



I ride the rails trying to forget about Jasper. About Rachael and Sharon. My mother and father. And I focus on the idea of starting over until it's the only thing I can see.

It sounds clean. It *feels* clean.

The idea of being someone else, maybe in a whole new city, with an entirely new name. With those things can I also somehow have a new past?

I'm not sure how long I've been on the train but at least one night has passed.

On the third night, sleeping in an abandoned car that's not going anywhere, totally unsure of where this new me should go, that I have a different dream of my mother. Though they're generally all black crows and strange portents I don't understand, this one is really just a vivid memory of her the year she died, played back in a bright Technicolor dream while I sleep. It's one of the last memories I have of her, though I'd long ago forgotten it until now. She's strong and vibrant here, seeming more like the mother I remember, not like some mythical creature constantly trying to warn me of imagined future danger. And more than just seeming like my mother, she seems like a woman; a girl even.

Just a girl finding her way like me.

In the dream we're at a carnival, the tinny familiar music soft in my ears. She's left me with my brother and my father so we can ride rides and eat sweet treats, but I've given them the slip and followed her through the crowds like a miniature spy, afraid to let her out of my sight, afraid she'll disappear if I let her. That was always my fear I realize, that she was going to disappear on me.

I watch her from under cover of a clump of rowdy teenagers as she buys a sideshow ticket and slips inside. Though the sights inside are probably alternately fascinating and horrifying to a child of five or six, I'm not paying attention to any of it, because all I can see is the look on my

mother's face. Most people walking through the show gasp in horror, or laugh and point fingers, but my mother's face is serene; a contemplative compassionate slate of kindness and solidarity that I can't understand, like she's in her own personal church. What is she seeing in the distorted reflections of these people that I cannot? When I emerge from the sideshow I can't for the life of me remember seeing anything inside except her face.

When I wake the tinny carnival music is still heavy in my ears. I can't shake it and for a moment worry I've trapped myself in some half dream, half waking state. After a few long moments though I realize that the music is real, and that it is in fact the music which must have brought on the dream and not the other way around. I pull my duffel bag together and hop off the train car and into a dark empty field. I turn around, trying to feel where the sound is coming from.

It's behind me.

I climb up the ladder on the car and pull myself onto the roof. As I do I see the bright colored lights of a traveling carnival light up the horizon. I smile, excited for the first time in a long while.

People are streaming into the front gates. It looks like admission is free, which is good because I don't have extra money to spend on carnivals. I don't know if my sense of what is right would allow me to sneak in, and I suddenly know I *have* to go in. I jog across the field with my bag slung over my shoulder and wander in casually, mesmerized by the lights, my eyes peeled for anything that looks like a sideshow. I see conjoined twins running a corn dog/hot dog kiosk and wonder if everyone here will be as interesting as the girls running the food stands. Toward the back of the carnival on the right, past most of the rides and across from the funhouse I finally see it. A real live sideshow. I'm honestly shocked that they still exist, it seems like something from olden days, but beautifully painted posters line the walls up to the entrance not unlike the

way it looked when I followed my mother in so many years ago. The first poster reads '*Casanova - The Most Handsome Sword Swallower To Ever Walk The Earth!*' It's followed by a newer looking poster of '*Mona & Nona - The Singing Siamese Twins - Joined At The Hip With Perfect Natural Pitch!*' which is weird because the women look nothing like the conjoined twins I saw at the corn dog kiosk. Next to the twins is an ominous poster for '*The Fabulous Mr. & Mrs. Ink!*' and an image of an intertwined naked couple that appear to be covered entirely in tattoos and nothing else. Next is the '*The Maddrox Family of Miracle Midgets!*' which is mostly broad smiles plastered on tiny faces, bodies clad in bright spandex. But next to the Maddrox Family is what stops me in my tracks. A poster for '*JOAN - THE WORLD'S STRONGEST WOMAN!*' and suddenly I am oblivious to everything else around me. Underneath the bright red text is a fairly realistic rendering of an enormous, beautiful woman with dark hair and long limbs lifting a huge barbell above her head. I take the next few steps toward the poster with my arm outstretched and trace the slightly fading red words with my finger, surprised how important they feel to me.

I'd never thought of this before; that there could be someone else like me out there. That instead of getting lost and becoming someone else I should instead be looking for others like me, to find where I really come from and what I really am. It all seems so clear staring at Joan's poster. Seeing her looking back at me through the canvas I can't believe how much I want there to be someone like me; how much I've been yearning for it without realizing it. Tears pool up in my eyes at the thought of the loneliness falling off of me in sheets as I confess all my secrets to someone who can understand.

I buy my five-dollar ticket, a painful price for my meager remaining funds, and walk through the doorway. Inside I hear what must be Mona and Nona's lovely singing pour from one tent and the oohs and ahhs of people watching the Maddrox Family's stunts, as well as a few

girls emerging from Mr. and Mrs. Ink's tent with disgusted looks on their faces. "I can't believe they are totally naked. So gross!"

But I have my eyes on only one prize and so I ignore all of this and push through to Joan's tent. When I get there it's empty, people not having made it to the end of the line yet, I carefully pick out what I deem to be the perfect seat, right in the middle, third row, and wait for the small tiered benches to fill. Props cover the stage; a huge barbell, a giant tree trunk, a massive boulder, a medicine ball, a partial hull of a rusted car with two front seats still intact, and in the background, a massive scale.

Within ten minutes the tent is filled to capacity and there is a strange buzzing inside me that I've never felt before, like a giant butterfly is beating its wings furiously in the cage of my chest, equal parts terror and excitement. I feel nauseous but exhilarated. I'm not sure what's happening to me, but I'm trying to chalk it up to anticipation, even while my body screams out something different. The room spins lightly around me and I clutch the edge of my wooden seat until my palms bleed trying to keep myself upright. My eyes are blurry and my throat is dry, I'm not sure if I'll faint or fly. This is the moment.

I realize as the curtains part that I'm expecting to see my mother.



I stride through the front gates of "Joan's" carnival, with an eye out for the sideshow. I have to admit, this carnival looks like a winner - there are all sorts of freaks walking around, including actual Siamese twins running the hot dog and corn dog kiosk. If real honest to god, though powerless, freaks are running food stands, what might they have lurking in the actual sideshow? I'm getting giddy with anticipation, and buy a corndog from the prettier of the Siamese with a wallet I lift off a young couple in love.

I see the sideshow in the distance and make my way there while devouring my corn dog and observing the freaks all around me with an annoyed eye. I'm beginning to understand that 'freak' is definitely the right word. People with deformities, and crazier, people who deform themselves on purpose, and people who pretend to be things they aren't. Ironically I've realized that I at least have more respect for the real freaks, since maybe they don't have as many options, but what of these people that turn themselves into freaks on purpose? I can't figure that out at all. I suppose a person could argue that I turned myself into one when I killed my mother...but I'd like to see anyone turn down my power. And also, it totally called to me. Long before I even knew what it was I could feel it calling to me, like those Sirens that killed that Othello guy...or whatever that story was. No. I'm not like these people. I'm unique in the world. I'm more and more sure of that every day.

But when I walk into Joan's tent it's like someone hits me with a sledgehammer.

Something is here for real.

It's not like with Lena.

I can taste it.

Real power.

I grab onto some benches nearby and take a seat near the edge of the tent before I almost faint. The feeling is so powerful it's like the air is water pressing on me from all sides, like I'm a submarine about to be crushed by ocean depths. Some guy next to me offers me a napkin and asks if I'm okay, but it sounds like he's underwater and a thousand miles away.

"Fine. Leave me 'lone," is all I manage. He doesn't like that and scoots farther away, which is my preference anyway. I put my head between my legs and breathe in some deep breaths trying to get my bearings. What if whoever is here causing me to feel this way is feeling this too? What if I can't stand up let alone fight if they reveal themselves?

What have I done?

PART II: and here we test our powers

TO BE CONTINUED! BUY THE BOOK! COMING SOON TO AMAZON & BARNES &
NOBLE AS BOTH EPUB AND PRINT!