

Tam Tam the Leopard Man! Alive! Alive!

Joshua Lee Shimmen

I hope you believe me when I write, I never loved another woman but you. And yet it is not your face that comes to me as I sit at this rented desk and try to shutter the light and sound of the Cross from the windows of my mind. It is another's. A woman I saw but a handful of times, when I was just a child in the village whose name has been lost to me, along with countless addresses and faces and cherished moments, all scattered now like postcards in a gale.

I remember this woman would tramp barefoot into town. Sullied and yellow-eyed. Her long grey dress worn thin from over-wear and under-washing. Dragging the boy along. We called him the boy, but he was likely a man. There were stories about him that stretched back to my grandparent's days. Stunted and outsized all at once. Limbs of mismatched lengths and a bobcat tail poking through the frayed seat of his short-pants. He toddled along beside her. Knee-high. Rising and falling and rising each step. Cartwheeling like a starfish in an ocean breeze. And if anyone came near he would shrink and hide behind her bird thin flanks and cry a terrible cry.

My mother told me he was the product of witchcraft. It is funny, I no longer recall much about my own mother. The woman who birthed me and nursed me and sold me to a stranger. A foreigner. Who wanted to display me to the world. But this I remember. She told me the woman could bear no children of her own. A condition that drove her husband away and into the arms of another. But she did not know how to be alone, this woman. And so she went to see a witch doctor to beg a cure for her affliction. The witch doctor told her she could never bear life, but there was another way. She was to take some cloth stained with a man's seed and bury it in rich top soil and heat it with horse dung for the forty weeks of human conception, changing the old dung for new whenever it began to cool, and then and only then would she have a child born not of her womb, but of the earth, to call her own. Why do I think of that now? When surely there are a thousand other things more worthy of recollection.

A few days ago, I had a reporter visit me. A smartly dressed young man with a bachelor's creases in his shirt. He told me he was looking for the Leopard Man and asked if I could point him in the right direction. Fancy that. He did not even believe me till I rolled up my sleeves and showed him the spots that remain, for these days I am more black on white than white on black. So far has my condition progressed that it has almost become invisible. And what is invisibility to a freak but a self-destructive yearning? A lover that treats you better from a distance. This reporter, he asked me what I remembered most fondly from the days of the sideshow. And do you know what came to mind? I pictured Jolly Penton in her stage clothes, all the alleged 300lbs of her, reclined on the lid of Angelo the quarter boy's baby grand, cigarette in one hand and a paper fan in the other. And it was like I could hear her again:

Big people don't make no trouble, we haven't got the energy. You don't wage wars when you got as much to shoot at as me.

Boy. She was quick. Really something. But later on when the young reporter was gone, I sat down to think, which is how I spend most of my time now, thinking being one of the cheaper things to do in the Cross, not to mention the least likely to get a man in trouble, and I realised Angelo never had a baby grand. He only ever used the upright at the show-grounds and that surely wouldn't have held Jolly.

A few weeks back, seeking a reprieve from elusive sleep, I took a night walk down Darlinghurst and thought I saw you there. You never saw what this place has become. Neon singing the magnetic night electric long hairs gathered in circles on the sidewalk professing love and peace immune to the beauty of their self-obsession, the footpath messiahs chanting and chiming to the rhythm of the moon, the feather-plumed and desperate Chequer girls calling to men like sirens in a steady tide of high times and low and the smart men hovering over it all like jackals doffing caps and shaking hands with carrion and watching, always watching. Amongst it all I saw you. Hair short and blonde and curled like when Meekin used to bill you as the inimitable Mini Mae West. You were walking beside a man, an old man who could've been Meekin himself. He even walked with the same showman's gait. The perpetual swagger. Like everybody around him was a just mug lining up to buy a ticket for

whatever he was selling. Only they didn't know it yet. And you had one hand threaded through his belt loop and the other one grasping a red leather clutch. And I ran forward thinking I was going to miss my moment but when I touched your shoulder and you turned around, it wasn't you at all.

I don't even remember when my spots appeared. There is a time before them and a time after them. But the space between the two, the point of fracture, is missing. There is a game I recall, from the village. From before Meekin. Where all of the children would gather in a circle, and through some elaborate method whose logic is known only to the young, two children would be chosen: a lion and an impala. I remember being the lion. Blindfolded. Made to chase the impala whose vision was unobstructed. When I moved closer in the darkness to the prey, the children would chant mboo-bay mboo-bay louder and louder. And when the impala skittered and gained a lead it would grow softer and slower mboo-bay, mboo-bay. And I remember the rush, the feeling of moving in the artificial night, the sunlight leaking through the borders of my blind, gaining on the impala whose breath would grow louder with the chanting mboo-bay mboo-bay, picturing my claws sinking into its flesh, my teeth claspings its throat mboo-bay, and then slipping in the dry dirt and crashing against the earth, and the laughter that always follows.

There's another picture that comes sometimes. Angelo in his half suit. Trouser legs pinned shut at the bottom of his torso. A cardboard box of books under one arm. The other holding Meekin's farmhouse handrail, heaving himself up the steps. Straining with each heft. Accepting no help from anybody. Just clapping up one stair at a time. It must have been during the off-season. I remember he locked himself in his room with those books for weeks and when he came out he claimed he'd taught himself French.

You weren't there that year. Maybe because you were already with the jockey. Given in to the advances. His persistence. Showing up at every agricultural show on the east coast. Or maybe you just had bookings elsewhere. Or had headed home for a spell. Regardless, I remember it being a long winter. Jolly was in one of her outsized moods and wouldn't shift from her armchair and I was left with only Haoyu and Li Mei for company. And they'd been billed so long as royalty at that point they had come to believe they really were King Chong

and Princess Wong, the world's smallest despots. And they wouldn't speak a word of English to me, despite happily nattering to Meekin. And the way they grovelled and kissed his feet made me nauseous. Sitting one on each of his knees by the fireplace calling him daddy and him petting them and calling them his little bubbies. And the whole time everyone knew Haoyu couldn't stand the man and had been saving every dollar he earned for the day he could head back home and retire like a real king.

By the time Angelo emerged from his room I was lonely enough to listen to anything the man had to say. And boy, did he have a lot to say. Always did.

Jolly used to say to him: *of all my misfortunes the greatest must be that the three quarters you're missing doesn't include your tongue.*

Lord knows what he had been reading up in that room, but he came out giving lectures about pleasure and pain and desire. About how desire itself is never really about the object of desire. Instead, it's the grumbling stomach that can never be sated. A hangover from infancy's oral fixation. A sense that once we were entirely whole and filled and overjoyed at our mother's breast. But all of it, only an illusion. Created by our weaning. A revelation of exchange, dependent bliss for terrible agency. Except the bliss never existed in the first place.

I don't think Angelo really knew French.

It must have been the off-season after Chang was deported. That was why you weren't there. Meekin told us you needed to rest your nerves, and nobody knew where he had sent you.

Some place she can rest, he said.

That was all. He wouldn't give me an address or a number or anyway to contact you. Said I'd done enough damage. Putting ideas in your head about the kinds of lives that weren't for us. Said I better quit the talk about playing family. We already were a family, he said. And all I was doing was ripping it apart. And he wasn't kidding around. The last show of the season I went to swallow my sword and found that somebody had sharpened the edges. I remember looking out at the crowd, the hair-sprayed housewives covering their eyes and the gleeful packs of feral kids who had surely snuck in beneath the canvas instead of coughing up the entrance fee, and the half-cut men in their Sunday suits chain-smoking cigarillos and stealing nips from rum flasks hidden in their jacket pockets, and there was Meekin standing in the centre of them all looking up at me with that jackal's look, like he'd finally got me pinned, and I remember lifting the sword and swallowing it anyway and being sure to keep it inside

myself throughout my bow and looking him straight in the eyes all the while.

I vomited blood for a week.

Despite what Meekin thought and as much as I wished it to be different, Chang was the change in you, not me. I seem to vaguely recall that he was on the west coast circuit before he joined us. Meekin had always wanted a pinhead act. He'd seen them in America and knew the money they could bring in. And Chang had no handler or guardian to handle his finances, which was a goldmine for Meekin. First thing he did was shave Chang's head completely bald, except for a ponytail on top, and dressed him in an oversized qipao. Made his little head look even smaller. The qipao was a great pretty red silk thing with twin phoenixes stitched in gold on the breast, their long tail feathers winding down the sides. Chang was all the time stroking it, feeling the silk between his fingers. Meekin wanted to bill him as Princess Chang, Beauty of the East. Wanted him to learn to sing in Chinese and tried to get Li Mei to teach him, but he'd never learned to speak Chinese and barely spoke English. Li Mei would pluck on her zither with her long nails and sing a few notes, and then pause for Chang to repeat them, but he couldn't make any sense of the sounds. He just looked at her cock-headed. And then Meekin would rap his knuckles with a cane, and he'd start bawling and curl up in a little ball, and it was your job to hold him and tell him it'd be okay and coax him back to try again. And pretty soon he wouldn't go anywhere without you.

They were the days in which you left Meekin's bed. And after the show, still wearing your furs and velvet dresses, cheeks rouged and lips red, you'd bathe Chang and croon songs from your act and brush his hair and together we would lay him down to bed.

Tell him a story, Tam, you'd say, from deepest darkest Africa. And then you'd wink at me.

And I'd tell him all about the lion and the impala that'd I'd never really seen and how the hunt was like a dance, a ballet on the savannah, the lion's power and the impala's grace, and the lion never catching the impala who was always too nimble and too spry, and too goodhearted to be eaten, at least that night. And you'd smile and place a hand on my arm. And when he had given in to sleep and the lanterns in the trailers had all gone out and we were alone in the waking world, I would pull you to my lap and slide velvet off your shoulder

and trace your breast with open lips and find your nipple pert and erect and I'd take it in my mouth and with the tip of my tongue I would dance across its surface and your hands would pull my head closer and I'd pray you would never let go.

Sometimes, sitting at this desk, I am overcome by fits of laughter. This is one of those moments. It is just a feeling, I suppose. Or something larger than a feeling. Less fleeting. An overarching blanket wound tight around every picture I can rescue from the depths of my memory. For so long I wished to be free of the shows and the showmen, and now that I have my solitude, I can't help but long for an audience. Even an audience of one, would suffice. Let alone the crowds we pulled at the royal shows.

Now and then when the hurry and fuss of the street trickles into my room, I'm taken back to the marquee tent. Sitting behind the curtain with you, Chang on your lap, watching the punters trickle in.

And you'd point out somebody, a man with a bulbous nose painted liquor red, and you'd deepen your voice and say, *here we have mother nature's mistake, the king of curiosities, the man whose muzzle burns hotter than the sun, warm your hands by his radiant proboscis, for the first time since he arrived from the mountainous no man's land of eastern Siberia.*

And Chang would giggle and blurt, *again, again.*

And you'd point to another, a woman with a long white dress covering her ankles, and you'd say, *today, today, do not miss, the amazing levitating woman, see her float and hover and fly, no string's attached, or your money back, she has never disappointed, except for her husband on her wedding night.*

And all the time Angelo would be on the platform outside playing his banjo tunes and Meekin would be pattering away with a call of his own. And slowly, slowly people would trickle in, and you would make up an act for all of them.

And when the house was full and the punter's seated, you'd turn to Chang and say, *what do you think, honey? Should we buy a ticket? Do you want to see the freaks?*

Isn't it strange how these things come back to you? First a trickle and then a flood. And if you're not careful, if you misjudge how long you can hold your breath, or overestimate your

capacity to swim against the tide, the current can sweep you further and further away from the shore, until there is nothing but darkness all around. And I have been there many times, and don't plan on returning today.

In the morning, the newspaper man will come again. He will ask for my notes. For my remembering. And perhaps I will hand him this. And perhaps I will hand him nothing. And perhaps you will see this printed, sandwiched somewhere in the centre of a weekday tabloid. A life distilled to three square inches of black on white. And perhaps you won't. All I ask either way, is that you leave me my confabulations. I am not interested in corrections. There is, I believe, no better way, to ruin the show.

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