

Freak Showing



by

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There were five of them, which was two more than I'd been expecting. The Lensky brothers and I leaned forward in our chairs to stare more closely, while Mr. Gotts stood before us unabashed, hands on his hips, pants around his ankles.

"OK, you were telling the truth in your letter," Harris said finally. "You do have more than the average number of testicles." Mr. Gotts' pride was apparent, though he tried to keep a poker face.

"And you say you've had these all you're life, Mr. Gotts?" asked Irwin.

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"I have, sir," he replied. "And please call me Louis."

"Interesting," muttered Irwin, then to me, "What do you think, Annie?"

As always, I tried to give a pragmatic answer. "They seem authentic, though from here what I see looks basically like a large shapeless mass. I don't get really get a sense of an actual number in there."

"Oh they're in there, ma'am," Mr. Gotts insisted. "Look." Using both hands, he expertly flattened out the area in question as much as possible. "Go ahead and count."

Harris and Irwin exchanged looks. Harris gave a be-my-guest gesture. Irwin held up a finger as if for Gotts' inspection.

"May I?" he asked.

"Please," answered Gotts.

Irwin rubbed his finger to warm it, then, with clinical delicacy, he traced an outline along the crinkly skin.

"Definitely five of them," he concluded. "You're sure it isn't just tumors or cysts?"

"Absolutely not," Gotts seemed a little hurt. "If you look at my resume you'll see it's been confirmed by x-ray, ultrasound, MRI, and even biopsy that each one is a complete testis. Three independent studies have confirmed me as a unique case."

Again, the swell of pride—even the poker face betrayed it this time. I flipped through the three-ring binder Gotts had presented as his resume. There were densely typed pages of medical jargon, complete with diagnostic image films and photocopied journal articles. The last page listed the two colleges he had dropped out of, and bullet-pointed his responsibilities during three months of employment at an Arby's. His birth date marked him as just 26, though he seemed a victim of a good deal more years. Not so much in the lines of his face—which was youthful enough—but in the resigned frustration that seemed to haunt his eyes.

"I believe you, Louis," Irwin replied. "I'm just anticipating what audiences are likely to think. People today see a fat lady and wonder why she hasn't gotten a stomach stapling. They look at the pig-faced boy and ask if he's had plastic surgery."

"Contemporary folk are very sophisticated," began Harris, "And by that, I mean they think TV has shown them everything there is to see. They're hard to shock, and even harder to amaze. We need to offer them a truly unique experience. Now, the fact that there are very few operations like ours still in existence helps make the—" he gestured each word to an imaginary marquee, "—Lensky...Brothers...Traveling...Human...Oddities...Show unique. But that's not enough. We have to be extremely selective about our exhibits and their presentation. Do you get me?"

Gotts nodded, but looked unsure.

Harris continued. "When you pay your hard-earned money for our show, we want you to see something so logically confounding that, once witnessed, your view of the world is irrevocably changed. Seeing Alligator Man put a whole grapefruit in his mouth does that to you. Watching The Torso bounce around on pogo sticks where legs should be does that to you. You behold these things, and the universe beneath your feet clicks a few degrees out of place. You leave disturbed, perhaps, but wiser... enlightened. And bursting to share that with others."

Irwin rolled his eyes. "My brother tends to be overly philosophical about our business—but he's essentially correct. The bottom line is that we need word-of-mouth to survive. We need every person who walks through those trailers to tell two friends about it."

"I understand completely," Gotts nodded vigorously now. "That's how I heard about your show. I knew a guy who's cousin had a friend and his brother came to see it, and he just went on and on about it. And I thought that's a perfect place for me. A real, old-fashioned freak show—"

"We prefer the term Human Oddities, please," said Irwin.

"No," added Harris. "We insist upon it."

Gotts looked mortified. "Oh. Um, sorry, sir."

He seemed so upset, I had to try to help, "It's trademarked as part of the name," I explained. "We have to use it."

"No harm done," said Irwin. "But it's more than just a—" Finger quotes. "—branding issue. It's how we see our exhibits, the men women and children who work for us. They're not abnormal, just unusual. Unique."

"And that's how we treat them," Harris cut in. "The world out there might ridicule or exploit them—but we tolerate none of that. We're a family here. And anyone who would be part of our family, has to be prepared to contribute to it. So what can you contribute?"

Gotts faltered and glanced down uncertainly.

"What we mean, Louis, is your act," said Irwin. "How do you propose to present yourself. An anatomical anomaly is one thing—but what can you do with it? RubberMan can work his whole body through an unstrung tennis racket. Crystellina dances on broken wine glasses. The Human Hedgehog can stick pins all over himself."

The brothers sat up suddenly and looked at each other.

"Could you do that?" asked Harris.

"What?"

"You know, stick pins or something in there."

"Um... I don't know. I've never tried." Gotts' face puckered a little as he contemplated this new idea. I caught his eye, and behind the brothers' backs, I shook my head and pointedly mouthed *Nnnooo...*

"I don't think so," said Gotts. "I can juggle a little," he tried to recover.

"Those?" Harris said, gesturing. "I'd pay to see that!" The brothers indulged in a laugh.

"How would you even display your condition," asked Irwin. "Sitting? Standing? Dressed? Nude? Will people know what they're looking at? Even I wasn't sure until I felt it. Can we even show a grown man's privates like this?" The last question was addressed to me.

"It could cause problems," I replied. "There are towns that rigorously enforce indecent exposure laws. And, since we don't restrict admission by age, we'd be particularly vulnerable." As the show's one-person accounting, legal, and clerical department, it was often my job to say no in practical matters that typically passed under the brothers' radar.

"I could let people feel," Gotts suggested.

"No," I said. "Contact of that nature in exchange for a fee is an option only in certain counties in Nevada."

"Yeah," Harris added, "Why don't you ask the Bearded Lady about the hazards of letting a parade of the curious indulge their urge to test reality." He made a savage tugging motion. "Once we let someone claiming to be a doctor, for a little extra fee, examine the conjoined region of the Siamese ballerinas. But we stopped that as soon as we saw what his other hand was doing at the time."

Gotts perked up suddenly. "A geneticist told me I could be the result of an incomplete twinning. There's an article about it in the *Journal of Developmental Morphology*." He pointed to his resume-binder.

"Siamese balls!" cried Harris. The brothers indulged in more laughter.

"Five-stone Louie," chuckled Irwin. "His underwear fits like a glove."

"E.T., the extra-testicles!" Harris mimed a crotch-kick. "Owww-uch."

Irwin wiped a giddy tear away as he recovered. "You see our problem, Louis. We present you to the public and you immediately become the punch line of jokes we all heard in grammar school. I just don't know what place you could have in our show "

Gotts seemed distressed. "But, I'm an oddity, like you say. A unique one."

"The medical uniqueness of your condition is irrelevant," argued Harris. "What matters is the visceral impact you have on an audience—which, frankly, isn't so strong in your case. Yes, you are an oddity. Just not a very good one."

The resigned frustration seeped back into Gotts' eyes. "So you're not hiring me?"

The brothers looked at each other. They both turned to look at me. Harris swiveled in his chair. Irwin rocked. Gotts stood like a statue.

I let the silence hover in the room, thickening the air with discomfort, until I could no longer stand brothers' fidgeting.

"No, Mr. Gotts," I said at last. "We will not be hiring you."

"Sorry about that, old man," said Harris, standing to shake Gotts' hand. "Really great to see you though. Really great."

"Absolutely," echoed Irwin. "An amazing experience. Seriously. Totally fascinating."

"You can pull your pants up now, Louie."

After the brothers had shooed him out of their office partition, I led Gotts to my desk alcove. I had the check ready.

"Thank you very much for coming to see us, Mr. Gotts," I said as I handed him the check. "\$25 for the interview, as per our agreement, all right?"

He took the slip and held it thoughtlessly. "Oh. Thanks.." He opened the trailer door but hesitated, lingering. "So what do I do now? I have no where else to go."

"What are you talking about?" I said with surprise. "Louis, you're a young man. You're fit. You're bright. You can have anything you want. A home, a career, a family, a wife. Any woman would love to have a cute guy like you."

This fellow who'd just bared his groin for three strangers actually blushed and looked away.

"I've never had to fend for myself, so I'm not very good at anything. I've thought it might be nice to have kids, but—as I guess you didn't notice on my resume—I'm sterile." He managed a shrug and nervous smile. "Besides, when it comes to women, I kind of freak them out. I was sure I'd fit in here."

"Louis, despite what the brothers said, this place is not one big, happy family. It's a rootless, grinding business." I gestured to the rows of battered trailers all around. "The people who gravitate to this business are sad loners who look funny. Laborers who can't hold any other job." I pointed to myself. "Or disgraced lawyers who've failed at the subtleties of professional respectability. This place is a gathering of misfits."

Gotts turned and stared out at the endless gray Midwestern sky. "I just wanted to be somewhere where I don't have to feel unusual," he said, then crumpled the check into a pocket and stepped out of the trailer onto a weather-beaten wooden stair.

I felt a great surge of sympathy for him. "Wait," I said. "Any experience with truck engines?"

"No," replied Gotts, puzzled.

"Electrical wiring?"

"Not really."

"Carpentry?"

"Uh-uh."

"Cooking?"

"A little," he answered.

"Fine. Go to the green trailer at the end of the line there. Ask for Earl and say Annie's recommending you for the assistant cook position." I added softly, "If you want it."

Gotts practically beamed. "Yes ma'am!"

He set off happily along the dusty path through the midway, walking with a slightly bow-legged waddle.

END