion, so there they were.

Hank, meanwhile, couldn't tell from her tone if she was giving him a boost or trying to humiliate him for keeping her out this late with a would-be midget in striped pants.

"Yeah, guess I have," he said, looking at the table. "None of it lasted, though."

"That sounds about par," Rocky said. "Like what?"

Hank took a breath, deciding to make the best of it. "Well... starting when, eight years ago. Let's see, I washed dishes at that Greek joint in Times Square, you know, over on Eighth Avenue. Across the street from Show World."

"Screw the ladder an' start at the top, eh?" Rocky said. "You were, what, fifty at the point?"

"Forty-eight. Then I hacked for—"

Rocky stopped him again. "Hold on a sec there, Rochester. When'd you manage to get your driver's license?"

Hank gave a quick shake of the head. "Never bothered."

"And you drove a cab."

"They never asked."

Rocky set down his drink. "You are fuckin' batshit, my friend, and I'm tempted to give you a hug."

"Yeah, well," Hank said without looking at him. "Just keep it in your stripey pants, there, Marlene. Let's see, I was a bartender for about two weeks—"

"But no one saw any good reason to leave him any tips," Annie added. "Then he got the job as an elevator operator at Macy's."

"If you say the job had its ups and downs, swear to god, I'll head-butt you through the window," Rocky said.

"I can usually count on other people to dust that gem off for me. But if you won't oblige, I guess we can move on." Hank could feel the fatigue seeping into his guts. It had been a long day. Or maybe it was being in Manhattan and dredging up all these failures. Or maybe it was the booze. Hell, it'd been only one. "So as you can see I was a loser."

"Some things never change, eh?" Rocky said before turning to Annie. "Hey, doll. Hank here ever tell you how us two met?"

Annie shook her head. "Hasn't told me too much about his past, no. I've had to do a lot of guesswork."

"No? Wow, you're a gutsy dame. Guess I'll leave out that stretch in Sing Sing then, hey Hank! *Hah!*"

"That might be wise yeah. Otherwise you'd have to tell her how you were passed around like

currency. Now just go ahead and tell your damn story, Petunia.” Hank groaned quietly inside.

Rocky took another swallow of the whiskey, which was nearly gone. Hank tried to catch up in part to keep things balanced, in part to numb himself. “All right,” Rocky said as he leaned closer to Annie. “So this all happens back in the late seventies, see? Seventy-eight, seventy-nine, I think. This was before Serpentine. I was with Spike Burr’s outfit, runnin’ a little ten-in-one. More a five-in-one, really, but they were all wha’cha call nowadays multitalented.”

Annie nodded, but didn’t ask. “Anyways, see, we’re parked in north Philly for a week, and the show’s goin’ pretty smooth for a Philly stand. Weather’s holdin’ up. So in comes this kid, right? He took another sip. “Now you gotta picture this. Kid comes in and he’s in this full getup, see? Torn jeans, mismatched shoes, leather jacket, safety pins, hair all cut like a rooster.” He raised both hands, fingers splayed, to the top of his head to illustrate. “The works. And I thought *I* had all the freaks in town.” He gave another sharp cackle and looked over to Hank, who didn’t join in. “So kid says he’s lookin’ for work with the sideshow, right?” He laughed loudly again. “Kid doesn’t wanna run away with the *circus*. Nah, this one here, *he* wantsta run away with the goddamn freak show.” He paused. “It’s pretty common nowadays—guess the little fuckers think it’s cool—but back then it was a new one on me. Mostly we just got junkies and guys juuust outa stir.”

“Maybe I should give her a little background,” Hank jumped in. “Don’t want to give her the wrong idea, *do* you?”

“Yeah, you do what you need, sport. I’m gettin’ another drink. Anyone?” He looked around the table as he stood. Annie shook her head. Hank nodded, then drained his glass. “Got it. Now you go on with your sob story.” He turned and headed for the long bar, his purple vest twinkling under the track lights.

“I’m sorry,” Annie whispered once Rocky was far enough away. “I had no idea he’d be such a dick to you.”

Hank shook his head. “He’s not. Just Rocky being Rocky. Midgets can get that way. And wannabe midgets are even worse. Bitter, spiteful little bastards.” He looked to the bar to check on Rocky’s progress. “So anyway, this story.” He sat back. “I was in my early twenties at that point. Felt like an outsider most all my life, right? Like most white boys with half a brain at that age. We’re romantics that way.”

“Sure,” she said. “It wasn’t just boys, either.”

It was a speech he’d made to himself a thousand times over the years. “A lotta kids at fourteen, fifteen years old, came to recognize their own alienation reading *Catcher in the Rye*, right? Maybe they still do.”

“Of course,” she nodded.

Hank shook his head. “Not me. I recognized my own alienation after seeing *Willard*. I had nothing in common with that snot-nosed whiner Holden What’s-his-name and all his private school crap. I recognized myself in Willard and his rats.”

“That suddenly makes a lot of sense,” she said. It was a revelation that helped explain why, to date, he’d made her watch the movie five times without any explanations.

“Then punk rock comes along. Greatest thing in the world for someone like that, right? The whole fucking subculture designed for half-smart fuckups. So I start going to shows around Trenton and Philly, and up here when I could afford it—Ramones, Damned, Dictators, anyone can see.”

“That explains the record collection, too.”

Hank paused and listened to the sound coming out of the speakers. The noir sound track had vanished, replaced with what sounded like Alban Berg, or one of those other abrasive European types. Maybe it had something to do with his mood. He frowned. It was appropriate in its own way, but not something you hear in bars too often. "Yeah... anyway. So I start going to these shows with others of my own kind, and what happens?"

"What?"

"They beat the shit out of me. Every single goddamn time, these other punks jump me. Complete *strangers*. This isn't lighthearted joking around, either—I'm not talking about slapping and dancing—these guys were letting me know that I was not welcome in their club. But I kept going back."

"My god," Annie said, sounding honestly concerned. "Were you hurt?"

"*Hurt?* Of course I was hurt!" He held up his twisted hands.

"My fingers didn't grow this way naturally. These were big guys. In combat boots. Little kids in combat boots, too, thirteen-, fourteen-year-old brats jumping on me. Girls. It didn't matter."

"Hank, why don't you tell me these things? I want to know."

"Never came up. But the point's this—"

Rocky returned with the drinks. "You about wrappin' this up, Johnny Alibi?"

"Yeah, Rock, thanks, have a seat." He turned back to Annie. "The point is, when you find yourself outcast from a society of outcasts, well, where do you go from there? What's the final refuge for the outcast's outcast?"

"The freak show?" Annie sort of guessed.

"Where else?"

"Yeah," Rocky took over. "So Mr. Discontent here shows up on the lot one night, wantin' to join up. Pay's shitty, accommodations are shitty, food's shitty but he doesn't care. He wants to be part of the freak show. That's just jim-dandy for me—we can always use an extra pair of hands, right? But then comes the kicker, see? 'Cause punkinlilly here didn't realize—never *occurred* to him—that when he signed on to work he'd actually be expected to *work*. Not just sit around all day eatin' fried dough an' being all existentialist an' mopey. There's heavy lifting. He gave Hank a look Hank knew all too well. "Goddamn hippie with a chicken haircut is who you were."

Annie looked at Hank, smiling. She was finally in on one of his secrets. "So how long did you last?"

"About three hours," Rocky answered.

"Five," Hank corrected. "There was a lunch break in there."

"Five, then. That's how long it took ole Salamander, clever monkey that he is, to decide that college might be an easier row to hoe. Pussy."

Hank turned his attentions out the window again. "Don't wanna push it there, Rochester," he said. "Remember I have a few stories of my own to tell."

Apparently taking the threat seriously, Rocky focused on Annie, shifting gears fast and smooth. "So hon, I gotta say, I like you. You're a helluva lot more fun than Hank's first wife. She was... a trip, weren't she Hank?"

"Yeah, that she was, Rock." He was still staring out the window at the slowly dwindling crowds. They were finding some place to go or they were giving up.

"What about you?" Annie asked. "Are you married?"

"Me?" Rocky pursed his lips and sputtered sharply. "Not no more. Was, couple times. No b"

deal. Now I got a skirt at every jump. Makes things easy.”

“That mummy in your show,” she said. ~~“Hank says Marcella was your wife’s name.”~~—

Hank’s face showed no reaction but, below the table out of view, his foot snapped out and kicked Annie in the ankle. She bit her lip but didn’t make another sound.

“Yeah... I guess it was. Hadn’t thought of that before.”

“May I ask what happened to her?”

Hank kicked her again. After all the pinches he’d received earlier that evening, he felt it was only just. Rocky gave Hank the briefest of looks before answering.

“She died a long time back. Same way as Hank’s first wife.”

“A car accident? I’m sorry. That’s so awful.”

Rocky’s eyes cut momentarily, but his face remained unmoved. “Yeah. Truck sideswiped her. Went through the windshield. Took her head off. But hey.” He clapped his hands. “Enough of that shit, right? We didn’t get along anyway. This is a *party*. Old friends, new friends, all that happy horseshit... So what about you, sweets? How do you support this layabout?”

“Me?” she asked, spinning the half empty glass around between her fingers. “Well, now I run a little used and rare book store in Red Hook. There aren’t too many of those left in New York these days.”

“I can imagine,” Rocky said, nodding. “That helps explain what you see in this big lug.” He jerked a thumb Hank’s way.

“What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?” Hank asked, picking his head up. He’d been awfully glad when Rocky changed the subject, but now he wasn’t sure where this was going.

“Oh, nothin’... nothin’ at all, killer. ‘Cept that you’re old, you’re a little worn around the edges, there’s some yellowing, you smell musty. Oh, and your spine might crack if you ain’t careful.”

Hank’s glass was halfway to his mouth but he stopped and considered this. “Y’know, that’s actually cleverer than I would’ve expected from you, shorty. Had no idea you knew what a book was.”

“I’ve picked up a few one-handers here and there.”

“I prefer to think of Hank as rare, not musty,” Annie said.

“Yeah, but he *is* worn at the edges. No denyin’ that.”

“I think ‘endangered’ is more like it,” Hank concluded.

“On that note.” Annie pushed her chair back. “I’m sorry, boys, but I think I need to head back to Brooklyn. It’s almost one, and I need to open the store tomorrow morning. But you two stay here and get caught up.”

“You sure?” Hank asked.

“Sure.” She leaned over and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, then stood. As she did Rocky jumped from his chair.

“Where the hell are you going?” Hank asked him.

“Nowhere. I’m *standing*. You’re supposed to stand up when a lady does.”

“Since when?”

Rocky sneered at him. “You’re such a lummo.”

Hank shrugged and remained where he was. “Maybe, but face it, Rock. In your case it just don’t make that big a difference. Standing, sitting, it’s all about the same.” He reached out and squeezed Annie’s hand. “Get home safe. I’ll see you when I get there. After I get Tom Thum here headed in the right direction.”

After she left, Rocky got them another round and returned to his seat.

~~“Car accident,” he said so Hank could hear the quotation marks. “That’s smooth.”~~

“Didn’t see much point in getting into it.” He raised his glass again. “Thanks for coverin’ Muttley.”

Rocky raised his own glass. “That’s what freaks are for. She’s a good woman. Puts up with you, anyway.”

“Yeah, but I couldn’t get her into the Girl-to-Gorilla tonight.”

“That’ll come in time,” Rocky assured him with a cock of the head. “Right?”

“Probably.”

“So what *are* you doing these days, ya pigfucker—livin’ off all them mountains o’ used boot money?”

Hank looked toward the door and half-smiled. “Ahh, you’d be proud of me, Rock. I found me some gainful employment at a local newspaper. Been there about a year an’ a half now.”

“What, you’re a paperboy now?”

“Ah, shut your pie hole. I’m a reporter.”

“A reporter? Jesus. You don’t have any background in that.”

“They never asked.”

Rocky barked that laugh of his again. “Well, look at Mr. Fancy Schmantzy reporter there. What’s your beat then, yer majesty? Fashion?”

Hank shook his head and looked down. “Crime,” he said.

“*Crime*, he says!” Rocky nearly squealed. “Who woulda thunk it? You went from elevator operator to big city crime reporter like that?” He snapped his fingers.

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“*Crime*,” Rocky repeated. “That’s the place to be... Y’know I used to tour with a crime wa museum. Now *that* was a moneymaker.”

“I remember. That was a good show. Till people forgot who Richard Speck was.”

Rocky was much more excited about this than Hank had expected him to be. Or maybe he was just drunk. “So where you at, one o’ them jobbies on the Internet?”

Hank shook his head again. “Nah, it’s a real honest-to-goodness paper. With print and in and pages and everything.”

Rocky’s increasingly bleary eyes narrowed. “Really,” he said incredulously. “I didn’t think any of those still existed.”

“In this town they do. Who knows for how much longer?” He thought about it a moment. “Guess it means we’re both wrapped up in dead industries.” Rocky threw back what was left in his glass, slammed it to the table with a startling crack, and wiped his mouth with a dramatic draw of the sleeve. “Now *that*, my friend, calls for a drink.”

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