

Last Man Standing

No matter what town or state they rolled into, no matter what time of the day or night it was, there was a fixed routine they all had to perform before anyone could sleep. As general manager of the Cohen Brothers' Traveling Circus, it was Hank Granger's job to make sure everything was ready to go by showtime at 3 p.m. the following day. That meant everyone helping to completely unload the train immediately after they arrived: equipment, animals, food, everything.

Today, finding the extra help to pound stakes and plant the poles, then haul the ropes to raise the heavy canvas tents was not Hank Granger's main problem. Nor was ensuring the booths got set up in their proper places along the sections laid out on the midway; Joey Twelve-toes was handling that pretty good.

The new high-wire act was the problem. It was Raoul Sierpinski and his twin brother Vladimir. Making the first of his many rounds for the day, Hank Granger came upon the dark-haired and handsome young Russians outside the ring dancers' housecar, light on their feet and swinging knives in the early morning light, cursing, trying to slice each other to ribbons.

With the help of his strongman, Andre Fairchild, Granger pulled them away from each other. Raoul had a small slice below his cheekbone and a nick on his earlobe, and Vladimir had a three-inch slash across his chest and a smaller cut on his arm. The only way he could ever tell the two apart was by the ring of blood-dripping daggers the brothers had had tattooed around their biceps—Raoul, on his right arm; Vladimir, on his left.

“What the hell is wrong with you two?” he said, knocking the knife from Raoul's hand and pushing him away from his brother.

“Bah! This Bolshevik scum messing with my woman.” Raoul said, his words heavily accented. Brushing the hair from his eyes, he bent down and picked up his knife. “But I teach him who is best man.”

Flushed with anger, Vladimir lashed out at Raoul with his knife. “What you mean, your woman?” he screamed. “I show you best man!”

“Stop it, Vlad,” Andre said, grabbing his arm and twisting until the knife fell from his hand.

Granger looked from one to the other, trying to figure out what it was about high-wire acts that made the walkers so volatile. This had a certain feel of déjà-vu, except it had been the women of the last high-wire team he had hired, fighting over a man.

“If you two idiots can't work your shit out without cutting each other,” Granger said, “then you can start looking for another show, because I've had enough.”

He was disgusted by the fact that the whole scene had been staged for the benefit of their women, that the brothers would never inflict serious damage on each other. Today and tomorrow and the next day, they would go on with the show high over the three rings, a little bloodied but acting as if nothing had ever happened.

As a young soldier fighting in the final months of the war in Vietnam, Granger had developed a strong aversion to violence of any kind. Being up close and personal with death he was sickened by the desire to inflict pain and suffering or see them being inflicted on another human being.

He turned on his heel, pulled his radio off his belt and keyed it, then spoke into it as he walked away. There were a million and one things he had to do before showtime that afternoon; it was only half past six and the day was already heating up.

A thunderstorm moved through sometime after three, raining long enough to cool things off and soak the midway. Hank Granger favored the rain during show hours. The sounds and feel of the falling rain calmed the big cats and the elephants, making them more accepting of commands. The rain also intensified the smells of the circus—the hot dogs and cotton candy, the sawdust and the animal odors—memories of which kids carried fondly into their adult lives and passed on to their own children. More importantly, it sent the customers scurrying into the tents, where the main acts were performed and

their highest receipts were collected—and the take was always good on rainy days.

At three, six and nine—and in between ring acts—the clown troupe would slap-stick their way around the big tent, teasing and pleasing, warming up the crowds and raising spirits. The brightly-fashioned clowns would douse each other with buckets of confetti or squirt guns, feign reckless surprise with exploding cigars and balloons and other comedic routines guaranteed to make customers of all sizes and ages laugh.

Greased up and dressed as a very small Bozo the clown, Trish Robertson separated from the troupe, then ran over to where Granger stood in the main entrance beside the ticket booth.

“Hank, something is wrong,” she said. “Pops didn't make the two o'clock line-up. Nobody knows where he is.”

Granger frowned. Harley “Pops” Pearson had been with the Cohen Brothers' Traveling Circus for nearly forty years, more than twice as long as he had and probably four times as long as any other act. Harley was like a father to him—to all of them—and it was a rare occasion when their number one clown missed a curtain call.

“Okay, Trish,” he said, “I'll check it out. Thanks.”

Trish gave him a thumbs-up and ran back into the parade.

“Stevy, you on the waves?” he radioed, walking out into the open air and squinting at the clouds.

“Yeah, boss, I'm here.”

“You seen Pops today?” he said.

“Nary hide nor hair, bwana.”

“Okay. I need you to start looking for him,” he said. “ You come clockwise from the south end of the lot, I'll work around from the north end. Let me know if you spot him.”

“You got it, boss. Out.”