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My mother was famous in her day, in the narrow world of the circus and its audience. Yet I can barely even believe in her existence, far less in what she was famous for. She was so hard to track down, she might have been better suited for a career as an escapist.

I followed her trail down the years, through self-important suburbs and rural hamlets of whinstone and granite, my heart growing hard and brittle as slate every with each failure to find a clue about who she really was. To be honest, I never understood the reason for my quest until now. She wasn't even a memory to me. But she was an idea, and ideas have more power and resonance than memory.

My hands burn and itch so much now. It's all I can do not to tear off these white cotton gloves, but I know if I do I'll have to look at them, and I can't, not yet. My feet swell in my shoes as though they might tear through the leather.

To master the fear and pain I think about Frankie. I can see him in my mind's eye, the way he was that day he told me who he really was. If I focus I can forget briefly what I am becoming. I can pretend it doesn't have to end the way I know it must.

Looking back I can see how ironic that Frankie had lived all those years in St Brame's, the place we first met. Ironic because of how he would have lived before that; stillness after all his restless travels, his adventures. The miles he must have covered. The things he must have seen. And then, to be stuck in one place for so many years. I can't begin to imagine how it must have felt for him.

St Brame's is one of those English seaside towns best visited in its melancholy off season. The day I stepped off the train, I caught a rickety old bus which dropped me on the outskirts. I found the main street, such as it was, a narrow corridor of closed shops and dismal bed and breakfast accommodation. I took the third street on the left, a narrow vennel which opened presently on the harbour. Over the low tide

stretched the cracked wooden tongue of the pier. I turned around and scanned the harbourfront until I spotted The Golden Lion, where Frankie said he would meet me, the only pub he could recommend because of its lack of large screen television or karaoke machine. For some reason I didn't want to see him right away. I needed to look around first. Maybe being so close to my goal made me feel achieving it would be anti-climatic.

Frankie had told me through a crackling phonenumber, "They have my picture on the wall. You can still make out my autograph."

The wife I imagine for myself in another life would have walked out on me by then. I had spent most of my money and time looking for my mother. The idea of my mother.

Last month my war of attrition against the adoption agency finally ended. I conceded defeat, having failed to wear them down. They flatly refused to tell me who my parents were. It was a legal thing, they told me. And so, with a chunk of my remaining savings, I hired a private detective. He was good. He even found my birth certificate.

Circus performers must be the most difficult people in the world to trace, urban nomads moving between cities where they flare brightly as comets and fade as suddenly in streaks of truck tail lights. My mother was one of them, one of the brightest. My mother, the origami woman, who folded herself away one day for the last time and simply disappeared.

When I entered the Golden Lion, the barmaid glanced at my face and took my order for a pint of ale too quickly, as though embarrassed by my presence. By the fact of me. The overlapping plates of scaly flesh beneath my eyes crinkled disgustingly when I tried to smile at her and I dabbed a handkerchief at the saliva I imagined trailing in a rope from the frozen left side of my mouth. A couple of girls in a booth by the door bent over to whisper to each other, punctuating their exchange with furtive glances in my direction. Tongue pressed to the points of my sawblade teeth I wondered what it would feel like if my tongue was instead the flesh of these girls, hotspill of metallic blood in my mouth as I rip out the throats they use to whisper about me. A fine revenge that would be, though it would not be fair to exact it upon them.

But who could I blame my condition on?

Sipping my drink at the counter I studied the photographs and posters covering the walls, some of them tucked behind the inverted bottles of spirits and their optic measures because wallspace was so scarce. Many of the photographs were old studio shots of mediocre crooners, comedians and vaudeville acts signed with a flourish of optimism that did not match their life experience. Who had heard of these people other than the locals and the indiscriminating tourists who would settle for the dregs of the entertainment world, believing they were really enjoying themselves when they laughed at hoary old jokes, ogled clumsy scantily-clad chorus girls and pretended not to know the villain of that season's murder mystery play? My mother might be up on these walls. I looked for the old circus poster which might advertise the Folding Woman or something along those lines. But if there was only a photograph and a signature I had no way of recognising her; she would have used a stage name.

“Looking for me?” Burly and lumpy as a sack of coal, Frankie McGruder was taller than expected from the split-reed squeak of a voice. The white scar on his throat might have been where a cancerous growth had been excised and damaged his vocal cords. Or maybe it was one of his acts gone wrong.

He nodded at photograph of himself in his youth: a tawny, sunken-cheeked and passably handsome young man, scowling darkly in one of those film-noir high contrast images popular back then. His autograph was an unreadable wriggling snake of faded ink. “Geek means something different these days. Computer obsessed kids. And 'fore you ask, I only bit off chicken heads a few times. My act was more extreme body mutilation, pulling a car with hooks through my nipples, hanging off ropes with rings through my ribs, an' that.”

His matter of fact tone was more surprising that the acts Frankie described. His accent was difficult to place. Mid atlantic, perhaps.

“What would you like?” I asked.

“I don't wanna drink at the moment; let's walk.”

No sooner had we left the bar and begun walking down the concrete steps off the promenade to the night-darkened beach, than Frankie grabbed me by the shoulders and slammed my back against the metal bannister. As he yanked open my coat I tried to push him away, but my energy had drained out of me, either through the surprise of the attack or

because I was beginning to appreciate how pointless my life was becoming.

He pushed his hand under my shirt and dug his nails into my abdomen. And just as I thought he was about to undo my trousers, Frankie stepped back.

He examined the glistening half-moons of hardening flesh he had torn away, like gigantic soft fingernails or scales. Frankie pushed them around in his hand like a miser counting gold.

“It really is you,” he breathed. “I knew you was after somethin’, money anyways, but mebbe somethin’ else, too. She ain’t got none left, in case you’re askin’.”

Rebuttoning my coat I sneered: “I thought you were the one who was after money. Money doesn’t matter anymore.”

He appraised my coat. “It’s okay for those as got it to say that.”

There was a button missing, and the wool torn where it had been ripped away. I showed him it and said with an attempt at irony: “I’ll subtract the damage off your fee.”

Frankie laughed drily. “I could snap your neck and just take the money off you. You’ll have it in the hotel.”

“What makes you so sure of that?” He was right of course. My last withdrawal of nearly a thousand in cash, which took me to my overdraft limit and cleaned out my bank account, was in the base of my suitcase wrapped inside a roll of t-shirts.

At the edge of the darkness silvery foam washed the fringes of the beach. Pebbles and small stones clicked together like billiard balls being racked. Right now I felt as lonely and frustrated as the solitary seagull crying mournfully above us.

We stumbled down the remaining steps and my feet sank into wet sand. Frankie’s glossy leather biker jacket made him seem even more menacing and I hesitated to go any nearer the shoreline with him; not that I was afraid of dying, but I was afraid of pain and I could see that Frankie could inflict it. Brutally, if he chose to. He wanted the money, yes, but he might want more than that. To torture me just for fun, for instance. His body might have been able to take extremes of pain, but mine was weak from lack of food and exhaustion. I hadn’t eaten in five

days, and now slept hardly at all.

My bones are melting. I can feel it. What used to be a rubbery-skeleton beneath translucent skin is changing again, liquefying. In the mirror I watch the tangled motorway of veins and arteries twisting around my arm bones, and below my collarbone where the shirt is open at the neck. A sluggish heartbeat makes my lifeblood pulse listlessly, and I can see every beat in the jittery vein at my temple. Frankie was right about me: I am different, but not in the way he meant, or in any conventional understanding of a monstrosity or a deformity. It's the essential me, my essence, my soul which is the most different and strange. Frankie taught me how to tolerate, if not exactly celebrate, the role of the outsider, but I can never grow accustomed to change. Frankie and my mother could embrace change because of a fixed sense of who they were. Frankie said mother was "very together". Whereas me, I am in a state of flux.

At first he refused to tell me where she was. As I ball my fists and touch my thumbs together to ground my thoughts, I remember how angry he would get if I asked about her. One time he nearly knocked me unconscious. He threw me to the floor of his dusty flat and straddled my chest and punched me repeatedly in the face. I blamed the booze, of course. Frankie had difficulty staying away from it; that first meeting had been an act while he sized me up in as sober a condition as was feasible for him. But there was a grim kindness to him as well. Like the time he invited me to stay once he realised how broke I was.

"You don't look that bad, you know," he informed me one night over a meal of gammon steak and fried egg. Frankie was a terrible cook. The gammon was crispy at the edges and the egg almost raw.

"Compared to what? This food's disgusting, by the way." Pushing my plate away, I stood up unsteadily and tipped the empty bottle of wine experimentally to the bare light bulb dangling from the ceiling. Three empties sat on the tabletop. Oddly enough I couldn't seem to get as drunk as I wanted, oblivious-drunk. If I hadn't opened the bottles myself I would have sworn that Frankie had watered down the wine.

"Drinking won't help," Frankie offered. Talk about the blind leading the blind.

“You said you’d take me to my mother. I need to see her.”

Frankie sighed. “I told you, boy; all in good time.”

By now I was beyond exasperation at this litany of his. How do you define “good” time? Good for whom?

On this occasion I let it pass, but next night, as I had done several times before, I followed Frankie as he left the bar. Instead of walking to the end of the pier and sitting on bench to watch the oily black waves flex like muscles in the starlight, he turned down a side street. Slanting moonlight across the rooftops blazed on the high whitewashed seawalls which had once protected the houses behind them when storms forced the tides all the way up here. I had seen a photograph of just such a storm in the local museum which had once been a schoolhouse. Dated 1901, it had been the last devastating tidal wave on this part of the coast. The ancient cobbled street rose to a ridge, beyond which lay woodland and a moor. At a bend in the road, I had to duck back out of sight. There, at the edge of town, I saw a shape which must have been Frankie turning. Checking in case he was being followed. I held my breath for a few seconds then leaned forward as far as I dared. And saw Frankie drop on all fours and lean down to sniff the ground like a dog. His leather jacket seemed to melt onto his torso, moulding to his musculature like a second skin, and the flat plates of his shoulder bones thrust upwards, pushing back from his spine like vestigial wings. His neck lengthened and his head pulled back with a jerk as though someone had grabbed him by the hair and tried to rip it off. His face lengthened, melting, blackening and pushing forward into a curved shape of what seemed like a gigantic beak sharp as a knife blade.

My heart thudded in my chest as I exhaled a long, ragged breath.

I turned and ran away, terrified by what I had seen, disbelief unable to quell the fear. Running, my shoes scuffed loudly on the cobbles and I stumbled and fell, cracking my right knee painfully. Pain was good, at least it was real. But as I righted myself, standing up with searing agony burned up my thigh and stabbed into my hip, I coughed bile. A racketing of wings startled me.

Just a seagull, ghostly white in the moonlight.

When I got back to the flat, I rushed to the bathroom and splashed cold water over my face. My face: the scaliness beneath my eyes was more

pronounced, my flesh was waxy, and when I pulled my fingers against my cheeks they left furrows like moulded clay. The finger marks remained in the dead flesh.

“What have you done to me, mother?” I asked my reflection in despair.

Ever since running away from my step-parents when I was 15, I must have begun to change. Before then, probably. Inside something must have been happening to me. Unlike the others children, who wanted a stable home more than anything else, my biggest dread was remaining in one place for any length of time. It was in my heart and bones to move from place to place, and the upbringing by my sour, dull, step-parents in a claustrophobic suburb of London was my worst nightmare.

Making my way in the world has never been easy. Part-time jobs were few and far between, but always I managed to get by. What I realise now was my restlessness was more than gypsy blood or the genes of carnival people; it was also fear of forming relationships.

Change. It was my nature. Movement was one manifestation of it, and now I knew another. Change, entropy, whatever you want to call it, Frankie had learned to control it whereas I was at its mercy. Not only was I an outsider to normal society but now, too, no part of the society which had bred me. The society of which Frankie and my mother were a part.

Franklin McGruder had been a carnival geek in the last years of the 19th century and the first forty five or so of the 20th. If I hadn't found the evidence through an academic who had written a history of the side-shows and carnivals in America, the story might not have come to light. Paul Jacobs even had reproduction newspaper clippings and he kindly e-mailed me the one extant photograph of this side-show freak McGruder, seen sticking his tongue out at the cameraman, a harpoon spike through his cheeks. It was clearly the Franklin McGruder I knew. But, judging by the date of the photograph and the fact that he looked the same middle aged man I had spent time with, must now be around 160 years old. What caught my attention mostly, though, was the edge of the poster behind him advertised the carnival. Headlined in lurid gothic typography was an act called “Madame Origami.”

St Brame's is long behind me now, the search for my mother given up if not forgotten.

My life until recently, such as it was, consisted of living in homeless shelters, or on the street, until I was picked up by some Samaritan or other while I was laid out in an alleyway with incipient pneumonia. My hospitalisation proved to be my way out. I told the doctors who I was and shortly after that papers arrived announcing the death of a man who claimed to be my father. He'd left me his home and belongings. A condition of the inheritance was that I make no inquiries about who he was. I could only suppose guilt and fear of the afterlife persuaded him to give me in death what he had refused to do in life, the old bastard.

No one in the hospital spoke of my condition; even the specialists who examined me were baffled, but put it down to a genetic disorder. My condition was not then so advanced, and might have been taken for nothing more than a mutant form of eczema. One bonus was that, with a permanent address and a doctor's certificate, I could collect social security and disability benefits.

Frankie caught up with me again in a bitter, late October evening. The phone rang in the middle of the night, and I checked the luminous dial of the radio alarm: 3.25am. I slept so little that the ring found me awake.

"I never told you who I am," he said.

"How did you find me, Frankie?"

"We can always find our own."

The Municipal Library was an unlikely venue for us to meet, especially since I feared going out in public; as usual I was swaddled in a long coat, gloves and a scarf, the icy weather making this garb seem relatively normal, though I would have worn it on a hot summer's day so ashamed was I of my appearance.

Frankie was sitting in the reference section, poring over a huge tome. He looked smaller than I remembered, hunched inside a shapeless pullover

and a pair of denims two sizes too big for him, like a boy in his father's clothes. His face was grey and when he looked across his shoulder at me his expression was furtive.

"Going to show me dirty pictures?" I said without smiling.

He motioned me to sit opposite him. Low whispers of other readers, a chorus of pages being rustled and the echo of whispers, provided the library's ambient sounds. A middle-aged woman at a table opposite frowned at us and went back to scribbling in a notebook.

Frankie's book was opened at a page about carnivals, with photographs of circus freaks, mutants with two heads, a foetus in a jar of formaldehyde, a bearded lady, the usual fare: all fakes, I presumed.

"Some of us are the real thing, James. Not this...pap."

And then he waited until I looked him in the eye, and changed himself. His pupils and the whites of his eyes bulged and melted to become black marbles, like the eyes of a raven.

I jerked back in my seat, terrified. His hand reached out and clutched mine, sharp claws digging into my softening flesh, impaling me.

"Mother's dead, Jimmy. It's only us now, us and the others."

"What are you trying to do to me?" I was trembling, ready to run the moment he let go of me, but he wasn't about to do that, not yet.

"Come," he said.

And then I died. Or felt I did.

It wasn't anything like sleep or a fever. Perhaps a coma, I told myself, with no knowledge of what a coma would feel like. All I know is that I dreamed terrible dreams. I dreamed I was flying, and the earth below me was on fire, blazing from horizon to horizon.

We were standing over a grave. The memorial stone read: Marion Armitage, 1832–1901.

"Not her real date of birth, or date of death, neither. We faked it."

Frankie seemed smaller, his head barely reaching my shoulder.

"She lived a long time. A very long time. We scattered her ashes in the wind, the way she wanted. But we wanted a memorial, so we paid a

lawyer to get some faked birth certificate, saying she'd been buried in the States but her family was here and wanted this memorial. So here it is."

"But...why didn't you tell me?"

"I needed to be sure. We...all needed to know it was really you, that you are one of us."

And in the trees at the edge of the graveyard I saw blurry shadows that could have been men, or animals or part both.

"You don't belong with them, Jimmy," Frankie swept his arm out, indicating the rest of the world, normal life.

"No," I said. And louder: "No! I'm going home. I don't need your sick games, Frankie. I'm tired."

And so I was. Tired of the search. And I knew it was over.

"You belong with us, James. You have to listen, you have to know that."

"No," I said.

Frankie reached out to me and I pulled back in disgust.

"But..." Frankie lowered his head, thinking. Then he said, "I'm your brother, Jimmy. Your brother."

I ran, his voice echoing behind me.

How long have I been on this earth? Was I a child for half a century? Or born late in this one, many years after Frankie. Childhood was an eternity for me. My mother might have died when I was born; she might have died the week I stood over her memorial stone. Why did she give me up? Maybe she was ashamed of me.

My feeling is she must have seen what I would become, and wanted something different for me. She wanted me to be part of the world she could never be at rest in, the world she was condemned to travel, moving from town to town like the outcast she was, with her outcast companions. She wanted me to be able to stop. And to rest.

At first my brother had wanted money, and he took all that I had left. He'd never intended, back there in St Brame's, to tell me the truth, and so I left. But the world is changing so fast. Maybe Frankie realised finally that a tribe like ours needs to stay together. Strength in numbers. Or maybe you're simply less lonely if there are others like yourself.

But it's too late. I don't want that. Mother wouldn't have wanted that for me, either, I'm sure.

But I know she wouldn't have wanted it to come to this either.

And as I gaze at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, my body the colour and texture of paper; as I bend back my hand, flat against my forearm, and breathe out so that my chest creases and I begin to fold in on myself; as my face begins to crumple like tissue; I know one thing and hope another.

The thing I know is that I am my mother's child.

The thing I hope is that that I can finally rest, the way she would have wanted.

I study the light dancing on the blade of the open razor that I have laid on the edge of the washbasin full of scalding water.

Paper wraps stone.

Scissors cut paper.

THE END