

# Sideshow

William Ollie

*Many Years Ago*

A late afternoon conversation with one of his barrack mates had brought him here. An excited exchange about the gambling, the sideshow freaks and strippers, all wrapped up in a nice little ‘do whatever you want to whoever you want to bow’. The guy had practically been foaming at the mouth about the place, ranting and raving like some kind of lunatic over the strippers, the freaks and grotesqueries, not to mention the open air gambling. Now he wanted to see it for himself—after all he’d heard, he *needed* to see it.

He’d be going away soon, going away and no telling when he would be coming back this way again. Never, if he had *his* way.

His name was Stanley Johnson. Private Stanley Johnson, fresh out of boot camp and ready to kick ass, which was what he soon would be doing, courtesy of a set of marching papers that had just come whistling down the pike. This time next week he would be ankle deep in the rice fields and paddies of good old Southeast Asia, dodging bullets and bombs and whatever else good old Charlie could toss his way. Half the pukers in his unit were scared out of their wits. *Half?* Damn near all of them. But not Stanley. Stanley knew what *he’d* be doing over there. No, he didn’t want to go—he wasn’t crazy, after all. But as long as he *was* going, he might as well mow down as many of those slant-eyed sons of bitches as he could lay hands on. Hell, they deserved it, for the shit they were pulling over there. And who could know, maybe if enough of those pricks were wiped out, Stanley might actually come home a bona fide all American hero. And make no mistake about it: Stanley Johnson was *coming* home.

Stanley took a long drink off a nearly empty pint bottle of Jack Daniels. Another pull and the bottle was slipped into his back pocket. He stood for a moment, looking up at the full moon before pulling off his black-framed glasses and holding them up to his mouth, frosting the thick lenses with a couple of breaths and then wiping them clean with a piece of his shirt. Then the glasses were back in place and Stanley was heading for a brightly colored sign welcoming him to the carnival. Thin strains of calliope music floated on the breeze as he made his way past the sign, under a line of tattered pennants flapping wildly in the breeze, then onto a chewed-up cow pasture of a midway.

Right away he noticed that something was wrong—out of whack. This place had nothing to do with the happy go lucky carnivals of his youth. No smiling families floated down *this* causeway; no laughing children ran through the sawdust. Hell, there *was* no sawdust. Before him were beer swilling rednecks, carnival hucksters and drunkards; an assortment of punks and farmers stalking a midway populated with soiled canvas tents and battered sheet metal booths, all laid out before a Ferris wheel that hadn't stopped spinning since he'd first spotted it coming down Grovetown's main drag. Not when he'd pulled up that old country road and into the makeshift parking lot had that wheel stopped turning. Not when he'd sat in his car finishing off his cigarette, nor when he'd stood by the car pulling on his pint of hooch. The brightly-lit structure, stretching far up into the starry night sky, stood as a beacon, lighting the way for the rubes and the suckers, an ever-spinning neon signpost drawing the dolts and dumbbells to the clip joint on the far edge of town. Which was what Stanley pegged the place to be, a fly by night open air casino, a place for the fool and his money to go their separate way; the fool, back home with empty pockets while his coin clanged its way into the communal till. A point fully

illustrated halfway down the midway, where a crowd had formed around some old farmer in faded jeans, who stood in front of a booth, eyes wide and wild while his jaws worked over a plug of tobacco and his hand came up clutching a fistful of crumpled bills.

Stanley stopped, and stood there, watching the old timer lay his money down: five dollars to set three silver balls spinning across a slanted wooden table while a bunch of rednecks egged him on. The board—pocked with multicolored, numbered grooves—lay before him, a game to be bettered, a beast to be conquered. All around the booth, bloodshot eyes narrowed, as one by one the old man put those silver spheres into play. He laughed, he shouted and swore. Then he groaned, his smile turning to a disgusted grimace as each and every one of those shiny little balls betrayed him.

Stanley stood quietly by, smiling as the old duffer scratched his head, all the while the man in the booth kept up his incessant crowing of, “Step right up, ladies and gentlemen! Five’ll get ya ten, ten’ll get ya twenty!” He was short and fat, a smile on his face and a half-smoked stogie hanging from the corner of his mouth.

Behind the gaming table he stood, an ill-fitting sports jacket adorned with enormously wide, red-and-white stripes draping his shoulders as he tipped his straw hat, smiling as he offered his frustrated mark a chance to get back into the fray: twenty bucks to keep his twenty points and roll again, another five-spot to start from scratch. One hundred tallied points to take the fat roll of crisp new bills gripped tightly in the carny’s fist. The farmer reached into his pocket. Good money followed bad, and Stanley moved a little further up the dusty midway, where he made his way over to the sideshow tent, where a few moments later, he stepped inside to find a tall, thin old man working a crowd who had gathered in front of a row of cages housing an assortment of freaks.

The juggler was cool, and he had to admit, that sword swallower really knew his stuff. And boy oh boy, that rubber woman. *Let me count the ways*, he thought, chuckling at the images *that* conjured up. The pickled punk looked fake, and that was just what he told that old barking fool. The old guy didn't like that, but Stanley didn't care—Stanley didn't care if he liked it or not.

Stanley barely glanced at the alligator boy, and the huge, two-ton freak of nature bored him. But when he got to that armless and legless freak, he had to stop and remove those thick, Coke-bottle glasses of his, wipe them clean on his shirt and slide them back onto his face. The poor bastard was moaning and groaning and coughing up blood, pleading with his eyes as he looked up at Stanley. He wore a dirty t-shirt, spattered with blood, and a filthy diaper that looped his waist. He looked like any minute now he could keel over dead. And Stanley thought that whatever he had come here for tonight, it damn sure wasn't this. He turned and made his way through the gathered crowd, the farmers and soldiers, the teenagers and little boys, all gawking at the traveling freak show that lay before them, orchestrated by the carnival huckster in his stovepipe hat and long flowing tails.

On his way out, Stanley gave that son of a bitch a piece of his mind, a *big* piece of it. Sideshow wonders were one thing, but this spectacle, this monstrous *abomination*, was beyond human comprehension, beyond human *decency*. Retarded and deformed or not, that poor, miserable excuse for a man did not deserve to be treated in such a way. Nobody deserved that. And who the hell did that guy think he was, anyway? What gave him the right? Up one side and down the other he cussed him, while the old man gave his shoulders a disinterested shrug, laughing as the young soldier became ever more

incensed, until, finally, all talked out, wound down like a spent clock, he stalked out into the star-filled night, up the midway through an ever growing crowd of rednecks and farmers and good old country boys, who drifted from stall to stall, winding their way into the different tents—card games and con games, Stanley figured. Figured they deserved whatever they ended up with, too, if they were stupid enough to participate in this bullshit. Which, apparently, most of them were.

He stopped for a moment, pulled out his whiskey and took a drink, leaned back and looked up at that spinning wheel of flashing lights, wondering if it ever stopped—if it even slowed down. Somehow he doubted that it did. He took another drink and started on his way. Yes, sideshow freaks were one thing, gambling yet another—although Stanley didn't see where this had anything much to do with gambling, not with the way these guys were being played. But the hell with that, anyway. The hell with *them*. That wasn't why he had come here tonight, not really. All that stuff—the freaks and the farmers, the oddities and idiots—all that stuff was all well and good, but what Stanley had really come for, what he had really driven out to this nothing little town on the edge of nowhere for, was the strippers, the raunchy display of vulgarities Kowalski had so regaled him with. That was why he was here, and it was damn time he got on with it.

He took another drink. From behind him came a great roar of laughter, and Stanley turned to see his old pal the farmer turning his empty pockets inside out, the people grouped around him laughing and cracking wise as the fat little huckster in his straw hat and wide-striped suit started back in with his patented pitch.

Stanley tipped back his bottle, finished off the last of his whiskey and dropped the empty container to the ground. He was on his way now, the pump primed, fire in his belly

as he listed sideways up the midway, the scorch of whiskey fueling him; on his way to see the strippers now, wishing the rubber woman could be a part of *that* show. He stopped in front of the tent, closed his eyes and saw her standing before him, her raven hair flowing over her shoulders, her alabaster skin, those sparkling emerald eyes. The touch of her as her hands glided across his chest, her ruby red lips parted and her tongue slithered across them, impossibly long as it snaked its way beneath the flap of his shirt, between the buttons. She was real now, on him, in him, whispering his name: ‘Come, Stanley,’ she said. ‘Come to me. See what I can do. Come play with me!’

Stanley opened his eyes and reached for the whiskey, but the whiskey was gone.

He stepped inside the tent amidst the backdrop of bump and grind music, trumpets and horns, the thud of the bass drum, the rap-tap-tap of the snare. Inside, where a group of old men and farm boys stood in front of a raised platform, watching a woman gyrate. Several longhaired kids had crowded in front of the stage, staring up at her, almost as if in a trance, all of them shoving crumpled bills into a series of buckets dotting the edge of the platform while the woman smiled down at them, her loyal subjects who would not leave her presence, *could* not leave until she dismissed them.

There was something strange about this woman... strange, yet oddly alluring... mesmerizing. Obviously very young, she was not pretty, but something about her garnered Stanley’s undivided attention. And soon he saw nothing but her, all thoughts of the rubber woman and her wonderfully elongated tongue gone instantly from his mind. He saw this woman, and only this woman, vaguely aware of the rednecks and farmers and good old country boys crowded before the stage; her, with her garishly made up face glittering beneath the seductive glare of a spotlight, dark eye shadow, thick red lips. The

wide scar running lengthwise down her cheek should have repulsed Stanley, but somehow it didn't. He wanted to touch it, to trace an index finger along it, and then keep that finger moving, across her neck, twining through the long blonde hair cascading over her enormous breasts. She had cupped her small delicate hands around them, pressing them together, while all who stood before her gazed up as if looking upon a lost wonder of a forbidden world.

She smiled down at her audience, showing an amazingly crooked mouthful of buckteeth as she stood before them in nothing but a G-string and spiked, high-heeled shoes, a flimsy skirt of sequined fringe hanging like a veiled curtain from her waist, barely touching the uppermost region of her thighs. Her hand swept down and the fringe parted; the crowd went crazy and she came to the edge of the stage, squatting before a young guy with shoulder length brown hair, whose wide brown eyes seemed to take in every single inch of her. She dropped to her knees, her incredibly long legs splayed out behind her while the guy leaned forward, only to receive a stiff-arm to his forehead—one hand flat against his head, she rubbed the thumb and index finger of her other hand together, the universal signage of 'money talks, bullshit walks'. His hand came up clutching a wad of bills, which were dutifully tossed into a bucket as the blonde swayed slowly back and forth, smiling and leering down at him. Her hand, which had slowly left his forehead, grabbed a fistful of hair, forcing him forward until her skirt of sequined fringe had covered his face. Still smiling, she swayed to and fro while his hands slid up and down the backs of her legs.

There was an old guy beside him, a farmer, maybe; maybe a truck driver or a mechanic. He was bald, just a trace of grey hair running around the sides of his head. He

pulled out a cigar, stuck it in his mouth and lit it; took a deep drag and she snatched it away, laughing and pushing her suitor back into the crowd, where he stood staring up at her, eyes glazed over as if a powerful mind altering drug had just been administered to him, all the while the mechanic, the farmer or whatever the hell he was, lunged toward the stage. Too late, however, to retrieve his cigar, or even to get a paw on what had quickly become the object of affection of every breathing soul in the room.

On her feet now, she dropped the cigar. Then, back arched, feet planted firmly on the hardwood floor, she began her striptease in earnest, dancing across the stage while crowd roared and the rejected suitor began to cry, and the mechanic, the farmer or whoever he was, stared up in wide-eyed wonder.

And Stanley, Stanley, who had felt the touch of her, the unspoken promise that she could be his, could take no more. The whiskey had him now. Whatever she was had him. Whatever she was, because she was more than a woman, damn sure more than that. She had to be, and he had to have her, had to touch her, to feel her soft skin beneath his fingertips. Feel the velvet touch of her on him. He wanted her; he *had* to have her. And he *would* have her, have her and have her now, this very minute. If he'd still had his pint bottle of hooch he'd be bashing his way through the crowd as he rushed the stage, but he didn't have it, and all he could do now was stagger past the geezers and farm boys, the rubes and the long-haired country boys, elbowing his way through them, until he finally stood before this grotesque goddess, who if he had run across her on a city street in broad daylight, he would've pointed and laughed with derision at the lopsided buckteeth, the ton of makeup hiding God only knew what form of disfigurement beneath it. Pointed her

out with glee to his friends, who would've laughed with him. But he wasn't laughing now. She had him; he was hers and he knew it, *she* knew it, and now she would be his.

He stood before his stripper, who had returned to her place at the edge of the platform, humping and pumping, gyrating for the roaring mass of humanity as the fringe skirt dropped Stanley began shouting obscenity-laden taunts at her.

He shouted.

His fists beat the stage and he shouted some more.

*Give it to me*, his addled mind whispered to her. *Give it to me!*

In a frenzy now, he reached out, swiping at her leg. "Give it to me!" he called out, staring up at her, his wide eyes magnified behind those enormously thick Coke-bottle lenses. "Show me somethin', ya buck-toothed bitch!"

While at the back of the tent, the Sideshow Barker walked calmly through the entrance, the same old geezer Stanley had cussed up one side and down the other. He shrugged his shoulders and raised his long arms high into the air, nodding at the young striptease artist, who smiled back at him as she danced her way along the edge of the stage, gyrating furiously, running those delicate little fingers of hers up and down and across her breasts.

"I'll show ya something, baby!" she taunted, her buckteeth fixed in a comical grin. "I'll show all y'all something!"

She danced to the rear of the stage, returning moments later with a small glass container in her hand, removing the lid and tossing it over her shoulder. "Step right up!" she called out, and then stepped up to the edge of the stage, right above Stanley, as she unsnapped her G-string and let it fall to the floor.

Knees bent, her hips began to sway and, much to Stanley's delight, proceeded to hump and pump right in his face. Suddenly she stood up. Slowly rocking back and forth, she took a powder puff from the container, holding it high into the air so everyone could see it. "Watch close, y'all!" she cackled. "Ya don't wanta miss this one! No sirree! 'Cause I'm gonna show this here boy how to powder a pussy!"

Stanley looked up, grinning, smiling appreciatively, those bloodshot eyes filling up his ridiculously thick lenses.

Geezers and farm boys alike roared their pleasure. Long-haired teenagers clapped and whistled, stomping their feet as a calypso beat filled the air around them.

At the rear of the tent, the old Sideshow Barker flashed a wicked grin. Then he did a back flip; that stovepipe hat somehow staying on his head while his coattails followed his feet up and around and back to the floor, where the carnival huckster spun himself completely around, and then pointed a hideously long finger toward the stage.

The stripper, smiling down at Stanley Johnston, pursed her lips in a sexy mock kiss, dipped the puff in the container and touched it lightly to her. "Ya'll ready?" she called out to the crowd. "You ready, baby?" she said, grinning down at the young soldier.

"Give it to me!" he shouted. He wanted her. Anything she had was his, everything was his, and he meant to take all of her, take her right on that very stage.

"Give it to me!" he screamed. "Give it to me, you beautiful bitch!"

Once again, she touched herself with the powder puff, and then upended the container onto Stanley, whose eyes were transfixed upon her when the powdery contents of the glass bowl rained down upon the young soldier's face.

“That’s how ya do it, boys!” she cried out with glee. “*That’s* how ya powder a *pussy!*”

“You bitch!” Stanley growled. He tried climbing onto the stage but somebody grabbed him, tried again and somebody shoved him to the ground. He sat for a moment, struggling to get up. He felt dizzy, faint, the fiery burn of alcohol that had spurred him forward suddenly dissipating as he staggered up to his feet, where he made a halfhearted move for the stage but was pushed back. It was over now, over and he knew it. She wasn’t his, and would never *be* his. He’d been disgraced and humiliated, dishonored. And now the tent was closing in on him, the walls surging forward, the ceiling pressing down while the crowd hovered impossibly close, so close they could reach out and touch him, even though he knew they were several yards away and couldn’t possibly lay a finger on him. He stumbled for the exit, listing sideways as he hurried past geezers and farmers, and all those laughing and taunting figures at the periphery of his vision, and the Sideshow Barker, who smiled as he went past, and then followed him quietly into the night.

Stanley felt dizzy as he stumbled beneath the starry night sky, his knees weak, his face... *numb*. “What did you... do... to me?” he whimpered. “You... buck-toothed...” He lurched forward, the ground slipping and sliding beneath his feet, the sky spinning, the swirling stars melding together above his head. Footsteps sounded behind him, followed by wild, cackled laughter. He turned to face the noise, and fell to his knees. He felt queasy, faint. He began to swoon. Soon he found himself flat on his stomach on the ground, cool and refreshing blades of grass pressing against his face, as his eyes closed and he found himself drifting down and around, around and down where nothing could

find him, nothing but his grotesque goddess, who came swirling up in a faint, hazy cloud at the edge of his vision. She touched him, and her touch was as cool as he'd thought it would be, cooler, even—cold. Cold as the razor-sharp edge of a butcher's blade, slick as the blood he soon found himself swimming in. She came to him, her and her master, with his stovepipe hat and tails, but now a longer tail—a forked tail of diamond-shaped scales ran from beneath his coat, dragging on the ground he walked upon. They swam at the edge of his consciousness, smiling, laughing and taunting as he lay before them, naked before her cold exhilarating touch, which was so much colder than he ever thought it would be, than he ever thought it *could* be, until she was gone, *they* were gone, and he opened his eyes to find daylight streaming in through the bars of the cage that confined him, patches of it painting the straw and sawdust floor he sat upon. He looked down at his hand, but he had no hand, looked at his arm but no arm was there. No hands or arms, no feet, no legs. But that was impossible. He had hands, he had arms and legs. He could see them propped up in the corner against the bars of his cage.

He opened his mouth to scream but nothing came out. But *he* could hear it.

He could hear it, all right.

That high pitched keening rising steadily up from the base of his throat was the only thing he *could* hear.



*October...*

He was a tall man, long and lean and thin as a rail. His grey hair hung over his shoulders like a tangled clump of bristled wires. There was a black coat with tails on his back, a stovepipe hat on his head. The weather-beaten satchel he carried—a valise, really—was very old. Older than he, even. The fine pebbled leather, worn down over the years, was as soft and smooth as the underbelly of a cow. So long ago had he acquired the satchel that he could scarcely recall from whence it had come. Only that it was his, and it held the tools of his trade, which he had also been charged with many years ago.

He had walked the back roads of this country for more years than he cared to remember. More years than he possibly *could* remember. And as he made his way down this lonely stretch of South Carolina flat land, he knew that he had a purpose in life, one he could not be swayed from. He was a man on a mission, a man with a job to do.

He would do that job come hell or high water.

He would do that job and nothing would stop him.

Nothing.

And nobody.

## Chapter One

Justin Henry sat on the front porch swing reading an *X-Men* comic book, the sun, bright and orange in the midmorning sky hovering high above the landscape—every once in a while it would dodge into a patchwork of fluffy white clouds moving slowly across the horizon, and then suddenly reappear. There was a gentle breeze blowing through the Carolinas that morning, one whose temperature put Justin in mind of his second favorite holiday of the year. Soon the Halloween decorations would be out, the pumpkins carved and left on the porch. Up would rise the fake tombstones from the neighboring yards. Throughout the small community, scarecrows and sheet ghosts would be hung.

Justin could hardly wait to see them.

A cool breeze was blowing, the sun shining in the sky, the chores all done and put to rest, leaving Justin nothing to do but sit around soaking up another perfect Saturday morning. It was his favorite time of the week, the day young, a weekend full of untold of adventures lying before him while the ‘cloud statues’ rolled by overhead—another favorite of his: sitting on the porch watching the different shapes float by on the breeze. Here a snow white Irish Terrier, there a white-cotton bull, its thick horns trailing above it, rising up and away into the pale blue sky like twisting wisps of campfire smoke.

Justin Gabriel Henry, the boy with three first names and no last, a tag he’d lived with since kindergarten. Not too bad a dig to endure, when you thought about it. At least he wasn’t fat. His face wasn’t all broke out like Mickey Reardon’s, either, his lifelong pal who obsessed over his affliction while damn near every kid he came across cheerfully

nailed him with ‘pizza face’ and every other variant of his disorder they could come up with. A disorder, really, that was nothing more than the rigors of childhood, an onset of puberty most kids eventually found themselves traveling through. Except poor old Mickey seemed to have been trudging his way through the slings and arrows it had brought his way for an awfully long time now. Poor old Mickey, who lived alone with a mother, who left *him* home alone most nights so she could roam the bars and honky tonks, hoping to dig up a replacement for the man who had left her and her son high and dry while he went off ‘looking for himself’. Went off looking and never came back.

Justin glanced up at the sky, smiling at the caboose of a train that had formed there while he’d been reading his comic, which was why he enjoyed those clouds so much. Look up now and see a caboose, ten minutes later the caboose would be gone, replaced by something else, a giant mouse, a duck with a hat, a galloping horse, maybe.

He closed the book and laid it beside him on the slatted wooden seat of the porch swing. He was only on page 8, but he didn’t care—he knew the story backwards and forwards anyway. The breeze lifted a swatch of sandy brown hair away from his forehead as he looked out to see Mickey Reardon peddling his bike up the old dirt road.

He sat on the swing while his friend laid his bike over in the front yard, bounded across the yard and up the front porch steps, and then leaned against the wooden railing that ran across the front of the house. He had on a red t-shirt, a soiled pair of Converse sneakers and, like Justin, faded Levi jeans. “D’ja hear?” he said.

“Hear what?”

“The carnival.”

“Yeah,” Justin said. “Next week. It’s always next week, same time every year.”

“No, man, there’s a *Ferris* wheel turning out at Godby’s field, right *now*.”

“Godby’s *field*? That’s—”

“I was riding along and this big-assed Ferris wheel sprouted up out of the ground like some kinda crazy tree.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I *saw* it,” Mickey said. “Through the trees out at Godby’s field, rising higher and higher like some kinda crazy trick photography. It just *grew*, *man*. Up, up, and up it went, ‘til it was towering over the tree line.”

“Reardon.”

“I’m telling you, there’s a Ferris wheel turning out at Godby’s field!”

“Heck, that don’t make any sense, no sense at all. It’s out in the middle of nowhere, for God sakes.”

“It ain’t *that* far out.”

“It’s not the middle of town, either, and that’s where they *always* set up. Why would they put it out in that old field, anyway? Nobody goes anywhere near that place. And there damn sure wasn’t no Ferris wheel growing up out of the ground.”

“I saw what I saw.”

“Yeah, and you are what you are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Justin was about to crack wise about Mickey and his crazy mom—she was crazy, all right. As pretty as she was, there was something about her, the look in her eyes, the far off stare of them, the way she carried herself. She was crazy, so was he, kinda. The taunt was right on the tip of his tongue, but he didn’t let fly with it. He looked at his friend,

who had something in *his* eyes as well, something that never left them, something floating behind the fun and good cheer, just beyond those brassy, one-line put downs he loved tossing out to the bullies and creeps—a sad glint accessible only to those who truly cared for him, which, sadly, seemed to be few and far between, these days. Justin thought he could probably have counted them on the fingers of his right hand and have plenty of fingers left over. He couldn't let it fly, but he wasn't about to let him off the hook, either, so he gave him a little smirk, and said, "Figure it out, dude."

"Yeah?" Mickey said. "Well figure *this* out, *dude*. If there's a Ferris wheel spinning round Godby's field—and there *is*—then there's gonna be two carnivals this year, and you and me can hit both of 'em. Startin' right now. Sooo... why don't we just ride on over there and check it out?"

"You know what?" Justin said. "I'd love to."

He grabbed his comic book, stood up and walked to the front door, opened it and tossed the comic onto a chair sitting just inside the doorway. "Hey Mom! Me and Mickey's riding into town!" he called out, turning his back to the screen door as it slammed shut behind him.

But they weren't riding into town, not really. They were heading much further than that, past the apartments and the rundown houses on the east side of town, past the bars the unemployed drunks staggered from when the money ran out and the bottles stopped pouring, past the alleyways the crack heads roamed, to a ruinous field on the outskirts of Pottsboro, South Carolina, a place they had no reason venturing to, to visit something that—as far as Justin could tell—had no reason being there at all.