

The Great White Way

THEY TRAVEL BY night.

Along the roads that cut through massive fields of wheat and sunflowers as high as a man's head, beneath the silent stars and the watchful moon, the caravan of horsedrawn wagons and gypsy trailers creak and groan on their way from here to there. They pass through towns, villages and even-smaller hamlets that have been asleep since sundown, and the dust they raise glitters in the moonlight like diamonds before it returns to the Russian earth. They go on until the circus master, the white-bearded Gromelko, decides to pull his leading wagon to a halt at the centerpoint of two or more rustic towns that have likely never seen a circus since a Cossack first sharpened his saber on a blood-red stone, and there Gromelko uses his hooked nose to smell the summer wind. Then, if the wind is right, he says with satisfaction to his long-suffering wife, *This is our home for tonight.*

The wagons and the trailers form a small village of their own. Torches are lighted and placed on poles. The main tent goes up first. Then the smaller tents, and the canvas signs announcing the attractions. One of the signs says how many coins are needed for entry, or how many chickens. The work animals are kept in a corral. The show animals—one young mule that can count up to twenty, two aged snow-white horses and a bandy-legged zebra all sleepy and dusty from their trip—are herded into a green tent to eat their hay and await their moments. The black leopard

with one eye is kept in its own cage, because it has been known to bite the hand that feeds it. The wolf, too, is kept caged apart, because the wildness can't be whipped out of it. The ancient toothless bear lumbers around freely until it wants to return to its cage as protection from the leopard, the wolf and mean little children who taunt it.

Then there comes the birth of the Great White Way.

This is Gromelko's huge pleasure in life, now that he's nearly seventy-five years old and he can neither drink, smoke, nor screw. He stands watchful as ever, expectant of miracles, and it is somewhat miraculous that from the dirt and the sawdust rises within hours the village of the travelling circus, and then—miracle of miracles—that the Great White Way blinks several times like an old man waking up from a solemn snooze, and suddenly there is an electric odor like a passing thunderstorm and all the dozens of bulbs light up in simultaneous splendor along the midway's length. As long as someone pedals the stationary bicycle that powers the generator, the bulbs will glow. The bulbs are not very bright nor the midway very long, but as the saying goes: A sparrow in the hand is better than a cock on the roof.

In the morning, the towns awaken and the farmwork begins with its routine and drudgery, and then someone in the fields sees the tents. Not long after that, the wagons come through with the circus banners rippling on their sides, and in the backs of the wagons stand—or wobble, if they've been early with their vodka—some of the star attractions. There are the catlike Boldachenko sisters, Vana and Velika, who perform jaw-dropping feats of acrobatics and contortions atop a forty-foot pole; the Lady Tatiana, who with her daughter Zolli gallops the horses and the zebra at full speed around and around a terribly small bigtop; Yuri the clown and his miniature clown-doll Luka, who always seems to get the better of his befuddled master; Arman the handsome, who walks a wire in his black tuxedo and throws a paper rose to a lucky farmer's wife at every show; and Gavrel the fire-eater from whose mouth flare ropes of flame and showers of sparks that whirl around the tent like the eyes of demons in the dark.

And also to mention the stars of the midway! For after the big show has ended, the audience is encouraged to walk in the glow along the Great

White Way, to spend more coins or trade more chickens to visit Eva the bearded lady, Motka the man with skin so hard a hammer bends a nail upon his breastbone, Irista the wrinkled dwarf who also plays superb classical Tchaikovsky on her pink toy piano, Natalia the emaciated spider woman, and last but not least the massive wrestler Octavius Zloy, who wears a purple cloak and a Roman helmet and stands with tree-trunk arms crossed over his traincar chest and, his slab of a chin upraised and his small eyes narrowed, dares any son of Russia to pin his shoulders for the count of three.

Though many have tried, no one ever has. And Octavius Zloy has no mercy for any son of Russia who climbs into the ring. Many have been removed, senseless and bloody, while his young and beautiful wife Devora raises his sweat-streaked arm and accompanies him as he parades back and forth like the superhuman species he believes himself to be.

The sons of Russia do not know that Devora, for all of her dark gypsy beauty and nineteen supple years, is missing several teeth and used to have a straighter nose. They don't know about the broken arm of last summer, and the black bruise across her lower back that caused her to hobble like an old woman through the month of June. But it is late August now, in this year of 1927, and as the saying goes: When Anger and Revenge are married, their daughter is called Cruelty.

It is the vodka, Devora thinks. Always the vodka. He lets it own him. And then when he has had more than enough to blaze his bonfire and not yet quite enough to topple him into sleep, Octavius Zloy rises up ragged and enraged within his own skin and he will not rest until someone has been hurt.

That someone being herself.

Oh, how he can use his hands. His hands were made for the punishment of other people. They are as strong as shovels, as brutal as bricks. They suit his soul.

So on a night like this one, after the big show is over and all the people have gone, after the coins and chickens have been put away, after the midway has closed down and everyone departed to their little wooden trailers and bolted their shutters and the Great White Way has faded to

dark, Devora wipes the blood from her nostrils with a cloth and walks past the drunken bulk of Octavius Zloy snoring on the bed. She checks her face in the oval mirror behind the door. Her ebony eyes are puffy from tears and pain. Her nose is swollen. Her lips look crushed. Her thick black hair is streaked with henna, because he likes the appearance of fire in his fists when he grips her head. She realizes she looks like a slim hard girl who has come many miles from where she began, yet she is still so far from anything.

It is time to go, if she is going tonight.

She has slipped into a patched gray dress, like the other few she owns. Octavius Zloy says he prefers her naked, anyway, and spread out upon the bed beneath him in helpless abandon. She puts upon her bruised lips a fingertip's worth of color, a deep red. Octavius Zloy would not like this, if he were to see. But soon it will be worn off. When she leaves the trailer she has a key with her, but she does not lock the door.

It is silent in the village of the circus.

Well, not quite silent...for as Devora walks her path she hears the distant note of someone's fiddle, a soft sad playing, and then the plinking of a toy piano. She can't understand the kind of music that Irisa plays, it's too far over the head of a country girl, but she appreciates how swift and sure the small hands are.

She goes along the darkened Great White Way. The night's breeze stirs tent folds. Moonshadows lie at her feet. Her heart is beginning to beat harder, it seems, with each step. She is going to see the boy who takes care of the animals. Her lover. Her desire and her freedom, if just for a little while.

As the saying goes: There is no winter in the land of hope.

He is waiting for her, as always, in the green tent.

He is a strange boy. He stays by himself most of the time. He seems to prefer his own company and the company of animals. Seventeen years old, he's told her. His first name Mikhail. He hasn't offered his family name, nor does she ask. He arrived at the circus little more than a month ago, with no belongings, wearing baggy clothes that might have been stolen from a fence where they were drying in the sun. Had he ever owned shoes? He never wears any. He is lean and sun-browned, and she can count his

ribs. He has an untidy mop of shaggy black hair that always seems to have straw in it, and when he stares at her calmly and fixedly as he does with his luminous green eyes something in her soul thaws and warms and melts. At the same time, something lower than her soul moistens and tightens and readies itself like a creature over which she has no control. It was such the first time she saw him, and has been every time, and is now.

He has lighted a few candles for them, in his private space of hay where he sleeps.

He has put down a wheat-colored blanket and smoothed a place for her. But first, before she can enter his domain, he turns and picks up something folded upon a piece of clean canvas, and turning toward her again he smiles and lets unfold the beautiful dark blue dress he has brought for her, and Devora catches her breath because no one has offered her such a gift for a very long time. Of course there were the wildflowers he had for her last week...but *this*...

He tells her to try it on, so that he can take it off.

Over from the far side of the tent, Devora hears the wolf pacing in its cage.

She does what he asks, with great happiness. The dress makes her feel sleek. It makes her feel...what is the word, when one feels uncommon? Well...*uncommon*. She won't ask where Mikhail stole it from, because now it belongs to her. She owns so few pretty things. She tells him she loves it. Loves, loves, loves it. The woman who gave her birth told her to say *loves* a lot to a certain kind of man, because they liked to hear it. Devora is very sure Mikhail is that kind of man. Boy. Whatever he is.

But she knows she must have him, for the need for him is rising in her and as he advances and begins to slowly and gently remove her new dress she puts her arms around his neck and he kisses her mouth so softly it is like a feather tracing the outline of her crushed red lips. An angel's feather, Devora thinks. For truly this boy has come to her from Heaven.

He blows out every candle but one.

The wolf paces faster, back and forth. The leopard sits watching, its single eye catching a glint of light. The bear sleeps, and shivers a little in some dream of honey.