

# OTHER GODS



**STEPHEN MARK RAINY**

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# CIRCUS BIZARRE

I was in ninth grade when the Circus Bizarre came to Scioto County. We lived down by the Ohio River, between Wheelersburg and Franklin Furnace, off highway 52: a real graveyard of a county, where the arrival of a real, live circus made bold headlines. The most exciting thing the kids around there generally did was shoot BB guns at the passing boats—though they were usually too far out to hit—or bottle mosquitoes during the spring. Yeah, bottle mosquitoes. You might get stung pretty good, but when they'd swarm, all you had to do was go out by the river with a mason jar, swing its open mouth through one of those dense clouds, and then cap it real quick. At school, Andy Nichols, who was probably the second or third coolest kid in junior high, would get a girl who was wearing a skirt to talk to him, then I'd come behind with the jug, pop the lid real quick, and stick it up under the girl's skirt. Sure, I got slapped a few times, but I'd often catch a good look at what was up under the skirt before the girl started squealing. Funny thing is, no matter how many times we ever did this, they always fell for it, never suspecting a thing.

It was kind of like that when the Circus Bizarre came—nobody suspecting anything, not even the grownups, who you'd think might have known better. I guess in lower rural Ohio, where the most crime was kids smoking pot in some farmer's tobacco barn, you always thought bad shit only happened in other places. I suppose that's why the circus chose our county, because everybody was small-town simple. The circus set up off the main highway,

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down near the river, right at mid-autumn, when most of the mosquitoes were gone. They had a big tent, lots of trucks full of equipment, and a number of animals, like tigers, elephants and monkeys. But the big sign over their gate said “The Most Bizarre Attractions the World Has Ever Seen,” and we kids took this to mean some kind of freak show. To be honest, I never much cared for circuses and fairs and such, but I did have kind of a weak spot for freak shows. So I thought that maybe, on the weekend, me and Andy and a couple of the other cool guys would pay the circus a visit.

But our plans were somewhat premature, for on Thursday of that week, our homeroom teacher, Mr. McCudden, announced that, on the following day, some of the circus people would be coming to visit our school. Best of all, they’d be bringing some of their attractions. This was exciting news because we were promised it would be an “event to remember,” and, if nothing else, for at least an hour out of the day, we’d get a break from our regular class routine. I hoped some freaks would show up, or at least some really cool animals, but I had a feeling our guests would be more in the form of tame monkeys or caged snakes or something; I didn’t reckon the schoolboard would have allowed the circus to bring bears or lions or gorillas onto school property.

On Friday morning, on the way to school, Andy and I were pleased to see a couple of circus vans in the parking lot, both emblazoned with the sign “The Most Bizarre Attractions!” in big red letters. There was also a trailer with no logo parked next to the vans, and we figured it, too, was one of theirs. Yeah, they could have fit something pretty big in that trailer—or maybe it was a dressing room for some freaks. Excitement mounted.

We went on to homeroom, and after Mr. McCudden took attendance, he happily told us that the circus people would be visiting the different classes throughout the day, and we were fortunate enough to be among the first. This announcement was met with a shrill cheer, and best of all, Mr. McCudden said that, as long as we were quiet, we could read or draw or do whatever until our guests arrived.

We didn’t have to wait very long. A knock at our door drew

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everyone's attention, and we could see through the window a pair of wide, staring eyes beneath the brim of a tall, black hat. Long, gleaming teeth shone from between grinning lips, and I thought that it was clown face until the door opened to reveal one of the ugliest men I'd ever seen. Not a clown, but a tall, wiry fellow with pallid skin and craggy features that looked to have been badly sculpted from hardened modeling clay. He wasn't a freak, I don't suppose, but he wasn't far from it.

"Hi!" he shouted in a thin, reedy voice, as Mr. McCudden ushered him inside. "I'm Mr. Euliss, and I'm just so pleased to see all of you!" He bowed deeply, removing his top hat to reveal a thatch of black curls that swirled around his head like burnt vermicelli. I couldn't refrain from laughing, nor could most of the class, for he wore a lemon yellow suit with thin black pinstripes, and his trousers barely reached his ankles. With his painted grin and bulbous nose, which looked like a swollen tumor above his upper lip, his appearance was both funny and unnerving, and right then and there I got the feeling that something about him wasn't quite right. More than just goofy or ugly, he had an unsettling air about him. In a strange way, though, this was exciting because, here, in our familiar classroom, with our ever-present teacher close by, we couldn't imagine that we might really be in danger.

Mr. Euliss walked stiffly, like a man on stilts, up to Debbie Hoover, the head Junior Varsity cheerleader who sat at the front of the class. He bowed again, lifted her hand in his long, twig-like fingers, and kissed it with exaggerated tenderness. "Good morning, young lady! What's your name?"

She giggled nervously, glancing self-consciously around at the class. When she said "Debbie," her voice cracked.

"Debbie! So pleased to meet you. Debbie, do you like animals?"

"Sure," she said, shivering slightly. "I love them."

"What's your favorite animal?"

"Cats. I have three."

"Lovely!" Mr. Euliss cried. "For you, dear girl, a free pass to the circus!" He slapped a bright yellow ticket down on her desk,

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much to Debbie's delight, then moved to Maurie Price's desk and ruffled his hair. "Hello, young man! What's your favorite animal?"

"I guess a dog," he said softly. Maurie was kind of fat, with long, greasy hair, and he never bathed but once a week. Seeming to take note of the fact, Mr. Euliss scrunched up his face and moved on to another student. I sat toward the middle of the third row, which, at the moment, wasn't close enough to attract his attention. I laughed silently at Maurie's indignant expression.

"Well, all you animal lovers, I have just the thing for you. Right outside this door, I have some very, very exciting creatures, the likes of which most of you have never seen." Mr. Euliss pointed toward the door. "If everybody is ready, I'll bring them in!"

A roar of approval went up, and Andy, who sat in the desk next to mine, leaned over and said softly, "This guy must think we're third graders, man. What a geek!"

"Yeah," I agreed. "An *ugly* damn geek."

He snickered as Mr. Euliss disappeared and then returned a moment later with his hands behind his back. When he brought them forth, he had a tiny spider monkey attached to his right forearm. All the girls cried, "Ooh!" and even some of the guys smiled at how cute the little critter was. The monkey had a nervous expression on its face, and I wasn't sure whether it was scared of all the kids in the room or of the creepy creature that held him. I couldn't help but feel a little sorry for it.

"Does anyone know what this is?" Mr. Euliss asked. He pointed at Andy. "You, young man! What's your name?"

"Andy Nichols, sir," he said, with prideful inflection. "That is a spider monkey."

"Bravo! Do you know where spider monkeys come from?"

"South America?"

"EXCELLENT!"

Andy cut a big, immodest smile, and Linda Wallace, in the seat ahead of him, turned to him with a scowl and whispered, "I knew that. Showoff."

Only Linda and myself heard him say, "Fuck you, bitch." I chuckled, but she just ignored him because she heard it so much.

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Mr. Euliss then thrilled everybody by presenting the monkey to Heather Montague, a.k.a. Heather the Feather because she weighed almost two hundred pounds. "Would you like to hold him, dear lady?" She nodded mutely, and Mr. Euliss placed the little creature into her waiting arms. "Hold him very carefully. That's good, he won't bite. He's sweet, but a little eccentric. He answers to the name of Sam. Strange, since his actual name is Clement." Mr. Euliss brayed like a donkey. "And a free pass to the circus for you, too, my dear!" He placed a yellow ticket in front of her. "But don't think that's all, my good friends, there's more. *Much* more!"

He disappeared into the hall again, and this time returned holding a small metal cage. When he held it up for everyone to see, the whole class exhaled sharply, for inside it was a very large, very hairy tarantula, and I have to admit that spiders are not among my favorite of nature's wonders. I shuddered, praying that Mr. Euliss would not bring the cage in my direction.

"Who here is afraid of spiders?" he said in a low, dramatic voice. "Spiders are our friends, but most people are scared of them. C'mon, who's afraid? 'Fess up!" A couple of hands went up, but mine didn't, for I feared drawing the man's attention. And I saw that my fear was justified, for Mr. Euliss immediately headed for Darrell Meecham, who sat at the back of the room with his hand in the air. Even Mr. McCudden began to look a little wary now.

"This is Fritz," Mr. Euliss said, waving the cage in front of Darrell's fear-widened eyes. "Don't be afraid. Fritz is quite harmless. And he's very even-tempered. Please, please don't be afraid!" And then, to my chagrin, Mr. Euliss opened the cage, stuck his hand inside, then drew it out with the spider on his palm. The little monster stood stock still, thank God, but my heart fluttered when he held the tarantula right up to Darrell's face. "Fritz serves a very healthy purpose, you know. He kills harmful rodents and insects. He comes from out west. Don't you think he's an exquisite creature?"

"I—I guess so," Darrell said, squirming in his seat. "I don't like him very much."

"Oh, lad! What's your name? Darrell? Oh, Darrell, don't be a

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crybaby! Look at him closely. Lots of people keep them as pets. Wouldn't you like to have one?"

"No sir, I wouldn't."

Softly, in a voice latent with menace, Mr. Euliss said, "Well, perhaps Fritz will make you change your mind." And with that, he placed the huge spider right on Darrell's desk, nudging it toward him with the back of his hand. Darrell let out a girlish squeak, and drew back in his seat.

"There, there, young lad. He's harmless. Harmless, I tell you!"

Mr. McCudden spoke up then. "Mr. Euliss, I'm not sure that's a very good idea. I know you wouldn't want anything to happen to it."

Mr. Euliss gave our teacher a withering stare, which everyone in the class noticed. After a long, uncomfortable silence, Mr. Euliss' smiley face returned, and he took the tarantula and put it back in its cage. Then he laid a yellow circus ticket on Darrell's desk. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"He tries anything like that with me," Andy whispered, "and I'll punch his fucking lights out." I nodded my agreement.

Mr. Euliss placed the tarantula cage on Mr. McCudden's desk. Then, with a great flourish, he bowed to the class again. "Now, ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce to you one of Circus Bizarre's *real* attractions. This is what we're all about. This is why we take your money! But you young men and women don't have to pay, no sirree, you get to see it absolutely *free*! Are you ready?"

After the tarantula, most everyone looked skeptical. But Andy piped up and said, "Bring it on, man!" Mr. Euliss beamed at him and then left the room again. Somewhere down the hall, a muted roar told me that another class was experiencing one of the circus's "attractions," though I couldn't tell if their reaction signaled excitement or terror. Seconds later, we heard a nearby rustling in the hall, then a low rumble. Mr. Euliss reappeared, wheeling in a large metal box covered with a heavy white sheet, beneath which something scuttled briefly—something that sounded heavy and possibly angry. He closed the door to the hall behind him.

"This is it, boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen, the star of our

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show. This is quite special, and you are all privileged—privileged, I say!—for you will be the first in the county to behold this wonder. But I must ask for your complete cooperation. You must do exactly what I tell you. Otherwise, our friend here might not perform, and then you'd all be disappointed. Isn't that right?"

A few nervous "Yeahs" and "Uh-huhs" came back in response. I glanced toward the back of the room and saw Mr. McCudden standing by the coat closet, looking distinctly uncomfortable. He was youngish for a teacher, probably about thirty, with thick, dark hair and wide blue eyes. Some of the girls said he was cute. I counted him as reasonably cool, because he was pretty much up on the things ninth graders were into, and in class, we did stuff like Chalk Talk and Wheel of Fortune games, with history and geography as the subjects. Most of us liked him best of all the teachers. So to see him sweating made me even more nervous than I already was.

Mr. Euliss knelt down behind the big cage, so that all I could see of him was his hat. Again, something inside that cage rustled, and everybody leaned forward, trying to get the first glimpse of the thing within. When Mr. Euliss stood up, I thought he was going to remove the sheet, reveal a baby alligator, or maybe a python or something. Instead, he walked over to Heather the Feather, who was still holding the monkey, and smiled broadly at her.

"Young lady," he said softly, gazing deeply into her eyes. "How would you like to be the first to see this morning's star attraction?"

Heather's puffy eyes grew wide, and her lips pursed in a soundless "O." She clutched the monkey clumsily, and I was afraid she might hurt it, which would have pissed me off, as the monkey was a lot cuter than she was. She looked around at the class, and several people goaded her on with yells of "Do it!" and "Go for it!" Andy called out, "Maybe it's a pig, Heather," which prompted Mr. McCudden to pop him in the back of the head with an eraser. Andy threw up his hands in apology, then broke into a big, self-satisfied smile, for he'd been popped in the head more times than anyone could count.

"Heather agrees!" cried Mr. Euliss, clapping his hands together

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in excitement. “Very well, young lady. Come here, come here!” He tugged at her sleeve, practically dragging her ungainly body from her seat, and led her to the covered cage, where she stood gaping at it like a swollen blowfish. The monkey was struggling in her arms, chattering nervously. A feeling of foreboding settled over the room like a dark cloud, and I could tell it wasn’t just my imagination. Everybody in the class, including Mr. McCudden, looked as if they had swallowed dirt, but no one moved or made a sound.

“Before we unveil this wonder, let me tell you something about it,” Mr. Euliss said softly, dramatically. “It is incredibly ancient, a one-of-a-kind survivor from ages past. The only place you’d ever see anything like this is...NOWHERE! Only at Circus Bizarre, ladies and gentlemen. Heather’s the lucky lady who gets to see it first.” Then he added with a low laugh: “Isn’t she lucky?”

A few reluctant nods. Mr. Euliss now took her by the shoulder and said, “Here you go, Heather. Let me have your friend there.” He took the monkey, which scampered up his arm to perch on his shoulder, its sad, deep brown eyes peering apprehensively at the cage. “Here we go. Let’s sneak a peek, shall we? Lean down slowly, all right? And we’ll see what we can see.”

Heather nodded, and Mr. Euliss lifted an edge of the sheet, on the opposite side of the cage so none of us could see. She leaned closer and closer, and finally, we saw her eyes grow large, as if in amazement—and then blank as if what she saw was beyond her comprehension. The monkey suddenly leapt from Mr. Euliss’ shoulder and bounded across the room, to cower in a corner near the trash can.

“Mr. Euliss,” Heather whispered. “I don’t see *anything* in there.”

The class groaned, but I saw Mr. McCudden relax visibly.

“You don’t see anything?” Mr. Euliss blurted in outrage. “What’s the matter, girl, are you blind? Why, maybe you’d better take a closer look!” And with that, he pushed her head down close to the cage, out of our sight. She uttered a quick “Urk!” and struggled to back away, but Mr. Euliss’ grip was firm. “Nothing there?” he roared. “Tell me what you see now!”

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“Nothing,” came her muffled voice. “Oww, you’re hurting me!”

“Now look here,” said Mr. McCudden, stepping forward with an irate frown. “What do you think you’re doing?” A red-eyed stare from the circus man stopped him in his tracks. It was uncanny. A strange power radiated from that leering face. My dick hardened as blood rushed to my groin, and into my head with a roar like thunder. *This can’t be happening*, I thought. *Not here at school!*

“What the fuck?” Andy whispered in surprise.

I couldn’t even respond to him. My tongue was frozen.

“This is MY show!” Mr. Euliss growled at Mr. McCudden. “You may be in charge of book learning. But this isn’t any fancy-ass college prep curriculum, Mr. Teacher. I got some *real* knowledge to dispense.”

My teacher stared glassy-eyed at him, not saying a word. I saw a small dribble of spit leak from the corner of his mouth. My bladder began to ache painfully. Heather whined, “Let me go!”

Mr. Euliss cracked the most vicious grin I had ever seen on a human being’s face.

“Young lady, I’m ashamed of you. There *is* an amazing attraction right here before your eyes. Since you can’t seem to see it...I want you to touch it.”

“I don’t wanna!” Heather cried. “Let me up, let me up!”

“Very well!” Mr. Euliss yanked the big girl up by her hair, grasping her neck painfully. With his free hand, he unlatched a door on the other side of the sheet. “Please, Heather. Put your hand in there. Just feel around. Tell me what you find.”

“No!” she cried. “Let me go!”

Very softly, he said, “You said there was nothing in there. If that’s true, you have nothing to be afraid of, do you?”

Tears streamed down her pudgy cheeks. “You’re hurting me.”

“Put your hand in there, and I’ll stop.”

She looked up at him, and he gave her a sad-eyed smile. The monkey screeched in the corner. The mixture of emotions blazing inside me twisted my guts. Mr. Euliss frightened me more than any man I’d ever encountered; but his weird ability to dominate others

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also *thrilled* me. To see him using it on this girl, whose manner and physique had utterly repulsed me for as long as I could remember, nearly made me come in my jeans.

I knew it was wrong. Hell, the whole class knew it was wrong. But not one dazzled soul moved. No one spoke.

“Stick your hand in there!” Mr. Euliss roared.

Stripped of her will, Heather whimpered; then she thrust her hand into the opening.

Beneath the sheet, something made a scraping noise, like metal on metal.

“No,” whispered Heather. “Don’t make me! Don’t make me!”

Mr. Euliss knelt at her side, gently pushed her outstretched arm further into the cage. “Don’t you feel it? Isn’t it WONDERFUL?”

Suddenly, the fat girl began to scream shrilly, peals of agony that rang through the room like sirens. Mr. Euliss now shoved her head down so that we couldn’t see her at all, and the cage lurched violently. The clown-grin widened, and we saw Heather’s feet kicking in the air as something pulled her right through the cage door. She alternately shrieked and moaned, and it came as no surprise when splashes of dark red appeared on the white sheet, and a pool of blood began to form on the tile floor at the base of the cage. After a few moments, her voice went silent and the cage stopped shaking. I realized my mouth was hanging open only when I felt drool on the back of my hand.

“Oh my God my God my God...” Andy intoned, his lower jaw sagging halfway to his desk. I glanced back to see Mr. McCudden still frozen in position, his eyes gazing blankly at Mr. Euliss, who smiled so broadly I thought his face would split in two. For a moment, he looked straight at me, and I felt hot wetness spreading between my legs.

But the evil eyes passed me by, only to fall on poor Debbie Hoover, who quickly lowered her own eyes. As Mr. Euliss approached, I heard her whisper a sob, and a burst of adrenaline nearly sent me leaping to attack him, for I had to admit to being a little sweet on her (she had been a frequent target for our mosquito trick). But the same power that held all the other sheep in thrall pre-

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vented me from moving, and I was forced to watch helplessly as he took her by the hand and drew her to her feet. She was so pretty, and in her short little skirt and tight sweater, she was a sight to make my young heart pound. I couldn't bear for the same thing that had happened to Heather to happen to her.

I couldn't so much as whisper a protest.

"Little Debbie-cake! Oh, that's cute!" Mr. Euliss guffawed. "Your turn. Perhaps you'll have better luck than your rather large friend there. I certainly hope you'll be able to see *my* friend!"

"Don't..."

"Ssh! Don't talk, young lady. Don't say a word, all right? If you keep quiet, everything will be fine. Okay?" He added in a whisper. "Just nod your head if you agree."

She did.

Again, he lifted the far corner of the bloodstained sheet, so that none of us could see into the cage. And he motioned for Debbie to look inside. Fearfully, she lowered her head, her blond bangs falling down into her eyes almost like a shield. As she bent down, Mr. Euliss leaned over and oggled her rear end, raising his eyebrows comically and winking right at Andy. Then he asked, "Can you see anything, my dear? *I* certainly can!"

I could barely hear her croak, "Oh...there's something..."

"That's just what's left of Heather the Feather," Mr. Euliss said cheerfully. "Oh, dear, such bad table manners. I shall have to have a chat with our attraction!"

"Oh, God," Debbie cried suddenly. "Oh, God...I see it! I see it!" She rose and tried to turn away, but the monster behind her blocked her path, grabbed her arms and spun her around, bending her over the cage. He clutched the back of her neck, so that she could not gain enough leverage to rise. "Now...spread your legs, little girl! Spread 'em!"

"No!" she gurgled. "No, please!"

One-handed, Mr. Euliss reached under her skirt and tugged her underpants down, then brutally levered her legs apart with his own, making a lewd pumping gesture with his hips. Debbie's horrified eyes rolled upward, as if she were trying to see what was going on

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behind her through the back of her skull. My heart was thudding so hard that I could not hear her terrified cries, though I could see her mouth moving frantically. The only thing I did hear above the roar was Mr. Euliss' shout of "Do it, baby!"

Suddenly, the cage lurched again, and this time, a dark *something* wiggled up from the opening, something wet and glistening, like a giant, bloated leech. Another appeared, then another, each crawling up to curl and uncurl ominously, slowly moving toward Debbie's face. One of the things slithered around behind her, toward her exposed rear end; a second later, her eyes bulged horribly in their sockets, and she would have screamed had Mr. Euliss not clamped a hand over her mouth. She tried to bite his fingers, but her teeth could not get a grip. Even if she succeeded, I knew in my heart she couldn't possibly inflict any pain upon him.

"Bullseye!" Mr. Euliss cried happily, gawking at Debbie's ass; another of the dark appendages slipped under her skirt, and he added, "Let's try for two!"

Then, the most awful thing of the whole ordeal occurred, something so unbelievable that I still don't know if it was real. At the door, a face appeared in the window, and I realized it belonged to our principal, Mr. Hatcher. I was sure he would burst in at the sight of this terrible violation, probably attack Mr. Euliss physically. But what should he do but raise a hand and wave cheerfully, smiling at us as if absolutely nothing was wrong. Was he blind? Did Mr. Euliss' power extend beyond the boundaries of this room? I realized, then, that he had friends in other classrooms. My God...Circus Bizarre *owned* our school.

Mr. Hatcher moved on, just as if he were making his usual morning rounds. My heart sank, but I knew that, even if the principal had tried to intervene, Mr. Euliss would have somehow gotten the better of him.

Still, I could not deny the incredible *thrill* of watching this evil degradation. My dick ached...bulged...burned...as the monstrosity beneath that blood-splattered veil continued its obscene assault on Debbie. Something about her helplessness, her heart-rending terror excited me like nothing I'd ever known before. I saw it in Andy's

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face...in Darrell Meecham's face...even in the girls' faces...*it* was there. All of them were entranced, mesmerized, and each face wore the same mask of unbridled lust—of sheer, perverted delight—that had transfigured mine.

Mr. Euliss gently removed his hand from Debbie's mouth, for she was now far beyond uttering even a whisper. Her body shook a little as those worm-like arms moved around inside her body. I could hear soft, wet sounds, like a bowl of slick noodles being stirred. Her hands, which grasped the sides of the cage, began to slip, and then she disappeared as was drawn in through the opening, to follow Heather to some unspeakable end. A moist crunching sound followed.

Then I heard a low whimper, followed by "Oh, my God, my God, my God."

It was *my* voice, leaking unbidden from my lips. Holy Christ, if Mr. Euliss heard, his attention might turn to me. *Shut up. Shut up! SHUT THE FUCK UP!*

All eyes remained on Mr. Euliss, each and every soul in the room consumed by the terror of knowing that the man was about to select a new victim. His bright eyes scanned the classroom. To my surprise, he pulled a huge handkerchief from his coat pocket, knelt, and began to wipe up the blood that had pooled on the floor. Then he tossed the blood-soaked hanky into the cage and, without a word, wheeled it back into the hallway, only to return a moment later, his grin still pasted in place. He went to Mr. McCudden's desk, picked up the tarantula cage, and dropped a yellow ticket onto our teacher's roll book.

With a sad shake of his head, Mr. Euliss said, "I will leave you now. So many things to do, you know. I've enjoyed my little visit with you. I trust each and every one of you learned a little something new today, experienced something you've never experienced before. It is so...rewarding...to share new things."

With that, he opened the little cage and again removed the huge, hairy spider. He stepped up to Darrell Meecham's desk and carefully placed the tarantula squarely atop Darrell's head. The giant creature's legs closed on Darrell's skull as it settled itself securely there.

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“A parting gift,” Mr. Euliss said. “Enjoy.”

With that, he turned and disappeared into the hall. A few pairs of eyes remained on the door, while others gazed in horror at the monster on Darrell’s head. Gradually, life returned to the classroom, and I could hear assorted sighs and sobs as our paralysis departed and full awareness of all that had happened began to take root.

What happened next nearly scared the life out of me. I heard a heavy thud just behind me, and an empty desk toppled over. Swiveling quickly around, I saw that Mr. McCudden had fallen flat onto his face, and his nose crunched sickeningly as it struck the floor. Andy and I were both out of our seats in a moment, and together, we turned him over, only to draw back in shock.

Mr. McCudden was all too plainly dead, his eyes wide and glassy, his skin as pale and bloodless as Mr. Euliss’s. A thin streamer of spit still dripped from his lower lip.

I heard a soft chattering sound, and a second later, the little spider monkey appeared before me, its sad eyes questing around the room, looking up at me uncertainly. Before I realized what I was doing, I took the little creature in my arms and held it tightly, unable to stop the hot tears that began to burn in my eyes.

I then found the evidence that I had ejaculated in my pants as little Debbie Hoover had been devoured.

And from the other side of the room, Darrell Meecham’s voice quavered: “Help me! Somebody get this goddamn thing off of me!”

««—»»

No one ever saw the Circus Bizarre ever again. Before the end of that school day, the tent, the vans, the animals, all disappeared from the face of the earth. All that remained to assure us that what we had experienced was real were a few flyers that advertised “The Most Bizarre Attractions the World Has Ever Seen,” the yellow circus passes that Mr. Euliss had left, a squashed tarantula, and the little spider monkey.

Besides Mr. McCudden, half a dozen other teachers had died of

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cardiac arrest. And in addition to Heather Montague and Debbie Hoover, at least fifteen other kids from various classrooms had vanished without a trace—every single one of them, according to the eyewitnesses, at the hands of a Mr. Euliss. A Mr. Euliss identical in every respect to the one who had visited our class.

Yes, the circus was gone before it ever opened. The police never could track them down or explain exactly what had happened. For all practical purposes, the Circus Bizarre never even existed. But the reality of dead school kids lingered in Scioto County for months, years, and none of us—especially the parents of those kids—ever felt safe, secure, or truly happy again.

I know I can speak for the others, even though Andy Nichols and I chose paths different from the rest of them. While they closed themselves off, retreating from everything the world had to offer, Andy and I set out on a quest. We had experienced something unique on that day—twenty-some years ago, it was. We were the cool guys, the tough kids, and had been spared, by luck of the draw, the horrible, disgusting fates of those who were chosen. But those horrible moments had awakened something in me—and in Andy.

Mr. Euliss did something to me that no other person or thing has ever done: He made me *feel*.

Andy knew it, too. In those soft exhalations of “Oh my God” and “Oh shit,” we had breathed our forbidden feelings into existence—at first with shame, but then without inhibition. The shocking joy of witnessing Heather Montague’s death. The pure excitement—the *envy*—I had felt as that unknown monster ravaged Debbie Hoover. It was obscene in every way, yet so very, very *real*.

Andy and I left our homes to search, and together we drifted, eking out existences any way we could. Stealing, sometimes begging. Occasionally, by blind chance, we have happened upon a flyer advertising the circus, found a stray yellow ticket, or learned about unspeakable horrors having befallen innocent witnesses—in schools, in churches, even in hospitals. Wherever a circus performer is welcomed, we know that death may visit.

The monkey came with us and to this day is still alive, occasionally fretting or chattering anxiously, as if to say, “This is the

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place.” But the Circus has always eluded us—sometimes just by days or hours.

I don’t know what lies in store for my friend and me. I don’t know that either of us cares. We are driven by the burning desire, the need to know, the will to *see*.

Just what *is* beneath that big top?