

*Thomas Price*

## THE RAVEN CIRCUS

The main strip was dark, and the food stalls were shuttered, lights of the advertisement signs off. Tilly still smelled the frying oil in the air. It had been only an hour ago that she had bought an elephant ear. Her fingers were still sticky with powdered sugar, and when she chewed her nails, they tasted dirty and sweet. On a Saturday night, her mother might allow her to ride the Devil's Wheel and play rigged carnival games until ten or so, but she always dragged her out of the gate while other people milled around, buying a last bag of popcorn and shooting the breeze. But now Tilly was alone, walking the deserted strip, searching for the restroom. It was her first overnight bunking down in the horse stable, a fair week tradition for the 4-H clubs: camping out with the animals, getting up with the sun to comb manes and paint hooves.

The older girls in her horse club always gossiped with salacious talk about meeting up with cow club boys for secret romantic rendezvous, about the poor adult supervision, about pranking rival clubs with animal manure in sleeping bags. Tilly grasped their words with fluttering anticipation. Not at the bubbling teenage drama of their stories, but at something deeper, a creeping but inviting feeling of a new world, one unknown and far from herself.

She had tried to convince her sister to accompany her to the bathroom, not wanting to wander alone. But Sarah treated Tilly as if she were a cockroach, something to stomp out of existence. She had even tried to stop Tilly from camping with the club, but Tilly was twelve now, old enough. The teenage girls were examining Cindy Purdy's hickies, little purple blotches along her fatty neck, products of Tim Overland's peppermint mouth, when Sarah growled at her, "If you can stay overnight, you sure as hell can walk by yourself."

Leaving the bathroom, she breathed the fresh air and saw the tops of the rides beyond the food stalls. King Ferris Wheel loomed over all. The baskets swung in the breeze, a gentle touch like at a ghost's hand. Tilly wondered what it might be like to climb the structure and sit atop its shoulders. Looking down, she would find the barns and the stalls and the dark lights. The vision suddenly made her queasy.

She felt her skin creep. She shivered, her blood pumping, the feeling both dizzying and scary. It was unnerving: the calm, quiet, and dark. She thought people could be hiding, soft-footed people with staring eyes, carnie people. They could be behind the food stalls or cloaked in the shadows under the grandstand. A place normally full of people shouldn't feel like that.

Tilly appeared brave to others, but she kept all her feelings of fear buried deep inside, like a living bubble, an invisible bladder expanding and contracting as she found herself faced with what scared her. And she loved it. The bladder pressed on a pleasure nerve. It had started to fill that night when she watched the night mothers padlock the entrance gate, not to be opened until the morning.

Coming around the corner of a barn, Tilly spotted a boy. He was not much older than her. His sister was in Tilly's class, and she remembered his name was Jacob or James. He wore a short-sleeved denim shirt and worn jeans. His boots were caked with manure. Around his neck, a bolo tie and, pulled down on his forehead, a blue ball cap with golden embroidered letters: FFA. He looked like the clique of boys who rode their tractors to school during Farm Pride Week. They were cute, with shaggy haircuts and plain demeanors, but only seemed interested in the other girls in the farm club.

Cigarette smoke burned her nostrils. The boy brought a lit Marlboro to his mouth. When Tilly cleared her throat, he snatched it from his lips and hid his hands behind his back. He saw her, his shoulders relaxing, but he kept the cigarette hidden.

"I'm not gonna tell." Tilly kicked a bottle cap along the top of the gravel toward him. The green plastic top disappeared into the grass at the edge of the barn.

He extended his hand to her, the cigarette held forward, an offering.

Tilly shook her head. "Those will kill you."

The boy shrugged and took a drag. "Not right away." He exhaled fits of smoke as he spoke. The words were contained in each gray cloud.

Tilly waved them away, her face pinched, disgusted. "I go to school with your sister. You're Jimmy, right?"

"John." He leaned against the barn and blew smoke up at the light above them. It scared away a couple of moths swarming around the opaque plastic.

"Do you show?"

“Dairy cows and steer.” When he started to talk about himself, the boy perked up, interested. Tilly liked catching glimpses of the gap in his front teeth. “Used to show lambs, but I told my dad that’s for little boys.” He put the cigarette between his lips and left it there to smoke, accentuating his adulthood.

“This is my first year overnight.”

“I’ve been coming since I was nine. You can’t start until you’re twelve, but my mom’s on the fair board.” He licked at the corner of his mouth, and the Marlboro dangled from the other.

Tilly thought he was trying to look like the gruff, dusty men of the black and white movies her father watched. They sauntered and puffed out their chests and shot their guns. They were men. She giggled because John looked ridiculous, pale in comparison.

“What?” He smirked.

“Nothing.”

She felt the boy took his first real look at her. He even removed the cigarette from his mouth in order to focus. She had never been looked at like that and was glad it was dark because she could feel her face take on a faint pink embarrassment. She felt the bladder move. His eyes on her like lamps. She wanted to grab him into a tight hug and not let go, even if he wanted to squirm away, even if she wanted to scream and run.

He touched her arm. “Hey.”

She held her breath. His hands were rough. He had the same eyes as his sister: hazel and heavy lidded, slight downward slant, sad.

He stepped in closer. “Are you going to the raven circus tonight?”

“The what?”

John pulled away. He took a deep drag and then flicked the butt into the air. It landed on the walkway, a red glowing spot on the blacktop. “I’ve gotta get going.”

“But—” Tilly tried to stand in front of him. “What were you talking about?”

John’s face went dark. Then he ran between the closed food vendors and disappeared behind the milkshake stand. Tilly was left with the faint stench of burning tobacco. She wondered if he had a peppermint mouth.

*The raven circus.* It warmed her skin like blood. She had never heard those

words before, together, the sounds following one another, like warning and invitation.

Tilly heard a high, double whistle out in the dark. There was a series of clicks in response and then laughter. Tilly's arms broke out in gooseflesh. The laughter sounded like a child's chattering, muffled as if at a dirty joke. But it wasn't human. It might be confused for human, but in the empty grounds, Tilly heard the faint repetition that could only be produced by animal mocking. She saw nothing. With all the shadows, all the small structures and big barns, there were too many places to hide.

Tilly told herself there were only the other overnights. She told herself there was no boogiemanager. But the fear bladder grew.

She slunk back to the horse stable, checking around corners, glancing over her shoulder. Tilly stepped into the cracks between sleeping bags, though none of the girls slept. Some lay on the ground playing cards by light of a camping lantern. A group played "Two for Flinching." One girl cursed as her hands were slapped twice, her friend laughing.

Tilly reached her own bag, which she had unrolled next to her sister's when they had arrived. But now, she saw the buffer of dirt between the other girls and her, the fabric flung hastily against the wall. Sarah must have kicked the sleeping bag away. Tilly turned to her sister and saw Sarah slip a small radio into her backpack. Tilly spotted cans of beer inside. Two other teenage girls were already waiting at the back stable door.

Tilly grabbed Sarah's arm. "Are you going to the raven circus?"

"What?"

"Take me with you."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about." Sarah yanked her arm from Tilly's grip and then pushed Tilly down to the ground. "You're such a scab." She shouldered the backpack, ran to her friends, and disappeared out the back.

Tilly wanted to know where the three girls were going. If it was the raven circus, John would be there as well. So she followed the girls. She felt the pumping of blood at her temples, the pounding of her heart. She kept several paces behind them, although they were too busy laughing and cussing and enjoying the lack of supervision to notice her. Tilly smiled at the anticipation of discovery, the secrets Sarah would never voluntarily share with her. At the

raven circus.

Tilly watched the girls enter the Jr. Fair Board's petting zoo. She found an empty metal trashcan and meant to drag it to a window, to stand on, to spy inside, but stopped. It was the animal laugh, cascading from building to building, and, even though it was an echo, it seemed to seek her out, pinpoint her location, vibrate her chest, and shoot back out.

The laugh stopped, midway through trilling. Tilly wondered if it was searching for her now, if it could make the distinction between used frying oil and her floral shampoo. She looked between the food stalls, which were giant tombstones, white, looming, engraved with the names of their dedications: SOFT PRETZELS, CORN DOGS, COTTON CANDY.

Tilly jumped as John appeared around the corner of a food stand. She made to run away, but he grabbed her arm. He was trying to calm her, shushing words, a gentle touch, but she flailed like a cartoon character. All those good feelings of sneaking, gone, as her heart rumbled around like a stone being polished.

"Hey, hey." He backed off a step. "Relax." He didn't sound impressed. As Tilly's pulse fell back to normal, she felt a sort of shame, rooted in his condescending look: she was a scared child.

"It's rude to sneak up on people." Her shame became anger, and she punched him in the arm.

"I thought you might have been lying." John smiled with a bit of a joker grin.

"What?" Tilly felt a chill down her spine.

"About going to the raven circus. I know we weren't supposed to tell anyone."

"Yes. I wasn't sure if you actually knew or were trying to trick me," Tilly lied. She suppressed her own grin. The bladder expanded.

"We should hurry." He walked off, heading toward the cluster of dairy barns.

They passed between the barns and along the carnival rides. The Ferris wheel watched. Up close, it seemed taller, the rocking of the seats more pronounced, the wind through its bars a high moan. Tilly felt the extinguished light bulbs follow them like eyes. Her stomach unknotted once they were out from under its shadow.

The overhead lights were off ahead of them. She hesitated. John didn't break stride, and wanting to walk side-by-side, she ran to keep up.

"There." He pointed to a show barn in the center of the dark. A tall man leaned against the wall under a blue light, a muck bucket at his feet. He was thin, like spindles of a puppet's metal armature covered in peach-stained cheesecloth. He wore a cowboy hat, but it wasn't his, or at least it hadn't been until very recently. Tilly thought it was something about the way the brim curved in relation to his face—they didn't match.

Tilly knew he was a carnie. Both forearms were tattooed. On his right, there was a blue-black mermaid, the tail wrapped around the wrist with the broad fin fanned across the back of his hand. However, instead of a human head, she had a cat skull, saber tooth. The left arm was just black rings from elbow to wrist. He also had that particular feeling about him. Tilly wasn't sure what it was, but it was the same with the homeless and aimless wanderers, those on the fringe, the unpredictable.

"Now here they come. Two babes, lost." He talked to the sky.

Tilly saw into his mouth. Several teeth were missing, including the bottom front. The rest were covered in fuzzy disease.

The carnie gestured around to the barns. "These, of course, are the woods, as the metaphor goes."

Tilly stood, silent and unsure of how to proceed. She looked to John, and he seemed a bit dumbstruck, his face a rounded blankness. She considered grabbing him, giving him a good shake, demand he give up the information.

She nudged him, her eyes going wide, her head nodding toward the carnie. All indications for him to speak up, to get the carnie to let them pass. But he just stammered, and Tilly realized he didn't know. She saw that he looked scared. Not hungry and scared, but just scared. Tilly squared her shoulders, thinking she should step in front of John, but her feet wouldn't move. She wanted to say *the raven circus*, let it work like a password, but her teeth refused to unclench.

The carnie said, "You've come for the circus." It wasn't a question. The carnie had spoken it to himself, but then he looked down, staring at them, unblinking.

Tilly felt like looking at her feet, removing herself from his gaze, but she held it, and the carnie's eyes shined in the blue light.

"You need your admission."

Tilly stuffed her hands into her pockets to search even though she knew they were empty.

"It's not free, you see. If things were free, then none of us would be slaves to whim."

Tilly stared at the carnie's mouth, at the diseased teeth, and said, "I don't have any money."

"Well, you brought you, didn't ya?" The carnie pushed off the wall and circled Tilly, sniffing for chum. He took her long hair into his hands.

He was gentle, but she still wanted to run. It was a thing she had been warned about, drilled into her from a young age: the unwarranted touch of a stranger. He held her hair between his face and the light and then dropped it, strand by strand, through the air.

"Each follicle is transcendent, ain't it?" He wetted the tips on his tongue. "Clean, good. Untreated. The birds will like that." He walked to the muck bucket and withdrew a pair of sheep shears.

The silver blades caught the glint of blue light, and Tilly thought they were beautiful, their shine. If only they had any other purpose.

John was in her ear. "You don't have to, but you won't get in." He touched her arm.

Tilly let the touch of John's hand be the comfort she needed, although she wanted something more familiar, the strong hug of her mother. And she realized she could run, straight through the fairgrounds and scale the locked gate. She could run right home, and despite her mother's surprise at Tilly's sudden appearance, she was certain her mother would hug her. But his words were the pull: *but you won't get in. The raven circus.*

She removed a black hair tie from her wrist and formed a ponytail.

"Only a couple of inches." The carnie spun her around and moved the hair tie higher.

He gave no warning. She barely felt the cut. She wanted to cry, touching the fringed ends that now hit her shoulder.

He let the bundle of blond hair fall down into the bucket. "They like it for their nests."

Tilly got her first look at the admission tokens. There were wadded dol-

lar bills, a football, a pink retainer, game tickets, sandals, a faded school ID, a Minnie Mouse wristwatch, even a half-eaten hot dog. Its mustard had smeared along the side of the bucket and was hardening. The more she saw, the more Tilly felt the thump of anticipation. They all seemed so personal, even if shallow. And there were the strands of her hair, strands of herself, now part of the dark mosaic.

“Now, you boy. My, you are plain. Very standard issue.” His words weren’t insults. The cadence was matter-of-fact.

Tilly figured John, being a young man, had one of two possible reactions available. He could puff out his chest, expand himself in an attempt to prove his masculinity via increased mass. Or he could deflate, slowly collapse under the alpha energy of the carnie. He chose the latter. “I didn’t bring money either.”

“You’re all surface though.” The carnie crossed his arms. “I suppose as shirts go, that’s not an entirely inoffensive one.”

John slowly unbuttoned the shirt. Tilly considered reaching out and holding his hand, to help him feel less embarrassed. He had no undershirt on, and his body was still that of a child’s, fleshy and undeveloped and pale. The carnie took the shirt, crushed it into a ball, and tossed it the bucket where it landed on the hot dog.

“We’re about to begin. But remember, upon admittance, nothing lost can be regained.”

The arena lights were off. Instead, several flood lamps had been set up in the ring, where sheep and steers were normally paraded. Their bulbs were blue, except for a low white light, pointed up, in the center of the ring. That was where Tilly saw them, the ravens, gathered in the rafters. The unkindness huddled together in the spotlight but burst out of the circle. Their pure blackness hid them in the dark. Tilly was sure they filled the barn eaves.

She and John sat among a small huddled group of kids and teens in the bleachers. Some munched popcorn or sipped from cans of pop. They, like the birds, were quiet.

Tilly, now among a crowd, disappeared, her chameleon skin activated, which meant a proper look at the audience. That was the first true unease. From birth, her life had been familiar faces: the same neighbors, family friends, fellow students, summer camp with kids from all over the county, and it seemed impossible for not one to be there. She felt the fear bladder in her throat.

The ravens called, open beaks, stiff, cracking tongues. The sound ran in runs from one end of the barn to the next, and then alternating groups, first to her left, then to the right, like sudden pops. It took Tilly a moment, but she realized it was music, like a poorly maintained calliope. The carnie glided through the blue light to the white spot in the center. But he was not merely the carnival man anymore; he was an otherworldly ringmaster. His top hat was ratty, with no attempt at repairs. Tilly squirmed when she saw that instead of a red jacket with tails, he wore a floor-length cloak made of raven feathers, clearly cast off, all diseased and malformed. He carried a weighted burlap sack. The upward spotlight casted his face in shadow.

“You’ve all come for a spectacle, first witnessed by Cro-Magnon Man: the conference of the genius birds.”

The ravens had turned silent when the ringmaster spoke, but, at the compliment, they burst into another round of clacks, and then laughter. Tilly mimicked John and wrapped herself in her own grip. Although he was the ringmaster now, with the way the birds loomed over him, the carnie seemed like a marionette.

“This is not a mere circus,” the carnie said. “It is a ceremony. A mystical communion between mammal and fowl: two different beasts with brains.”

The ravens grew excited. They hopped from foot to foot. Some stretched their wings, flapping them slowly. The carnie approached the bleachers. He lifted the burlap. “Here is your admission, but also your raffle ticket, for participation.” He swung the bag out, holding the bottom. The contents of the muck bucket, the audience’s little personal things, flew across the arena.

The dust settled slowly to the dirt floor. Then the ravens descended. A few fought, pecking, clawing, for the used hot dog. In seconds, it was consumed. There was a hiss of air when the football popped. Cotton batting torn from the stuffed animals. Paper money and tickets ripped apart. Tilly had seen her hair flung to a dark corner. She wanted to see if the birds were fighting over it. She stood, as the rest did. Only John remained seated, holding himself.

The arena floor was an undulating sea of black feathers. The cacophony drew noise from the crowd. Kids yelled out at the mayhem. One boy tried to climb onto the shoulders of the friend next to him. Tilly rose on the balls of her feet. It was all for naught. As sudden as the descent, the ravens returned to the rafters with bits of the torn mess clutched in their beaks. Tilly’s eyes followed them to the top of the barn, but the birds had returned to the dark. She heard

them though, clicking and croaking communication at each other, assembling, nesting.

The carnie jogged off into the blackness of the arena. He bent and grabbed something off the ground, then moved to another spot for another item. The birds may have shredded the tokens, but they had picked the ground clean again, except for two objects, left intact. The carnie returned to the spotlight and held them aloft. In the hand of the ringed arm, John's shirt and in the mermaid hand, Tilly's ponytail.

She felt sick again. The fear bladder pressed her intestines to the floor of her abdomen. And yet her mouth watered. The kids looked around, waiting for the winners to step forward. John took her hand, held it tight. He led her out of the bleachers, to the arena fence, and under it. For a moment, she was still in her seat, watching herself being led, and thinking what an idiot that girl was.

Tilly held John's hand, squeezing tighter as they approached the carnie. Two pairs of ravens swooped down and snatched the hair and shirt, returning to the nests with them. Tilly looked at his fingers as the carnie gripped her shoulders. His nails carried the blackness of dirt and grease. He turned her to face the crowd.

"These are those that have been chosen. The plain man-boy and gold-haired girl. You have been entertained, for the selection is not unlike that of clown work, but I must stress what is to proceed is dangerous." The blue lights faded, only for the arena to be flooded in red. "Think of sword swallows or fire eaters, geeks snacking on light bulbs, pin heads nailing spikes up their noses. Think of all the fear conjured by our greatest nightmares. There is more danger here than in our deepest dreams."

Tilly glanced at the carnie, and he had a look of smugness on his face. She imagined that he was pleased at the tension, that he had performed the circus a hundred times, and if asked for how long, he'd reply with: *eternity*.

The carnie brought Tilly and John face-to-face. "You have to hold on to each other. Don't let go. If you do, things will not end well." He left them.

John took Tilly by the waist. The carnie, at the fence, raised a hand to the audience. When he closed it into a fist, they went silent. Ravens dropped down, landing on top of the floods, the dirt floor, and cocked their heads, black bead eyes on the young couple. Each bird's head made micro adjustments. One hopped along the ground toward Tilly's feet. Upon seeing the large curved beak, Tilly pressed into John. He, in turn, held her tighter. She felt the ribs

under the flesh of his boy's body.

"How did you hear about this?" Tilly whispered in his ear.

"They didn't tell you?"

"Who?"

"The birds."

Tilly felt like she was going to explode. The fear bladder pressed against her muscles and bones and skin. It pushed up into her throat, and she thought she might vomit it up onto the dusty barn floor. The ravens would swoop down, fighting for it. Snack on it like the hot dog.

The birds in the rafters joined those already in flight. They became a black tornado funnel blocking the view of the rest of the room. The force of their wings stirred the dust. A floodlight fell. The red bulb shattered, and sparks showered from the pop.

The birds laughed. Earlier it had been just mocking, the laughter Tilly had heard in the fairgrounds. Birds with brains perhaps, but no voice, no warmth. But this new laughter reminded her of a pool splash fight, nighttime hide and seek, sweet and wicked. She heard names yelled out, not hers or John's, but other names—*Monique! Raymond! Clarice! Jose!*—screeched with the laughter. The raven names.

She cried out as she saw the birds start to transform. Flying raven bodies with dangling baby legs, a child's face instead of a beak. Children with black wings for arms trying to keep flight.

Tilly pulled away.

John grabbed her by the shirt.

She couldn't breathe. She gasped, but the fear bladder, over-pumped, choked her. She pulled it back into herself for a moment.

Tilly wanted to close her eyes, erase John's face from her mind, with its new beak full of human teeth. "No," she whispered.

"Yes," he moaned.

She slapped him. The shock allowed her to pull free. The last point of contact was his fingers grazing her bellybutton.

Tilly thought there should have been a pop. There usually was at the climax of a magic trick. When she pulled away from John, he reverted back to his fleshy boy's body. The ravens, in their variety of forms, suddenly returned to

wings and beaks, and they descended on her and John.

Tilly heard John scream, but he was lost in the black maelstrom. She smacked bird bodies out of her way. Claws tore at her hair, her clothes. She felt them scratching her skin. One hand protected her face, and the other groped in front of her as she ran toward the door. The laughter turned sour: harsh, angry clicks and crop screams. She was just a raffle token now.

Tilly started grabbing feathers and tearing them from the birds. When she broke a wing, a beak pierced the back of her hand. She tripped, falling to the ground, and tasted sawdust. The ravens dove, and while they reverted again to animal cries, she swore she heard *her eyes, her eyes, get her eyes!*

Claws dug into her back. She crawled along the ground, and finally her hands met the wooden walls. They searched, seeking out the exit. She found the crack of the door, opened it wide enough so that she could escape, and then closed it again. Birds slammed into the wood, clawing, pecking. One raven had slipped out, and it landed on top of a light pole, crowing at her.

Tilly ran. She only stopped when the show barn disappeared from her sight. Her lungs burned, and she wrapped her fingers around her throat, realizing she was breathing. Her throat was not blocked anymore. And then her hands moved down her body, feeling her chest, her stomach. It was gone. That bubble, the living vessel of fear and pleasure, disappeared, and in its place, she found nothing.

She saw that the structure monsters were gone, returned to metal and grease. The eerie presence in the emptiness had transformed into just void, empty darkness, nothing hidden, no secret-sneaking circus folk.

Tilly now understood what the carnie had meant. That once she entered the raven circus, there was no refund. She considered returning back the way she came, going back to the show barn, but part of her, a new part, assumed when she pulled the door back that the barn would be empty. It would be dark and quiet: the birds gone, the carnie vanished, the audience invisible. It was a world slipped away, out of her reach, not out in the distance in front of her but instead on the horizon over her shoulder. She wanted to cry. Because she worried—not feared, not trembled, but brow furrowed, proper worried—that she would never feel that strange marrying of exhilaration and terror again.

The stables were totally dark, no camping lanterns or headlamps, and full of sleep breathing. Tilly walked to her sleeping bag but wanted a bed with four walls and doors with locks.

Sarah sat up. “Holy hell.”

Tilly froze as her sister took in her red eyes, torn clothing, and scratched skin. Sarah grabbed a pillow and tried to hide the boy next to her, but Tilly had already seen Ryan Waterson, shirtless.

Tilly looked directly into Sarah’s eyes and was shocked for a moment because she found understanding, even respect. She thought Sarah’s face glinted with recognition. Sarah even smiled. Tilly suddenly felt unsteady, as if all that night had finally caught up with her. Tilly wished that Sarah would lash out at her, be the sister that she knew so well. Let Tilly be that annoying cockroach that Sarah hated and give Tilly solid ground to stand on. But they were finally sisters-in-arms, now that Tilly had put away childish things.

Sarah gave a soft chuckle. “Mom’s gonna kill you when she sees your hair.”

Tilly turned away and climbed into her sleeping bag. She hummed a wordless tune in her head to block the sounds of Sarah and Ryan kissing. As she drifted into sleep, she remembered the ravens’ wings, how they stirred the air with such force, how they drifted in between floor and rafter, and her tune became their cackling music, each raven beak calling her name—*Tilly, Tilly, Tilly*—until she thought she might just turn into a bird. And then sleep was there, hushing her, lowering her to dreams, dreams of peppermint and gun-slingers, and deeper still, into sadness at losing herself and not knowing what came next.