

A Circus Never to Return

by strannikov

Receipt tallies confirmed that the Giant Man-Eating Rats of Sumatra had been the biggest hit in October: Lloyd Holcomb, impresario for the East Carolina Agricultural Fair seven years running, thus made sure to call their Georgia exhibitor by the end of January, the contract for their return engagement was faxed that same day.

In his RV towards the rear of the vacant fairgrounds, a clear day struggling for thirty degrees, glancing down his talent roster from a good three months back, Lloyd crossed off the Aztec Zombie: he'd gotten himself flattened by an eighteen-wheeler on a hitchhike drunk up to Charlotte in early November. Lloyd also understood that the beautiful Snake Woman with her writhing collection of boa constrictors would not return, owing to her stubborn misunderstanding of the terms of her previous contract.

As spring came and summer arrived two weeks later, Lloyd made more calls and faxed and mailed more contracts for acts and exhibits to appear at the next fair. While he delegated the booking of food vendors to Louise Smidgins and mechanical rides to Clovis Pankhurst, the petting zoo to Myrtle Skidmore and the farm implement exhibits to Willis Chatburn, Lloyd reserved for himself the bookings of the lucrative attractions: like the Hoochie Coochie Palace (plus, he got to inspect and audition each or any of the lovelies for the ten-day fair); the Flying Acrobat with No Legs (who could climb ropes and ladders unassisted and navigate obstacle courses on his hands and toss himself from trapeze to trapeze without a net); Madame Zola, the famed Gullah cartomancer, crystal-ball gazer, and psychic advisor; the ridiculously profitable Petrified Woman (a concrete cast of an impressive nude, painted to sparkle just like real petrified wood); and the Giant Man-Eating Rats of Sumatra.

Through summer Lloyd's involuntary recall of the rats' debut persisted. He still could see parents glaring at the six or seven

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canvases showing camouflaged Asiatic soldiers on patrol in a swamp being ripped to shreds by huge rodents with long greasy tails, dining on their haunches or leaping from palm trees with helmeted heads in their mouths, bright blood spurting from stumps of necks and shoulders, soldiers paralyzed by the spectacle of oversized rats chewing off arms and legs and heads at a swipe, two giant rats portrayed in sinister silhouette with gore dripping, eyes alight with demonic fury and unquenched thirst for blood. Hell, the canvases themselves practically made the money: the spectacle repelled frantic girls trying to pull parents away while young and older boys strained all the more to gawk at the canvases or get in line at the ticket booth entry.

“You never will see a more amazing spectacle!” the barker would begin in strict understatement. He would peer down into the display pit shrouded behind him then casually assure passers-by that the cage was now sturdy after the latest mishap. In his fashionable foreign military garb he warned sternly of the dangers posed by the rodents in the display parlor, swatting a bas-relief canvas with his swagger stick: children under age four and pregnant women would not be admitted in case the bars worked loose and a stampede of fairgoers ensued, man-eating rats in pursuit.

Of course, the rats were nothing but wild boars from south Georgia, with a few nutria from Louisiana on display as baby giant rats (brighter lights at eye level, dim lights below: the boars trotted and grunted and squealed in an aromatic cage at spectators' feet): hardly anyone here from east Carolina could know exactly what they'd be seeing in the poorly-lit display parlor. The boars' grunting and squealing helped terrify young boys paying the full five dollars a head, while older boys and their parents thrilled more to the pen strewn with red-glistening bones, dented military helmets, shredded stained uniforms, discarded weapons, and a half-buried plastic human skull. Mats of brown or black mohair were glued to the boars' legs with Caro syrup to hide their hooves, as the canvases outside plainly depicted large rats with large rat feet.

The caravan of Sumatran rats would duly arrive the first week in October, the countersigned contract specified. Lloyd smiled in anticipation even as the stinking hot summer hung still into late September.

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Someone who'd never attended one single solitary East Carolina Agricultural Fair stepped with caution along the south bank of the rust-lipped, muck-strewn Croatan River. He was stepping through muck not three inches deep not four miles south of where the Fair would be opening in not two weeks. This was—well, let's leave his name out of it, the poor sot's good and dead now. He'd once been a professor and department head of genetics and bio-engineering at Palmetto State University in Middletonburg, but his academic research concerns were yielding steadily to grave worries in the late September afternoon as he followed the trail along the muddy riverbank.

What looked to be eight sets of tracks were pressed into the mire along the river, only a few hours old if the testimony of the fresh piles of manure merited belief. The professor wore a Glock 9mm on each hip and a .38 revolver in a holster under his left armpit, and he led with his five-pump twelve-gauge with the safety off, stepping slowly as he followed the path with his eyes, darting his gaze ahead as far as the trees would permit, glancing into overhanging branches before approaching the trees they dangled from, and taking care to avoid the manure.

He had killed the one pair before they'd escaped from his basement lab the day before, and it looked as if the remaining four pairs were staying together, which was both good news and bad news: good news if he found them first, bad news if they found some unsuspecting someone or, God help him, an entire family or even a small cluster of occupied river shacks.

The Croatan continued its sluggish flow as the sun dropped through the forested ridge parallel to the river, when a large limb snapped behind and above the professor's right shoulder. He never got off the first shot, and what emerged from his throat was not a

scream but a sickening gurgle. A fresh puddle formed in only minutes and then trickled for even less time into the river's murk as twilight deepened. Late-season mosquitos fluttered over the spot from which the body was dragged.

The professor's attacker was not a party of the eight specimens he was tracking but one of the other thirty-odd omnivores to've escaped from his basement lab that morning, hours after he'd left on his expedition.

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It wasn't the way she crossed her legs, it was the way she uncrossed her legs, was that it? Lloyd still couldn't say for sure, but modesty in a hoochie coochie performer always seemed out of character to him, red fishnet hose or not. Or maybe it was the way her looks promised more than her eyes were able to deliver, she was cross-eyed by just a fraction of a yard, which imparted vulnerable charm but suggested mild derangement not less pronounced with her hair the way it was.

Otherwise, Merlinda was a handsome redhead in her early forties until she opened her mouth. Her teeth were much more yellow than they need to've been even for a heavy smoker, which she claimed not to be, and her gums were as red as ripe watermelon, but because her teeth were not overly large, her gums looked that much more swollen and unhealthy. Lloyd subscribed to the aesthetic of "total effect": and while he could not or would not specify for her and the manager her shortcomings, he passed on her.

He still needed one more for the hoochie coochie lineup, and only one candidate remained. A dark-eyed brunette with mahogany highlights and an appealing chest, five foot two or five foot four, early- to mid-thirties, clad in a short black lambswool jacket and jeans and sipping vitamin-enriched Diet Minute Maid through a straw, paused to burp as she entered the RV. Lloyd eyed her chest with his practiced furtive stare and decided on the spot that as long as she never smiled or opened her mouth while performing, he would sign her, which took all of five minutes. Darlene, her name

was. As all exited the RV, Lloyd slipped the manager a \$100 bill to arrange a private afternoon interview.

The front gate would open in under four hours, this was as late as he'd ever been settling the lineup, but now it was done. The Highway Patrol sergeant had begun setting up traffic cones and supervising the placement of lighted signs along Highway 62, troopers under his command directing service traffic through the cluster of performers' campers and exhibitors' trailers parked on dirt acreage almost the size of the paved midway, itself brilliant in electric neon even in the bright glare of midday.

Now where were those goddam Sumatran rats? The rig had broken down on I-20 outside Augusta a week earlier, and either with a repaired rig or a newly-leased rig, the caravan was set to've arrived that morning by ten, it was now half past noon.

A horn blasted twice somewhere a few hundred yards away, and moments later the rig pulling the caravan of Sumatran rats rolled into view, the driver quizzing the trooper standing at the gate on where to go. Lloyd saw Willis Chatburn go over to assist: even fifty yards away Lloyd could see Willis walking as if each leg were shorter than the other or as if each leg were shortening with each step taken.

They still had a good three hours to set up their canvases and get the boars and nutria into their dimly-lit pens, the front gate wouldn't open until four, after area schools let out. Willis knew that the rats were assigned to the spot on the angle of the avenue leading up to and by the Hoochie Coochie Palace, you'd have to pass the one to get to the other from either direction. With Willis directing their set-up, Lloyd would be able to spend a couple of hours or more with Darlene, which after the stress of settling the lineup and the late arrival of the Sumatran rats would much relieve his mood.

Only Lloyd's rendezvous with Darlene had to keep getting postponed as the afternoon wore on. The goddam Sumatran rats had barely gotten their caravan parked when Louise Smidgins blared out over the PA system that the compressor for the main sno-cone booth

had gone out. The electricians had barely been summoned to the sno-cone booth when Clovis Pankhurst discovered that the cables for the Scrambler and the Octopus had been mismatched and would have to be switched over before either ride could be operated safely. The state inspectors would need at least an hour to determine whether the cables had been switched over satisfactorily (even with free passes to the Palace in hand).

As two o'clock arrived, Willis was still supervising the accommodation of the Sumatran rats, which meant that Lloyd himself had to oversee the matter of the sno-cone compressor and help Clovis oversee the switching over of the cables for the Scrambler and the Octopus. A replacement compressor was being driven in from Middletonburg but wouldn't arrive until almost four. Willis didn't show up to relieve Lloyd until just before three.

Lloyd still hadn't had time for an afternoon chili dog and hadn't even reached the chili dog booth when Myrtle Skidmore intercepted him waving her arms to no effect and squealing that one of the goats had disappeared from the petting zoo set up at the little pavilion.

"I know we had three but now there's only two, the black Angora has gone missing!" she squealed.

"Myrtle, go check with Willis," Lloyd moaned. "Hell, maybe one of those goddam Sumatran rats ate it by now. Just go on and let me enjoy a chili dog in peace, I ain't had nothin' to eat since breakfast." He had to have something before his interview with Darlene, and by God he was going to interview Darlene, even if the gates opened first and fairgoers had to risk hearing the goings-on in his RV.

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In the thirteen days since his unrecorded death, the late professor's thirty-nine marauding omnivores had been steadily depleting their range of the Croatan basin of its resident populations of frogs and toads and lizards and snakes, gnawing on sweetgums and red maple sprouts along the way, while attacking available beavers and turtles and pouncing on unwary raccoons and possums.

In the past twenty-four hours, though, three omnivores had succumbed to wounds sustained in their encounter with an enraged black bear, and a fourth had been mostly obliterated while chasing deer across Highway 62 in front of a barreling log truck. Thirty-four of the remaining thirty-five foraged amiably north of the Croatan, all thirty-five having crossed over in the shallows beneath the railroad trestle the day before.

One party had strayed a bit farther north and refused to be deterred by a fence he'd encountered: he kept butting a loose corner of chain link with his large head until he managed to squeeze through, success which seemed only to rile him further. Settled down just inside the loose fence, he was now dining on Angora goat amidst the complications the long hair presented, as the cool dark of early October began to descend.

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After three chili dogs and a Pepsi, after conferring with Willis and the state inspectors, after inspecting the new sno-cone compressor, after surveying the Sumatran Rat set-up, and after a brief word with Darlene's manager at the Palace entrance, Lloyd finally got back to his RV at half past four. By this time he wasn't sure he'd be able to get his pants off or his condom on fast enough once Darlene arrived and began to undress.

But on arrival, Darlene was in no prompt mood to undress.

"There's some ugly sumpthin' out there along the fence, looks like it's gnawin' on sumpthin' dead."

Just dammit to hell! Lloyd sneered at the news. He stomped over to the window facing the back fence and almost ripped the curtains down pulling them back. "What? Where?"

Darlene pointed far right to the shadowy mass in the far corner, the corner just inside the tree line. "There. That."

The shade was pretty thick already as the sun dropped low, but Lloyd could just make out something that seemed to be bobbing its head up and down over some other dark mass of something that wasn't really moving. If this was a wild dog that had gotten in, it was

one large wild dog. Then Lloyd recalled Myrtle's missing goat. Just dammit, dammit to hell, shit hell fuck and damn!

"Stay here a moment, it's probably just a wild dog that may need to be shot," he confided as he took down his .22 rifle and slammed the RV door behind him. Before heading to the corner of the fence, he reached into his pickup and raised Willis on his radio. "Bring a state trooper with you, too, or a deppity already here, I damn sure don't want this thing tearin' across the midway if it's rabid."

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Would've been a fine thing indeed if only it had been a rabid dog or if it had still been alone by the time the four-man posse approached with guns drawn.

A brief clatter of gunfire erupted just after five which no one on the midway seemed to pay any heed to. Darlene watched from the RV in horror as a pack of ugly things hurled into and through the corner of the fence near the tree line. Lloyd got off a few shots but then retreated headlong back to the RV, the highway patrolman and the deputy popped off a few more shots as they retreated, but the fellow with the funny walk got knocked down and was now being swarmed by the ugly things.

"It's the Giant Man-Eatin' Rats from Sumatra! They're loose!" she gasped as her throat tightened and tightened more.

Lloyd broke in panting, barely long enough to slam the door shut behind him. "Stay in here and don't leave!" was all he shouted.

He skipped across to his pickup and got on his radio again, this time raising Clovis Pankhurst. "Clovis, get to the Highway Department station and tell 'em to get an ambulance to the southwest corner, don't let anyone else in at the gate, and get Louise on the PA to tell ever'one to assemble outside the front gate, tell her not to use the word 'evacuate!'"

As soon as he put the radio mic down, though, Lloyd could hear that it was too late, he could see from the truck's cab that it was too late. Whatever those things were, most of them were bounding and scurrying straight for the midway, shouts and screams

were rising already from around the petting zoo, Myrtle had to be crazy out of her mind already.

Then it dawned on Lloyd just as it had moments before on Darlene that, somehow, these were actual Giant Man-Eating Rats from Sumatra that had gotten loose. And just as the blood-chilling revelation dawned on Lloyd, it dawned simultaneously on scores of the hundreds of fairgoers on site.

Panic broke out, trampling began, and the awful things that were attacking the fair were already ripping dozens of available grandparents and grandchildren to pieces. The things even threw themselves at the Sumatran Rat display parlor and shook down the spectator scaffolding around the cage and sent the boars and nutria into squealing frenzies.

Once he recognized Willis's body for what it had been, Lloyd killed the two things hovering over it and later killed another that returned, and probably another two or three or four.

By the time the National Guard units arrived two hours later, Willis and eighty-four fairgoers were dead, Myrtle Skidmore had disappeared altogether, Merlinda the hoochie coochie reject and the Palace manager were among ten casualties flown down to Charleston with severe trauma, the Flying Acrobat with No Legs was a newly-designated quadriplegic, and the freshly connected cables for the Scrambler and the Octopus had become freshly disconnected, amidst all the other mayhem that ensued that night.

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The investigation began only after the things had all been killed. Entire blame was placed squarely on the deceased professor, whose former relationship with the University was subject to much angry speculation and whose private experiments were shown to've been the direct cause of the lethal attack on the East Carolina Agricultural Fair.

Myrtle Skidmore was never found and thus presumed dead, along with most animals from the petting zoo. Willis Chatburn's remains were interred at Magnolia Grove Cemetery. Funerals for the

other victims lasted through the end of October. The professor's remains never were recovered completely.

Merlinda and the Palace manager both survived with severe disfigurement and disappeared as soon as the media frenzy began. Madame Zola retired her remaining deck of Tarot cards, her crystal ball, and her trampled psychic advisor shingle and minutes later keeled over. The Petrified Woman's display case had overturned in the melee: she now lay in countless fragments and pieces. The Flying Acrobat would fly no more. The wild boars and nutria all survived but, traumatized by the ordeal of their captivity, they all had to be slaughtered within months.

The state electrical inspectors all survived without injury. The Highway Patrol troopers and county deputies were cited for professional resolve. The National Guard units were thanked profusely by the Governor. The barker and the exhibitor of the Giant Man-Eating Rats of Sumatra disowned all connection with the tragedy, but the exhibit lost every former appeal, even in its native Georgia.

Louise Smidgins retreated to the coast somewhere prior to leaving the state for parts unknown. Clovis Pankhurst manages an amusement park somewhere along the Grand Strand and operates the Ferris wheel there.

Darlene struggled mightily to recover her composure but succumbed to a drug overdose weeks before the tragedy's first anniversary.

Lloyd Holcomb remains pretty much a recluse on his small farm between Oughton and Effingham, a model of strict sobriety but given to great agitation. Neighbors within a quarter-mile of his farm complain serially to the sheriff about gunfire on his property at night each October, all to no consequence since Lloyd was relieved of his .22 rifle: no one's within range of his shotgun or pistols. Lloyd sold his RV at a huge loss and lives in the modest frame house standing within its lonesome pine thicket.

As of this writing, no East Carolina Agricultural Fair has been held in over twelve years, and no one dares mention holding another, not even sneering teenagers.

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