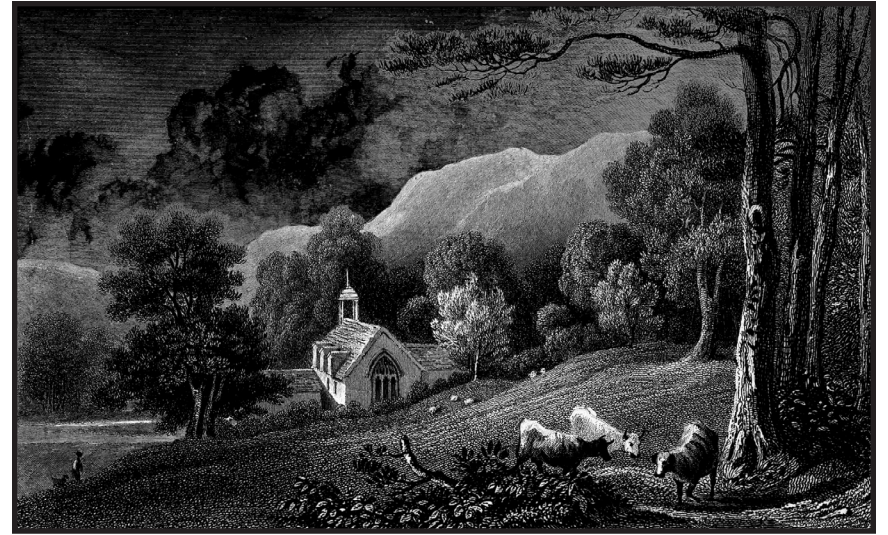


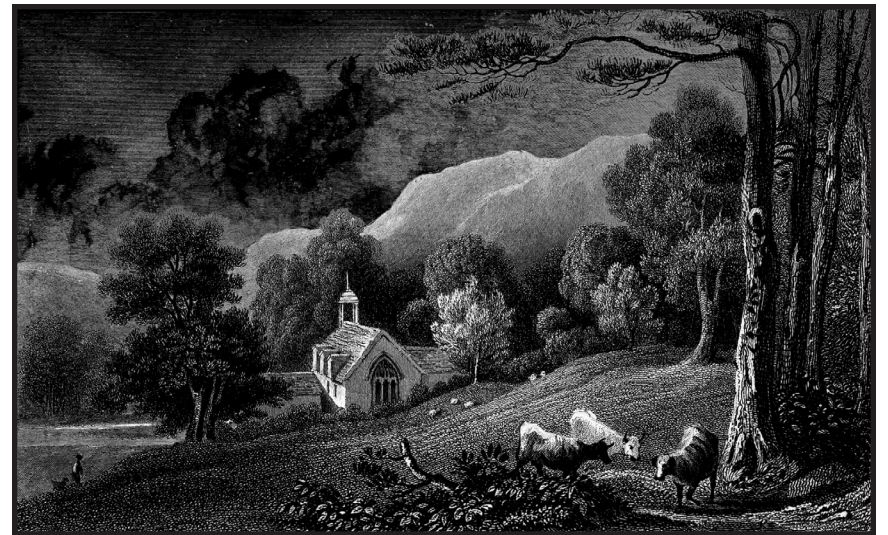
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The World Below & Here Comes The Fucking Circus

two stories by Jimmy T. Hand

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In this second collection of short fiction by Jimmy T. Hand, we present you with two tales, set in the modern era, that explore the realms of imagination we have locked ourselves away from. His other works include The Seduction of the Wind, a longer collection of stories, and In the Hall of the Mountain King & The Road to Either-Or, autobiographical novellas. All are available free from Strangers In A Tangled Wilderness.

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“Where you going?” He asked.

“Work.”

“I thought you didn’t have any clients on Saturdays anymore?”

“I just got a new one, but only for today. Remember that stiltwalker, the one who was giving balloons to the kids in the line?”

“Oh.”

Laura walked out the door as Kerry shook hot sauce onto his potatoes, trying to keep his mind a perfect blank. 

HERE COMES THE FUCKING CIRCUS — 29

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"I'm fine, I think. I'm pretty drunk."

"Me too. Look at us... we match."

"We do indeed."

They looked at each other for a long moment before looking back to the crowd. "There's Laura," Kerry pointed.

Sharissa laughed. "How can you find her?"

"She's been dancing with the frowning stiltwalker all night."

"Ah."

KERRY'S MEMORY AFTER that mostly consisted of motion, of dancing or bicycling or falling off his bicycle. One moment stood forward in his mind—laughing as he jumped off his moving bike to retrieve his hat that had come off with the wind.

He woke the next morning in his T-shirt next to Laura, whose corset was loosened but not removed.

His knees were weak as he rose, his head pounded as he fried potatoes, and Laura didn't try much to make eye contact. Before he finished making breakfast, Laura had changed into the dress she often wore for work and was busy

THE WORLD BELOW

"I COME TO BRING YOU THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY NEWS, MY FRIENDS." The speaker, one M— Reed, spoke with a quiet fervor quite unlike his usual contemplative calm. "Not that I expect a one of you to believe it, of course."

We laughed at this. Reed was not prone to fancy, and, quite unlike the rest of us, had opted to not explore drugs in his youth. He was a sober bore, to be quite honest.

Our fellowship, of sorts, had opted to allow his presence because he was young, handsome and counterbalanced us quite well.

But Reed continued.

"As the few of you who have inquired are aware, I am an amateur anthropologist; I make the hobby of studying cultures old and odd."

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"As the few of you who have inquired are aware, I am an amateur anthropologist; I make the hobby of studying cultures old and odd."

“And boring,” interjected Johnson, the pillhead who sat to my left.

“Yes... yes... I am aware that perhaps cultures that haven’t bothered with destroying their cognitive ability might not interest the lot of you.”

“Go on, M—, go on.” This last was spoken by a woman named Q—, of whom it was known that she had a soft spot for the sober man.

“I will stand no further interruptions until I have told you this thing through, for it’s a fabulous story and I want not to answer questions until I am quite ready.”

He stared about the room, met us all in the eye. There was Q—, and Johnson and I already mentioned, as well as S—, an herbalist who self-medicated with abandon.

“Right.

“I stumbled across a cheap book, a photocopied mess that must have been through several paper generations before I found it in the used bookstore’s throwaways. *Ruminations of a Non-Secular Sort*, I believe it was called, and subtitled *The World Below*.

“Naturally, much of it was indecipherable, a mess of contrasty photos.... black circles and what were probably some people. But much of the text, aside

One by one, the over a dozen children and young teens filed into the center of it all in a spectacular disarray of costuming. One of the smallest walked out from the rest—wearing a miniature coat with tails and bowler—, pulled out a baton and led them in song.

The words were foreign, the singers untrained, and yet they reached a crescendo that rivaled Wagnerian opera. While they sang someone rolled back the peak of the tent, revealing the gibbous moon and light-polluted stars.

The ringmaster came back and once again everything grew silent.

“Thank you,” he said humbly, “thank you. There is no more audience; there is no more stage. Those of you left are more than welcome to join us now in dance.

Kerry woke from his daze and looked around him. There were less than three hundred people remaining, but soon they were directed in folding the chairs and clearing the tent.

Ten minutes later the ring was un-fenced, the tent walls rolled open, and the dancing began.

HOURS LATER, SHARISSA pulled Kerry aside to stand in the grass outside the tent.

“How are you doing,” she asked.

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For the next two hours Laura and Kerry were transfixed by the well-orchestrated chaos. Stiltwalkers breathed fire, igniting one clown who ran screaming out the back entrance while the others danced their waltz unperturbed. The alcohol-clown kept the crowd inebriated.

The accordionist sang beautifully and incomprehensibly while standing on the shoulders of a man half her size. Two people of ambiguous gender fist-fought slow and choreographed, solemnly swinging at each other while surrounded by silent clowns in suits and roll-up ties. Without the dubbed in sounds of a movie or the hollering crowd of a street fight, Kerry had a hard time believing the blows were real until the blood from one combatant's mouth began to seep into the packed earth.

Well over half the audience filtered out aghast during the course of the show, but the rest were transfixed. At one point Kerry heard angry shouts from outside, and he could have sworn he heard violence.

A drunken audience member climbed into the ring and shouted obscenities to the musicians and clowns, but he was roundly ignored and he eventually sat down at the edge of the stage and wept into his hands.

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I admit, I began to pay more attention when the idea of drugged out teenagers fucking on altars came into the picture.

“But the last page of the pamphlet spoke of one church, one frequented by only a few in a tiny town, a protestant place, where they discovered... the world below.

“At this point the zine ended, and I expect that the author felt that the photographs would have served a perfect explanation. But this copy being so far from the original, I had little to go on.

“Now, my profession leaves me much leisure...”

(Let it be noted that the speaker was a professional burglar who felt no need for luxury—a single night's work every year sufficed for his spartan lifestyle.)

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“But when I saw the church from outside I knew I had found the right place. Something simply... reeked... yes it was as though an odor in the air... of oddity. I was out of my car quite quickly to knock at the door.

“I had no thought in my mind of criminality, only anthropology, or I would not have taken this direct route, I assure you.

“And so a woman-priest answered my knocking and I was immediately taken aback. First, that in a rather small town in Pennsylvania I was to find a woman priest, and secondly, she was not uncommon beautiful and I was immediately taken in by her eyes. Yes, her eyes. The last time I had seen such fiercely violet eyes had been in a club and *that* woman had been wearing contacts. I swear to you by the nothing I believe in that her eyes were naturally some shade of purple that owed more to crimson than blue. And her eyes told me that I was welcome in the church.

“She chose not to speak but instead turned and walked back into the sanctuary, a room cavernous in height but in breadth no greater than a rich man’s dining hall. There were only two rows of pews, a total of four, and they sat a

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“We wander the world as we wander our minds,” he said, and the accordion player joined the invisible violin, slowly. “And we cannot abide by what passes as entertainment.

“Most of you have never seen a circus...”

Two clowns came walking on their hands into the ring, one circling clockwise, the other counter-clockwise.

“Even if you’ve been to the ‘big top’ before.

“But I oughtta shut up, if we’re to get out of here by sunrise. Welcome, everyone, to the fucking circus.” No one applauded. No one said anything.

The tattooed man turned and walked out of the light, leaving only the accordionist and the clowns. She struck up a slow waltz, and the clowns stood back on their feet. One unbuttoned and removed his shirt, revealing a brace of juggling knives. A full fifty feet apart, at either edge of the ring, he tossed one in an overhand arc to the other. The crowd gasped. The other clown caught it seconds later and the crowd breathed out, but the tension stayed palpable the entire time the two were slowly juggling three knives where a miss might hit the audience.

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“Shush, I don’t know. Maybe there is a separate children’s show.”

Shortly, the tattooed man from the flyers walked to the center of the ring and the tent grew silent. He was imposing, well over six feet tall, and Kerry couldn’t discern his age. The ringmaster’s head and face were bare of hair but covered with complex, thick linework that ran down his neck into the collar of his modern but shabby suit.

“People of the world,” he began, “of every possible gender, welcome.” A violin struck up somewhere, filling the void between his words. “We are here this afternoon because we need this. I’m sure that most of you here are missing the television shows you would otherwise be watching. I hope that some of you are missing work. I know that I don’t miss work.”

A nervous chuckle came from the crowd at the old joke, but the atmosphere was too heavy for a laugh.

“But we need this. I need it. You need it. She needs it.” He gestured behind himself and the accordion woman from the other flyer was walking into the light, indeed seemed to *be* the light.

“They must have some kind of spot reflectors set up by the fires...” Kerry murmured.

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“The crucifix was another matter and I began to understand some of the strange air about the place—the Christ figure was un-shrouded and anatomically correct. What’s more, he was aroused. The wound of the spear was quite evident and raw, even in an unpainted wooden carving. The look on his face was... was what a heathen might refer to as heavenly delight. Church Of Christ the Masochist, I dubbed the place in my head, for indeed what a masochist this Christ must have been, choosing to suffer the weight of the world. If only I had been further off the mark...

“The priest who had opened the door for me was nowhere to be seen, having silently moved on while I had stared raptly at Christ’s genitals. No wonder black metal kids had loved this place.

“I never know what to do in churches. I felt perhaps the proper thing to do was to sit in a pew, so I sat close to the aisle in a pew on the right. I was taking in the moldings and had begun to count the tiles—a habit from a childhood of Catholicism—when I heard footsteps. I turned and saw an older man, in black robes matching to the first priest, and I was in for an even greater start than before.

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“The priest crossed himself and sat next to me, and this man turned to look at me, his craning his neck to move his face closer to my own. His nose was mere inches from me, and one of his eyes was weeping. I have thought this through many times since, and I can come up with no other explanation. One of his eyes wept and one of his eyes stared forward without a trace of emotion, no matter the words he spoke. And oh, my friends, did he speak.

“Welcome, my child. What brings you to our church?”

“I chose to be forthright with him, for I was seized with an understanding that his cold eye would see right through the lies, spoken and unsaid alike, even as his tears would believe every word I spoke.

“I tell you this knowing how you know me, knowing me to be the hardened skeptic of this circle, and I tell you that I came to know these things with a certainty.

Many of us nodded—I certainly did. I appreciated what it was like to first *understand* in ways that we cannot properly *know*.

“And thusly I told him about the photocopied book I had found. I told him about the passage relating to ‘the world below’ and looked at him with an expectation, no, a mere hope, of explanation.

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Laura bought them both a beer and questioned the man about the low cost.

“It’s better that you’re drunk, you’ll see, you’ll see.” The clown grinned and doffed his top hat to them both before moving further down the line.

“Tickets, please,” a plain-looking young woman requested from behind a desk when they reached the front of the line.

“Right uh...” Kerry looked flustered. “Don’t we buy the tickets from you?”

“Exactly,” the woman replied, bored, “which is why you must say ‘Tickets, please’ if wish to buy a pair.”

“Oh, yes. Tickets please. Two.”

“That will be ten dollars.”

Kerry paid the woman and they went quickly inside the tent. Letting their eyes adjust, they realized that the only light came from three braziers encircling the ring and from sputtering kerosene lamps that hung every few rows in the audience. They found their seat assignments among the folding chairs and sat down, just two rows from the sawhorse fence that defined the stage.

There were perhaps a thousand seats and soon they were all taken. But looking about he noticed something was missing.

“Hey,” he whispered, “where are all the kids?”

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“I’m sorry,” Kerry murmured. “I’m making an mess of things again.” He spoke up: “What did you bring for me?”

“Oh! I’m excited...” she reached into the paper bag and pulled out a bowler and a coat with tails. “I know you’re always wearing black slacks already, so...” She was watching his face. “You don’t like it.”

“No. No! I like it fine. It’s just funny, that’s all. Sharissa is wearing the same thing.”

“Oh, well that will be cute! Now, come! Let us ride our bicycles to the field by the cemetery. Let’s go to the fucking circus.”

BY THE TIME they arrived the crowd was sizable, and a loose line led all the way to the cemetery’s parking lot. The couple dutifully took their place in line and saw people from every culture in town.

A father discovered his teenage son in line and began to yell.

But for the most part the crowd was up jovial as the line made its way towards the giant brown-and-tan circus tent. A stilt-walker in sad clown-face plied the crowd with balloons while a grinning clown came to sell beer and liquor at a very reasonable price.

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“And the priest answered me just as candidly. He told me that indeed teenagers had come and explored the world below, but they had not broken in at night... they had come to the door and knocked as had I, and were admitted by the same violet-eyed priest, whose name I learned as Mother Zachariah.

“They had been admitted, and they had asked about the crucifix, and they had all of their questions answered. Thusly, they had been admitted to the world below.

“And the priest lapsed into an explanation, one that I tell you, defies convention and rationality at every turn. But it made sense to me that day, listening to a man who wept for the world with half his face and blankly accepted with the other.

“Catholics will tell you that Jesus Christ died for our sins, and in many ways that is true. But the point was not to wash our sins away in His holy blood as they would go on to tell you. Jesus was sent to communicate to us the single-sided nature of our worldly understanding. We had been in denial of sin, yet it had surrounded us constantly. Sadly, with the rise of the Catholic faith, this problem has only grown worse.

“‘Christ was both hedonist and puritan,’ the priest went on to say, ‘and he

“And the priest answered me just as candidly. He told me that indeed teenagers had come and explored the world below, but they had not broken in at night... they had come to the door and knocked as had I, and were admitted by the same violet-eyed priest, whose name I learned as Mother Zachariah.

“They had been admitted, and they had asked about the crucifix, and they had all of their questions answered. Thusly, they had been admitted to the world below.

“And the priest lapsed into an explanation, one that I tell you, defies convention and rationality at every turn. But it made sense to me that day, listening to a man who wept for the world with half his face and blankly accepted with the other.

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“‘Christ was both hedonist and puritan,’ the priest went on to say, ‘and he

died to open for us a physical connection with the world below, a world that many of us had always longed for. Jesus indeed was the great liberator of humanity, but not in the ways you were probably taught.

"I told him that I was a devout atheist and skeptic, that I had no love for the Catholic Jesus.

"And this is understandable," he replied. "Rejection of a one-sided worldview is to be found in any independent thinker. But I will be honest with you that I intend, if you will let me, to make you a believer. There is no dogma in the Church of Christ the Weeping Man, but only some truths that I will show you, now, if you like.

"Of course I accepted. I suppose that if I had had any inkling I might actually believe him I might not have gone with him; I've always been a stubborn type in my atheism."

We the audience, in rapt attention, chuckled.

"I went with him, whose name I was to learn as Father Thomas, to stand under the Jesus. As I walked I noticed that we stepped over a seam in the floor that forming a circle around the pulpit. 'Zachariah,' Father Thomas called out, and from an unnoticed small door in the side of the sanctuary the mesmerizing

the awkward stares of the casual-friday office workers who scurried off to their cars at frequent intervals. They ate avocado and cheese on rye, with a salad on the side, contentedly munching away in their own worlds.

While Kerry finished the last of his sandwich, Laura got back to her feet and started to pull her T-shirt over her head. Looking up, Kerry saw her reveal a dress he had never seen her wear, dark maroon with a brown canvas corset laced down the front.

"Wow," he managed to say.

"Do you like it?"

"Of course I do. You look amazing. Where did you get it?"

"A client gave it to me."

Kerry looked down and picked at the empty tupperware with the fork they had shared the salad with.

"Oh look, honey," Laura tried, "it's not like that. It's really not. He didn't even ask me to try it on for him."

"No," Kerry half-muttered, "but he seemed to know what size you were."

"Because he asked. And I let him buy it for me because I wanted to wear it out with you."

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“Nothing, I suppose. It’s just that... it’s the circus. No, it’s not that. It’s the *fucking* circus. I figure it’s a formal occasion.”

His co-workers drove off to a vegan diner, and Kerry walked out to the manicured office-park lawn to wait for Laura. It was a beautiful summer afternoon and he sat down on the mulch of a young tree, contemplating the monstrosity of bureaucracy about him.

He watched as Laura first came into sight, a speck down the road, and he watched as she grew closer. He watched her legs working the pedals; he watched her easy breath as she sat back on her bike, hands hanging idly by her side. By the time she reached him she was grinning uncontrollably.

“I brought us dinner,” she said as she dismounted above him. “And I brought you something to wear.”

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” He tried to keep his tone curious.

“Nothing. I just thought we might go formal, that’s all. After all, it’s the *fucking* circus.” Laura opened the plastic buckets that served as panniers for her bike and pulled a soft-sided lunchbox from one, a paper grocery bag from the other.

They picnicked their dinner there beside the parking lot, content despite

woman came to join us. Once over that curious seam in the floor she went to a large heavy rope that hung on the back wall and I realized I was on a sort of primitive lift.

“We descended. At first I was afraid, disappearing into the basement of a strange cult, but then as we continued lower, hundreds of feet now, I was overcome by curiosity. We seemed to be descending into the very bowels of the earth. But this supposition too was wrong.

“When the daylight of the sanctuary above had become naught but a pinprick above us and everything seemed dark as the grave, we broke through into a the ceiling of another room, a sanctuary that seemed identical at first to the one from which we had come.

“Completely inexplicable to me was that light filtered in through the windows, as bright as daylight, yet with the pale color of moonlight. Jesus was in his place over the altar and the four pews stood in the same place. It was only the quality of light, and the complete mystery of the place, that set it apart from the church I had left above.

“Numbly I walked to the front door and stood by as Mother Zachariah opened it. The soft, bright light flooded in, blinding me for a moment. As I

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“No cavern lay before me. Out the doors of the church was a land every bit as much of an outside as the world above, but every color was wrong. Parts spoke of a photographic negative—the sun, or perhaps moon, was a deep gray that verged on black, and yet the sky was light still, but as I mentioned, it was a light charcoal, a color that no earthly sky has ever been. There were no clouds, so I can’t speak to them.

“The landscape was a vast and featureless plain and yet I couldn’t properly see a horizon. The plants were green, yes, but the grass was the green of a fir, a deep blue-green that may never wither to brown.

“I was taken aback and was silent. Father Thomas however, continued.

“This world is a world without sin—not without carnal acts, but a world without guilt, for it is guilt that defines sin. Can an owl, as it eats the defenseless mouse, sin? This is the world that you will come to visit as you accept Jesus Christ as a man who wept for the world. Once you have accepted Him into your very being, then when you visit will all of your sin will be washed away.

“And indeed I already felt the slight lessening of a weight I didn’t realize I bore. I was raised Catholic, and although I might fancy myself from time to

and put it on her collarbone, where he began to massage her neck. “You just need to learn to trust me, that’s all.”

Kerry grew defensive but tried not to show it. “Alright.”

The lovers fell asleep embracing, but woke on opposite sides of the bed.

FRIDAY ARRIVED AND Kerry’s office was drooling with excitement. Workers there set their own hours—usually 11-7—and no one person was in charge, so they all agreed to cut out at six. Sharissa had driven her minivan to work so she could take everyone.

“No thanks, Laura’s meeting me here,” Kerry dodged when Sharissa invited him to join them.

“She can come too, we’ll all fit.”

“No, we’re going to bike over.”

“Well, okay. If that’s the way you want it. What’re you going to wear?” Sharissa had changed into old-fashioned drag; a coat with tails over her lanky form and a bowler from under which her afro pushed out.

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“Well, I wouldn’t want to interrupt you while you’re... you know...” Kerry walked into a trap of his own making.

“Massaging a customer?” Laura was angry. “I’m a masseuse. I’m. Just. A. Fucking. Masseur.”

They finished their dinner in silence and Kerry started to wash the dishes.

“I rented a movie I thought you might want to watch, it’s...” Laura began.

“No thanks. I think I’m going to read a bit and go to bed.”

“Well... alright.”

WEDNESDAY AND THURSDAY passed mostly without incident. They watched the movie she had rented, *Freaks*, about sideshow performers in 1932. On Thursday night they even slept in the same bed.

“I do love you, you know,” Kerry told her post-coitally. “I don’t show it right, I know that.” He traced her generous belly with his hand, running his finger subconsciously along her caesarian scar. He looked for a long moment into her soft brown eyes and moved his hand to massage her temples. “I just live alone, in my head. I spend so much of my time in my head.”

“I know. It used to bother me, but it doesn’t anymore.” Laura took his hand

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“I asked to wander about, but Father Thomas told me it was ill-advised. When he spoke, I bowed to his authority more naturally than is in my general character, and we three—Mother Zachariah having not uttered a single word—walked back to the pulpit. We ascended back into the world above and I began to understand quite a bit about the nature, almost illusory, of heaven and hell.

“And this, my friends, is what I have discovered, and I come to you today seeking your company for an expedition to the Church of Christ the Weeping Man. So that you too may discover the world below.”

I sat still and quiet for quite some time, trying to ascertain how I felt about the story that had been related. So did all of my fellows.

When we assented to this witchery, as indeed we knew we would, Q— approached me and with a sly grin, complimenting herself on her choice of lovers, a choice that had, until that night, been greatly in question. A world without guilt awaits us, perhaps. I am anxious to see. ☞

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"I'll let you know." He turned his eyes but not his attention back to his own screen. "But you know that I don't have any friends."

Sharissa laughed. "Hah. Yeah. I know. If you would ever come to our vegan potlucks, or the fur protests..."

"It's not my thing."

"Alright, alright. It's just, you know, if you stopped eating cheese you'd probably drop a few pounds..."

"I've got a girlfriend, thanks. I don't need to lose weight."

"Right."

Sharissa probably meant nothing by it, but her near-daily remarks on his weight ate into his self-esteem.

"YOU CALLED ME at work today," Laura started.

"Sorry."

"No, I liked it. Makes me think you care."

"Oh, well then." Kerry picked at his dinner: tempeh and greens with mozzarella and rice.

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HERE COMES THE FUCKING CIRCUS — 17

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“Oh! Great!” Her exclamation lacked exuberance. “I’m busy with a customer right now, so I’ll talk to you at home.”

“Oh, okay. Uhm, bye.”

“Bye honey.”

Sharissa, his office-mate, looked over once he hung up. “Well, I’m surprised.”

“What, that I’m going to the circus? Isn’t everyone else here going to end up going?”

“No, that you called her at work. I thought you were too nervous.”

Laura was a masseuse, and though she swore that she remained clothed, Kerry couldn’t help but imagine the worst.

Worst? He knew, intellectually, that there was nothing wrong with sensual massage. But the thought of her young, full-bodied form being ogled for money bypassed his logical thinking and struck him right in the gut.

“Hey. Sorry I brought it up.” Sharissa turned back to her computer—she collected and disseminated information on animal torturers across the globe. “You know, I’ll be going. I’m trying to find myself a date though, so if you know of anyone...”

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“I SAW A FLYER TODAY, STAPLED TO A POLE ON THE CORNER BY MY WORK.” Laura dug through the cabinet looking for the pasta while she spoke. “The circus is coming to town...”

“You know how I feel about the circus.” Kerry was seated at their modest kitchen table, paging through the morning paper.

“No, it’s not one of *those* circuses. I don’t think they even have any animals. The flyer had a drawing of a tattooed man, done Art Nuevo. It was really pretty.”

“Well, when is it?” Kerry was half-listening, his eyes gazing out their front window to the city street beyond.

“It’s on Friday.”

“Friday is my night alone.”



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Leaving the water to boil on the stove, Laura walked around the counter to stand behind her boyfriend. “I know,” she started, clasping her hands over his chest, “It’s just that we haven’t done anything interesting in...”

Kerry interrupted her, shrugging her arms off of him. “That’s not true, we went to that jazz club...”

“Two weeks ago. And I don’t like jazz. I went to watch you get drunk.”

Kerry sighed, and reached back to put a hand on the side of Laura’s knee. “We’ll see, my love.”

THE NEXT MORNING, on his bike ride to the office, he stopped to examine one of the flyers. A... woman(?)... was depicted with an accordion open to near full extension, her head thrown back in mirth. *Lock up your children*, it read, *here comes the fucking circus*.

Circuses were something he heard quite a bit about, doing tech work for an animal-rights non-profit. He knew about the bullhooks used to beat and rip the oft-tender elephant flesh. Though he didn’t always agree with the aggressive tactics that animal-rights groups used, he wanted to see The Ringling Brothers driven out of business as much as the next good vegetarian.

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But as soon as he was back in traffic he was too busy fighting with the aggressive cars to give it further thought.

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Someone from the PR office phoned the city government to find out if the circus held a permit, but she learned only that the field was private property. No one could track down the owner.

Kerry knew he was going to end up giving in to Laura, what with all the mystery surrounding the event, so he decided to get it over with. He called her cell while she was at work, something he hadn’t done in months.

“Kerry?” She was surprised to hear from him.

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