

SIDESHOW

You gonna sit yo' skinny ass right here, Pearl Tomato, and wait, case he comes back like he said he would. And think. Been doing a heap of that of late. And talkin' to myself. Crazy stuff. Ain't like me though. Thinkin' ain't sump'um I like much. Don't do no good. He promised he'd come back and do it to me for five minutes if I'd let 'im put a blanket over my top half. I sayed he got hisself a deal cause I can get it off in five minutes. I ain't got that problem most girls got. Jolene told me Shahandra tries anythang walks in the big top tryin' like crazy thing to get herself off. Stump sayed Jolene talkin' 'bout fuckin'g's like a blind man talking 'bout seeing.

I ain't never spoke myself to Shahandra. I seen 'er plenty though. Everybody seen 'er plenty. Flyin' up high like some kind of glittery bird. I sneaks out sometimes and plants myself right behind the big top 'tween the changin' trailers and peeks through the tent slits at her beautiful self, hangin' and spinnin' by jes about everythang she got. Hands, foots, neck, hair, toes, fingers, teeth. Makes my mouth get dry and my eyes water. She's so perdy. And she ain't young neither. No sir. Up close she got a whole bunch of wrinkles. Jolene sayed anyway. I ain't never seed 'er up close. The ones work in the big top wouldn't be caught dead over here with us freaks. Course if you'uz beautiful like Shahandra, Pearl Tomato, you sho wouldn't be caught dead with the likes of yo'self neither. Or Stump. Or Jolene. But Stump, he sayed Jolene's face is perdier'n Shahandra's up close. They seen 'er once up close, on accident when she come flyin' outa 'er changin'

trailer and fell down. Good thing they'uz peeking cause nobody inside woulda knowed she fell. But without no legs, Jolene, you can be nerdy but ya cain't be no flyer. Without no ankles for them blond-headed boys to catch a holt of. Don't you start that fuckin' cryin' again, Pearl Tomato. You know it don't do no good.

Stump sayed Shahandra's same old as him. I cain't hardly believe that. He's so old he used to work for PT Barnum way back when freaks was getting rich. He can sure tell some tall tales about those times. When freaks was proud of theyselves. That was a long ago 'cause I knowed Stump my whole life. Since that one day when they found me in front of the ring toss. Stump gimme me my name. Pearl. Cause that day they found me was the same one the Japs blew up Pearl Harbor. And Tomato, cause I'uz wrapped up in a dirty apron and stuck down inside a 3-gallon tomato soup can. That's how they figured my mama must've worked in a cafe. Course nobody never did find out. I got a bunch of nick names too. Fumble Fingers, Nails, Horny, Twinkle Toes. Ever'body here got a bunch of nick names.

Stump and Jolene was the only ones had room for anybody else. Course nobody else woulda had the likes of me anyhow. So they got stuck with me. And somehow 'tween the two of them they figured out a way to feed me and change my shitty diapers once ever' blue moon. By the time I'uz two I could get my own food. And by the time I got three I'uz cooking hot dogs for all three of us. Jolene and Stump loved to brag about how I could do things then. Like a regular grown-up. That'uz they favorite thing to talk about. I don't 'member it much. But I reckon it's true. I'uz better off than both of them put

together by the time I'uz three.

The first thing I 'member real good was my first show when I'uz four. Sampson wanted to put me on when I turned three, but Jolene cried so hard Stump pitched a fit and Sampson beat the fuckin' shit out of him. But still he didn't make me go on till I hit four. And I loved it. Stump sayed I'uz a natural born showman. I loved all them people. They all had funny looks on they faces. I didn't know why then. I jes loved it when they clapped for me. And I grinned like a monkey. I 'member once a real perdy lady looked at me and cried so hard, her man wrapped 'er up in his big strong arms and took 'er away from the sight of me. I don't really know know how old I am but seems like I been around here for a million years. Sampson told the people I was five for three whole years. For some crazy reason five sells more tickets than eight. At about ten he said I was thirteen and gave me some fake titties to try and make me sexy. Boy that was a bust. Anyway, it was just too much trouble to keep track of how old I was. Don't make no difference anyway.

Jolene sayed I had the cutest face and curls of any little circus freak she ever saw. And I'uz the star of the show till I got ugly. Jolene'uz always popular. If you'uz to see a picture of Jolene from 'er waist on up, you wouldn't know she'uz a subhuman. That's what Sampson calls us. And so perdy. She has the perdiest titties in the whole wide world. They got only a little saggy, but I just wrap 'er snake skin on up a little higher and lift em right up nice. Not no more you don't, Pearl Tomato, so just quit playin' like it. And 'er face still looked good with its make-up on. And 'er red hair too. I learnt how to do

it real good. You couldn't even tell it'uz died hardly. And I loved to brush it every night. Course it wore out my arms. My hands is so heavy. Not heavy as Sampson tells they is. He says they's thirty pounds each and my foots is forty each. And he says I got thirty-five fingers on each hand, but the truth is I only got twenty-four on one and twenty-three on the other one. They ain't all whole fingers, mostly jes ends. But they all got them damn nails. And he says I got twenty-six toes on each foot, but I only got sixteen on one and eighteen on one. But I only weighs a hundred and fifty pounds all told. Jolene sayed accordin' to Sampson's addin' the whole rest of me only weighed ten pounds. You can laugh yo'self silly, Pearl Tomato, it don't change nothin'.

Folks 'round here loved to joke about me and Stump and Jolene. They sayed me and Stump'uz made for each other. Cause what he ain't got, I got plenty of. He ain't hardly got no legs. Only 'bout a foot of leg. Course they look more like two slabs of meat stuck to his fat ass than they does legs. And he can scoot around on em good. He got a little bit of arm below his elbow. He sayed that'uz what saved him from the river. By the time he hit five, he had learnt to do all kinds of tricks with them nubs. Stump's still our biggest attraction. Sampson says it's cause he does sump'um besides just lay there like a dead hog. He can tie any kind of knot you jes about ever saw. And he can untie it. And he can do it in no more'n two seconds flat. Stump, he ain't no ordinary subhuman.

When I'uz twelve and not doin' too good in the show, I tried to git Stump to chop off my hands with his shiny ax. Another one of Stump's tricks is splittin' wood. But he wouldn't do it cause he sayed what would they do with two knot tiers. One of 'em would

have to go in the river. Course I knowed he'uz right, and I couldn't o' learnt to tie knots like him if I'd o' practiced all day and all night for the rest of my life. One of the amazing things 'bout Jolene is she could swim. Without no legs she could swim jes like a fish. She ain't even got a ass. She got a asshole though. Kind of in 'er back. But she ain't got nothing you could call a crack. But 'er asshole works plenty good. I cleaned up 'er shit more times'n you could count. But I don't much mind. I bathe 'er too. Not very much. But when it gets done, I's the one what does it you can bet. *Did* it, Pearl Tomato, *did* it.

One day when Sampson and his crew of stinkin' buddies got drunk as dogs and decided to have a little fun. They throwed us all in the back of they old truck and hauled us out to the river for a swim. I figured they'uz gonna pitch us out far so we'd drown, but they just sits us out on the edge o' the water and near 'bout busted laughin' at us splashing and floppin' like washed-up fish. Jolene begged till she talked me into carrying 'er out a little ways. I wouldn't go in past my waist though. Then she got me to let 'er float on her back. Which she did so easy I couldn't hardly b'lieve it. Then all of a sudden she flipped over and swum off like a fuckin' fish with his tail chopped off. Jolene had the strongest arms of any woman you jes 'bout ever saw. Stronger'n most men. She used to pull herself around all over tarnation. Even at night, she come out when everybody'uz sleeping and pull herself around on 'er scooter board.

Stump was squirming around in the mud and yelling at me to get 'er out of the water. I was froze. I couldn't move. And then Jolene jes swum on up to Stump underneath the water and popped up and spit a stream of water in his face. She laughed

like crazy. That made happy. She don't laugh much. *Didn't. Didn't.* That'uz when Sampson got his great idea to change 'er from a serpent woman into a mermaid. But after a few weeks he got sick of setting up 'er pool and trying to keep the water clean enough all week so people could see 'er swimmin' around. So Jolene went back to being a snake. She had got sick of mermaidin' too. I tell you what, it'uz a whole lot harder to keep 'er lookin' good. And 'er costume. Snakes is a whole lot easier'n mermaids. And she was a great snake. The best anywhere Sampson sayed. He bought 'er way back for thirty bucks from a show going bust. The sideshow manager sayed she'uz easy worth fifty. Cause she'uz more fucked up than anything he ever saw that wadn't in a jar of formaldehyde. But Sampson got 'er for only thirty anyway. Cause she didn't have no ass and was so skinny from 'er ribs down to 'er tailbone, she looked like a real fucking snake with 'er costume on. And she could wiggle at 'er waist and make 'er long tail swish back and forth, and folks would go out of they minds when she did that. Some of 'em screaming like crazy, some had to leave, and we laughed back stage till our sides hurt. Stump 'specially. He liked Jolene. He sayed he liked 'er so much he'd even eat 'er pussy if she had one to eat. He'uz always crackin' jokes like that. He sayed he'd give the rest of his right arm to eat Shahandra's, and then he'd laugh like crazy. Jolene ast him why not me, and he sayed I'uz too much like his own kid. But I knowed it'uz really cause I'uz so ugly. Round here fuckin' with your own kids ain't no big deal. You don't think nothin' of it. Stump sayed that's how the likes of us come to be.

I felt real bad Jolene and Stump couldn't fuck, once I found out about how good it

was. Stump just had enough of a dong to pee with. Jolene made him a little hose to hook onto it so when he had to pee he could take a holt of it 'tween his nubs and take aim. If he wanted to.

Another thing folks loved about Jolene was 'er beautiful smile. And when 'er teeth rotted Sampson even forked over the money for 'er some new ones. Course they'uz plastic, and she couldn't hardly eat nothing with em. But they looked good when she smiled 'er perdy snake smile. I quit smiling around ten and didn't smile again till a coupla years ago. I don't know why I started up again. I guess 'cause not smiling is a whole lot harder work than smiling. I figured Sampson woulda got rid of me then in my not smilin' phase if it wadn't for Stump and Jolene. They couldn't get along without me. They'uz so used to me doing everything. And they sho wadn't nobody else around to do it. And I reckon when I hit around fifteen or sixteen I figured I had the best life of any freak I knew or heard tell of. I got food and a place to live, and I sleep ever 'night 'tween Stump and Jolene. Not no more you don't, Pearl Tomato. You better get that through your dumb thick skull.

At night when I snuggled up 'tween them, they'uz like two warm pillows on each side of me and I knew I had it good. That was the reason Stump finally made Jolene cut my toenails and fingernails. He sayed he'uz fuckin' sick of being stabbed near to death in his sleep. Sampson decided when I got ugly we should let em grow out like claws, and that is sho what they done. And curled around all them fingers and toes, and I'uz a whole new freak for a while. When Stump made Jolene cut em off, Sampson beat the fuckin'

shit out of him. But he didn't make me grow 'em out agin.

Sampson loved to beat up on Stump. Sayed he couldn't afford no punching bag, but Stump'uz jes as good. Better'n Delilah. On stage he'd lift up his fake thousand-pound barbell, and then lift up Delilah over his head with one hand, and she'd whack off his fake ponytail and then beat the shit out of him on stage. The womenfolk loved it. Then when they got off stage, he'd beat the shit out of her. Jolene sayed they had a good marriage. Both got what they wanted.

He'uz the first man what did me. Sampson. I'uz around eight I think that first time. He'uz like a gorilla, black hair all over his white skin, head to toe, front and back. And he had a dong like a club. Nearly killed me that first time. I ain't ever even played with myself 'fore then. With hands like mine snooping around inside wadn't too easy. Sampson came in and did it to me right in front of Jolene and Stump. Course I didn't think nothing of that till I saw Jolene cryin' and Stump pitched another fit and got slapped upside the head a time or two. But Stump told Sampson if he'uz gonna do me to take me over to his own trailer. And so he did. And Delilah would sit and watch and smoke cigarettes and laugh. Wadn't long till I got to likin' it, even with Delilah watching, and he did it to me ever'day, sometimes more. Then a few years later my belly started to swell up like I swallowed a watermelon. And one night late Sampson brought a old nigger woman over, looked like he snatched 'er right out of 'er grave. She gimme some kind of potion and some whiskey and told Sampson to do me real good to help the potion open me up wide. And so he did. Did me so good I thought I'uz goan die. And Stump and

Jolene'uz watching and Jolene'uz cryin'. I hated seeing 'er cryin'. And then the old dead woman stuck 'er bony fist right up inside me and pulled out a big bloody glob of sump'um. And she did it again and again. I thought she'uz killin' me and that'uz why Jolene'uz cryin'. I only found out a coupla months later what it was. I'uz sick as a dog after. Near 'bout died Stump sayed, but Jolene never left my side for four whole weeks, except to do the show. I don't know how Stump and 'er did it and did the show too. All by theyselves. But then when I got well, Sampson sayed I wouldn't have to worry 'bout gettin' knocked up ever again. That I could fuck anythang that'uz willing. But he never did me again, and I had to talk other people into it.

They's been lots of times when I wished I woulda died then. I don't know why. I cain't figure it out. I ain't got nothing to be sad about. Jolene and Stump, they as good to me like they'uz my own mama and daddy.

Two years ago I tried to talk Jolene into chopping off my hands. I'uz willing to hang onto my feet so I could walk. She said she'd cut the left one off if I'd slit 'er throat with the right one. She sayed she didn't have the guts to slit 'er own throat. But I sayed she didn't have no deal, cause choppin' off a hand wadn't the same as slittin' a throat. But I hid and cried. That'uz the first time in my whole life I 'member cryin'. I couldn't stand the idea of Jolene wantin' to have 'er throat slit. Later she told me she'uz just jokin' around, but I knowed she wadn't. Then I got to thinkin' 'bout how good I had it compared to Jolene. I could walk around. I couldn't run or wear shoes, but Jolene made me rag shoes to keep my feet warm in the winter. And she ain't even got a love sandwich.

But Stump sayed Jolene could do sump'um nobody else 'round here could do. She could love. He sayed God maybe fucked 'er out of a pussy but he gave 'er a extra big heart to make up for it. Jolene sayed that was some fuckin' shitty deal to give somebody a big heart and no love sandwich to go with it. Stump sayed Jolene learnt to love cause she had a mama till she'uz six. He sayed so what if 'er mama was deaf and dumb, a mama is a mama. And they had a act where Jolene'uz strapped to 'er mama's front facin' straight out to surprised faces. Her mama'd back out onto the stage in a sexy tight dress wigglin' her bottom and the spin around with Jolene poppin' out with 'er perdy smile. The crowd would scream Stump sayed. Then even as a half a person Jolene got too big and it didn't look real no more. And one morning 'er mama was gone. Jolene sayed she knowed 'er mama didn't leave her. They jes throwed 'er in the river.

But later Stump found out he'uz wrong about Jolene being the only one 'round here who could love. Cause one day you come in, Pearl Tomato, and you find Stump tryin' like crazy to pull that greasy boy what does the lunge lines off Jolene. He'uz beatin' the fucking shit out of 'er cause she bit his slimy dong when he shoved it in 'er mouth. And you beat 'im blue with your big heavy hands, Pearl Tomato. You beat 'im to a slimy pulp and stomped on his face and dong with yo big heavy feet. And you knowed then, Pearl Tomato, why God give em to ya. And Stump sayed he reckoned you loved Jolene much as she loved you. And that's why yo heart is broke now she's died.

She jes died peaceful in the night sleepin' right beside me. Stump sayed he should've knowed she could do it, just make herself die without even havin' to get

somebody to slit 'er throat. And me and Stump did ever'thang we could think of to get 'er buried instead of throwed in the river. I told Sampson I'd dig the hole if he'd just take us somewhere to bury 'er. That I'd give him a blow job every day for the rest of his life. He promised us he'd bury 'er. But he wouldn't take us with him. Me and Stump knowed he jes throwed 'er in the river. And I told him when he got back, if he wanted a blow job, he'd have to kill me first and get it from a dead mouth. But like Stump sayed, it don't matter really, once you're dead. You don't know no different. And that's all Jolene ever wanted, was to die. And he sayed wadn't no person before or since born like Jolene. And you know, Pearl Tomato, Stump never told you no lie.

But look here. Here comes the boy that promised to fuck me five minutes. Now stand yo skinny ass up, Pearl Tomato, and smile.

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