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THIS IS NOT A STORY ABOUT GRIEF

by John Warner

Years back, after the Great Lorenzo fell from the great height, even as he lay dying, cradled in daughter Graziella's arms - her sequined bodice stained by the mix of her father's blood and her own tears - the blame washed over the circus, searching for the cause of the great acrobat's fall, until finally it settled on the rigging boy, who in turn raged in his private grief and woe over the great man's horrible death, at the unfairness of it all, the false impugning of what he knew to be his flawless rope and knotwork, until frustrated, sad and furious, the rigging boy fled the whole mad scene on his motorbike. Engine whining and tires churning dirt and midway mud, he sped away for parts unknown as the thronged and hungry press shot picture after picture after picture after picture.

With a wracking cough and shudder, the Great Lorenzo was pronounced by rheumy old Doc Combes, then gathered and wrapped in his own starred and glittered cape to be carried away from his final audience that, at the last, stood, heads bowed in respect and reverence as Graziella began singing her sweet song of grief.

A circus feeds on the fuel of traveling town to town to meet the fresh crowds of amazed, clapping hands and newborn looks of wonder, and as the circus stayed still and mourned the Great Lorenzo, everything slowed, shriveled and withered.

For weeks, only the barest of things happened. The fallen big top shrouded the three idle rings while the freak show - Mavis the bearded lady, Dan the two-headed man, Roy the lizard-boy, and Plunder the legless wonder - lazed about their trailer and played endless rounds of aimless pinochle and asked:

What is to become of us?

Are we attractive in and of ourselves?

Will people still desire to see us?

And lastly:

Is it love that shall save Graziella? Will it save us?

The big cats, restless, unsure, looked askance at the hastily offered meat scraps and half-rotten carcasses. Elephants pawed the ground; their trunks lazily swayed as great, gobbing tears dropped and puddled at their feet. All the while, Graziella's grief song arced over the circus and traveled, traveled, traveled, until

finally the call went forth, urgent and urging, and we three were summoned: the musician, the mechanic, myself.

I liked my chances. Remember, this was long ago when I was handsome and strong, when my fortune was intact, when I was known as a somebody.

Nevertheless, I planned carefully. My hair was arranged with pomade in the most attractive style of the day. I wore my best three-button suit and buffed my ultra-fine shoes to an impressive gleam. While waiting my turn, I slicked a hand along my temple and practiced what I believed to be a shy yet engaging smile. As I said, if I were a betting man, I was betting on me.

We all gathered round, for first was the musician, shabby-dressed and skillful. For Graziella he played and played, joining her song with his deft runs, nimble arpeggios, and the hushiest of caesuras. This mingled music danced around our gathering, lovely lovely-like, but soon enough, with bow frayed and strings wrung out and dulled, the musician staggered off, rubbing his arm, failing, in the end, to slake Graziella's grief.

I was next. Standing before the gathering, fingers at teeth, I whistled the heavy machinery - manned by my minions - to life, set them to plowing under tent and rings, barker booths, thrill rides, food stalls, port-o-sans, trailers and the rest of the old circus works, then, ditch-filled, next came the toadies, the creeps and flatterers, wielding their flame throwers with decided skill and a resolute sense of purpose, ignited the whole blessed pile.

The pyre climbed the sky as I took Graziella's hand and brought her toward the flames.

Things looked hot. Things looked...promising.

I spoke to her of ashes, of redemption and rebirth, of reclamation. As we approached the fire, it nearly singed us, but she held fast to my hand and I told her of my love.

I said:

"What you see here, I could do again and again for you. It is in my power to remove those things that stand as obstacles to your happiness. I have the will and the means and I stand ready to use them."

I swept my arm in a grand gesture across the scene, the heat and flame, that bathed us in light's glow, and said in a voice that I imagined large at the time:

"Look, look what I can do, and have done...for you."

You would think that I should not remember what happened next so well, that it should be only a vagueness, a blur, but I have found that the reports of numbness and disassociation following a heavy emotional blow (such as the loss of love) are mythic and wrong, that we are in fact doomed to remember and revisit the scene of our shame many times over.

That night, the torched circus burned to its embers and we gathered to the ground for some rest. After awhile, Graziella slept, curled against my leg. I

stroked her hair. She had not slept for some time. I worked the tangles from her hair, gently, gently. In sleep, her song was low, barely present, but still there between breaths. "Hush, hush," I said, over and over.

The pile cooled into rubble as the sun rose for morning. The animals stirred, scratched and stretched before moving off for their early day's business. Graziella opened her eyes and blinked, stroked a hand across her head. A stripped shard of charred canvas danced past, carried by the wind. Her song, wonderful and awful both, hummed from her throat.

I had failed, as close as I had come, still, failure, so I was led away, firm hands at my shoulders, and left to watch the mechanic and his brand of magic. He stepped forth and popped the hood on an old pick-up, rubbed his soiled hands on his even more soiled coveralls, and said softly to Graziella:

"Come here."

And she did.

Softly still, he told her of intake, compression, combustion and exhaust, of rocker arm, valve and spring, piston, rod, drive train and wheel.

"Here," he said, pointing, "this is where the spark is."

Graziella stood on her toes to better see and nodded and smiled and said "But it is so small."

"Yes," he said. "The movements are precise and small, but movement can be imperceptible, unnoticed even, and still contain great great power."

I live with the rigging boy now. Our meals are simple and sparse, toasted cheese sandwiches or chipped beef and broth-based soups. He is old and I am still older. He shows me his latest work, bow-hitch, sheep-line, half-shank, "Look," he says, giving me the twisted mass of rope that I turn in my hands. I tug at the ends:

"Strong," I say. He nods. Sometimes his cheeks still go hot, remembering the pop of press flashbulbs.

We know (or at least suspect) now that it must have been a draft, or perhaps a weakening flu or nonspecific fatigue that knocked the great man from the rope to his death so long ago and started all of this and led us to here and now.

And now, we are not so far from the mechanic and Graziella. On days when there is sun and breeze, the rigging boy helps me into his motorbike sidecar and we speed the streets, feeling quite free. At sudden stoplights, the rigging boy reaches out his arm, and holds me safely in my seat. It is just a gesture, but it is a good one.

We travel, and travel, and sometimes we buzz past their small yard, and while I am sure that we are a blur, I still see many things and these things bring me comfort: There are flowerbeds - only half-tended - but still full and blooming. There is a golden-furred puppy, bowed down and barking, chasing the barefooted children that run and tumble in the long grass, squealing squealing. The children carry sticky popsicles that drip from their hands, and there with

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them, watching over, is Graziella...stooping to the wash basket and clipping clothes to the line. And again.

The sun shines through her dress. Her back is sturdy and strong.

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