

Storylandia

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Table of Contents

Albey Damned

Phillip E. Temples

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1

It was a hot, humid afternoon on the third day of August, in the year of our Lord 1934, and the good citizens of Denison, Oklahoma, had come to see the circus. They came that day, like on all days and in all towns, because they wanted a brief respite from life's everyday problems—finding food to put on the table for their family's next meal, holding the bank at bay just a little longer because they couldn't make last month's mortgage payment, or trying to coax the Model A to run just a while longer even though the carburetor was shot.

For some, the games and the rides lifted their spirits and those of their children's. It took them back to a happier era—to a time when they were truly carefree. Carefree, light, and happy in the sun. Yes, the circus held such a promise of respite from the harsh world! Willie wondered then, *why were these folks here in this dark corner of the universe, in my freak tent?*

Why did they come to gawk and stare at these *others*, who walked or crawled this earth with awkward

gaits? Others, who possessed exaggerated features, or deformed arms and legs, whose bodies were stunted physically or whose genders were pathetically confused? Others, who exhibited grotesque and bizarre behaviors, who growled or barked or looked out with crossed-eyes, dripping drool from the sides of their mouths? Was it out of boredom or morbid curiosity? Perhaps. Was it an opportunity to feel fortunate or superior? To silently thank the Lord Almighty that He chose *others* and not *them* to bear these horrendous burdens? Possibly.

God made the freaks, of that Willie was certain. But it was his job to put them on display.

2

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls! And now the moment you’ve all been waiting for! Without further ado! I give you! The horrific! The blasphemous! The one and the only! Devil Boyyy! Son of SAAA-tan!”

Willie made a sweeping gesture with his arm, parting the curtain with a flourish. The audience gasped in unison as Junior appeared. Junior parted his lips, bared his fangs, and hissed at the assembled crowd as he rattled the bars of his cage. Having witnessed these shows hundreds of times before, Willie was well aware that the sudden appearance of Junior was enough to make women and children swoon and grown men wet their pants. Up until that moment, however, a few of the Denisonians were beginning to grow restless after sitting through the acts proceeding Junior’s—something that Willie and the other carnies didn’t like to see in their business.

A fat, middle-aged woman in a flowery pink dress, sitting on the front row and sweating profusely,

appeared to be in imminent danger of dozing off. A plump little wart of a girl sitting beside her—probably her daughter—was growing noticeably restless as she sat through the earlier shows, featuring Boris, the Mighty Miniscule Midget, Wanda, the Bearded He-Woman, and Frederick, the Elephant Man.

The little wart-girl wolfed down a corn dog on a stick, picking her nose all the while. Things got interesting, though, when her mother—the fat woman—woke up and saw Junior. She let out a blood-curdling scream that scared the bejesus out of poor Junior and practically everyone else in the tent. The little girl choked on her corn dog. She coughed and gasped for air. A man sitting behind reached out and slapped the girl hard between her shoulder blades. The girl expelled the piece of dog into her lap. She gasped loudly and knocked the undigested treat onto the ground in disgust. She then covered her teary-face with her chubby little arms and began to cry. The crowd murmured its approval for the man's heroic act. Willie was watching from stage left, behind the main curtain. He had to bite his arm to keep from howling with laughter. He knew that he shouldn't have reacted that way, but it was one of the funniest things he had seen in quite some time. It was a lot funnier than the acts they put on.

3

The story of the Albey Brothers Traveling Circus began back in 1909 when Robert “C.J.” Albey, a former tavern owner from Toledo, Ohio, purchased the Boxer Traveling Circus. According to old C.J., he had been mesmerized as a young boy when the traveling circus came to his town: “I was always receiving whippin’s

from my old man when the circus stopped in Toledo because I would skip my chores and sneak off to see those daring young men on their flying trapezes, or huge elephants dressed in silver tassels standing on a single hind foot while balancing the other precariously over the scantily-clad women performers.”

The years passed, and C.J. partnered with a childhood friend, purchasing a local pub house on the east side of town. Even as an adult however, C.J. maintained a special place in his heart for the traveling circus. Every summer, he'd ask his partner, Joe, “Can you hold down the fort for next couple of days? I'm goin' fishin.” Joe, along with every other regular patron in the joint knew what that meant. The Big Top was in town.

As a bartender, C.J. would sometimes overhear customer conversation—on this particular occasion, the chatter of two patrons. They were both medical doctors schooled back east. After a few shots, one started to pontificate about the human condition—specifically, various human deformities put on display for their benefit during medical training: Siamese twins conjoined at the heads and hips; a man who was born without ears and a nose; “he-she” individuals possessing both pairs of sexual organs, along with a multitude of other poor souls with disfigurements.

When C.J. asked the physicians, what became of the specimens, he learned that some of the human oddities were locked up in relatives' basements for their entire lives. Those who were able-bodied were sometimes banished to the countryside to work as indentured farmhands. Others from the more well-to-do families were committed to sanitariums. Many of them, however, ended up in the carnival freak shows.

The subject fascinated C.J. He peppered the doctors with all manner of questions: “What kind of

food do they eat?” “Do they get sick more easily?” “How long do they live?” “How would someone track these people down?” And so forth. He filed the answers away in the back of his mind.

Two years later, C.J. came across an advertisement in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* announcing that the Boxer Traveling Circus based out of Omaha, Nebraska, was up for sale. Apparently, the business was down on its luck, its former manager having fled with the remaining cash to points unknown. The remnants of the outfit were marooned in a muddy field just outside of Stillwater, Oklahoma. After some considerable soul-searching, C.J. decided to sell his stake in the tavern to Joe. He telegraphed Boxer’s company office, bought a train ticket to Omaha, and a week later, he bought the circus for a song. He left Toledo for good.

The circus came complete with two trucks, sixteen horse-drawn trailers, two donkeys, assorted farm animals, three broken-down rides, six big tents, two scrawny elephants, twenty-one workers, performers and two bonafide freaks.

C.J.’s vision for the new Albey Brothers Traveling Circus (there were no brothers—just C.J.) was to round up some of the best freaks in the country—after he fixed up the rides, of course. He placed advertisements, and procured the services of a number of free-lance *talent scouts* based in cities and towns back east, as well as in Chicago, Kansas City, Denver, and Omaha. These so-called scouts amounted to little more than two-bit con artists. But be that as it may, no one in the circus had ever thought to employ scouts before. It wasn’t too long before old C.J. had a leg up on the competition. He was able to acquire some of the best freaks in the business.

Albey formally christened Junior “Devil Boy, Son of Satan” or “Devil Boy” for short. He was the undisputed star freak in the Albey Brothers Traveling Circus. In fact, he was one of the best freaks to grace the circuit in some time, according to many in the business. C.J. reckoned that the Enchanting Calloway Siamese twins couldn’t hold a candle to Junior. Neither could Earl the Stupendous Snake Man or the Elephant Man With No Name.

It was surely true, thought Willie. After the opening shows in each new town, friends told neighbors who, in turn, told other neighbors about the frightening Son of Satan. His sinister reputation grew exponentially with each passing night. Willie put Junior in the cage draped with lots of chains, and even affixed a bible or two for good measure. It seemed rude and disrespectful to Willie to keep Junior locked up, and calling him by those ridiculous names.

“It’s okay, Willie,” Junior told him one day. “I don’t blame you.”

Still, Willie felt bad for Junior. He never called Junior by his stage name, except in the shows. Willie didn’t refer to Junior as the “Devil Boy,” even when he spoke privately with the other carnies. To Willie, he was always “Junior.” Junior was more than just a good draw and an incredible freak. Junior was his friend.

When Willie was sixteen, he ran away and joined the traveling circus. Willie’s Ma had died a year earlier; his daddy had little use for him. The old man would call Willie a worthless runt and beat him mercilessly

for no reason. He'd belittle the child in front of people at every opportunity.

"Ain't no good fer nothin', that boy! Jest another hole to feed come dinnertime. 'Least I git me somethin' a use out of my hound dog."

After enduring countless beatings, Willie decided to run away from home. He soon found the means for his escape—the circus was coming to Millers Corner, just twenty-three miles as the crow flies from the farm.

Willie was bound and determined to do anything if they would only take him in—put up tents, sell tickets, shovel manure. Anything. Just so Willie could escape his miserable existence. Fortune was smiling on Willie that day when he came calling. The circus was short a hand, having lost a boy to desertion just two weeks earlier.

The first few weeks on the circuit, Willie began to wonder what he'd gotten himself into. The work was dirty and backbreaking and it was a lot harder than any of the farm chores he was used to doing. Worst of all, no one seemed to pay Willie any mind. Willie was miserable and exhausted. He barely had enough strength at day's end to drag himself to the supper table where he would eat alone. Luckily for Willie, after a few months, the foreman overheard him mimicking a barker one night while the boy was cleaning out the latrines. "I think you jes' might got a talent for barking, kid." The foreman told Willie he had a sincere-sounding, deep baritone voice, good modulation, and a slight nasal tint. Also, he'd seen Willie go out of his way to be friendly and helpful to the paying public. "You got a way with folks."

"All of these attributes, when combined," he said, "command the respect and admiration of the

marks so as to entice ‘em to dig deep into their pockets and part with their hard-earned pennies.”

As far as Willie was concerned, barking sure beat the hell out of pounding stakes into the ground and shoveling shit.

6

“Hey, honey, come back here! I ain’t got my money’s worth yet!”

The drunken traveling salesman sat up in the bed and reached to grab Maxine’s arm as she struggled to get up, but he was a second too late. “Hold on to your stick there, honey. I’m in need of a smoke and a pee. You just stay right there and rev it up and I’ll be back in no time.”

The man belched loudly. “Ho-kay. I’m a just a gonna ... wait right here for ya’... that’s what I’ll do...” He fell back heavily onto the mattress. The man was slurring his words badly; the prostitute was certain he would be fast asleep at any moment.

“Miserable, bad breath, limp dick son of a...” she muttered under her breath as she threw on some clothes to go outside to the outhouse. Maxine was also three sheets to the wind. But she managed to find the john’s wallet in his pocket to see how much money he had on him.

“Fuck me,” she whispered, noting the salesman was a full two dollars short of the agreed amount. “Fuck, fuck, fuck! Hell of a way to treat a lady.” Maxine pocketed the bills and quietly shut the door behind her as she stumbled down the hallway to the backdoor.

After relieving her bladder, Maxine walked back to the porch and lit up a Lucky Strike. She took

a deep drag to help sober up and to contemplate life.

Her's had been better. She'd arrived in town almost two years ago in the company of a good-looking man she'd met in St. Louis. Clyde was gainfully employed. He promised to show her the sights. It wasn't soon after, though, he broke that promise. Clyde had lit out of town with a younger, more attractive floozy. A friend said that they were headed for California. Maxine figured she'd never see him again.

She had held down a seamstress job for a while, but the pay was barely enough to cover the rent for her room in the flophouse. There was no money for food. Before she even realized it, Maxine had stooped to turning tricks. It wasn't something she was particularly proud of, but a girl's got to do what a girl's...

Suddenly Maxine was startled by a scraping noise coming from behind one of the trash cans nearby. "Who's there?" Maxine cried out. There was no reply.

"You better come out from behind that can, mister! I have a gun, and I know how to use it!"

She tried to calm herself. *It's only a raccoon. Or a possum.* She timidly approached the can, ready to curse and scream or do whatever was necessary to fend off an attacker.

Suddenly, she heard a faint whimpering. As she got closer, she could see a small figure crouching. *A little boy? Shaking in fear—in fear of me?*

"Darlin', are you okay? What are you doin' hiding back there?" In the glow of her Lucky Strike, Maxine suddenly caught a brief glimpse of the boy. What she saw terrified her—a wisp of a thing with practically no hair, and no nose to speak of. His ears

were not round, but rather, pointed. And his skin! In this poor light, Maxine thought she was imagining things. But he looked... *An In'jun? An imp, a demon?*

Not long after Willie joined Albey Brothers, Junior was “recruited” from Leavenworth, Kansas, by one of the Albey talent scouts. Late one night, a drunken whore had found a half-naked, devilish-looking boy hiding behind a trash can. The sight of Junior scared her so badly that she went running to the Sheriff’s office in spite of her inebriated condition. The Sheriff must have nearly locked *her* up after hearing the outlandish story she told of finding the son of Satan hiding in an alley off Broad Street. Something, however, must have compelled the Sheriff to go and check out her story.

When Junior was picked up, he was scared, ragged-dirty and half-starved; he wasn’t talking sense. It was only later that the authorities made a startling discovery—Junior wasn’t dumb or an imbecile. He spoke all right, but it wasn’t English. Instead, it was a strange dialect that one of the Irish jail keepers said resembled Gaelic, but wasn’t. Even so, the jailer couldn’t understand a word of it. And to top it off, the boy punctuated the odd speech with assorted grunts and tongue clicks.

A few weeks after Junior took up residence in the county jail, word reached Frank Wilshire, one of the Albey scouts based out of Kansas City, Missouri, about a strange, freakish boy with almost no nose, pointed ears, reddish complexion, who was nearly hairless, and who possessed a frightening mouthful of chisel-sharp teeth—a boy who couldn’t speak English or any other known language. This latter fact was important to Wilshire, since the boy wouldn’t be able to explain to anyone where *home* was. It certainly

would make his job easier.

Wilshire arrived two days later at the Sheriff's office brandishing a shiny twenty-dollar coin and a bottle of smooth Jack Daniel's to help initiate a dialogue. It didn't take much convincing by Wilshire for the Sheriff to quickly grant custody of the boy to the Albey representative. The Sheriff figured he was doing the boy (if you could call him that) a big favor by allowing him to be with his own kind. Besides, it wasn't safe for the child to remain in Leavenworth. A traveling preacher at a tent revival had nearly started a riot on the jail the night before, when he preached to the God-fearing townspeople that "the Sheriff was harboring the Devil's spawn" and that he should "hand over the varmint to the Army of the Lord forthwith."

7

The speed at which Junior learned to understand and speak English was nothing short of phenomenal. When he arrived, C.J. made Willie his ward and told him to talk to Junior and tutor him. Willie was like a big brother to Junior, who—if Willie had to guess—must have been 12 or 13 years old. Junior also received additional rearing in the living skills and social graces like, how to dress and bathe himself and how to shake hands and be polite—courtesy of Wanda, the Bearded He-Woman.

For months, Willie would spend nearly every waking moment when he wasn't working schooling Junior. At first, Willie simply pointed to trees, rocks, and trucks—naming them as he went along. "Horse," Willie would say, pointing at one of the horses. Junior would pause, appearing to ponder the word for a moment. He would obediently say "horse" back to

Willie, as best he could. Then, Junior would amaze him by attempting to use the word in an actual sentence. There was no doubt in Willie's mind that Junior was incredibly smart. Once he got used to Junior's physical appearance, Junior was a lot of fun to be with. The other carnies—with the exception of the freaks—never did take much of a liking to Junior.

Just a year after he came to the circus, Junior's knowledge of English was most impressive. His thirst for books was voracious. He devoured Wanda's and Willie's limited library collection. Junior especially liked non-fiction and history books. Willie found himself knocking frequently on C.J.'s door to borrow new titles.

“What do I look like, son—a public library?” C.J. would ask, throwing his hands up in mock disgust. He'd wave Willie inside, and then he'd point to his bookshelf while shaking his head. Despite his theatrics, Willie knew that C.J. was secretly pleased with Willie's visits to acquire more books, and with Junior's progress. Junior's knowledge of history and current events was impressive. Junior's spoken English was good, too, although he did speak with a strong lisp. Willie attributed the impediment to his cleft palette—or whatever you wanted to call it. There were other oddities about Junior, however, that had escaped the attention of management.

8

“That boy, Junior... he's so sweet,” Wanda said to Willie one day.

The company was set up a few miles south of Little Rock, Arkansas, on a grassy knoll overlooking