RUNNING AWAY FROM THE CIRCUS

CONFESSIONS OF A CARNIE KID
(WHO TRIED TO BECOME A PRIEST)

NOVE MEYERS

atmosphere press

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PART I

OF CIRCUSES AND SACRAMENTS

NEAR MISSES

My grandmother could fly.

Every night she flew from one slim trapeze bar to the other, twisting, somersaulting, gracefully floating through the air as though gravity itself had been suspended. Thirty feet above the sawdust-covered circus ring she flew—no net.

She would briefly descend to the ground. When she rose again, the sequins on her winged costume shimmered in the spotlight. Slowly rising, gently spinning. At the apex, her butterfly wings fell away like a chrysalis in reverse. As the wings fluttered softly back to earth, the crowd gasped its astonishment, realizing that she was held aloft only by her teeth, gripping the end of a small metal and leather device—the Iron Jaw.

There, hanging by her teeth, she began twirling, slowly at first in tight spins. Then faster, making wider arcs. As she spun round, she gradually descended back to the ground amid the roars of applause.

Dollie Mae LaStarr was the queen of the circus, its prima donna.

But Dollie Mae wasn't the only trapeze artist using the Iron

Jaw. It was the current fascination: the one act that most impressed the crowds. It's what they came to the circus for—more than the jugglers, the clowns, even the elephants. And each of the prima donnas from competing circuses tried to outdo the others.

It was almost the essence of the circus, to go beyond where anyone else had been; to be more elaborate, riskier, more daring; to exceed the hype on the posters the advance men had plastered on barns announcing that the circus was coming to town.

Dollie Mae had an idea. *What if? What if, instead of hanging by her teeth, she hung by her knees from a trapeze ring and inverted the Iron Jaw. And what if, hanging from that ring, she grasped one end of the Jaw in her own teeth while the other end held something else: her young child, barely more than a toddler? What if that child, not she, would spin, protected from harm only by its own mother's clinched teeth?*

No one could compete. No one tried. No one even dared. And the crowds swelled, night after night after night.

Until the circus tent filled to overflowing.

Until the night the leather stretched a bit too much.

Until her child plunged to the sawdust thirty feet below.

The crowd shrieked its horror and Dolly Mae hung midair, forgotten, as Granddad and his circus workers rushed to the small bundle lying motionless in the ring.

And my story could have ended right here: the first of the *what if*s that seem to string themselves together to direct a life along its way—or not.

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Our family circus had been started by my great-grandfather, Andrew Jackson Richards. He left Georgia after the war that was called "civil," although it's hard to consider any war that. It's not entirely clear how he started, as family lore dif-

fers. We do know that by the early twentieth century his three sons—Henry, Franco, and Wesley—were operating circuses based out of a five-hundred-acre ranch in Pipe Creek, Texas, sometimes partners, sometimes competitors.

My mother was born into this circus family in 1920, the year that women gained the right to vote, and the rest of America lost the right to drink. Her daddy owned the circus and named his daughter after his elephant, Maxine. According to her daddy, Mother wasn't born at all. His wife loved tamales and he frequently bought her some from a roving vendor. And one day, wrapped in a husk among the tamales, they found Mother. That's what her daddy had said. And that's why he called her his little "senorita."

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The child lay still as its father picked it up; but, as he cradled it in his arms, the baby opened its eyes and began to cry. It didn't die, but Dollie Mae's Iron Jaw act did. The incident occurred when my mother was two or three years old. Usually, when she told the story, it was she herself who fell, but sometimes it was her brother. Possibly, Mother was unsure herself. Her brother always suffered from back trouble, so it might have been him. But then again, the earliest photo that I have of Mother shows her with Grandmother in a trapeze costume.

In a certain way, it doesn't really matter. It was a circus, after all. In a circus, things get embellished—like the size of the elephant, or the wonders promised by the sideshow marquees—and twisted, like the spins of a trapeze artist as she flies through the air, or the location of the pea under a walnut shell. And the years and the decades of tale telling itself take their toll on an octogenarian mind.

But one fact that cannot be denied, one "what if" that did and one that didn't happen. We still have the broken Iron Jaw, rusted metal and torn leather; and two more generations of a

circus family have lived, and outlived, the circus itself.

And "*what if*" one of them would want to join not the circus but the Catholic priesthood? What would God think of that?

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This is where I come in. The one who thought he wanted to be a priest? Yeah, that was me. I first dipped my toe in the center ring of life smack dab in the center of the twentieth century. Unlike my mother, though, I wasn't born directly onto a working circus; there was no talk of tamale wrappers, virgin births, or other distractions. I came the regular way, with a doctor and a hospital room, as far as I know, although I have to take others' word for it, as I was quite young at the time. And it is true that several of the congratulatory cards in the baby book that Mother put together clearly show an infant being hauled in by a smiling stork, so I can't be certain.

Mine may have been a regular gestation and birth, but my childhood was hardly your boy scout path to merit badges sort of a thing, as we shall see. My family followed its own rules, or lack thereof, marking my earliest memories. And that's before we even begin to get to the God stuff. Let's start with a few early stories to show you what I mean.

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"I don't want my mommy to burn up like paper!" I hear my three-year-old lungs scream their first full sentence. I knew that my mommy was always cold, even in California, and on that particular day, she'd backed herself up to our gas fireplace while chatting with Uncle Rusty, the brother she had raised from infancy by herself after both her parents had died. Rusty was home on furlough from the Korean War and was still wearing his uniform. Standing in front of the flames gent-

ly rising from the faux aspen logs, they looked like a picture that Norman Rockwell might have painted for *Life Magazine*.

Fake logs, real flame. Mommy must have backed a bit too close to the flames, which couldn't resist reaching out for the thin fabric she was wearing. I smelled it first, like paper burning, before I saw the flames licking at the hem of her sundress.

That's when I screamed.

"Mac, you're on fire," her brother yelled as he grabbed her, trying to extinguish the flames with his bare hands.

Dad heard the commotion and rushed to the living room. "Hold still, dammit," he commanded, as he grabbed Mommy and threw her to the ground, rolling her in the oval rug which covered the floor in front of the fireplace. Then he flung himself on top of her and held her until he was sure the flames were out. After a couple of minutes, he unrolled the rug and gently picked her up. Modesty took a back seat as he peeled off what was left of her dress, leaving her just in a bra and slip, until my uncle grabbed a blanket off the couch.

I stood there frozen, as if my feet were glued to that living room floor.

Mommy was clearly shaken, and a dress short of a full wardrobe, but suffered no permanent damage from the incident. After she had recovered, she held me tight and told me what a brave boy I was.

The worst injuries, though, were to my uncle's hands, which probably should have been treated at the ER but weren't. The small white scars there served as a lifetime reminder of this near-miss that could have changed my life forever, just about the time it was getting started good, another "*what if*."

My reward for saving Mommy from the fire was a tricycle. She was a beauty. I see myself standing on the sidewalk outside the metal gate that leads into our front yard, or what would have been the front yard, were the space not dominated by an unused koi pond guarded by hideous gargoyles that a

previous owner had installed.

"Some assembly required," the box must have said. I watched wide-eyed as Dad removed the parts from the trunk of his 1950 Lincoln and used a wrench to transform the oddly shaped metal into the Harley Davidson of tricycles. It was bigger than I was: a shimmery copper color with contrasting stripes. The pedals were chain driven, like a bicycle, not mounted on the front wheel like a regular trike. After he tightened the last nut, greased the chain, and checked all the fittings like a NASCAR mechanic, Dad sat me on the seat and showed me how to grip the handlebars, ready to teach his first son how to ride.

My short legs dangled in the air, a few inches of nothingness between them and the pedals of my marvelous new toy.

As Dad headed toward the garage, mumbling something about needing some "goddamn blocks," a young stranger walked up to me.

"Hi. I'm Tommy. Is this your trike?" She was tall, at least compared to me, and had blue eyes like mine; and her brown hair was cut in a bob.

I muttered a "yes."

And again, "My name is Tommy. What's yours?'

An inquisitive look met my answer, "Engineer," the nickname that I had acquired because of my fetish for railroad trains.

"What kind of a name is that?"

"I like trains."

It satisfied her.

"Can I try out your trike? You can come along." Without quite waiting for an answer, she helped me off the trike, told me to stand on the back and put my arms around her waist. She took the controls, and away we went, towards her house, half a block away. We turned around in the driveway of her white stucco house, nearly identical to its next-door neighbor, and returned to my gate. So now I had my trike, which my dad

fixed so my feet could reach the pedals, and a playmate. Or my first girlfriend, a take-charge older woman, her five years to my not-quite-four.

We hung out for a couple of years before my family moved from Albany to Fairfield to be closer to my dad's job. I missed Tommy after we moved and wanted to go see her when we visited my aunt, who had rented our previous house. But by then, the family had moved. Or maybe I got confused and knocked on the wrong door. Well, she probably already had another boyfriend by then anyway.

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Nearly being roasted herself had little to do with it, but Mommy hated smoking—and Dad needed it. He was a two-pack-a-day Camel man. He bought them by the carton and would go through a carton a week easy, turning two hundred cancer sticks into a houseful of butt-filled ashtrays. My rough calculation is that he managed to choke on half a million of 'em before they finally got him, give or take.

I was on Dad's side. I probably started smoking because of the smoke rings. Dad would blow his smoke rings at me as a toddler—not as perfect or sexy as the sultry broads in the movies, but they intrigued me. I wanted those smoke rings. Got so he couldn't light up with me around that I didn't pester him, getting right in his face. A man has few enough solitary pleasures without a two-year-old hounding him every time he tries to relax.

And, like the "first fix is free" from the drug dealer they warn you about, I didn't quit with smoke rings. My dad was putting the thing in his mouth, and I wanted to do that too. I'm sure he tried to put me off. Any good parent would. But, as any parent also knows, two-year-old's have a penchant for perseverance. I kept crawling into his lap and trying to grab the hot end and he kept saying no, until he didn't one day. He

probably figured, *What the hell. I'll let the kid try it. That'll fix him.* He showed me how to hold the cigarette and put it to my lips.

My eyes might have been watering, but I was sittin' pretty.

And I didn't let up.

It may have been my cigarette-hating mother who suggested he teach me how to inhale. "Teach him how to suck it in, Sweetheart. That's bound to cure him."

Once again, it didn't.

I was addicted to the whole experience. I didn't even object when they were out of Camels, and Dad occasionally got a pack of Chesterfields or Lucky Strikes. I hear that I liked the look of the Lucky Strike packaging better anyway. This was before the tobacco industry got the idea to market to kids directly, using cartoon characters such as "Joe Camel." If I'd have been going to preschool, I'm sure I would have impressed all the ladies.

Now I don't personally remember any of this and would doubt that it had ever happened, were it not for the photographs. Mommy, the nightclub photographer, captured everything on film. Her first effort, when I was a month old, featured me in my "birthday suit." She printed it out as a Christmas card with "Merry Christmas, Happy New Year" scrawled across my infant torso leaving nothing to the imagination. The camera even caught me mid-pee.

At first, everybody thought my smoking was "cute," or "precocious." But my dad was already experiencing coughing fits some mornings, a harbinger of his eventual demise, and Mommy started to get worried. Finally, she put her foot down. It was the morning of my third birthday. I had asked my dad for a birthday smoke when Mommy said enough was enough.

"No more smoking for you. It's not good for you. It's not good for your daddy either, but he's a grown-up."

"Mommy," she claimed I said, "if I can have just one more cigarette now, on my birthday, I won't ever ask again."

The photo from that day shows me, wearing my train

engineer overalls, puffing away. I've got the cigarette held between my second and third fingers up to my lips, smoke curling from the business end. I never asked for another cigarette and never took up smoking again. To date, I've lived a decade longer than my dad managed to, something that may not have happened if I hadn't snuffed out that last butt on my third birthday.

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It's two years later: a new house in a new town. But the burning smells stayed with me. So, when I got a whiff of smoke coming from the direction of our garage, I rushed through the house. I was just about to step onto the cold garage floor when I froze, one foot still in the air and my hands gripping the door frame. Not ten feet away from me, Mommy and Uncle Rusty were huddled over the concrete wash sink meticulously burning stacks of crisp twenty-dollar bills. Like newspaper used for kindling in a fireplace, these little green portraits of Andrew Jackson would first gently blacken, as if contemplating their fate, before curling and bursting into flame. They then became a shadow of their former selves, the consistency of butterfly wings. It was a slow, deliberate process, as they burned them, one by one, to reduce those stacks of twenties to an indistinguishable ash heap, which they then washed down the sink drain. They were talking in hushed tones, and I couldn't make out what they were saying. The concrete sink they were standing at was just a few feet from the door of the darkroom Dad had built for Mommy to use as a photo lab.

I wanted to ask, "*Mommy, why are you and Uncle Rusty burning up money?*" But instead, I silently backed away and returned to the house. They were so focused on their task that my presence went unnoticed. I knew, of course, that money was meant for purposes other than burning, but even at this

early stage in my life, little that Mommy did surprised me.

Those incinerated dead presidents would hold their mystery for nearly half a century before I finally put all, or almost all, the pieces together. It was kind of like finishing a thousand-piece jigsaw and finding that one piece is still missing, forever lost.

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Decades later, as I was going through some old trunks the angels wouldn't let Mother haul with her through the pearly gates, a faded newspaper clipping, a scrap really, returned me to that garage when I'd been five or six and had gone out to investigate the burning smell.

About the same time as the money barbecue was heating up in our garage, that brief article had appeared in the Reno, Nevada, newspaper. The title announced: *Sparks Man Arrested "Holding the Bag" Full of Counterfeit. Denies Guilt; Trial Slated.*

"*Wesley Cisco Richards, formerly connected with the Owl Bar in Sparks, who was recently arrested in a Fallon house of ill fame in possession of a bag full of counterfeit money, yesterday pleaded innocent in federal court in Carson City. Mr. Richards is formally charged with possession of counterfeit money. He is alleged to have been trying to persuade one of the owners of the Fallon Institution to finance him in going into wholesale production of the phony money. He was represented yesterday by Attorney Frank Peterson, and Stan Brown was in charge of the prosecution on behalf of the U.S. District Attorney's Office.*"

The Wesley Cisco Richards cited in the newspaper article was my mother's middle brother, the man we came to know as "Uncle Cisco." Women, men, and money have always been the necessary ingredients for the world's oldest profession,

but it seems that Uncle Cisco was introducing a new twist. He had gone to a "house of ill fame," located a few miles outside of Reno, not to sample the madam's wares, but to persuade her to help him peddle his.

While the Jacksons were roasting in our garage, Uncle Cisco had been sitting in the Washoe County Jail, hoping for bail. It is my understanding that he used his free phone call to alert some family member that there was additional "product" curing on clothes lines strung throughout his apartment like so much wash hanging out to dry. Someone, possibly Uncle Rusty, had made a quick trip to the Reno area and returned with it to our garage for the cremation ceremony I had stumbled upon.

But part of the mystery remains to this day, that missing puzzle piece. The money-burning sink in the garage was right next to the darkroom (photo lab) that Dad had built for my photographer mother. What I never learned was the full extent of how much she helped in Uncle Cisco's money-making scheme?

MEETING GOD

The "money mystery" was only the first of the many "mysteries" I'd discover in my life. And the next one was the "biggie."

I first heard God speak when I was just six years old. It was Christmas Eve, and Mother had taken me to midnight mass. It was the first time I remember being in a church.

When we entered, the church was dark, dimly lit by the candles flickering at the shrines of the saints. We slipped into a pew about four rows back from the altar rail. As more worshippers arrived, I kept getting pushed along the hard, wooden pew, polished smooth by the backsides of congergants. As I leaned back my feet dangled, not quite touching the extended kneeler. It too, was a plain, hard, wood, unlike the cushy pews and kneelers that would grace the mausoleum-like structure that would replace our almost cozy church a few years later.

At exactly midnight, the semi-darkness exploded into brilliant white as what seemed like a million lights burst on all at once. The pew seemed to shake as "Angels We Have Heard on High" thundered from above and behind me as if it were the

angels themselves welcoming the baby Jesus. Just as I turned to look back towards the source of the singing, half expecting to see multi-winged seraphim, or at least chubby cherubim, the priest processed by our pew in his gold and white vestments. As he passed, the air was filled with a new odor: incense, *how God smelled.*

The church was packed, and about the only thing I could see for most of the service was people's backsides. Except when they knelt down. Then, I could stand on the kneeler and just see the priest's head and part of his gold vestment. And that's when I heard him talking with God. They spoke in a strange language that only he and God could understand. The priest would say something, and then God would reply; in multiple voices, as if the entire Trinity were there conversing with Fr. Murphy, just a few feet from where I stood on tiptoes on that rickety kneeler, clinging to the back of the pew in front of me.

And that's how I became a part of "Catholicworld." Not only was the church God's house, but He was there and would talk to you, right out loud, at least if you were a priest. A priest—suddenly a very impressive person to be.

In 1955 I only knew about three kinds of people: Catholics, Protestants, and the godless Communists in a place called Russia. There were only two things I needed to know about the Russians. One, we prayed for their conversion every Sunday at Mass, and two: they were going to blow us all up with the atom bomb. The first of these things I learned in Church, and the other I learned from the television set in my aunt's living room. My family didn't own a TV, so I'd sit on the floor and glue myself to the tube when we visited my dad's sister every few weeks. We often got to her house just about the time the news started. A solemn-faced man would intone the dangers of Communism and its horrible leader with his finger on a button that could blast us all to smithereens. This was often accompanied by a demonstration of how the demon

bomb worked. One little ball, like you used to play jacks, would bump into two more, which would hit two more, and then four, until they were bouncing all over the thirteen-inch black and white screen, visual evidence that Russia was just a day or two away from blowing up our whole country. I didn't exactly understand how rubber balls could blow me up, but neither did I understand how the man could be inside the television. Yet there he was.

I know that later I must have practiced bomb drills in grade school; following the Sisters' orders to slide under our desks, stick our head between our knees, and pray. I have blocked those memories out. I already knew what I needed to know. It was from that little television screen that I learned what fear was.

The other group, the Protestants, were even more dangerous. All the Russians could do was kill me, but the Protestants could cause me to lose my immortal soul, and spend eternity shoveling coal for the devil. We could pray for the Russians, because, probably, they didn't know any better. But the Protestants—they knew. As the Sisters were to tell us, they had once been part of the one, true, church—the Catholic One—but they had revolted, and rejected, not Jesus perhaps but the pope in Rome; and that seemed to be what really mattered.

It was hard to tell exactly who a Protestant was as they looked the same as everybody else. About the only way you could know for sure, unless someone told you, was on Sunday, when they went to a different church than I did. I went to "public" school for first grade, and I knew that some of my classmates were Protestant. But you couldn't tell by looking.

And, as far as I could tell, being Protestant was their only fault. They didn't go around kicking dogs or kidnapping children. And I couldn't figure out how they got to be Protestants in the first place. I was told that they lacked the "grace" to believe in the one true faith. Grace—that was a tough one. I

knew it was real because all my religion teachers told me so. It was grace, given to us by God to help us believe in Him and be Catholic. I never really understood it, but I believed in it. I had to because otherwise, I might become a Protestant, or worse, if there was anything.

Well, enough about Protestants. By the middle of the last century, the American Catholic Church had almost come of age. The bishops had decreed at the Council of Baltimore in 1874 that the parish priest was to build a Catholic school, even before he constructed a church to house Jesus in the tabernacle. It worked. Several Catholic school generations later those hordes of unwashed European immigrants had learned English. "No Irish Need Apply" signs had vanished, and Catholic politicians were running many of the cities where those immigrants had settled, supported by Billy-club-toting Irish policemen. Five years later the immigration would be complete when Joe Kennedy got his son elected president, probably the greatest event in American Catholicism since Jesus's resurrection.

Why all of this matters, is because of what would happen to the church itself, and how that would affect me a few years later when I became a teenager.

Now I didn't have all this figured out that first night in church, but it was the beginning.

My timing with finding God was good. I had just stopped believing in Santa Claus a couple of nights before that midnight mass. As he did every year, Santa came to visit us, not down our non-existent chimney, and not on Christmas Eve, but through the front door a couple of nights early. But this year, I noticed that when Santa came, Uncle Rusty wasn't in the room with us. And then there were Santa's shoes. They looked an awful lot like Uncle Rusty's. I studied Santa more carefully as he spoke to each of my younger brothers, noticing a small tear in his red pants. After Santa had gone, and Uncle Rusty returned from an errand, his pants exactly matched the

color I saw through the tear in Santa's.

I was taken aback, but my discovery didn't provide any great trauma, and I didn't share my new knowledge with anybody: my parents, Uncle Rusty, or my three (younger) brothers. By the time Christmas came around the following year, I was in Catholic school, and Santa had been replaced by Jesus. I knelt before the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in that same church and prayed: "*Dear Jesus. Happy Birthday. I'm glad you made it so that we get the gifts on your birthday. I just want one thing this year: a white horse, like Silver, the Lone Ranger's horse. Thank you, Jesus.*"

I guess Jesus was out of horses that year because no horse of any color showed up under the tree. He would come close, though, with the pony a few years later. It was a bit disappointing; but then, Santa hadn't always answered my requests either. But maybe Jesus wasn't out of horses. Maybe it was something else. Maybe the only person whose prayers got answered was the one who could speak God's language: the priest. I'd sit on this one for a few years yet.

But first—the circus.