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We never spoke of the canal as anything very important. We never said, "It is because of the canal that we are here." At most we would say, "The canal is high today." Or, "The canal is low today." "It's covered with scum." "It stinks in this weather."

That summer when we wheeled Ole Papa to the bridge he let out a scream that stopped us cold. He was eighty-two and by that time both legs had been amputated. We had meant to wheel him over the bridge for a look at the new housing project when he cried out and we stopped. We looked up and down the still water. It was one of those hot days when the only sound is the whine of the cicadas up in the trees. The water was low and covered with scum, and I felt that I was just beginning to understand something, although I did not have a name for it.

Ole Papa's father had moved here from a little town on the Adriatic because he had heard that a man could get rich in America working on the canal. He came, and he worked, but he didn't get rich. Eventually his son, our Ole Papa, started working the water too, loading the barges with onions and potatoes to send down to the cities. That was when he was fifteen, the same year he met our grandmother.

The two of them, and their children, swam in that water in the summer and skated on it in the winter. They stood on the lift bridge as it was raised and lowered and watched the boats that came from New York and Albany loaded with spools of wire or bales of linen or furniture or tins of food or tobacco. And Ole Papa had pulled his first son, the son our father was named after, out of that water one March day when the ice was thin and it was already too late to save him.

You had to cross the canal to get to the cemetery. After they took you from Lou Grasso's parlor and had the mass said for you at church, your last ride carried you over the canal. Ole Papa had followed many friends and family members on their last ride, and most recently it was

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his wife who had made the trip. So that day, when he cried out as we tried to wheel him across, we had the good sense to turn around and take him back home.

I loved Ole Papa fiercely and claimed him as my own. I took delight in wheeling him around town, spoon-feeding him because he couldn't feed himself (nor could he talk in more than one-syllable words), adjusting his clothes, patting his bald head, and talking to him in the way I might have talked to a favorite doll or a younger sister. But more than that, he was in my blood. Ordinarily my parents thought of me as stubborn, wild, a little too imaginative for my own good, embarrassingly and hopelessly tomboyish. But they took solace in the fact that I was mature, responsible, and even somewhat maternal when it came to Ole Papa. They never had to ask me to watch him. I did it on my own because he was mine.

Father was always away working. When he wasn't at the factory rebuilding transmissions for school buses he was out on Uncle Paul's farm, helping him top or weed or screen. And mother was often sick with her headaches and couldn't take care of Ole Papa. After her operation, the one she had when the baby wouldn't come right, her headaches started. Sometimes they'd last a week. We'd all have to clear out of the house then, and she'd lie in bed with the shades down and a wet washcloth on her forehead until father came home. Then he'd fry potatoes and eggs for our supper, and he'd open a can of pears for her because that was the only thing she could eat when she had her headaches, canned pears. If we had to ask her something she'd hold her head and say, "Shhh. *Whisper* to me," and we would whisper.

It was later that same summer, in mid-August, that I took Ole Papa to the canal bridge a second time. And I wheeled him over the bridge, deaf to his protests. The circus had come to town. Teddy and I had been to church socials, and we had been to the county fair, but we had never been to a circus. And we were going. I had saved a dollar and a quarter; Teddy had eighty-five cents. We couldn't count on father taking us, even though he had said, "Maybe," because after work he had to help Uncle Paul. And two days before the circus came, mother's headaches came too. But if necessary, I knew I would steal, I would lie, I would do anything to get there.

We had seen the posters around town, and we had talked to some of our friends, imagining, and then elaborating on our imagination of what it would be like. Mostly, though, Teddy and I talked to each other of the wonders we would see, of the exotic animals, elephants and camels. And in the dark of the night, in quiet voices, we talked of the freaks we'd seen in the advertisements, especially the man made of India rubber. He could twist his body into any number of unnatural positions and make horrid, grotesque faces. Teddy thought it was because he was born with no bones, and we debated the idea for a while until we realized that most likely he would not be able to stand up if he had no bones. At any rate, there was something frighteningly wrong with the man. We had to see him.

The posters also promised the Amazing and Mysterious Zonzono, Master of Levitation and Other Dark Secrets that Will Astonish and Amaze you. I had recently been reading about magic and the powers of the mind, and Teddy and I had been practicing magic on each other.

We read each other's minds, concentrating with a passion that forced the other's nose to itch, hypnotizing each other and convincing ourselves that our arms *did* grow heavy, we really *couldn't* move them if we tried, and we *were* in a deep trance. And during those days, whenever I wheeled Ole Papa anywhere, in my heart of hearts I pretended I was one of the men who set up the circus and I was wheeling the legless wonder to the sideshow tent. But even then I was horrified at my thoughts and didn't speak a word of them to anyone, not even to Teddy.

On the day of the circus, Teddy looked at me, forlorn. He had his eighty-five cents tied up in an old sock, and he had wrapped the sock around his wrist. We were on the porch. Mother was lying in bed with the shades down, and father was at work. Ole Papa was sitting out there, tilted to one side in his chair, his head flopped over, snoring. "What are we going to do?" Teddy said. Earlier I had thought of just leaving Ole Papa sitting there while we took off. But if mother got up, if father came home, or, heaven forbid, if Aunt Ruby stopped by to see that everything was all right, we would be in for the belt. But I really didn't want to leave Ole Papa because I knew he needed watching. Sometimes he got thirsty or hungry or lonely or scared. And sometimes he got himself all slouched over in that chair and needed to be hoisted up and straightened around. "We're taking him with us," I told Teddy. Then I knelt down in front of Ole Papa and put my hands on his hands and shook him.

"Poppi, Poppi, you want to go to the circus?" He lifted his head and looked around. "Me and Teddy's going to the circus," I told him. Then he saw me and stared. "You want to go for a walk, Poppi? You want to go see some elephants and camels?"

He grunted out, "Huh." It was the one word he used for both yes and no.

"I think he said no," Teddy said.

"You dope," I told him. "Take him to the bathroom and give him his pee can while I get my money."

He looked at me.

"Go on," I told him.

Teddy lumbered off, maneuvering Ole Papa through the doorway, and I ran upstairs for my own sock full of money that I'd hidden in the register. When I passed mother's door she whispered my name, so I went in. She held the washcloth out to me. "Will you wet it," she said. "Cold." I ran the faucet a long time and came back with the wet washcloth. She folded it across her forehead.

"We're taking Ole Papa for a walk," I told her.

"Shhh," she said. "Keep him out of the sun."

"We will," I whispered, and I tiptoed out.

Teddy was trying to get Ole Papa back through the door onto the porch. "Did he do anything?" I asked. I held the door for him.

"Some," he said.

"I told Mama we're going for a walk." We wheeled down the ramp and out to the sidewalk. I jostled Ole Papa on the shoulder. "I bet you never saw a circus *or* a camel, huh, Poppi?" He made no answer, and I took over pushing the wheelchair.

Teddy and I talked about the India Rubber Man and about how much money it was all going to cost. It would be fifty cents to get in, that

much we knew, but we didn't know if they'd charge for seeing things once you were inside. All I really cared about was the sideshow, but to Teddy everything was a wonder, and he wanted to see it all. We decided we'd better hold onto our change until we found out how much everything cost. We weren't going to miss the India Rubber Man, and I knew as well that no matter what I was going to see the Amazing and Mysterious Zonzono do his levitation act.

The circus was set up out in the vacant lot near the old canning factory, not quite a mile from our house, and there was sidewalk for most of the way, at least until you got right to the factory. Then you had to walk in the road. The only hard part about getting there was going to be crossing the canal bridge with Ole Papa. As we got closer to the bridge, Teddy and I started talking faster and louder, and then I started firing questions at Ole Papa about the kinds of strange animals he'd seen in his time, and about India Rubber Men, and had he ever seen one, and did he know where they came from and what made them that way. I don't know that we really thought all that talk was going to work, but we knew we had to do something, and it seemed that talking was the only thing we could do. We got to the bridge, and Ole Papa started grunting out "Huh, huh," and we knew that those huh's meant "no." We stopped. Somebody was walking across on the other side, and he watched us as he walked past. We waited. Ole Papa was quiet, but his hands gripped the arm rests and I knew he was mad. There wasn't anything else to do. I nodded at Teddy, and we hightailed it over the bridge, pushing the wheelchair while Ole Papa let out a blood-curdling scream. We didn't stop once we reached the other side. I kept running down the sidewalk until we were almost to Coleman's, and then I realized people were looking at us, so I slowed down. Ole Papa had stopped screaming, but he was huffing and making noises and hitting the arm rest. Teddy's face was the color of chalk. "We're gonna get in trouble," he said, and I knew he was right. I was as scared as he was, but we were across the bridge, and there was no turning back.

We strained to catch sight of the circus, but the canning factory blocked our view. Still, you could smell it, a smell that is unlike anything else in the world. When the sidewalk ended I wheeled Ole Papa into the road and we walked in silence, looking ahead. Then we passed the factory and there it was, looming before us like a vision: the one giant tent with three peaks, and a smaller tent, and trucks, and bales of hay, and people in costumes, small wooden stalls with clusters of people standing around, music, everything, all hitting you at once.

"We're here, Poppi," I told him, but he didn't seem to notice any of it. Teddy stood with his mouth open. Then he dug the sock out of his pocket and started unknotting it, and we headed for the entrance.

The man was saying, "Step right up, folks," just like he was supposed to say. But he didn't look like he was supposed to look. He was a kid, not much older than me, with stringy hair and a faded tee shirt. Teddy gave him fifty cents and got his ticket. I plunked my two quarters down and stared at him as he ripped a ticket off. Then I went through.

"Whoa there," he called. "Hey you, girl."

I turned around.

"What about the old man?" he said. "Fifty cents for the old man."

I could feel my face go red. I went back and gave him two more quarters and didn't even think to make Teddy split it with me. Teddy just shook his head when I went back in. Then he shrugged.

What struck me about the people inside was how odd they all looked, not just the circus people, but everybody. They were too fat or too skinny, or their clothes didn't match, or their shoes were worn down and without laces, or their shirts were untucked, or their hair was dirty or needed brushing, or else they were just plain funny-looking—ugly I would have called it. They weren't the sort of crowd you'd see in church on Sunday, or even what you'd see at the train station or in the grocery store Friday nights. They were the circus crowd, and we were part of it.

We didn't go in the main tent, even though that's where most of the other people were headed. Instead, we walked down to where a line of stalls had been set up. One sold popcorn, another candied apples, others had games with balloons and darts, or plates and baseballs, a dozen or so of them like that, all in a row. And from each stand came the persistent shouts of a man or woman wanting you to buy something, try something, win something, only a nickel or a dime. Teddy wanted to stop and smash plates so he could win a pirate bank, but I told him not until we had checked the whole place out. Ole Papa sat wide-eyed. He didn't grunt, and he didn't pound the arm rests. He just looked.

At the end of the row of stalls was the smaller tent. A rope hung across the entrance, and on it a sign said, "Twenty-five Cents." You could hear noise inside, music, and words like *amazing, incredible,* and *right before your eyes* drifting out. We looked at the posters propped against the canvas. One showed a man with snakes wound around his neck and arms and stomach. Another had a fat lady in a flowered dress sitting in a tiny chair. On another a man wearing a cape was sawing a lady in two, and on another a tall man had his legs crossed twice, it seemed, and his arms twisted around his neck as if he were trying to put his right elbow in his left ear.

"It's him," I told Teddy.

"Is that him?" he said. We stared. "Crimast," he said after a while. His own arm went up around his neck as he looked at the poster.

"Come on," I told him.

"We going in now?"

"No, dope, not now."

"Is it closed?"

"There's a show going on. We have to wait."

We wheeled back down into the big tent. The bleachers were half-full, and music was playing. A man with a long stick was taking a bow and next to him an enormous elephant bowed too. They walked out while people clapped, the elephant huge and awkward and stepping slow like he was too old and tired to lift those heavy feet. The men rushed around moving boxes and tightening wires. We parked Ole Papa in the front row. The seats were full down there, so we squatted in the dirt next to him.

"You having fun, Poppi?" I asked. It was the first time since we'd left home that I'd taken a good look at him. He was beginning to slouch over in the chair, so we pulled him up. He grunted, "Huh, huh," when we touched him, and once we got him straightened up he glared at me, furious. "We're at the circus, Poppi," I told him. "It's going

to be fun.'' Music sounded over the loudspeaker, and the men who had been working in the center ring hurried out. ''Look there,'' I said to Ole Papa, and I pointed to the ring. He continued to glare at me. I had a sudden thought that there was something terribly wrong with our being there, and I wanted to rush out with Ole Papa and Teddy and go back home. But somebody near us said, ''Here they come,'' and I looked up to see a family of acrobats tumbling into the arena. They juggled and ran and jumped and built a human pyramid with a girl who was younger than Teddy and dressed in a silver bathing suit standing on the very top of the pyramid. Then the man and woman got on opposite ends of the tightrope and walked toward each other while their kids did stunts on the ground. They didn't have a net, but they didn't need one. The tightrope was only about six feet high.

Next came the clowns, a fat one that kept falling into a barrel and a skinny one that kept trying to keep the fat one out. A lion tamer entered a cage that had been set up inside the arena. The lions paced, barely noticing the tamer, their roars like loud yawns. A midget rode a unicycle and threw bubble gum at us. Then there was exotic music and a woman dressed in silky handkerchiefs, with one handkerchief covering her face, rode out on a camel. She made the camel lie down, and then she got off and danced. Teddy seemed enthralled, and Ole Papa, too, kept his eyes on what was happening. But I was waiting for the sideshow to start.

''It looks like a horse,'' Teddy said.

The camel had one hump and, like the elephant, seemed old and tired. I kept looking at Ole Papa. He was watching the arena, but I don't know what he was seeing or what he was thinking, or if he was thinking anything.

''Let's go,'' I said to Teddy. The dancing ponies were just coming out and he wanted to stay. ''I'm going,'' I told him, and he followed me. He kept looking behind us as the ponies danced in a circle while a lady dressed in white danced on one of the ponies. ''We can come back later,'' I told him, but I knew we wouldn't.

We headed for the sideshow. I caught sight of old man Stanford from the diner, watching some kids throw darts at balloons. They weren't his grandchildren, and his wife wasn't with him either. Just as we passed him he turned his head and saw us, but we kept going. I told Teddy he could try for that pirate bank on the way out, after we'd seen the India Rubber Man.

I was beginning to worry about Ole Papa. It was a hot day, and I thought he must be getting thirsty. I was thirsty. But I was afraid to give him anything to drink because then he'd have to go to the bathroom and we'd really be in trouble. If he didn't have his pee can he just went in his pants. ''You okay, Poppi?'' I asked him. He didn't say anything.

We had to wait outside the tent for the next show to begin, so we looked again at the pictures of the freaks. I remembered my daydream of pushing the legless man up on stage for the show. ''We better leave Ole Papa out here,'' I told Teddy.

''Why?''

''We just better. He can't go in there.''

''He'll fit,'' Teddy said. ''Look how wide it is.''

"Never mind. I'm going to park him under this tree. You think he'll be all right?"

"I don't know if we should leave him," he said.

I knew we shouldn't leave him, but I also knew that we shouldn't take him in. And I knew, too, that no matter what, I was going in.

"You stay with him," I told Teddy.

"Are you nuts?" he said.

So we put Ole Papa's brakes on under the tree, and we hoisted him up in his chair, and I patted him and told him not to worry, that we'd be right back, and he scowled at me with a look of absolute hatred. Then we paid our money and went in. I didn't look back at the old man. I was afraid to.

You could only go one way in the tent because they had the inside roped off and partitioned into a series of rooms along a common walkway. Each room held one of the spectacles. The fat lady was fat, but not much fatter than old lady Bass who lived behind the beauty shop downtown. She sat in her chair and let you look at her while a midget told you how old she was and how much she weighed and how much her brothers and sisters weighed.

The snake charmer came closest to impressing us. The enormous snakes, unlike anything we'd seen, wound around his body. They slithered and arched and raised their heads and looked at you with their snake eyes while they flicked their tongues. I saw Teddy shiver when the snake coiled around the man's face, and I shivered, too.

I don't know what we were expecting to see in the India Rubber Man. Maybe we thought he wouldn't be human after all or that if he was human he wouldn't have bones, just like Teddy had said. But he looked pretty much like anyone else, except for being a little too tall and a little too thin, and maybe a little on the grotesque side which, I was beginning to realize, was the way most people looked. His face was a rough one, covered with bumps and gouges, a face that might have been punched a few times. He went through his stretches. He made some faces. "Buddy Pellnick can do that," Teddy said. He twisted his arm around his neck, crossed his legs double, lay down on the floor, and said he was going to make a human knot. It didn't look like a knot. It looked like one of the exercises they make the first graders do in gym because they don't know how to play games. Somebody next to me said the man was double-jointed. "I bet Buddy can do that, too," Teddy said. All that time I thought the India Rubber Man was leading up to something big—that he would twist into some impossible, inhuman form. But he stood up, said thank you, bowed, and went out the back of his room. At first Teddy looked surprised. Then he looked like he was going to cry. Then he looked disgusted. We walked on to the next room.

"You want to go now?" he asked me.

"Don't you want to see Zonzono?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. He was kicking at some straw on the ground.

"You go wait with Ole Papa," I told him. "I'll be right out."

He kept kicking at the straw, but he didn't leave.

Zonzono entered in a whirlwind of crashing cymbals, his cape flying, his beard and mustache jet black. He spoke with a deep voice so that even then it seemed you were being hypnotized. He did a few

card tricks, then one with boxes and a walnut, and one with a pitcher of water that he poured into a napkin and then back from the napkin into the pitcher. He guessed somebody's name and somebody else's birthday, and he made a body disappear in a trunk and made him come back. I was half-trying to figure out the catch to each trick because I was afraid that underneath it all he, too, might be a fake. Yet I believed, or wanted to believe, and when he called for another volunteer my hand was in the air before I knew what I was volunteering for. I strained my arm and waved my hand, looking at him beseechingly. Perhaps I had powers, too, because he pointed at me and said, "Yes, you."

I climbed the three steps to his stage in a delirium. I had left my brother without a second thought. I had left the audience and was oblivious to their existence. I had no fear or doubt or shame. All I knew was that I was standing next to the amazing and mysterious Zonzono who had chosen me out of all the others, and who was now whispering in my ear on the sly as he talked to the audience and told them what he was about to attempt. To them he described his gravity-defying levitation act. To me he said, "Lie down on the platform, keep your eyes shut, and don't move till I tell you." He was pushing me back onto the platform, telling the audience how I was going into a trance. "Close your eyes," he told me.

There is something disorienting about lying on your back on a metal table in a tent in front of dozens of strangers, your eyes closed, your ears attuned to the sounds of the crowd. I was drifting, drifting. A thin blanket was placed over me. There was silence, and then I was drifting some more. I became terrified. I turned my head in what seemed to be darkness. I opened my eyes a bit more and thought I saw a metal bar connected to the platform on which I lay. I thought everyone had left. I couldn't hear anything. Had he told me to get up? Was he gone? I raised my shoulders, and he pushed me back and told me to keep still. He was telling the audience how he was passing a hoop over and around my body that was suspended in midair to prove that there were no gimmicks or devices involved. I felt a whoosh of air pass over me. Then I was being lowered, and Zonzono told me to come out of my trance. I got up, blinking. He helped me off the platform, and I walked back to my brother, dizzy and confused.

I was vaguely aware of people around me, of their voices and their movements, but that was all. Minutes passed. Slowly, I became conscious of Zonzono on stage, finishing up one of his tricks, then thanking us all, sweeping his cape around to the sound of clashing cymbals and applause.

We walked out. Teddy hung close to me. After a while I asked him, "Did you see it?"

"I saw," he said. He was nodding.

"Was I in the air?"

"Yeah." He looked dazed. "Were you hypnotized?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know what happened. What happened?" I asked him.

And then he told me all about the hoop and how I was floating in the air. "Crimast, it was spooky," he said.

When we reached Ole Papa I was surprised at how different he looked, like something had happened to him while we were gone. His face

seemed sad and lost, and he looked past us to the trees beyond the tents. Even when we spoke to him his face didn't change. Old man Stanford from the diner was lurking near him, watching while we straightened Ole Papa up. "Where's your mother and father?" he asked us.

"They're not here," we told him. He watched us undo the brake.

"Are you kids here alone?" We didn't answer him. "Do your parents know where you took your grandpa?"

"We take Ole Papa anywhere," I told him, and I started wheeling away fast, afraid he would think I was being smart.

"I wonder what your father is going to say about all this," Stanford said.

"Cripes Almighty," I said to Teddy when we'd gone a distance. We didn't say anything else, either one of us, we just went, and fast.

When we got to the sidewalk Teddy wondered if it was past supper time. "It's not that late," I told him. But I wasn't sure.

"We're going to get it," he said.

The thought of "getting it" had nothing to do with the knot that was tightening in my stomach. But I told Teddy, "I know it. I know it. You don't have to keep reminding me."

If there is such a thing as true remorse for your sins, then that is what I felt as I wheeled Ole Papa home. On the way to the circus, and even while sitting under the big top, I had had my moments of doubt and my twinges of fear and guilt. But the anticipation of a wrongdoing, or even carrying it out, has none of the impact of its having been accomplished. Now, with the wisdom of experience behind me, I feared that something irrevocable had taken place. As we trudged along in silence I imagined the conciliatory gestures I would make: I would sneak Ole Papa a piece of chocolate, which he wasn't supposed to eat, or I would help him hold the neighbor's dog, because he loved dogs and ours had died last year, or I would find the money to buy a pint of strawberry ice cream, his favorite, and feed it to him in secret.

We got to the bridge, and I took a deep breath. I could see Teddy brace himself, but we were too exhausted or bewildered to even bother trying to divert Ole Papa's attention this time. All I said was, "We're almost home, Poppi." I tightened my grip and pushed, not running this time, but moving fast just the same. Ole Papa sat there holding the arm rests, and he didn't make a sound. His pale head bobbed along as we hit the cracks in the walk. Then we were over, and none of us said a word, we just kept going.

It was the cry that Ole Papa didn't give that finally got to me. When we reached home I wheeled him into the kitchen. Mother was still in bed, and father hadn't come in from work. I pushed Ole Papa up to the table and poured him a glass of water, then put a banana down on the table near him. A banana was the only thing he could eat without help. Teddy slipped away without a word, going up to his room, I supposed. I felt that I should touch Ole Papa, or hold him, or say something to him, but I knew I couldn't do any of those things. I waited for him to look at me. He kept his eyes on the glass of water. There was no expression in his face—nothing, nothing at all. I ran out the back door.

I climbed the pear tree and sat there waiting. I could feel something welling inside me. But I felt dried up, too, and beyond tears. I didn't

know what was going to happen when father found out, and I knew he would find out because either I would tell him, or old man Stanford would, or else we both would. But I wasn't even thinking of that then.

I was thinking instead about the strange and solitary man I could not know. And I was thinking, too, about all of us, about my grandmother who was dead, about my father and his brother, whose name he had, about my mother and her lost baby and her headaches, about me and Teddy, all of us. I had seen the elephant and the camel and the man made of India rubber, and I myself had been transformed and levitated, suspended in midair so that a hoop passed over and around my body proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that no trickery was involved. I had seen some of the wonders the world had to offer.

I touched the bark of the pear tree. Everything, everything was important.