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THE AGE OF STRONGMEN

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ABSTRACT

“The Age of Strongmen” is the opening excerpt of a novel in progress. The excerpt covers the opening four chapters and follows the parallel stories of two characters: Jules, the child of a poor woman and a delinquent father; and Sunra, the Turkish refugee turned circus strongman, in Atlanta and the American South at the turn of the twentieth century. The novel follows Jules as he runs away from home. Similarly, it also follows Sunra’s escape from certain poverty in Istanbul after a short career as a street performer propels him into joining a troupe of travelling strongmen, an enterprise that first leads him to fame and prestige in Europe, through demise of the troupe after arriving in America, to his final rebirth as a great circus performer, the greatness of which is ultimately illuminated by the profound relationship he develops with Jules, the burgeoning understudy who together with Sunra experiences his first truly paternal relationship. Jules has a grand capacity for imagination, and the boy’s fantastical imagination colors his narrative with fantastical realities that may or may not exist in the magical story book world of a young boy’s imagination where dreams and realities melt together. In this lens, the world becomes the circus in which the narrative finally lands and in which both characters live and flourish.

The text that will comprise this thesis will be made up of the opening four chapters of this story. These chapters will tell the following tales: Jules’s first encounter with Sunra during a childhood outing with his estranged father; Jules’s brief relationship with a neighborhood friend which ends abruptly after a racial incident in Atlanta, and after which Jules runs away from home; The boyhood of Sunra in Istanbul, the tale of his street performing and his running off with the troupe of strongmen; and the travels of Jules through the wilderness and as a stowaway on trains in pursuit of the circus. This builds the first section of the novel which takes Jules from his first experience with Sunra until the point that they actually meet.

CHAPTER 1

Many years later, when Jules Pate was reduced to a tired old man, weak of limb and of mind, he recalled with magical fondness the story of the time his father took him to see The Great Sunra. His father having rarely sobered up long enough to come home to see him, it was the only story of him that Jules ever bothered to remember or retell. So great was the effect that this story had on Jules that would often tell it in lavish, incredible detail to his own children, though it would never inspire in them the frantic pleasure and excitement it did in Jules, as their worlds had been so profoundly blessed by the glories of Hollywood that the pagan treasures of the sideshow and their father's fanciful stories were wasted on them.

This was back when the country was still very much a railroad country and when Jules's was still very much a railroad town. If you worked for the railroad in those days, you were somebody. And in order to get anywhere, you'd find yourself trickling along one of the lines riding a car that rumbled along like thunder. Jules's father had been all over the country, which was a grand thing in that time before airlines and automobiles would shrink her great expanse into a fathomable distance. He told stories of far away lands so remarkable that they seemed, certainly not of this country, but perhaps even not of this earth. After all, this was a dusty town that had, through the railroad, become the Jewel of The New South. But Jules's father told stories that were full of the riches of an unknown land, about ghettos and boroughs, about towering trees, and about mines so deep that men had built cities inside of them. There were men who rode on cattle through deserts, men who lived in trees. There were magical men who fashioned instruments that made music so sweet and hypnotic that it was like the singing of angels. He told of oceans that glistened gold in the sunset, about climbing peaks that rose so high from barren, baked earth that, once he'd reached the summits, he'd bathed his sweaty head in clouds. Often times when he told these stories he was surrounded by men who were still able to drown themselves in the fascination of childhood.

For Jules, this was life.

He'd emerge from his quiet row-house to the sun drenched streets of the town that had a smell that hung over it like heat and sweat. In the street the children played stickball and they called out to him – Jules! Tell us a story, Jules – Then a chorus of laughter. The children were generally not permitted to play with Jules – he was, after all, living in a fatherless home – and this was just as well because it left him with the time to sit and dream of the wonders of what must truly live in the world beyond the confines of their town, which sat, The Jewel of the New South, bathed in the charcoal dust of the railroad.

Though Jules did not yet understand it, he hated his father for leaving him there while his father was out chasing wonder, while Jules was left in the stagnant days in their town. Jules wanted nothing more than for his father to bring some of that wonder to him. So, when Jules's father came home on an early summer day, walking up to the front yard amidst the giggle of the children playing tag in the street, Jules greeted him by running first towards him with all of the speed that his small legs could muster, then by asking him, before saying hello even – Where are we going?

There was whiskey on his breath as they rode the streetcar together. Jules was not

ignorant of such smells. They would ride first through the city, then to the outskirts of town, passing shanties at times that seemed to have first grown and then died in the brittle red ground. They were hollow, empty buildings with cracked, heat-hardened earth beneath them, makeshift fences around their perimeters, all with slats missing and sections having fallen at odd angles. And from the streetcar, Jules saw the little black children playing in the streets.

For Jules, the train was really something. When you were on it, the thing was, you were going somewhere. Through the window, the world opened up and became visible, and here were things that you had not known existed, unraveling in front of your eyes. It was an infinite space with infinite sights, so long as you kept moving. Always a new thing in sight, or just off on the horizon.

“You know what came into town on the train with me?” Jules’s father asked.

Jules continued to look out of the window of the trolley car, pushed up against it by the crowd of people that filled the car with the hot volume of human bodies in the summer time and with the hot stench of men, and there against the window, the moving air was the only thing cool against Jules’s face.

“Whole town knows,” Jules said. “I guess.” And he turned his face just for a moment, squeezed an arm up through the crowd around him, and adjusted the cap on his head. There was Jules, pressed up against the window to suffer in the heat, with a hat that looked more mature than the ones the kids wore, and too large for his growing head.

“I suppose they do,” his father said.

Jules looked up at his father, hardened by the train, his skin leathered and brown. He leaned, dangling an arm from the handrail. He seemed to be the only person on the train in any open space, and he swung from the rail with a callous ease that showed his years of service on the train. This was his home.

“This your first time on the rail, boy?”

“No sir,” Jules said. And out the window the real city started to swell up around them all. Even in those days you could start to hear her as you came up on her. The Jewel of the New South. Wasn’t she something. “Every now and then Mamma takes me along when she comes in to town.”

“Ain’t that awfully nice of her,” his father said. He slipped his flask from his hip pocket and it was hot and shining and silver when it caught the sun from the open window as Jules’s father brought it to his mouth for a swig.

And then, just like that, the city was around them. It wasn’t that Jules was from outside of town, but when you got into town, you knew it. There were more streetcars than Jules could count, and horses being led by men in white linen suits. The street was wide as anything. There were big buildings too, rising up and around Jules, and shops and kiosks along the road. What Jules loved the most were the signs. They were big, and they meant something. They meant that you were somewhere where things happened.

“You seen any of them?” Jules asked.

“What’s that?” his father asked. He looked down at him in the shadow of the mass of people of the trolley. He was no more than a small and light face poking out from behind the torsos of the large men around him. All around was the sound of chattering people.

“Any of the circus people?”

“Sure I’ve seen them,” his father said. Frank Pate loved the big push of the train

underneath him. He often told others that it was in his blood, that he was never meant to root to a spot, that he needed the fresh rush of the wind in his hair sitting in a box car. Damn if it didn't make him feel like a man.

"What are they like?" Jules asked him. He had not seen his father in several months, and before that it had been several months, and before that it was the same thing. But, despite the coarseness of his face and the sharp sourness of his breath, his father had become a thing of the outside world. And if Jules didn't look at his father the way other boys his age looked at theirs, it was because his father had become filled with strangeness, with the real reek of travel and of far off places. Jules marveled at him. "Are they really like they say? I mean, are they as great as everyone thinks?"

"On the train," his father began, "I only seen them get on and off. We loaded up all of them, even the elephants, up in Virginia, and then brought them all down here with all of that other nonsense, the tents and such. Hell of a day it was." His father plucked an eyelash from his eyelid and then examined it in the bright sun of the window. "Thought that day wouldn't never end." He blew the eyelash from his finger. "They're people just like we are, I guess," he said finally.

Jules turned his face back out toward the window, and the lumbering streetcar turned up a small hill and the city began to dwindle again, flickering finally in the near distance, but off and away again. Jules watched it for what seemed like a long time, but it couldn't have been that long, because he could still see the buildings off down the little hill when he smelled something new in the hot air, something like the smell of animals, of sweat and of peanuts, and then he could hear it all around him, the organ grinders and the criers out in the lanes between the tents, the applause, the pounding of the band from the parade: the circus!

The circus was like a sweat in the air around him, and Jules felt a kind of hot rumble from his stomach as the music thronged around him. The parade of animals came along the midway, and Jules's father pushed him along down the lane, holding him by the back of his shirt collar. When they got near enough to the elephants that the ground underneath him shook with each of their steps, Jules's heart began to race and he said to himself, under his breath, but with a voice that trembled with his feverish pulse, "Elephants!" And he plodded along after them, feeling his body pucker up their heavy sway from side to side.

Along the midway, the tents and booths lifted themselves up from the trampled dirt, and at the end of the road was the enormous tent. Jules felt as if he were floating, not feeling his feet touch the earth, pushing forward towards the main event. But, just before they got there, he felt his father's tight grip on his shirt tug him stiffly, and they veered off to the right together, where two smaller tents swelled from the earth and shimmered in the hot morning. Jules looked to the big tent spikes driven into the red earth that cracked around them, and he thought of a story his mother had told him about how they had the elephants pull the big metal poles that held the tents up, further and further apart, until they had pulled so hard and so far that the tension on the line caused the big canvas tent to spring into form. Then, the big circus men, who had hard and rough hands, pounded the metal spikes into the ground to hold the line, and the tent was there, risen in the quiet of daybreak, held erect by the force of all of the ropes pulling against each other.

"I want to go to the show," Jules protested, grabbing his father's arm by the wrist just above where his hand pulled at the boy's neck.

“It ain’t time yet,” his father told him. Then, for a moment, he picked him up by his shirt and carried him over to the side show tent. “In here,” he told him.

Jules’s father led them into the crowded tent that was small and beastly hot. There was a rumbling of voices inside, and Jules and his father made their way along the rows of chairs, finally finding two open ones near stage left where there was a pretty good view of the stage.

“Sit,” his father said, and then he sat down with him. “You know what this is?” he asked.

Jules felt the air quiet around him. The tent was full of people, but they all seemed to whisper so that the usual roar of voices inside the tent, like in the big top, became a hushed rustle like the sound of wind through trees. “It’s the freaks!” Jules said. It was dark in the tent, but a beam of light slipped in through the small crease around the bottom of the tent. It crept along the dirt floor and lit up the feet and shoes of the people around him. “Are they scary?” Jules asked.

“No.” His father let his hand come away from his son’s neck. “They ain’t scary.”

Jules looked out and up at the stage where a man was readying the curtain. The lights came on, and the whole stage was lit with a hot yellow glow, so that the crowd faded away into the blackness that was left over them. The room became quiet, but there was an energy that seemed to vibrate the air in the room. Jules felt himself get hot and sweat formed around his hair line. He wiped at it with his sleeve, and his father gave him a little slap on the arm.

—Ladies and gentlemen—a voice rang out over the crowd, a voice that was big and loud and that filled the tent—for your viewing pleasure, the A. F. Gibson circus, otherwise known as the show of shows, presents to you our menagerie of the animal kingdom, our high flying high wire artists, our masters of mimicry, the clown of the big top, and all of the thrills of the greatest show you will ever find. – At this the crowd began to applaud and whistles rose up from the darkness. —Yes, ladies and gentlemen, all of those treasures can be revealed in the big top show a mere hour away. But, here, ladies and gentlemen, here we have something much different, something much different indeed. These treasures that we are about to unveil, these talents, these specimens will dazzle you, they will amaze you, they will startle you, and thrill you, and they will frighten you. And so, with no further ado, ladies and gentlemen, I introduce to you none other than the world’s strongest strongman, the Turkish terror, the man who inspires awe and fear in any man who dares set eyes on his tremendous hulkish form, the one and only, *The Great Sunra!* -

And with that final yell, the curtain was pulled up with a screeching that seemed to come from everywhere, and then there was silence. On stage was the biggest man anyone had ever seen. Nobody stirred.

Sunra stood center stage. A beast of a man! with his hands at his hips. He was clad only in a crudely falsified fig leaf. In the light, beads of sweat glistened on his body. He was dark skinned and wore a long moustache that curled upwards at the ends. Jules didn’t even dare breathe. Here was a man.

Sunra walked forward to the front of the stage. “Good morning ladies and gentlemen,” he said, with a strange accent, which sang in a way that was both sinister and alluring. When he reached the front of the stage, he paused for a moment, and then bowed. The entire tent was suddenly and alarmingly filled with applause.

Jules looked up to his father who stared out to the stage and clapped with an animal ferocity in the dimly lit tent that made everything go orange. Jules clapped louder. And then Sunra raised one giant hand and the crowd was silenced once more.

“What would you like to see?” he began, twisting his face into a sardonic grin that dared

the crowd to challenge him. No one dared. “Perhaps you would like to see feats of my strength,” he said, waving a calloused hand at piles of metal weights, bars, and odd pieces on the left side of the stage. The crowd applauded. “Or perhaps you would like to see me flex my muscles.” Sunra dragged one massive arm up from his waist. He pulled it to his side, curling its hand slowly up to his ear so that his forearm and bicep were engorged with blood, and his arm swelled to twice its normal size. There was a taste of dust and of baked dirt rising from the ground, and in this the light flickered and sparkled. The crowd stood and cheered, and the light cast wavering shadows along his body that made him seem as if he were dancing in flames. Jules could not believe his eyes! So dim was the room and so magical this thing on the stage that Jules wondered if indeed this were real or not. “There will be time for bows,” Sunra said, and the crowd was driven into a mad frenzy of applause that only stopped, and then suddenly and sharply, when Sunra waved a large paw over them, as if casting the benediction, and said, “Silence!” And there was silence, and then, “The Great Sunra is ready to perform.”

Sunra flexed his enormous chest and then made his way over to the big iron weights on the stage. – Now Sunra will demonstrate the power of his arms, - the impresario called out, and Sunra took a large and thick iron rod from the floor of the stage. He held it up over his head, and then, with a large grunt, his arms began to tremble. Barely did Jules notice, but the bar began to tremble as well. Sunra stood like a shaking statue, the bar spread over his head. And then, that iron thing that was once straight was suddenly twisted and contorted into a curving beam that to Jules was a magical object. How did he do it! Then, as Sunra took one of the big weights in his hand, the impresario called out, – Now Sunra demonstrates the strength of his body! – And with that, Sunra seemed to effortlessly fling the huge metal balls above his head. He performed a series of thrusts, each emphasizing a part of his body. “This is for the legs,” he might say before executing a thrust of his lower body. All of his muscles swelled with blood and began to bulge and glisten with sweat in the yellow and orange haze of the tent. He became an enormous sweating brute.

Jules could not believe that this was possible. Here was this man, this enormous thing, forcing a silence over the crowd. What a story this would make! After all of the weights had been lifted, Sunra once again moved to the center of the stage where he flexed all of his muscles through a series of poses. He danced into and out of the light, so that the shadows that fell across his body accentuated the grand refinement of it. And when he had finished, he took a slow and controlled bow as drops of sweat rolled from his head to the wood of the stage. Jules saw that he trembled just slightly, and he realized that this man had pushed his body to its limits. When Sunra rose from his bow, the crowd, overwhelmed in silence for nearly fifteen minutes, burst into applause, and a smile that was every bit as large as the man himself spread across the jaw of The Great Sunra. And, with that, he walked slowly off the stage, and the curtain again fell to the floor with a quiet thud.

- The Great Sunra, ladies and gentlemen. – The voice waited for the applause to die down. – And now for your viewing pleasure, ladies and gentlemen, be prepared to have all of your questions answered about where we came from by the world’s most famous missing link, the coneheaded wonder, Zeph, the never-before-seen. -

The curtain rose again, and there, on stage, was a dark-skinned, hunchbacked little thing that never would have seemed quite human without the little glimmer of understanding in his dim eyes that, helped by the splashes of orange light, danced around on the quiet stage. His head was pressed upwards into a cone shape that seemed to tower over his little hunched up body.

The crowd let loose a collective gasp.

Jules nearly jumped out of his chair. He reached around the seat next to him, unable to believe that there existed such horrible things. The glory of Sunra had dissolved quite quickly into the terrible, twisted mass of Zeph, and Jules was scared for his life. His heart pounded up into his throat, and he could not take his eyes from the stage, though they started to hurt from the strain of staring into the light. He reached his hand out to his father, but his father had fallen asleep in the chair next to him in the silence that came in between the acts, and he would not wake up for the gentle nudging that Jules was sure would suffice. The still air of the tent was suffocating.

- Zeph, - said the voice. – Do you understand me? -

The thing on stage grunted in a way that seemed very likely to show understanding. Jules was petrified. He wished his father would wake up. He wished Sunra would come back out and onto the stage. The thing walked around the stage with its arms swinging simianly at its sides. This thing can't be human, he thought.

- Zeph, - it began again. – How many fingers do you have on your hand? -

To this the thing stomped his foot five times on the stage, hard, so that the wood of his shoe clicked hard with the wood on the stage, and so the sound that rose was loud and hollow and it carried through the whole tent. The crowd applauded. Jules wanted somebody next to him. This was all too much.

Jules covered his eyes with his hands and slid down from his chair. He removed his hand only when he knew that he had turned away from the stage, but he could still hear the awful thing on stage, wheezing through his malformed head.

- Zeph, what is two plus two?

Then, four loud grunts were released from the stage.

Jules tapped his father again. A quiet snore escaped his lips, but still he did not stir. Jules crept up to the front of the tent. He had to get out. This was more than he could bear, and, though a sense of shame for his cowardice tingled in the back of his mind, he could not muster the strength to stay in the tent, which had become overwhelmingly hot and full of smells, human and otherwise. Jules felt a hot, fiery sensation in the pit of his stomach. He pushed his way around the circus toughs at the door and finally, desperately out into the open air and into the midway again where the sun was hot and blinding, and he crawled around to the side of the tent where he vomited in the dirt and then lay on his back looking up at a crystalline blue sky that spun slowly around him for several minutes. But, as he felt the fresh air around him cool, the sky became still and he felt strong again, and so Jules rose and smelled the stench of the animals in the air again, and felt the gentle warmth of the sun, and he heard the roars coming from the big top, now only minutes from the matinee.

Jules could not bring himself to go back into the sideshow, so he milled around the back of the tent. Here there was a makeshift fence that ran along the backside of the midway. He held one of the slats between his hands and felt the coarse wood against his fingertips. Through the slats he saw the colored people waiting on line to get into the colored seating in the big top. They were as dark as Zeph, but they stood firmly upright with a kind of noble air that refused to be stamped down. Jules pressed his face to the fence and he watched them intently. They wore dirty clothes, threadbare and browned with red earth. But, they were talking loudly and they spoke, even to total strangers. A little boy who must have been near Jules's age saw him from only about ten feet away. He waved at Jules and smiled, and Jules waved back, but then realized

that he wouldn't have seen him wave through the tall fence. The boy walked over to the fence and Jules smiled to him, but stepped back only just slightly from the fence. This was something he had never done before, and some part of Jules was sure that he was not supposed to talk to these people. But they were different and they were fascinating, and the day seemed to overtake him.

"What you doin'?" the little boy asked him as he approached the fence. The boy took hold of one of the slats, and Jules felt himself move back closer to the fence.

"Nothing," Jules answered. "My pa fell asleep inside."

"What you mean he fell asleep?"

"He just did." Jules put his hands back on the fence, and now the boys were nearly touching. The black boy had dirty clothes but a clean face. He had a pleasant smile.

"You going to run off somewhere?" the boy asked.

"Nope," Jules told him.

"Hey," the little black boy started. "What's it like in there?"

"You didn't go in?" Jules asked.

"Nope," the boy said. "We cain't go in 'till later."

"There's this one man," Jules began to say, "who's a huge beast man, and he has these big arms and legs, and he can lift all types of things up over his head." And Jules swung his hands quickly up over his head to demonstrate.

"That so?" the little boy considered. He took one hand up to his chin. "That ain't so great. My pa can lift all kinds of things up over his head too."

"But they said that these things are really heavy."

The boy rubbed his chin. "Mm-hm. Well, they must be if he's going to make a whole show about it."

"What's your name?" Jules asked him.

"Name's Luke," he said. "What's yours?"

"Jules," Jules answered, and he put his hand out like he'd seen the adults do. This, Jules was sure, was a big thing. He was out in the world. Luke saw Jules's confident hand protrude through the slat in the fence and he took a quiet step back. A shadow fell, coming from behind Jules. Luke looked up and backed suddenly away from the fence. Then, he turned and ran off. Just as he did, Jules felt a hard smack to the back of his head and a stern, familiar hand grabbing at the back of his collar. He squirmed and flailed hard. The back of his head burned where he was hit, and there were dark spots in his eyes. He threw his tightly balled fists blindly behind him at that hand. His father picked him up and turned him around to reveal a face full of fire.

"What in the hell are you doing talking with those niggers!" Jules's father yelled at him, picking him up off the ground.

"I was just talking about the sideshow," Jules stammered, and he felt his eyes go hot and blurry with tears.

Frank Pate slapped his boy, and Jules felt the hot sting on his cheek. He could see almost nothing through the blur of his tears, and so he squeezed them shut and kicked blindly in front of him where, even if his eyes were open, he would not have seen his father, but only the menacing figure of a man he no longer saw as different from any other man, and who he no longer feared.

Jules must have caught what he was aiming for because his father let fly a pained yelp and dropped Jules to the ground, where he found himself dusted with the dry, chalky earth of the circus grounds. He was breathless and weak, but he knew that he had done something great and

something that he would be punished for. Jules brought his hands up to his eyes to dig the dirt out of them. His father was soon back on his feet and he picked Jules up by his neck again, dragging him up from the ground.

“Damnit, boy!” he said. “Don’t you ever lay a hand on me again.” His father’s face was flushed red, and Jules was filled with a terrible feeling. It was clear to him, though he was young and he didn’t yet understand such things, that he would never see this man, this stranger, as his father again.

“I got scared,” he said. “I didn’t want to stay.”

“That doesn’t matter,” his father told him, and he led them both away and down the midway towards the tent that now loomed solemnly in the air, big and heavy with the weight of the hot day and the smell of the animals, and taugth with the pull of the ropes and the unrelenting grip of the metal spikes.

Jules’s father walked them into the tent and up along the rows of makeshift bleachers until they took a seat above the center ring. The tent boomed with the sound of voices, a roaring sound that rose and fell like the beating of a great drum. But that enormous ocean of noise that filled the tent became instantly quiet when the impresario took the stage in the center ring.

He was a mustachioed man dressed in a tailcoat. He took a graceful bow and the crowd applauded politely. The circus was nearly upon them all.

- Welcome one and all to the A. F. Gibson Circus, The Show of Shows, the greatest Big Top Event that has ever traversed this wondrous globe. That’s right, ladies and gentlemen, we’ve crossed Europe, Africa, and Asia only to bring all of the majestic treasures of those great continents back home to you, in the greatest of all lands. – To this, the crowd cheered. – To start the show, I present for you, in all of their splendid wild power, the A. F. Gibson Circus Menagerie of the World! -

The band struck up a pounding chorus that held a waltzing rhythm. The tuba thumped away and out came the animals, led by an enormous elephant, whose tusks were capped with gold, and whose tumbling swagger kept perfect time with the pounding bass drum and bouncing tuba.

The crowd was abuzz, and Jules’s father cheered wildly next to him. But the circus had begun to drift away from Jules. It had become too familiar a thing for him. The circus was only pageantry, and for Jules it had lost its luster, here in the bright lights and ornate music of the big top. He thought back to the sideshow and the pressing together of bodies all filled with the same sense of fear and wonder. Here in the big tent, things were spread out, far away.

Jules’s father was swept up in it, though, lost in the false wonder that would soon fill his stories of the rail as he told them, standing on a table, in some far off saloon.

After the elephants were the acrobats, and Jules watched them with a mature and studious eye. They inspired little excitement in him from so far away as he sat. The impresario’s voice danced around the tent between the acts, and then, finally, it all came to an end, and the crowd cheered, dizzied by the spectacle, but Jules walked hurriedly and solemnly and unfazed back into the sunshine of the day, careful to keep a distance between himself and his father, who had been drinking in small but dutiful bursts from his hip flask. This Jules knew could lead to more violence.

Back on the midway, there were crowds of rail workers beginning to take down the small carnival tents that lined the circus avenue. Their work cast dirt into the air where it lingered and sparkled in the afternoon light, a haze of glitter against the blue sky. The men were ragged,

dressed in overalls and the tattered clothes that physical workers like his father often wore when on the job. Looking through the dust, they looked like cowboys to Jules, men sweating out the morning on a Wyoming ranch. His father put his hand to his neck again and began to lead Jules over to a small group of the workers who had gathered around the side of the big top, and who were drinking from glistening bottles filled with cold beer.

His father shook hands with some of the men, and they clapped each other on their backs. Jules was in the world of men, suddenly, as the circus dissolved around him. "This is my boy," Jules's father said, and he pushed Jules into the middle of the group so that he was surrounded by them, large men who towered over him and who cast sullen shadows over his face in the afternoon sun. The men patted the boy on his head and shoulders and there was a rumble of laughter. Jules felt uneasiness, the kind he often felt around men who had no real home, who, like his father, were allowed to travel the country with the railroad. They were men with no anchors or allegiance, and this was easy to see in their manner, which was loose. For these men, there were few consequences.

"Have a beer, Frank," one of the men said. He reached into a pail that was filled with ice and salt and beer.

"Don't mind if I do," Frank Pate told the man.

Then that man turned to Jules, hunched himself down so that he was eye level with Jules and so that his shadow became a spherical ink blot that covered the boy in darkness. "You remember me, boy?" the man said. "I used to come by your house?"

"That's enough," Frank Pate said.

"Now hold on," the man continued, standing back up and filling his chest with air. Jules was scared and confused. "Your boy used to sing the best little song to me." The man turned back to Jules. "You remember that song?" he asked him.

"No," Jules said. "No, sir."

"Well get on out of here," the man told him, and he turned Jules's shoulders away with a light push, and then sent him off with a pat to his rear end.

"Go on home, Jules," he heard his father call as he walked off, and he knew that his father would spend the remainder of the day here, drinking until the daylight blurred into the colorful summer dusk. Maybe he'd even drift off into the wind of the railroad and be blown clear across the country by tomorrow.

Jules walked slowly off, and he heard the men's laughter and talking behind him, and he was glad when he had put some distance between himself and them, so that their presence was gone, and his father had, without doubt, been left behind, there behind the big top.

At first, Jules walked along the midway, feeling the circus dissipate behind him, the tents melting back into flat ground, each removed stack giving way to a quiet collapse of canvas. But then, as he rounded the last of the little carnival game tents, smelling the aroma of pink lemonade soured by the afternoon, he turned and made a deliberate and determined march back around the backside of the row of midway tents, and he was sure only of the place to which he was returning: the sideshow.

The sideshow was the last tent to be taken down. It remained up after the main event so that more money could be collected by selling tickets to the colored people who had waited all afternoon for the chance to see the freaks in the isolation of that last standing tent. Often in the

late afternoon, it was cooler in the tent, and it would lose the steamy, malarial air that it held at noon. But in the sideshow there was still an unparalleled breath of mystery that trembled in the dark.

Jules approached the end of the line of midway tents and stepped towards the big canvas flap that served as the door to the tent. He put a hand against it and felt that it was rough and heavy, but he heard the booming voice of the impresario inside. His heart pounded in his chest, and a salty metallic taste rose into his throat. He was not supposed to be here.

He pushed the flap only slightly aside, trying to keep as much sunlight as he could from seeping into the darkened place. He crept nearly noiselessly in and along the back wall of the tent. So quiet was he that he felt and heard the place breathing around him, and his heart began to settle and his breathing soon fell in line with the pulse of the crowd. There was an empty spot on the furthest bench in the back. He took his seat in the far corner that made it difficult to see over the files of heads, many topped with caps, but here he was and nothing could make any of this less glorious. The impresario continued to chant away at the crowd, bringing the intensity again to a feverish crescendo. Jules glanced around, feeling himself again helpless against the rush of excitement he had succumbed to earlier in the day, an excitement that now left him nearly dizzy with the hope of seeing Sunra again. He glanced around the crowd to see if they too were taken up in the tremulous force that was soon to be before them. And they were. And Jules saw that he was the only white person there, the only face that stood out amongst the men, large and small, gently fanning their faces with their removed caps, or wiping little droplets of sweat from their temples with handkerchiefs, or craning their necks in an attempt to get the first glance of the man who would soon be before them.

Jules waited for what was only minutes, but that filled Jules with the kind of desperate impatience that often seizes you during travel by sea or by train, that claustrophobic expectancy of something coming that you are unable to go and take on your own, but that you are able almost to see on the horizon. But then, finally, he was on stage again. It was later in the day, and he was tired from the earlier show and the lonely solemn hours when there was only waiting to do between shows, but he was still magnificent. Sunra swelled and filled the room with the same massive energy and amazement that he had earlier in the day, and Jules looked around the room at the faces that seemed to fall still with pleasure in beholding this statue of a man. Jules knew in those moments that he wanted more than anything to be a man such as Sunra, devoted to strength and virtue. This was how Jules saw it anyway. A man undaunted by any other. A man so noble that it seemed to Jules there was no way to impugn him, no question of his valor. And this time, after Sunra had left the stage, Jules forgot himself and his place and looked up to the man next to him, an older black man with a face made kind by softly graying hair, a man who wore a pinstriped suit that was modestly dusted with a light layer of red Georgia clay, and said, "This next one is scary."

The man looked down with a gentle smile and said, "Don't worry. He ain't going to hurt you." And Jules saw immediately that he was right, and he watched, calmed by the wonder of the crowd as Zeph stomped his feet and grunted through a series of questions, and then sat and saw the bearded lady, the Baroness of Broncay. He watched the little Belgian midget take stage, the pygmy twins, and a whole parade of marvelous creatures, picked from strange surroundings from all over the world, costumed in marvelous circus finery, and he was dazzled and enamored by all of the treasure that he saw this world could offer him. But for all the power of these trinkets, Jules knew that the real treasure was The Great Sunra.

Outside the tent, after the show, Jules found that it was late into the afternoon, that the sun had started to sink behind the horizon. The air had cooled, and the families of blacks gathered in little huddles outside of the tent, collecting each other for their trips back to their homes, where the labors of the world would soon begin again. But they lingered together, there, just long enough to hold off the realization of that thing as long as they might. Off to the right, near the fence that ran along the far side of the midway was Luke, standing beneath a big man that Jules though must have been his father. The boy saw Jules watching him, and he freed himself from his father's gentle grasp, an arm lightly draped about the boy's little shoulder, and walked up to Jules.

"You was right," he said. "The Sunra is a great big man."

He's incredible," Jules agreed.

Luke nodded. "You see it again?" Luke asked.

"Yes I did," Jules said, and he glanced around and saw that the men were beginning to take down the sideshow, which was now the only tent standing as the others had been reduced to tired heaps of canvas laid out upon the ground. His father was nowhere in sight.

"You wasn't supposed to be in there with us," Luke said.

"That doesn't matter," Jules told him. "I wanted to see it again."

Luke's father called out to him, and Luke turned as if to go back to him, but then stopped and said, "Alright now. Looks like I better get on back. You ought to go on home." Luke turned and looked back at his father standing in a group of men who smiled and laughed and talked in deep and booming voices that hovered like feathers floating in the evening wind.

"Alright," Jules said. "I guess I better." And Luke walked off and back to his father, who took him by the back of his head and hugged him before Luke ran off, laughing, to play tag with some other children. And they chased each other around the grounds and around the fence and around and around the last piles of tent canvas and poles that were bathed in the pink light of sunset.

Jules walked quietly and happily back along the empty midway where the elephants and camels had marched, past the ground that had been touched by the tires of the clowns' unicycles, past the jugglers' turf, past the sellers, the dancers, the bearded lady, past the lion tamers and the toughs who'd raised and lowered the tents, and finally and exhaustedly out and into the street and the waiting streetcar that he boarded without stopping to think about the things that he'd seen and that he might never see again.

The streetcar left, and Jules looked back out the window. It screeched as it pulled away, leaving the circus behind like the dying embers of a fire. It made its turn back and up towards the city, and Jules found that he was nearly alone on the streetcar, save an old, man who slept in his seat on the far side of the car. Jules watched the streets unravel through the window, but in his head, he was picturing Sunra. He was the greatest man that he had ever seen.

As the streetcar rolled through town, the morning business had slowed into a sleepy evening lull that was thick with the humidity of the coming night. The town was bedded down beneath that coming darkness, settling into a tired rhythm that would give way, eventually, in the morning, to that same bustle that overtook it with each sunrise. There was little to see on the streets from the empty streetcar. Jules rode along in silence, hearing only the gentle screeching of the streetcar wheels along the rail and the rhythmic rumble of them along the tracks. And

eventually, in the dying light of the sunset, the images in his head of Sunra, the mammoth man posing in the trembling stage light, began to fade into the calm, easy portrait of his father, dangling from the ringed strap that hung from the ceiling of the streetcar that rode on and carried them all home and into the night.

CHAPTER 2

Jules lived in his mother's house, which was a small row-house at the end of a quiet lane. Fresh air and light were often held outside by closed windows and by thick oak shutters that kept the house filled with dust and with the deep scent of the woman. Jules himself slept in a corner of the main room that had been separated from the rest of the room by a standing wooden screen that allowed his small cot to remain hidden, but that did little to remove him from the doings of the house. His mother had slowly become a stern and quiet woman. She had become nearly deaf, and this had left her spirit broken, first by the difficult domestic work that kept her child fed, then by the lengths that she would go to in order to feed him after her hearing had nearly completely failed her. She and her son barely spoke. She often sat in the wooden rocking chair, which was her greatest luxury, in front of the shuttered kitchen window after having cooked dinner, staring out through the austere slats at splinters of the outside lane and the field of dead grass and scrub brush next door. Her face was often still and emotionless, numb, as if suffering from stroke, lines of pink from sunset striating her face, the silence of the room spreading like fog through the little row-house.

Jules was beginning to be old enough to understand who those men were who visited his mother sometimes, and, lying in his bed, wishing that the screen in front of him could quiet his world as his mother's deafness had done to her, he heard the whispers that she could not control and the barking of the men who came to call on her.

Ever since the seeing of The Great Sunra, Jules had let his father slip off into that recess of his mind that he reserved for people and memories that he was aware of but that he paid no mind to, and that he gave little thought. He found it silly to devote any energy to a man who had long been carried away on a railcar. Sunra, though, was often in the boy's mind.

Across from his mother's house, there was an abandoned house that disuse, emptiness, and a small fire had reduced to a wilting huddle of a shack, all dark and empty inside, except in those moments of the afternoon when the hot sun would stream in, falling in between gaps in planks and through holes in the roof. The place smelled to Jules of the sideshow tent, dank and moldy. Years of rain and heat had given it that same distinct perfume. And the sun lit the tiny shack in the same fragmented, spotlight way as the sideshow stage. Inside of this hovel, Jules was back in that very sideshow, only in this tent, he took the stage with Sunra. He stood upon that grand stage, the mythical Turk beside him. And it was Sunra who became Jules's first friend.

Jules's world became limited to two places, his corner behind the screen and his imaginary sideshow. The only other person who really inhabited this world was Sunra. All of this began to become a prison, as Jules was confined to this isolation, and no one ever seemed to enter into it, save the children who mocked Jules the stranger as he crossed the street to his shack. But Jules knew that there was a world out and beyond this one, but he was too young and inexperienced to understand how to discover it, how to venture forth into it. And so, he contented himself to living mostly within his dreamed up sideshow, where he could control who and what came in from the outside world.

"Watch as I demonstrate my powerful arms!" he called out from atop the large wooden table in the hovel to an invisible audience. Then he flexed his biceps, then curled his arms into a

circle that framed his chest.

Sunra beamed next to him. “You see, ladies and gentlemen,” he said in his dancing Turkish accent. “Strength in smaller creatures is often hidden by their stature.” And the great Turk flexed his body in the same manner as Jules had. “But do not be deceived, for my young comrade is more than a match for any other man I have ever met.”

“Thank you, Sunra,” Jules announced. “But there is no need to brag.” Jules was certain that manners and diplomacy were even more important on stage than they were in daily practice. After all, there was no reason to intimidate your audience to the point of fear. You must bring them in to your world so that they can share in the elegance and beauty of your strength, not frighten them with its raw power so that you became a mindless animal. “Ladies and gentlemen, I will not hurt you,” Jules said. “I am here only to entertain you.” Jules took one step towards the back of his stage. He relaxed from his posing. “What would you like to see?” He waited for their response. Then, picking one answer that rose out above the other yells, Jules lay down on the stage. “Very well,” he began. “I will exercise pushups for you.” And with that, Jules began a series of slow and dramatic pushups until his arms burned and salty sweat ran down his forehead and into his eyes and mouth, and he smelled the peaty musk of the floor and of the table, and he tasted the dust in the air, and he saw that the sun had begun to slink behind the clouds and down under the horizon, and he felt, in his trembling pain and exhaustion, the sideshow return to the shack that it really was, his dream dissolve into reality. And he made his way back to his home, where he washed his hands and face and readied himself for dinner, which his mother busily made at the stove, loudly clanging pots together. She had not heard him come in.

When he sat at the table, his mother was finishing their dinner, placing a piece of chicken she’d fried on the stove on his plate, along with vegetables and a piece of bread. She set the plate down in front of the boy, and, with her head bowed, went into the other room where she lay on the sofa, noiseless except for the heavy sighs of her breathing. Jules ate quietly. From time to time he looked up and into the other room, watching his mother’s chest and stomach rise above the horizon of the table as he ate. It was warm in the house from the heat of the stove, and Jules wanted to lie in bed, wrapping his blanket around him and feeling the warmth of the house fill him completely.

Just before nine o’clock, when the man would come to the door, Jules crept slowly into that bed behind the screen. From there, he heard the knock on the door, the series of footsteps that followed, and he heard his mother rise from the couch. He knowingly heard and understood her silence as she answered the door, hearing only the creaking of the wood floorboards and the rust on the door’s hinge. “Hello,” the man said, and his mother, he was sure, motioned in some way that communicated enough what she would have said, had she not been so ashamed of what her voice might sound like now that she could barely hear it.

From behind the screen, Jules suffered through the noises coming from the room, wrapping his pillow over his head and shutting his eyes so tightly that even the morning sun would not have filled them with the orange and pink glow that announces the breaking of day.

When Jules did wake, he dressed. He was alone in the house because his mother was away. During the days she cleaned and did other such domestic labor for anyone who would pay her. But in those days there were many black women who would do the work for less, and so it was often difficult for her to make any money, but it broke her down all the same. Jules went around

the house and opened up the shutter slats so that beams of light hung about the room like ribbons, and the dust that floated in them was illuminated. Jules ate some bread with butter and jelly while sitting at the coffee table, and he watched those bits of dust hover in the light.

After he had eaten, he walked across the street to the abandoned house where he stretched out his muscles as he waited for the sun to reach the height that would create the lighting of the sideshow. And, as the sun floated lazily up into the sky, lighting the little room with an orange glow, and filling it with the hot stench of rotting wood, Jules climbed up on top of the big wooden table in the middle of the room. Through the fallen wall, the browning grass of early summer unfolded for twenty yards and then gave way to a wild field of weeds that glimmered green. Inside, the walls were dark and black, and so when a small black boy walked into the gaping, sun filled mouth of the shack, Jules saw him immediately. The boy had not expected to find Jules, shirtless and flexing, perched atop the big oak table, exercising in a manner more bizarre than the boy would have ever imagined.

“What are you doing?” the boy said, and Jules’s face flushed hot.

But Jules did the only reasonable thing that he could think of. He answered, “I am becoming a strongman,” in so relaxed a manner that he felt he had dodged any real threat of embarrassment. After all, this was a perfectly natural thing to want to become. Jules sat down on the edge of the table, letting his legs dangle loosely off the side. “Haven’t you ever heard of a strongman before?”

The little boy let his eyes wander up toward the ceiling. He chewed for a moment on his lower lip, and then said, “No. I mean I’ve heard of them.” He looked back at Jules. “I just don’t know what they are supposed to do. That’s all.”

“All kinds of wonderful things,” Jules said. He jumped down off of the table. He walked over to the boy and then, mimicking the movements as he went, said, “They’re in the circus, and they have big muscles, and they can lift really heavy things right up over their heads.”

“That sounds pretty alright.” The boy lifted his head up straight and made his way over to the table where he hopped up and perched at the far end, careful to imitate the pose that Jules had taken. He puffed up his chest. He was a short but solid little boy. He had on denim overalls and a buttoned cotton shirt. He wore a grey cap that he had pushed to the back of his head so that a big tuft of black hair shoved its way out from underneath the brim.

“I’m Jules,” Jules said, and he walked over to the table, his hand extended up to the boy who considered it for a moment, watching it as it approached, before he took it.

“Tommy,” he said, and he was careful to look Jules in the eye. “Do you think I could be a strongman too?”

“Not sure,” Jules said, and he took into account for the first time that there might be some sort of criteria for being a strong man. But knowing what these were might rule Jules out as quickly as Tommy, so Jules said, “I don’t see why not. It only takes alot of work.”

Tommy was a sturdy enough kid, ready to sprout into a tall and powerful man. He was dusty and had beaten up shoes, but he had bright eyes and a kind smile.

“How is it you’re around here, anyway?” Jules asked.

“Moved in down the street,” Tommy said. This wasn’t unheard of, that a black family would move in to a white neighborhood, but it was new for Jules’s street. “My mom does work at some of the houses on the street, so she moved us closer so she doesn’t have to stay away so long during the day.”

“Oh,” Jules said. “Down the street, huh?”

“Yeah.” Tommy used his hands to slide along the table towards Jules so that they were sitting right next to each other. “So what is it that we have to do?” Tommy said, and he unhooked the shoulders of his overalls so that he could take his shirt off like Jules, as this was clearly requisite for the day’s exercises.

“Best I can figure it,” Jules began, “we’ve got to make ourselves big and strong. I saw this strongman at the circus once, and he was doing all of these exercises on the stage, lifting himself up and lifting weights and such. He said that it showed how strong he was, so I figure that if we do enough of those exercises, we’ll end up strong like he was.”

“Oh,” Tommy said. He glanced over Jules’s physique and noticed that the boy was indeed strong looking. Already he had the kinds of carved striations that indicated, in Tommy’s experience, years of hard work. “How many are we supposed to do?”

“I think alot of them,” Jules answered. And then Jules made a quick move up onto the table and took a position face down on the table. “This is a good one,” he said, and he began doing pushups right there on the table. “See, you do it like this. You just lower yourself slowly down until you touch your chest to the table, and then you raise yourself back up.”

“Is it hard?” Tommy asked as he watched beads of sweat form on Jules’s forehead in the midday heat.

“Not the first couple,” Jules said. “You try a few.” Jules got up from the table and leaped down onto the ground again to make room for Tommy. It was good to have a friend, another voice to fill the silence of the abandoned shack.

Tommy spent a few minutes clumsily getting the hang of the exercise, and then, before he knew it, he was rattling them off with ease. Later in the day, Jules took Tommy to the old field full of weeds behind the lane of houses, and they ran among the tall grasses and reeds that sprung from the ground. They found an old wagon wheel and Tommy watched Jules running and rolling the wheel, until it hit a rock and split. It was really just a thing to keep them running anyway. At dusk they fell, panting and covered in pollen and the dust of the red earth, into a tired bundle on the ground. They watched the sky grow dark and fill with the millions of pinpoint stars, and they felt a sleepy summer night come on. When the sound of crickets began to rise, the two boys walked slowly and with heavy feet back up the hill to the lane. Before parting and walking home to his barren and quiet house, Jules made Tommy promise to meet him each morning, just before noon, to continue their training. Tommy agreed, and they walked home, their footsteps surrounded by the chirping of the night and covered in a blanket of darkness.

When Jules arrived home, his mother was at the window, rocking in her chair and watching the still night through the window. There was a plate of chicken and biscuits and beans on the table for him. He washed and then ate silently, letting his mother stay alone in her chair. At times Jules was unsure if she was awake or merely sleeping in her chair that rocked always gently beneath her.

After dinner, Jules went to bed and fell asleep before anyone came to the door. Maybe his mother wouldn’t hear the knocking without him awake, and then maybe she would be spared that night.

Jules dreamt that he and Tommy and Sunra had taken the stage together in front of a marvelous crowd full of feathered hats and cheering children, children delirious with joy. There were wondrous golden dresses and silken finery in the audience, and Jules felt in himself the

thrill adoration and the power of the stage beneath him. When he woke in the morning, he was exhilarated with the thought of it, and it carried him out and into the morning sunshine where he realized that he wanted nothing more than to make that dream real.

Eventually, the boys finished the design of a lengthy series of exercises that they used to strengthen their bodies, and this series, while strangely and crudely organized, proved highly effective. As June gave way to July and the air filled with mosquitoes and with horse flies that left red, stinging welts, the boys noticed that they had become much stronger and ever more capable of impressive feats. They felt new power in their bodies, and though they probably ought to have been more conscious of what it meant for a white boy and a black boy to be together so often, they knew how strong they really were, and so fear slipped softly away as the azaleas reached full bloom, and the summer bees made a noise so loud that it hovered always in the air above the town, a constant and pervasive vibrato. In fact, in only that month's time, both of the boys had nearly doubled in size so that they could now overpower any of the other children and, they were sure, any adult who showed any ill will to either of them. This was the way that they felt, though they never spoke it aloud, understanding that these things were best left unrecognized.

Jules had become so strong that it was ordinary enough for him to lift Tommy over his head many times. The first time he had ever attempted this, he had failed to do it even once. But, now, it was nothing for him to do it nearly forty times. Tommy too could repeat a certain exercise of his own invention, in which he hoisted a big wooden support beam (that had served the house before its collapse as a central pillar of the roof) onto his shoulders. Then, while holding the heavy beam, he would lower his rear end toward the ground as the first step in the movement, and then bring himself to an upright and standing position as the second step. This he could accomplish many times consecutively. They were well on their way to becoming strongmen. Of this, both boys were convinced.

From time to time, the boys went into town together, a trip that still enthralled Jules each time they went, but that often left Tommy shaky and uneasy, though he dutifully went along with his friend. Town was different from their sideshow tent because there were so many people there. Anyone could see them. They rode the streetcar into the center of town, and walked along the streets downtown. Here it was easy to feel the tension between black and white people. Tommy was careful, and wisely so, to watch his place around the white people. But, generally, he was overlooked, as it was still common enough in those days for a white child to travel in town with the child of his mother's servant. Indeed nobody ever really paid much attention to Tommy.

Jules very much loved the bustle of the city in the morning, and so they'd often go to town before their noon exercises. He and Tommy would walk from storefront to storefront with eyes glazed in amazement. Inside the stores were generous stockpiles of incredible things that neither of the boys had ever experienced. There were sweet rolls dripping with white frosting, glowing lamps, miles of colored fabric. And though these things had strange and powerful draws for the boys, by the time they got back to the abandoned house, they were able to lose themselves in their routine and in the companionship that they gave to one another. But, in the city, it was easy to long for all of those worldly things, though they were unsure why.

One night, after Jules and Tommy had spent the morning in town, Jules sat at the dinner

table in deep thought. He couldn't eat. He felt no hunger. He looked at his mother in her chair by the window, her rocking like the constant and precise pendulum of a grandfather clock. "Mother," he said. "Why do the black people ride in the back of the streetcar?"

She stared out the shuttered window at a sky growing deeply pink, a sky that would soon fade into total darkness. Her rocking made a gentle creaking.

Jules got up from the table and made his way to his bed, leaving his dinner uneaten on the table. He thought that he heard her say, "Because they are different," but when he looked up, she was as still and as silent as before. And when the knock came at the door late in the night, Jules was still awake in his bed, turning over and over again. When the noises started he ignored them, even when he heard a lamp crash to the ground and shatter in a dull trickling of ceramic against the wooden floor. He did nothing, not because he was scared or incapable, in fact he was strong enough now, he felt, that he could do almost anything. But he was sure that it was not his place to interfere, that this was not his house. He covered his head, first with his pillow, and then with his blanket, and he stayed as motionless as he could until the morning light lit the particles of dust around his bed like millions of stars floating behind that wooden screen.

When Jules got out of bed that morning, he found that his mother had already left the house. Everything had been tidied up. Not a scrap remained from the night before. Jules would have been unsure if anything had happened or not, were it not for the lamp's having gone missing. This filled Jules's mouth with a sour acrid taste that burned in his throat. He could not bear to stay near the house. So he gathered up Tommy at the abandoned house, and together they went to the streetcar stand, where they boarded in complete silence. Jules showed every bit of his upset on his face. In his wrinkled brow, his reddened cheeks, and the grinding of his teeth. He stared out the window of the streetcar in silence. Tommy sat next to him, quiet as well, and though the crowd should have stared at the black boy sitting where he was not supposed to, they left the boys alone. It was plain to see that something was wrong with Jules. It made Jules feel better to think that Tommy was there next to him. And to Tommy, it was easy to feel the heat of the still air inside the streetcar, to know about the sting of all of those sets of eyes on him, white and black alike. What was he doing? The boys watched the shanties from the window as the trolley plodded its way into town.

When they left the streetcar, Jules fished around in his pocket and pulled out a nickel that he had taken from his mother's drawer at home.

"Today," he told Tommy, his face softening with each word, "today we will get some sweet rolls." Jules loved to be in the city. It made him feel better. Things moved around him, and he had a sense that, though they had chosen to exit the streetcar, he could have stayed on. The tracks kept going.

"I bet they're really good," Tommy said, his eyes as big as saucers of milk.

The boys walked down the street. The town was busy, but tired and worn down by the long heat of the summer and the sticky humidity of the overcast morning. The city seemed lulled into a quiet rhythm, a tired, drunken summer waltz. Horses and carriages seemed to pass slowly, their wheels rumbling and creaking sedately along the avenue. The pulse of the city, of everything and everyone, had slowed all around them.

The boys passed a store that sold chairs and lamps and tables, and they stopped by the window and looked in at a big mahogany banquet table that stretched out in front of them with a shine that seemed to be slicked with oil. It was so shiny that they were sure they could see their

own reflections in it, if they had gone into the store.

Tommy's face was pressed up against the window, and his breath frosted the glass in billowy wisps. "What do you suppose they do with a table like that?" he asked.

"I suppose they eat on it." Jules wiped a sleeve across his brow to dry it from sweat and from the thick humidity of the air. It was hot like a jungle.

"My word! I don't believe that I'd ever eat off something that pretty," Tommy said. "I might mess it."

The boys continued walking down the street, but Tommy slowed and took a long look back at the grand thing before they were too far off.

"Do you believe a thing like that?" he said.

"Like what?" Jules asked. Tommy's face was flushed, and the boy's head was covered in a glaze of sweat.

"All that fuss over a table you're just going to eat off of," he said.

The boys stopped in front of the bakery window. There were sweet rolls, delicate gooey things that dripped butter and that were dusted in finely ground cinnamon. Cookies covered in a fine glassy sugar glaze. There were tea cakes powdered with snowy white sugar, and big colorful cakes, frosted in thick fondant. Everything seemed to drip with sweetness. Jules stared at the sweet rolls with his mouth wide open. They looked hot, and Jules thought that he saw steam rising off of them. But he had already forgotten that it was summer, and that it was so hot on the street that the tar around the streetcar tracks was melting in the sun.

The boys walked into the store, and they were immediately overcome by the thick smell of cooking butter and flowery sugar. All around them were crafted the most beautiful sweets they could have ever imagined.

"Wow," was all that Tommy could say. He lifted his hand up to touch one of them.

Just as Jules's finger was about to touch a beautiful orange and gold marzipan fish, that was shaped into a pose so that it looked as if it were leaping forth from deep, cold ocean water, the purveyor yelled, "Don't touch that!" He walked over to the boys, a tall and slender, stern looking man. He looked whittled out of wood, bent at odd angles with sharp knees and elbows. He wore a long white apron that was covered in flour. Jules looked around, and the store was empty except for one other black boy, a few years older than the two of them, on the far side of the store. "You want something," the baker said, "You ask me." He spoke only to Jules.

"Yes sir," Jules said, and he put his head down so that his eyes were not challenging the tall old man, whose white tufts of hair jutted from his head in spikes. "We'd like two sweet rolls," Jules said, and he held out the shiny nickel that he'd brought.

"Alright," the man said, softening his tone a bit. He looked Jules over with a careful eye, and then turned and made his way over to the window, where he lifted the dripping pastries from the dish with a pair of metal tongs. He brought the rolls to Jules, and the two boys took two wooden chairs in the corner of the store. There was a mannequin there, strangely placed and naked. The thing had no business being in the store. Jules looked over the strange, polished wooden statue. It was in the slender shape of a man, and it had a smooth, featureless head. Jules wanted to touch it, but he was scared of the baker, so before he did, he looked around the store to make sure that the man was not watching him.

"These are some good rolls," Tommy said.

Jules had not tasted his yet. He looked over to Tommy whose mouth and cheeks were covered in the sticky white icing. Jules looked down at the thing in his hands. He heard the

labored, ecstatic breathing of Tommy next to him as Tommy chewed away at the pastry. Jules considered the sweet roll in his hand. Now that he had the thing, he was unsure if he wanted to taste it at all.

“What’s he doing?” Tommy asked, and he pointed to the black boy at the far end of the store who had gone over to a plate of tea cakes, and who was now taking them, one by one, in a napkin that he then placed in his shirt pocket before walking towards the door.

The store was very silent, and it seemed to take far too long for the boy to cross the wooden floor of the bakery, the one big room still full of the airy cloud of sugar vapor. The boy walked determinedly towards the door, and the boys felt the heat rushing around them, first from the open door at the front of the store, and second from the big ovens at the back of the store, where the candies and treats were made, and from where was coming the sharp-jointed man in a puff of white flour.

“Stop, thief!” the man yelled, and his face became twisted into a fiery rage. Eyes like lightening bolts, a flash through the silent store. Jules and Tommy jumped from the chairs, and Jules felt the sweet roll slip from his fingers and land on the floor. The boy began to run from the store.

The boy had nearly reached the door when he collided, head on, with a broad white man, who was dressed in a white linen suit. The collision sent both men tumbling to the ground, the black boy and the broad white man. The black boy was the first to his feet, and the baker leapt in a remarkable fashion right over the other white man, and he chased the black boy into the street.

“Stop, thief!” the baker yelled again.

The white man on the ground had a trickle of red blood that started in his hair and slipped down his temple. “Goddamn nigger,” the man said, wiping the blood from his head with his hand. He stood up and pulled, in one fluid motion, a small revolver from the waistband of his pants.

The boys turned to face the window, where they could see, silhouetted against the grey buildings in his stark white suit, the broad man, his arms extended, the little black barrel of the pistol reaching out into the hot summer air.

And then everything seemed to shake with the bang and rattle of the loosening of the bullet that roared through the air. The window rattled, and Tommy covered his ears. Jules jumped to his feet, and Tommy followed, both of them running for toward the door. Then another shot rang out, and their ears rang with the huge noise that filled the empty space in the alley. They stepped out, and the sidewalk beneath their feet was covered in a pile of tea cakes and powdered sugar. Off, down the road, maybe only forty feet from them, the body of a seventeen year old black boy (who the papers would soon identify as Buddy James) lay in the street. Blood pooled around him, and he squirmed and moaned in a way that was barely audible, and to Jules it was horribly unnatural, the way the boy twisted on the ground like an earthworm pulled from the deep red Georgia clay. Then, a long high pitched whistle from the boy, like steam escaping a cooling tea kettle. And he was dead. The white man wiped a spot of foaming white saliva from his chin with a shirt sleeve. He replaced the gun in his waistband, his chest heaving with heavy panting. He fell to the ground and knelt there on one knee, holding his handkerchief against the bleeding temple of his head.

Jules saw that Tommy had tears running down his face, but all he could think of to say was, “I’m sorry,” which he felt wouldn’t help, and so he stayed quiet. From across the alley, from one of the other storefronts, a voice lifted itself above the terrible silence that had fallen on

the street in the long seconds since the shots were fired. “Walt just shot a negro!” And then there was a murmur of voices that came rushing into the alley like the tide crashing against cliffs. And the little alley was full of voices and bodies. They crowded around the two men on the ground, the dead and silent body of Buddy James, and the collapsed, sniffling body of Walt Greenlake, who held his head in his hands, lying on the cobblestones, sobbing. Around Buddy a group of black men had gathered, and they called out to the crowd for a rope to lynch the offending white man. Jules took Tommy’s hand and tried to pull him off to the side of the alley so that they might escape. There seemed to be no way to avoid a terrible brawl. The white men called Buddy a “no good nigger thief,” and the two parties moved closer and closer together in a crescendo of tiny steps that swelled and filled the entire alleyway with yells and echoes. Jules could hear almost nothing over the sound of his heart pounding in his ears. The broad man from the bakery emerged with a rifle and fired it into the air, but this only provoked the crowd into an eruption of shouting. They smelled the tinny smell of blood rising from the hot cobblestones into the humid summer air, and they all began to swirl together, and then the first punch was thrown. Screams rose into the air, and suddenly, there was a battle in the street.

And there, behind it all, the whole mess, slinking away towards the back of the alley way and out into the street, were the two boys, Tommy nearly overcome with rage and with fear, Jules pulling at his arm, dragging him out and into a sprint down the street to the streetcar station, the poor children, lost in the sweeping disorder of it all. Something dreadful had happened, and it had happened so quickly that even now, even after seeing it all, Jules was unsure if it had even been real. But then, there was Tommy, his face covered in the chalky white salt of his tears that had dried to his face in the hot sun.

The children ran, hurried and frightened, all the way back to the trolley stop. Their hearts pounded in their chests, and they felt the hot burning in their legs. Sweat poured down their faces. They were feverishly lightheaded.

At the stop, the boys boarded the trolley, and sat separately. Tommy took a seat in the back. Jules, near the front, his head pressed against the window. As they rode, the air flew past the window, and it cooled Jules’s face. His clothes were soaked through with sweat. He watched out the window at the little shanty town. He saw the little black children playing in the streets and sitting on the porches of those rickety shacks. He thought back to the sweet roll and imagined its smell, thick with sugar and rich with cinnamon, and the thought filled his head with the perfume of the bakery that overcame him with a dreamy haze and he fell suddenly asleep, as if etherized or defeated by opium. And he slept on the street car as it rolled lazily, undisturbed by any of the day’s events, until it finally stopped at the boys’ stop. And Tommy took Jules by the sleeve and woke him, and they left the car together, walking into an empty street, and they heard the crack of thunder above them, as a hot summer rain began to fall in the cooling late afternoon, and the boys walked down the street towards home.

And when they arrived at their street, they were dripping with rain, a warm rain that ran down their faces and into their eyes, and playing with a ball on their blurry, washed out street were the other boys from the neighborhood, apparitions in the rain. And as the boys went closer, Jules felt the rain grow stronger and harder, and he felt that it might never stop raining, that something had broken and that now the world would be covered in a terrible, driving rain for ever and ever.

The boys converged on Jules and Tommy. Tommy who had not said a word since leaving the bakery. Tommy who was swollen with fear and anger. Tommy who now knew what there existed for him out beyond the confines of the little shack.

“Well,” a tall and blond one said. His hair was matted onto his head from the rain, and he wore a strange smile. The sky was dark, nearly black. The clouds had closed in all around them. “Look who it is.”

Jules looked over at Tommy. He was still, and he gave no emotion away in his expression. Water poured from Jules’s head in sheets. “Go away,” he called out to the boys.

There were five of them. “Why should we do that?” the blond one said. “You can’t hide in that abandoned house forever. Sooner or later you have to come out and face the world. You should run on home.”

Jules took a big step towards the blond boy, and he showed him how big he was. Jules, the rock of a boy, with water falls cascading from every angle of his body. “Get out of my way,” he said again. “Leave me alone.”

The blond boy looked off and behind Jules, then he turned and glanced at his companions. He laughed out loud.

Tommy did not move. Jules glanced over at him, and Tommy was like a statue in the rain, as if he were playing a game with the other boys, remaining always still and never even stirring. The other boys paid Tommy no attention.

“I told you to get on home,” the blond boy said, and he stepped toward Jules and gave him a shove on his broad chest.

But the shove could not move Jules even an inch. What it did do was release a terrible anger in Jules, a rage that had been building in him for a long time. And Jules reached out with his huge right arm, taking the boy underneath the arm and picking him up into the air. Then he threw him to the ground, and the boy lay there in the rain, the huge, chiseled body of Jules standing over him, shielding him momentarily from the hot rain. The other boys stepped back. They had not expected Jules to toss the blond one so easily. But Jules had not calmed the thunder inside himself, and he pounced on the fallen child. He began hitting him on the head and face. And Jules felt his body move around him, but he did not control it. It had come free from him, liberated by his anger and his sadness. And his arms hit like sledge hammers, and soon the blond boy’s face was like pounded putty, and the water that pooled around them was red and hot. The other boys screamed and ran off down the street, but Jules’s arms continued, like steam dynamos that would not stop until the water that powered them cooled and left them at rest.

And when his arms did stop, the boy was a crumpled mass on the ground, sputtering and spitting blood and water from his mouth. Jules jumped off of the boy, horrified at the sight of him. He turned and saw Tommy, still and unmoved, but Jules could not be sure in the rain if there were tears running down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Tommy,” he yelled out into the rain as a huge clap of thunder rang out over head.

But Tommy did not answer.

“I have to leave,” Jules said, and he glanced around the street. “Help him in somewhere,” Jules said to Tommy.

And finally, Tommy nodded softly, a stream of water pouring from his chin as he lifted it ever so slightly. Jules saw that he was smiling, a crooked smile, one twisted by pain and sadness and by the understanding that his only friend in the world was leaving, because he couldn’t

change anything about the world, no matter how he might try.

Jules walked over to Tommy, and the two boys embraced. Then, Jules took a last look at the street that he had lived on for the entire life that he could remember. Dark clouds blacked out the sky, and rain fell in long, hot ribbons. Steam rose along the dirt of the street. And there, off in the distance, was the burned out abandoned shack that Jules knew would smell of peat and must in the morning, and that he would never see again. His house was lit only in the kitchen window, where Jules thought that he might see his mother's shadow, a black spot in profile through the shutters, sitting and staring out the window and down the street. Maybe she had seen the fight, seen what happened, Jules thought. And maybe she would understand late tonight when Jules did not come home, and through the next morning, and even on into next week, and forever until the day that she would eventually crumble, too young a woman to be so badly defeated by life, into her own desolation and death.

Jules looked back to Tommy, and his face had settled again. "Goodbye," Jules said. And Tommy nodded, his eyes narrowing for a moment, giving away how hard Tommy held back his tears. Jules turned and looked down the narrow lane that opened into the main street, which in turn led to a larger street, and that one to the train station. This was the way with everything for Jules now, one road opening up, and that one up, like the tributaries of a great river, ever widening and growing stronger in current, the rapids forming white foam as they push, always down stream. And Jules ran. He ran as fast as he could, out into the opening street, and on into the dark, starless world.

CHAPTER 3

As a boy, Hakan Aziz would wake in the mornings to the white reflected sun from the Marmara, hearing the ocean like a gentle breeze off in the distance, and in those mornings he knew nothing beyond Istanbul, beyond the look of his grandfather in the garden as he sipped coffee and read over the paper news. Hakan thought rarely that there might be something beyond mornings in his green shuttered house, beyond the cobbled streets and the smell of the ocean in the air, but when he did think of those things, he wondered what they might be, what sorts of things might exist out and beyond the world of his family and his black maid who made him breakfast every morning and who had no family of her own.

Hakan was as ordinary a boy as most, and he loved to walk to the garden of the small blue mosque near the house where he would meet with the other boys on summer mornings. From there, they might go to the sea, or spend days wandering through the city and eating Baklava.

When his grandfather died, Hakan was left in the home with his aged grandmother and his maid, Helvi. Of them he knew little, for they were silent and kept to themselves as Hakan knew women often to do, and he found himself longing for the days when his grandfather would come to his room in the morning and raise him out of bed by his powerful right arm, an arm that had grown strong from many years on the dock loading the ships of the Sultan. Hakan knew the smell of Turkish coffee and strong cigarettes on his grandfather, and those smells vanished quickly from the house after his death, and so Hakan, who never knew his own parents, felt the emptiness of Istanbul fall suddenly upon him. Soon the baklava had no sweetness and the Raki, which had only recently become less than forbidden for a boy his age, tasted not of the sweetened raisins and licorice aniseed, but of murky and cloudy brine. In these days, the mind of Hakan drifted more often to places far off that he might one day see for himself.

After the death of his grandfather, Hakan quickly grew into a man. This was mostly due to his working at the dock everyday. Here he would load and unload large crates and boxes for the Sultan and for other ships coming into the port. The days were very hot, and it was often difficult to continue to work through the hottest afternoon hours. Hakan drank much water and refused the Raki at lunchtime because it only made him slow and weak and thirsty.

While lunching, Hakan would sit on a wooden crate and look off above the cliffs of the port and at the towers and domes of the city rising above them. He tried always to see the little blue mosque of his neighborhood, and at times he thought he saw it as a fleck of blue amongst the bridges and domes.

Hakan grew up very quickly on the docks, both because it made him a man to support his grandmother and Helvi (who had grown sick during a failed pregnancy and was now an invalid) and also because he often was forced to defend himself against the toughs from the boats who would often start trouble with him. But soon, Hakan's work and the constant threat of fights made him swell into a large mountain of a man. He had arms the size of tree trunks and legs the size of the columns in the mosques. And his fighting had given him scars along his chest, stomach, back, and arms, and to look at him often caused fear in even the most toughened and

crude sailors.

But Hakan wanted nothing of this world, and in secret he dreamed of the day when Helvi and his grandmother, who was growing blind from cataracts, might die and be set into the peace of the afterlife so that he might leave the docks and the doom of the city of Constantinople, so that he might go away to a new place where new things would find him and where he might become something much more gentle than the bear that he had become. He was fifteen years old.

The early fall of 1891 brought with it a small collection of days during which the sea was whipped into fury by heavy winds and by a rough spell of weather not so far offshore. The tide washed the pier and the Marmara with a milky white that was like the Raki when added to water. The result of all this was the suspension of travel to or from the docks, and so Hakan was temporarily suspended from employment. In the first days this was a welcomed rest, even if a nagging discomfort and fear for his wellbeing, and for the wellbeing of Helvi and his grandmother, lingered in his restful hours. On the fourth day, Hakan took Helvi for a walk through the *Kapali Çarsi*, both because she enjoyed the walk through town because of the fresh air she felt rush through her (though she sat held in Hakan's big right arm now as she had become nearly completely paralyzed), and because this was an appropriate spot to shop for the family's needs.

The Grand Bazaar, as it is sometimes known, was a beautiful maze of hallways, gothic arches, and skylight windows that cast the glow of day over every manner of item ever thought up for purchase. There were hats and spices and meats and Raki. Hakan loved to take baklava, and he offered Helvi a small piece, which she took, and Hakan heard the soft sigh of pleasure as she chewed, her head nestled in just above his shoulder. They passed stacks of beautiful plates, which were adorned in Byzantine swirls of blue and gold and red, intricate patterns that Hakan liked to stare into. As they neared the large square lying next to the market, Hakan noticed that Helvi was sleeping, and so he took a seat by a small kiosk that was selling flavored pipe tobacco, and he sat and had a long smoke with the man at the kiosk.

The tobacco was scented with apple, and it's sweetness made the cooling fall air seem like summer again, when the winds would be hot and the Marmara quiet and cooperative. After the smoke, Hakan leaned over, taking Helvi in his right arm, and hoisting her quickly up to his shoulder again.

"Are you ready, my little Helvi?" he asked her.

"I am ready, my little aniseed."

And as Hakan began walking out through the Beyazit square he saw that many people were watching him very closely. Perhaps they are confused about Helvi, he thought to himself. He cursed their poverty and wished that he could buy her a chair to cart her to market in, because she so loved the air outside of the house. But really they were amazed by the strength of this huge man who could carry another person so simply from his shoulder as if she were only a bag of rice.

From his right, a man approached Hakan. He was a Cypriot, small and dark with a big moustache that nearly covered his mouth and that curled up at the ends.

"You are a very strong man," he said to him, and Hakan paused in the street and bowed his head to the older man.

"Thank you," he said and started to walk again towards the avenue of Divan Yolu.

But the man took gentle hold of his elbow and said, “You see that they are watching you.” And Hakan turned around so that he was facing the square again, and he indeed saw a crowd of people, many of them children, gathered ten meters from his own toes watching him with wide smiles and flashing eyes. Many of them seemed only a few years younger than he was, and for the first time Hakan became aware of his enormous size. Lost in the daily labor of the pier, it was easy to forget that he was only a boy, and that life had made him a gnarled man before he had stopped to consider his smallness, and so he had avoided it all together, swelling quickly into the man that he now was.

“What do they stare at?” Hakan asked the mustachioed man.

Helvi put her mouth to Hakan’s ear and said, “I want to see,” because she had had her head turned away from the square and could not see the mass of people.

“They wish to see you, boy,” the man said.

Hakan set Helvi down to the ground and lay her in a small pile of pillows that were lying in front of one of the kiosks. He turned her head so that she might see into the square, and a small smile showed through her dark face which was newly but clearly etched with a weariness of age and nearness to death.

Hakan walked towards the little group and felt a quickening of everything within his body. “Gather around,” he said, and the group started to form a bit of a circle around him. Istanbul was not foreign to street performers, and the tales of Aydin the Sword Eater, and various groups of acrobats had been common to Hakan only a few years earlier. “Do you wish to see feats of acrobatics?” he asked the crowd, because this was something that he knew was known to them. He paced awkwardly, his young body still graceless in its massive form.

The crowd sat silent for a moment, and then a boy, who must have been younger than ten years of age called “no” out to him.

“What would you have me do then?” Hakan asked, and he was as puzzled as the crowd was silent. The entire square it seemed had settled into a silent rhythm, a nearly motionless, windless, and voiceless standstill, save Hakan who continued to pace in the center of the ring.

“Why don’t you lift one of the kiosks,” a small but fiery voice called out from the audience. It was unknown in the crowd where this voice had come from, a voice that was unwavering, but somehow fragile, that seemed to come from the crowd as if speaking for all of them. Hakan knew it as Helvi’s voice, and he turned to see her lying on the pillows, her eyes as rich with life as he’d seen them for many years.

Hakan made his way over to one of the vendors nearby. He bowed slightly to show his respect and to ask his permission. The man gave him a little nod. Hakan made his way to the front of the big cart, and wheeled it into the square. The crowd seemed to be breathing all around him. He felt as though he could hear their breaths in his head. Hakan positioned himself on the far side of the cart and placed his hands underneath it. He felt it, stern and heavy against his calloused palms. He dared not question whether he might be able to lift it, for he had learned through the austerity of the docks that the only way to survive was to push on blindly as if there were no such thing as failure. He maneuvered himself underneath the cart, so that his legs formed perfect right angles, and he positioned himself, inhaling deeply for the big lift.

“Lift it!” someone from the crowd called out. But Hakan heard little of it. He was focused deeply on the object that felt so enormous in his hands. Then, with a great grunt, that twisted nearly into a shout or a howl, Hakan thrust his body upward, ripping the thing from the ground, then swiveling, grabbing, and leaning, so that when he came to rest, his back was arched

to balance the kiosk, and it was firmly in his grasp. His legs trembled underneath him, but the cart was in the air, pressing heavily against his chest. And though sweat ran down his temples and face, he was filled with a powerful rush of joy and the crowd became a riotous chorus of yells and applause.

Hakan held the cart in the air as still as he could make it, but his legs shook and his arms burned, and he wondered if the crowd could see how hard he was straining. But, once the applause had come to a stop, he set the cart down as lightly as was possible. Then, something incredible happened, something that Hakan would not have thought possible only the day before. A man flicked a gold coin towards Hakan and it landed at his feet. The crowd began to cheer and other coins were thrown, though there was no other that was gold.

There, standing in the plaza, the warmth of the applause filled Hakan with a kind of inner satisfaction that he had not felt since the consuming anticipation he had felt each morning while he waited for his grandfather to come and wake him, and to toss him in to the air, and to take him down to the sea to run amongst the waves and feel the fish against his bare legs in the water. He saw in front of him a mass of adoring strangers and he thought to himself that this was something he could do for ever. He looked over to Helvi and saw that she was happy as he was.

“You have grown into a man,” she said. “A very powerful man, my little aniseed. And Hakan was filled up to the brim, and he saw his life unfolding in front of him, decadent streets of Europe filled with applauding passersby as Hakan performed feats for them in exchange only for a small token of appreciation, a sovereign or a corona. The docks, in this vision, slipped off behind him, drifting away and sinking into the sea. Istanbul itself dwindled in his mind until it became only a spot on a vastly expanded world.

And just like that, the Great Sunra was born.

Hakan continued to spend his days at the docks, working to support his grandmother and Helvi. And when the weather calmed, it became an enterprise sufficient enough to keep the family fed once again. At night, though, Hakan began a very new and very different life. The streets, then, were often frequented by performers who under the torchlight of the streets, and the lanterns of the shops and inns displayed magical feats. Acrobats and jugglers, musicians, storytellers and all manner of incredible acts. Hakan became one of them. In the warm summer nights, he went out shirtless. He had a good corner that became his territory near the *Kapali Çarsi*, where the smell of sweet pastry mingled with the licorice smell of Raki in the air, and where often there was a crowd of people. This had once been the territory of Khalib the Juggler, who was an old man now, and who believed in the passing of legacy, and who gladly gave his own corner to the young performer. After, Khalib went to live inside of the catacombs at the little blue-roofed mosque where he awaited death. This was a beautiful spot too. A halo of light blanketed the corner because it was near the inn that led to the grand space that was the *Kapali Çarsi*. From the plaza there was a golden glow that came from all the torches and lamps of the shops, and the corner itself was lit by a fabulous scone that was hung on the wall of the inn so that its door could be seen from all the way down the avenue Divan Yolu.

Here, the big Hakan could be seen from far down the avenue, and almost throughout the plaza. And, the light, which made wild shadows dance through the avenue and over the big child's body, made Hakan look larger and fiercer so that he was almost a supernatural figure inhabiting that darkened boulevard. At that time, he called himself Hakan the Magnificent, which was a good enough title at that point. And it was a name that became famous across

Istanbul. On many nights, Hakan would go home with pockets full of coins.

His show was simple. He improvised feats of strength, often times lifting a collection of audience members at a time or large objects that lay near his corner. He would flex and pose (this in the flickering candle, sconce, and torch light was a remarkable sight, the light making him glow a deep golden yellow against the blackness of the night). And at the end of the night, feeling rich in money and in spirit, Hakan would walk his tired way back to his small house and fall into a deep and exhausted sleep, all the while the Marmara whispering its tender cadence to him.

When the early fall began to settle in, Hakan's grandmother became very sick. A stroke had taken away her ability to speak and had removed much of the glimmering of life from her eyes. Only when Hakan came in to her room and sat by her bed, holding her hand tightly in his enormous paw, did she seem to be alive at all. Her pallid skin, in those moments, would flush with a warm pink and her face seemed to fill again with a spark of life. But all of that would leave her when Hakan would leave her side. She'd become pale and cold again, and Hakan was sure that her death was near. And when she finally did pass on while in the soft peace of dreams in the night, Hakan was happy that she had been given peace and happy that his performances in the street might give him the chance to pay for her to have a real funeral, which they held at the blue-domed masque in their quarter. It was a lovely, somber affair, and so many of their neighbors had come to honor her, for she had always been a rock of a woman, and she had gained, in her younger days a certain respect from all of those in the quarter who knew her and her husband.

After the funeral, Hakan knew that he would soon be able to leave Istanbul, and with the money that he had made, he hired a little wiry black girl, who he thought must look like Helvi had at the same age, to take care of Helvi full time. And knowing that the aged orphan had a young one to care for her, he readied himself for his chance to move away and pursue his own dreams, dreams that were then wrapped up in his performances, dreams that would let him leave the rough and backbreaking life of the docks forever behind him.

"Go, my little aniseed," Helvi had told him. "Go and find your own life in the world." And Hakan saw when she spoke to him that there was still an indelible fire in her eyes, a powerful soul that would keep her alive for many years to come.

"I will," he told her. "And I will never forget you."

But this was in the early fall, and with the coming of winter, Hakan's performances became less frequent because he was less imposing a figure when fully clothed, and because there were fewer people wandering the nighttime streets. So he bided his time obediently at the docks, pushing ever on toward the coming of Spring when he felt sure his opportunity would arise. So in those first days of Spring, Hakan became determined to save a large sum of money so that he might buy himself passage to some far away place.

At first, this was easy. Crowds gathered around him in the same way that they had the summer before, and he wowed them with his show. They seemed insatiable in their desire to see him perform. But, inexplicably, this enthusiasm waned early in April. And then, Hakan saw it. A poster pasted up on the wall of Beyazit square advertising "Professor Edward Desailles's Collection of the Strongest Men Alive." They were to arrive in only two weeks. The men would come in and perform, first for the Sultan at the palace, and then in a few of the local theaters. And so Hakan, having found the source of his diminished crowds, went and spoke with the

theater owner who told him that they were to come in from Paris, that they were a traveling group of strongmen who performed all over Europe. There was no doubting that this was Hakan's chance. He needed only to join with these men, and then he would have his leave of Istanbul.

He readied himself in the coming weeks by performing less in the square, by working hard on the docks (the thing he knew had made him strong in the first place), and by eating his fill of wonderful foods each night. His savings had been sufficient to afford Hakan a kind of luxury in those two weeks, and he relished in what he was sure would be the last of his days in Istanbul. He fed Helvi rich sweets and Raki, and they huddled together in the moonlight that bathed his bed from the window each night. And each night, Hakan became certain that the Marmara was one night closer to changing from the sweet lullaby of his childhood into a song that would wish him goodbye and carry him on his way.

And then the day came when the boat carrying the strongmen arrived at Hakan's dock, and he watched them walk from the gangplank onto the long pier. They were enormous men draped in strange clothing, and they were led down the pier by a curious Frenchman dressed in a dull brown suit with a vest underneath his jacket and a funny hat that had a brim that swept all the way around it. Hakan stayed back from them, careful not to provoke any attention. His reputation, he knew, had traveled around the city, and he was sure that any direct confrontation that might arise on the dock would neither be friendly nor suit his designs. So he waited near a pile of crates, staying seated the whole time so as not to appear large, and he watched the men and their little professor walk up and off the pier, and he saw that they were large men, but that there was none so large as he was, and he was happy knowing this, because he felt certain that they would ask him to join them, if only he could find the right moment to reveal himself.

And so, on the following night, Hakan, having clothed himself in large and flowing clothing to disguise his own massive size, went to the performance at the theater with all of the other local people. The stage was made up with an enormous mirror and sets of large metal poles with metal balls attached at the ends. There were also various apparatus on stage, some of them metal and some made of wood. Hakan sat in the back of the theater, choosing a corner that was shadowed by the balcony so that he might nestle himself into a kind of dark anonymity in the back of the room.

The men took the stage to a roar of applause. They were enormous! Five of them up there on stage, all dressed in different robes. Then, the professor took the center of the stage, with a small Turk who, hunched by scoliosis, was made to look tiny by the large men. The professor spoke in a dancing, musical French, that was as strange to the crowd as the huge men on the stage. Then the little Turk spoke, translating the Frenchman's words to the crowd.

"Behold!" he started, and then he gave a pause and a glance up at the professor. "Professor Edward Desailles Collection is before you." And with that, the audience cheered again. The professor motioned and waved his hand to the men, and they bowed dutifully. "They will now perform for you a series of human-strength defying acts never before witnessed." Again the crowd cheered.

Then, the little man looked up to the professor, who walked up to the very edge of the stage so that he seemed to tower over the men seated in the front row. Hakan could now see that the man wore a monocle, and that he had a long French nose, with a drastic slope. Tufts of silvery air seemed to spill out from under that absurd hat's brim.

The Frenchman spoke, and the crowd waited eagerly for the little Turk to translate. “The great Italian, Braccione, will now perform first for you.” And with that, the man clad in green and red silk robes and a cape stepped forward on the stage. The other men stepped back one pace and lowered their heads. Braccione removed the cape first, and then the robes so that his enormous physique was revealed to the crowd, who made only a small reaction. A mild clapping rose up from the floor. The professor looked oddly nervous.

Hakan watched the stage with intense focus. This Braccione was a fine specimen. He had rock solid arms and legs, with a chiseled abdomen and fine features. He wore tight fitting underpants made of black cotton and he stood a powerful figure on the stage. His face was as emotionless as stone.

The Frenchman whispered to the little Turk who shrugged his shoulders lightly, and then the Frenchman spoke again. “Braccione will now lift a metal weight weighing over one hundred kilos!” said the Turk. To this the crowd applauded more enthusiastically, and the Frenchman’s face brightened.

The big Italian made his way over to the metal pole that had been set up at stage left, and Hakan watched him first as he moved across the stage, then he watched his reflection in the big mirror. The Italian picked the big thing up over his head with a huge sweeping of his body and a grunt that became a yell as it cleared his head and he locked his arms above it. The crowd cheered, and the professor clapped as well.

“Have you ever seen anything so magnificent,” the Turk translated, and the Italian dropped the metal weight and walked back to the rear of the stage, getting a clap on the back from the professor as he passed.

Hakan saw that it was time. He rose, at first only a shadow in the back of the theater, and then walked out into the aisle and the bouncing torch light that lit up the whole stage. He continued walking forward until it was clear that he was as large as these men, that he was, perhaps, the biggest of them all. “I am not impressed,” Hakan said, and he removed the hood of his robe from his head, so that his young and sea roughened face shone to the whole theater. No one spoke.

The Frenchman looked down at the little Turk, who quickly whispered Hakan’s words to the professor in a shaky voice. “Is that so,” came the voice of the Turk back to Hakan?” “It is so,” Hakan said, and he walked up to the front of the stage, where, still standing on the theater floor, his head was nearly level with the head of the hunchbacked Turk. Hakan then did that which he had been dreaming of. He cast his robes quickly and suddenly from his body to the floor so that his entire girth was visible to the whole of the theater, and all of those present saw that this was the real strongman, and they ripped into raucous applause. And then, Hakan took the stage. The applause settled, and he walked over to the enormous metal bar, feeling the blood get hot through his entire body. His head was swimming and his breath blew from his chest forcefully. He bent over and felt the solid thing in his hands, felt its cold metal grip against his own, and then, feeling the weight of the thing all the way down to his feet he thrust it over his head. The rush of the moment was so intense, that Hakan felt little of the effort he was sure it took his body to lift the thing. But then, he did the unthinkable. He brought the weight down from above his head to his shoulders, where he pushed it, straight up, using only his arms, again up over his head. This strain he felt through his whole body, and he felt his whole person shake as he did it. His heart thumped hard against his chest, but he had done it, and every person in the place was sure that they had imagined this act, as it was surely impossible. Hakan threw the

weight down on the stage, leapt down, gathering his robes as he went out into the street, where, after being out of the sight of all those inside, he collapsed upon the ground, feeling his body hot and trembling beneath him.

The night was cool against his face in a way that made his breath fall wet and cold and heavy upon his own cheek. From outside he heard a sequence of polite applause. Hours seemed to pass, and Hakan's strength returned to him. He picked himself up, so that now, rather than lying in a crumpled pile, he was propped firmly and erect against the side of the theater. His eyes became awake again, and the heavy exhaustion had given way to a euphoric, wakeful warmth that flowed over him. Hakan waited calmly and patiently, and then the doors to the theater were thrown open behind him, so that there was a loud impact of heavy wood against the stone walls of the theater that echoed around the square. Hakan sat against the theater wall and watched as the big men marched disappointedly from the theater, hanging their heads and shoulder so that Hakan was sure that in their sunken stature he would tower above them. Then, behind the row of men came the little professor, who seemed to skip with an excited curiosity. And then, turning to find Hakan crouched in the shadows, he said, in nearly flawless Turkish, "Come along now."

"I'm sorry?" Hakan asked, flustered by the little man.

"That's what you want, right?" he said. "That's what this whole show was all about, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Hakan answered, and he felt his pulse slow as he realized that he had succeeded. "But where are we going?"

"Paris," the little man said. "We are going to Paris."

"Right now?" Hakan asked.

"In the morning," the professor told him. "I suggest that you ready yourself quickly, for we shall leave at first light, from the big pier where I believe it was that I first saw you."

"Yes," Hakan said. "I will see you there at first light." Hakan bowed to the little man, and when he did so, he brought his head so far forward and so low that it became nearly as low to the ground as the Frenchman's head, and this was a curious sight to all who passed by, to see this monster of a man, nearly doubled over in a bow of respect, bringing himself to the height of a curiously dressed man from the outside world.

"I am professor Desailles, Edward Desailles," he said, and he extended his hand forward, which was the French fashion, and Hakan took it and felt in the little man's grip a strange strength that, while it could not lift large and heavy things, or bend strong metals, it could hold things under its inquiring grasp in such a manner that they could not escape. "Now go. Go and ready yourself and kiss goodbye to all those you know. In a few days," he began again, and his eyes lit up with the light of the stars and with a powerful glow that washed over Hakan and that made him long deeply in his own body for the world, "we will be in Athens."

Hakan made his way quickly down the dark streets that now blurred in his eyes. He was overcome with joy, with excitement. He would be off to see the world! He made it quickly to his home where he found Helvi asleep in bed, and he took her up in his arms, holding her across his great chest.

"Tomorrow I am leaving," he whispered in her ear.

"I know, my little aniseed," she said, and he felt the warmth of small, wet tears on her

cheek.

A soft wind blew in through the open window, and Hakan packed his things into a small bag. The air that blew in from the Marmara was salty, and Hakan knew that he had longed for the sea. He slept none, and for much of the night he held Helvi in his arms, sitting straight up in her bed and watching out the window, waiting for the sun to rise, and thinking back to the days when he would sit and watch out of that same window waiting for his grandfather to throw his tiny body up into the air.

“Do not ever think of turning back,” Helvi told him, and Hakan had no answer for her, and so they sat together and stared out the window and waited, together, for the delicate triplets of the birds that would signal the rising of the sun, and the end of Hakan’s final night as a boy in Istanbul.

CHAPTER 4

When Jules awoke, the landscape that streamed past the open door of the freight car was already a new world. Open fields of clover and green grass, golden mounds of hay piled in livestock fields, wandering ribbons of red fences, rolling hills and pine trees, white silos rising like great masts in the horizon. He was wet and cold, but he sat up, propped against a wall of wooden crates. There was the smell of manure and of cut grass, and Jules felt the earth sliding underneath him, and he was happy. He was unsure of how long he'd slept, or even where the train was going, only that he'd gotten on a northbound train and that the sun was high in the air and spilling all over the landscape a golden syrup. Jules crawled over to the door of the car and sat with his legs hanging off the edge, watching the countryside flying past him.

Though he had not stopped to consider where he was going when he left, he knew in his mind that there was only one place for him to go, that somehow, no matter which trains he took or which roads he walked, he was going to the circus. The wind rushing in through the door was warm, and it felt good against his wet clothing. He removed his shirt and pants and tied them to the big handle of the door so that they blew in the wind like windsocks and so that they might be heated and dried in the sun. Jules let his body bathe in the warm amaranth sun light. He felt it warm his skin and he felt that heat run into his body, and he was filled with it.

Soon, he was dry, and the wind blew through his hair. I'll have to get off the next time the train stops, Jules thought. He did not intend on getting caught his first time as a stowaway, a poor boy, tossed around the country by the pull of the circus, eager for adventure and the taste of the grit of dirt roads between his teeth. Once his clothes had dried sufficiently, Jules dressed again. Soon after, he felt the train begin to slow, and he knew that it would not be long before he was jumping from the open door and running off and away from the track and into this new world.

Houses began to spring up in the distance, and then the large buildings of a city, grand stone and stucco buildings, cobblestone streets. There were enormous live oak trees that opened up towards the sky like huge umbrellas that held entire worlds of shade underneath them. There was the smell of salt in the air, and Jules knew, once he smelled it, that for the first time in his life he was near the sea.

When the train had slowed enough that Jules could jump off, he readied himself by first holding onto the big door handle and hanging just off the edge of the car. He looked down at the ground that trickled like a stream just underneath him. Jules jumped, feeling the slowing of time that comes with having no connection to the ground. And he landed with a solid thud, and then took off running towards those buildings, that city just off down the road. The road was a dirt path that cut through a brilliant emerald green field. The air was wet and warm, and the entire universe seemed to smell of honeysuckle, and grass, and, underneath it all, the salty, fresh smell of the ocean. Some of the oaks formed canopies over the road, and Jules felt how much cooler it was in their shadows as he jogged through them. Spanish moss hung in bundles from the branches like clothes from a line, white spirits in the summer air. As he got closer and closer to the buildings, the composition of the little road changed. Now it was covered in a fine powder of

crushed oyster shells that glimmered in green and purple, and that crunched under his feet. Lining the road were big rhododendrons that had scrambling branches that were covered in bright pink flowers and that reached out into the road like tentacles. Jules slowed to a walk. A dark brown wooden fence began, and it conducted him to a large plantation house with a wraparound porch that housed rocking chairs and small tables. There was a smell of food frying that drifted to him from the house. Jules walked towards the house, and he saw that there was a long path that led to the porch and that there was an old man sitting on one of those rocking chairs, smoking from a pipe (and wisps of smoke rose from that pipe in perfect circles) and drinking from a tall glass that was filled with ice and a brown liquid. The glass was covered in water droplets that pooled on its cool surface. Down the road a ways, Jules could see that the path split in the distance, inexplicably winding two directions through the open green lawn that spread flat toward the horizon.

“Pardon me, sir,” the boy called out toward the porch. “Which way is it to get into town?”

“Depends,” the old man said. He took a long sip from his glass. His chair rocked forward and back in perfect time.

“On what, might I ask?” Jules said.

“On how fast you want to get there.”

This was a curious answer, and Jules was unsure what to make of it. He had no real desire to see the man from any closer, nor to see the man’s house, but he felt his body pivot and his feet step slowly, once, then again, towards the big white two story castle that filled the otherwise wide open sky in front of him. “Fast, I guess,” is what Jules said, as his body carried him through the open gate of the white fence that surrounded the plantation property.

“Well, if it’s fast you want,” the old man called out, “then take the path that leads right.” He indicated with his finger exactly which way he meant by pointing off into the distance. Then, he took the straw hat from his head and wiped the thick coating of sweat from his bald head. He put his hat back on and took the drink again in his hand. “But I wouldn’t go that way if I were you,” he said, and he rolled the ice around in his glass so that it clinked and chimed.

Jules suddenly felt very hot and lightheaded as if he might faint, and he leaned over, resting his hands and the weight of his body on his knees.

“There’s a witch that lives that way,” the man said. Then, “Yup,” agreeing with himself. “Nobody who goes down that road comes back.”

Jules, who was ignorant in these sorts of matters, was incredulous. “A witch?” he asked, and he stepped closer to the porch, inching towards the old man and the brown viscous liquid in the glass.

“Yes indeed,” the man began. “Known all over this county she is. She gets in everyone’s story who passes through these parts, one way or another.” As Jules got closer, the man indicated a chair on the other side of the small table next to him, and Jules sat. The man had a large wart just below his chin, and a solitary drop of sweat hung from it. “I’d recommend you take the path that leads off and to the left.”

Jules looked out at the two paths, twisting off in two opposite directions. He wondered how they might ever end up at the same place at all.

“I was born in this house,” the man said, and the porch creaked underneath him as he rocked, as if the house were confirming this thought. “When I was young, oh maybe about your age, but then I don’t think I looked so grown and strong as you, I set out to go into town, and my

mother called to me to remind me from inside the living room. ‘Don’t you go taking that right leading path,’ she yelled. But I was curious as young people can be, and you know how the more you here not to do a thing when you’re at that age, the more it makes you want to do it.”

“Did you take the path?” Jules blurted out.

“Now settle down, boy. Have yourself a drink and sit for a moment. There’s never any reason to rush a story. A story is a thing that evolves over time, that twists and turns like a river. And each time you tell it, it gets longer and slower, and it twists and turns more and more.” The man poured some of the syrupy liquid into a tall glass and then he waved his hand over a plate of tea sandwiches that Jules had somehow not seen before. “Have a bite to eat before you’re back on your way. There’s no reason you ought to be traveling in the early afternoon on an empty stomach.”

And the truth was that Jules was starving. He had not eaten since breakfast the day before. The thought of the uneaten sweet rolls crept into his mind.

“Now, about that day,” the man began again, with a redoubled vigor. He began waving his hands about as he spoke, the air around them spinning under his manipulation. Jules took a long drink of the brown drink, and it was sweet and had hints of mint and caramel and maple and gooseberry and currant and tobacco and chocolate and cassis, and it was refreshing, and it filled him with warmth, and he sat back in the chair and looked out at the two paths dividing the landscape into two very separate and distinct worlds. There were bright green trees and birds that whirled in circles, chasing one another amongst the trees. In front of this, the man’s hands moved in twisting shapes, figure eights, circles, grand swipes, and where they passed Jules saw things that he had not seen before. Wild flowers, purple and yellow, sprung from the emerald grass. Swarms of honey bees, turned golden by the lemon drop sun, sparkled against the blue sky. A black cat, an inky sketch along the ground, jumped straight up into the air, nearly eighteen feet, to grab a limb of a tree. “Well, I left the house with every intention of doing as I was told, as I had always done before. I was off to buy some cream for my mother and some whiskey for my father and a new knife for myself.

“Now I head out walking, heading always to the left. Hell, I was thinking so hard about it, my body was even leaning that way. Now I get up to that little piece where the road splits and all my thinking and leaning, and every step towards the left I took, didn’t do any good that day. And I’d done it one hundred times before! But it was no good, my feet started pulling on me, and they dragged me over to that right leading path. I was practically digging my hands in the dirt trying to go left!

“You know,” the man said, and he paused, and his hands stopped moving, and the landscape became still. Jules turned to look at him, and his face was scrunched up. He had his hand on his chin. “Have a sandwich, boy,” he said, and he relaxed his face. “Sorry to hesitate, but an important thought as just occurred to me.” He wiped his sleeve across his brow. “An important thought about that day. It don’t matter how hard you want to go to that path on the left, how many stories you’ve heard about what’s that way, when it’s your day to head down the right and see for yourself, you go.” The man stopped again. Jules took a hungry bite of the sandwich that was peppery and creamy at the same time. It filled Jules with a rush of sustenance that almost immediately satiated him.

“But there’s a witch that way,” Jules said.

“Damn sure is,” the man answered. “Turned me into a dragonfly!” The man waved his hand in a big stroke across the landscape in front of Jules’s eyes and there was an enormous

dragonfly at rest, suddenly, on the small railing that ran along the front of the porch, not more than four feet from Jules's face. "Just like that one there," the man said.

The dragonfly was nearly two inches long, and it had an azure body that was like the color of the sky and that stood out against the green of the grass. Its wings bobbed, first apart, then together, with the calm rhythm of a boat at rest in the water. Then, with a great buzz, the insect spun up and away from the railing, into the air, and off towards the green trees, wild flowers, and swarms of bees in the magical countryside that spread out in front of the boy and on until it reached the door step of the first city building, the cobblestones and carriages, and finally the port and the sea.

The man was gone. Jules sat quietly in the rocking chair, unsure of how to take what had just happened. He took another long sip of the brown liquid, and then he sat and looked out at the landscape, watching the day quiet around him. He rocked comfortably in the chair, and he felt all desire to get up and walk off and down the path leave him. His eyes became heavy, and he smelled lilacs and honeysuckle in a gentle warm breeze that blew over him. And then he slept.

When Jules woke, it was night. The land was still. A blanket of darkness covered everything. The moon had risen high into the sky, and stars filled the black night like confetti. In the distance, near where Jules thought the beds of wild flowers had been, were fireflies who went off in the blackness like blinking eyes, their light swelling in tiny orbs that illuminated small bits of the world.

The house, while Jules had slept, had fallen into complete disrepair. The porch was now a ragged and crooked stage, beset upon by termites and bowed by rain and heat. The windows were broken. The wood had rotted. The roof had caved in. Spiders had taken over the kitchen and living room so that it seemed as if those rooms were filled with cotton candy. Gone were the sandwiches and the glasses of brown liquid, and, except for the fireflies who flickered among the flowers, everything was still.

Jules stood up from the rocking chair and stretched his arms and back. He felt strong and rested. And he took his first steps away from the house. His final step, which was on the final step of the short stairway that led up to the porch, broke through the old and rotted boards of the house, and then, with a great crashing sound, the entire house collapsed behind him, and Jules turned around to see a cloud of sawdust rise into the air, and the fireflies quickly swarmed into the cloud so that it glimmered with them, and the whole house was swallowed up in dust and fireflies so that it glowed and twinkled through the haze of its own destruction.

Jules walked up the path until he came, finally, (and it seemed as if it had taken him a lifetime to arrive) to the fork in the road. Here, as anyone might do in the same situation, he paused, realizing that this could be a fault that would haunt him for the rest of his days. There was a buzzing that arrived, presently, first as a small, high-pitched whine, then growing into a tremulous vibrato, from the path to the right. And Jules felt a great rush of air as an enormous swarm of dragonflies swept over him, like water washing over a sand castle. And Jules was instantly powerless to resist wandering down the path that led to the right, where he knew that he did not want to go, but where the smell of the sea, so close to the east, drifted at him like the hot air from an oven filled with tea cakes and chocolate. Off in the night, he heard a chorus of cicadas take shape, and they filled the air like castanets.

Soon the ceiling of the sky was covered in a canopy of live oak branches that writhed

overhead. The path grew dark and swarms of gnats filled the blinking lights of the fireflies with static. Jules walked along, and if he was scared, he was not conscious of that fear. It was as if he were calmed by the pulsing rhythm of the night, the chirping of the insects and the soft smell of caramelized sugar that seemed to drift in the air, leading him ever on down the path. But the night continued to grow darker, and Jules soon felt his step slowing underneath him. There were fewer fireflies, and the oaks choked out the remaining breaths of moonlight. Jules feared he had lost the path, and that now, he was doomed to wander, lost, until daybreak. And so, creeping around in the darkness, running his hands along tree roots and rocks, he found a stump that was suitable for sitting.

Jules sat on the stump for what felt like many hours. He was neither tired nor hungry, and he was not afraid. Not even when a cough of his sent a tornado of bats from the boughs above him. And still daybreak did not come.

“This must be an enchanted forest,” Jules thought, and he remembered the stories his father had told him when he was very young, about the towering redwoods of California, trees that had lives and souls and minds. Trees that had magical powers. Trees that could move and hold you inside the forest, that could block out the sun, and that you could live amongst as friends if you only learned to talk to them. But Jules did not believe any of this any more. Those stories were only his father’s tricks.

Jules presently decided that he could wait no longer, as the night and darkness had remained forever thick around him. So he rose and blindly crept forward in the darkness, along that line that he was sure was the path, that desperately dim grey floor beneath his feet. And then, as if opening a small hole in the forest, a light appeared, a fuzzy halo of a light, off in front of him, as if a lantern perhaps. And Jules walked for it, seeing, finally, that it was a sconce mounted above the door of a small cabin, and that there was another light coming from the window. Here there were fireflies everywhere, hovering around the cabin as if haunting it.

Jules walked up and knocked on the door, and a hollow, dull thud came instead of the crisp knock he had expected to hear. Jules heard footsteps, similarly dull from the inside of the house, and then the door drifted open. Standing there, dressed in a flowing white dress was a pale, beautiful woman with flowing blond hair that seemed to twist in tendrils like pumpkin vines.

“I’m sorry to have knocked on your door so late at night,” Jules began. “But, I was lost in these woods, and I saw that your light was on.” He peered past the girl and into the house, which was nearly bare of furniture and decoration, but that was filled with a gorgeous golden glow that lit the naked wooden floors. “Could you tell me which way to walk to go to town?”

The girl looked him over. “You’re a very large boy, aren’t you?” she said. “You’ll never find your way in the darkness, why not come in until day break.”

Jules thought back to the man’s story, and though he was certain he did not want to be turned into a dragonfly, but he was equally certain that the radiant woman in front of him was no witch. “Alright,” he said, and she led him into the wooden cabin.

Inside, there was a brightly lit lamp at the far side of the room. Next to it was a wooden rocking chair, and there was another wooden chair in the room. The only other furniture was a bookshelf, and a big potbelly wooden stove from which a strange heat and a strange orange glow emanated, but there was no smell of burning wood.

“Please sit,” she said. “Would you like a cup of tea?” She moved towards the stove

where a tea kettle hung. The orange glow of the stove lit her in a strange light that seemed to blow her hair like a gentle breeze. It revealed shallow lines on her face, highlighting them briefly in shadow.

“Yes, please,” Jules said, and he took a seat in the wooden chair at the far side of the room. Through the windows of the cabin, there was only blackness and the gentle tide of the fireflies in the night.

She carried the cup of tea to him, and steam rose from the top of it. Jules took a sip and it tasted of mint and of orchids. And Jules felt the warmth of it go down his throat and into his stomach where it grew warmer, and spread through his body in waves. Jules’s vision became blurry, and the room seemed to sink away into darkness.

Though Jules was not conscious of it, time passed. Not long, but enough for the transformation to take shape. When he became conscious, the same blur remained over the entire world. He could see very little. The forest was dark, but beyond his sight, tiny tones chimed in the blurred world. Like the gentle pings of a kettle drum, the world was suddenly alive with gentle and percussive notes. Some were closer, some came from further off. Some were loud, and some were very soft and were nearly inaudible. Some were melodic strings of beautifully harmonized notes (those Jules felt sure he wanted to chase through the darkness), others were violent yelps of sourness (from which Jules recoiled). Jules was completely still.

He reached to stretch out his arms, and he felt them unfold along the sides of his body. Then, he let go with his feet and felt the tiny free fall from the tree before his arms began to hold him up in the air. He followed as fast as he could one of those melodious strings of tones, and he flew into a swarm of gnats. Jules felt himself take several of these into his mouth, and then, in his absolute horror, he retreated to the tree, trembling. He knew, then, and finally, that he had been turned into a bat, and that this was certainly a profound set back in his attempt at finding the town.

Jules calmed himself. – There is a way to turn myself back – he thought. But his body was still awkward to him and he wisely realized that he ought to get used to it, before he worried about what he had to do to change back. So he dropped from the tree and flew high up into the air. He practiced his flying, feeling the huge sweeps of his wings hold him on the heavy air. First in the big open air of the sky above the trees. The world was a fantastic place without sight! All of the world seemed as lit up with the pings in his head as it had been with fireflies before. And through these pings, despite the darkness that entered his head through his eyes, the entire world was illuminated. He realized, while flying above it, that he could feel the canopy of trees, for it was a sound wall, with dim, echoless holes between the branches and leaves. Iridescent pops of sound were tiny bugs. The ground was a sheet of dead tones. He flew about in the high air, learning quickly what his body could and couldn’t do. And he couldn’t go faster than he was able to flap, and when he tried, his wings filled with a burning sensation that told him to stop trying. He spun downwards in a kind of barrel roll, and he found that he could maneuver quite well and quite instinctively.

He dove down underneath the trees. Here there were so many sounds. There were the leaves cascading from the tree branches and trembling in the nighttime wind. There were insects nearly everywhere under the canopy, and Jules feasted on them because he felt sharp hunger pangs after his stunt flying among the clouds. Jules ate as many as he could, and he soon was filled with the satisfaction of his meal.

Jules realized just how much ground he could cover in the air, and he decided to fly until

he heard the solid pings of buildings and of the town. He flew up above the canopy and soared through the night air. He felt the salt on his tiny bat tongue and he wondered what he might look like, his own body now a sleek, black shape in the sky.

Soon he came over a long gap in the canopy of the trees. Here there were thousands of bugs, and Jules ate as he flew. – I must be over a field, - he thought. And this gap gave way, eventually, to large blocks of sound, and open spaces, and Jules knew that he had found the town, or some town. He made diving, sweeping passes through the streets. Finally he took a perch on a tree, dangling from his tiny legs from one of its branches. – Well, - he thought, - what should I do now? - And Jules was uncertain, but he was comforted by the air warming around him, by the smell of salt and ocean in the air. He knew that he had accomplished something in finding the town, and he knew that he would find some way out of being a bat. But, just as he was calming himself, the first rays of sun pierced the black sky. Jules recoiled at them, and he soon felt a powerful tiredness come over him, and he fell into a profound sleep, feeling the sun wash over his colorless body.

When Jules woke up, he was lying on a cobblestone street underneath a cherry tree that was in full bloom, the strange white and pink flower petals nearly covering him. He was no longer a bat, and the sun was well up into the late morning sky. – Had I dreamed it all? – he asked himself. – How else would I have come to town? – Jules propped his body against the tree and looked out over the town. Several carriages strolled past, and there were some people in the streets, but this was not like home. This was a small town, arranged so that Jules had landed in a large plaza. Jules smelled fresh bread baking, and peanuts roasting. And, somewhere just off in the distance, maybe only steps from the square, he heard the prancing, jerking tune of the circus music. It drifted in from an organ grinder who had a pet monkey who danced to it, and they performed for morning children on the sidewalk around the corner from the square, but it pulled Jules nearer, and he felt it leading him forward in his journey.

As Jules rounded the corner, he saw first that the music had been nothing more than this man performing for the children, the little monkey dancing and stealing one of the boy's hat, always from off of his head. Then he saw, behind the laughing children, who were dressed in dark pants and jackets for church, the street and city swelling in the background, the small square giving in to a long, wide open main street, that was filled with people and storefronts. And so Jules hurried off and down the street and into the long avenue that unrolled like a red carpet in front of him, leading him forward still.

This street was not unlike streets he had seen at home, filled with trolley lines and carriages and swarms of people who drifted among the stores like honeybees among wild flowers. Jules strolled into the streets, and the rhythm of the day caught him. He wandered towards the storefronts and looked at the skinned chickens hanging in the windows, the caged dogs and cats and squirrels, the oddly proportioned bicycles with enormous, bulbous front wheels and miniscule rudders. One shop was filled with strange pipes that looked like lamps, and from tubes that were inserted in them, men smoked tobacco that smelled like apple and watermelon, and Jules paused at the door to take in the aroma of the fruity smoke. It was here that he first noticed a dirty and tattered boy, somewhere behind him in the street, crouching behind a bush in the open street and in broad daylight.

Jules turned to look directly at this spot. But the boy was gone. There was only a scraggly bush sparsely decorated with withered leaves. Jules continued to walk down the street,

but he was careful to watch around him, and presently he caught sight of the boy again, but the thing was like a gopher, his head emerging for only seconds from the sand before disappearing again, only to reappear seconds later but from a spot far off from the one immediately previous. Jules became very cautious. He tried to keep the boy's movements under observation. Finally, as he reached the end of the long avenue, the boy sprung up in front of him, and Jules used every bit of his large body and massive strength to lunge at the thing, grab him, and keep him immobilized and on the ground.

"What are you doing!" the boy yelled, and his voice was harsh and gravelly.

"Why are you following me?" Jules yelled back. The boy squirmed and writhed on the ground, trying to break free from Jules's incredible grip.

"I know where you're going!" the boy began. "And I'm going to get there first!"

The boy was small and lithe and agile. And he was strong. But, his strength was not the match of Jules's, and Jules held him well in place. The boy wore brown leather clothing that had become tattered and torn and covered in dirt and mud, and he was covered in fleas. His hair was wild and unkempt, and he had sharp pointy teeth.

"Just where is it I'm going?" Jules asked.

"The circus!" the boy snarled.

Jules pressed harder against the boy's wrists. "Now listen," he said. "I'm not going to hurt you, so stop fighting me." He loosened his grip on the boy, who politely obliged by relenting some small part in his struggling.

"I saw you," the boy said, and he finally became still on the ground. Jules let go of him and the boy sat up with his legs crossed.

"What did you see?" Jules asked him.

"You were a bat," the boy said. Jules sat down next to him on the ground. Jules's enormous body towered over the small boy who scratched himself under the armpit and then rubbed his sore wrists. "You're going to the circus aren't you."

"Do you know where it is?" Jules asked him.

"I might," the boy said. "But, why should I tell you?"

"Because if you tell me, we can travel there together."

"That doesn't help me at all," the boy said, and he turned his head smugly so that he was no longer looking at Jules but down the avenue at the people in the street, the normal people walking into the shops and riding the streetcars.

"Of course it does," Jules said. "Because if you don't take me there, I will have to crush you," Jules said, and he stood so that his huge shadow fell over the wild boy. Jules reached up to the tree branch above him and, using all of his brute force, snapped a large club from that branch. He held the club out over the boy so that the threat became clearer still.

"You don't know where to go, do you?" the boy said. And Jules relaxed the club in the air, then he set it down on the ground. He sat next to the boy again.

"No," he answered. "But you can show me?"

"Yes," the boy said. He jumped up excitedly and began bouncing on the balls of his feet as if he were ready to run off into the woods. "We'll go together!"

"That's what I've been trying to say," Jules said. "My name is Jules."

The boy paused, and his face wrinkled up, and he turned his head so that it glanced at Jules from a slight angle. "That's your name?" he asked. "How can you expect to be in the circus with a name like that?"

“Well,” Jules started. “You see I wasn’t looking to join the circus, exactly.”

“You’re the Batboy,” the wild boy interrupted. “That’s what I’ll call you. I’m Grey Wolf.”

Jules agreed, partially because he was tired of arguing with Grey Wolf, but also because he was eager to get moving in their trip and because a part of him enjoyed being given a circus name, an alter ego, a title that would make people tell stories about him.

So Jules and Grey Wolf began following a road that led out of town. First it was wide, like the main street avenue, but outside of town it quickly narrowed to a thin dirt road that meandered across the landscape, taking gentle rises and small brooks with bridges. Rarely did a carriage pass, but when it did, it excited Grey Wolf, and he often ran to hide behind bushes or, at least, in the shadows of nearby trees.

Jules found him a curious person, and this was fine by Jules. It was nice to walk the countryside with Grey Wolf. The boy knew every turn of the road, and he often found sweet berries and edible leaves just off the roadway. In the late afternoon, when the sky was only just beginning to fill with the deep, fiery orange of evening, Grey Wolf jumped into one of the creeks that they were near crossing and pulled out a fish, which they gutted and cooked over a crude fire the wild little boy made. They suspended the fish over the flame with skewers they’d made from tree branches, and Jules could not have dreamt of a better meal on the road than this one. It was nice to walk this road with Grey Wolf, to be with someone for an entire day. Perhaps Jules would teach him about being a strongman.

For any passersby who managed to catch a sight of the two boys together, a small shiver would have most certainly taken them. Perhaps they might think that the enormous child with chiseled muscles and an almost regal air and posture and the little dog boy, who had scraggly hair and who was covered in the dirt of travel, were figments of their imaginations, apparitions of the road, spirits of nature. For there was almost no way that such a sight could appear perfectly normal, even in that forest in that part of the country.

Later, as dusk neared, the boys found a suitable campsite. It was a small grassy area that opened in the middle of a copse of trees. Small oak trees, barely older than saplings dappled the site. Grey Wolf quickly went to sleep under one of the trees, but Jules stayed awake for a while to make a fire. With night closing in around him, Jules warmed his hands and wondered if the transformation would happen again, as sleep slowly took hold of him.

When Jules awoke, flying through the crisp night air, it did not surprise him. He feasted on insects, gnats and flies, and they filled him with a warm sustenance that he found nearly as fulfilling as eating people food. The moon was big and full and filled the night sky with a glow that spread out from it like a saucer of spilled milk. Jules heard the snores of Grey Wolf as he swept through the campsite and he heard the greenish pings of the boy’s body as he flew back up into the high night air.

Jules loved flying. He loved the sensation of soaring above the world, feeling the weightless air, and knowing that his awkward bat body was capable of anything in that world above the trees, even if, as a bat, he was incapable of anything spectacular on the ground.

Once Jules had flown to the point of exhaustion, and the sun had begun to rise into the sky, he took his perch, hanging from a small tree, in the campsite. And, soon thereafter, he awoke to a bright new day, returned to his enormous boyish form, the young strongman casting a tall shadow over the dew in the grass. Grey Wolf was nowhere to be found.

Jules rose and stretched. His body was sore from the many days of travel, and he was hungry for breakfast. He began walking down the path, and within that first mile, the dancing apparition of Grey Wolf became visible in the trees up ahead, first here then there, like the blinking lights of the fireflies. Presently, Grey Wolf stepped out into the path, and waited as Jules approached.

“You would have left me behind, wouldn’t you?” the boy said.

“No,” Jules said. “Of course not. I figured that you went off ahead. These are your trails and your woods after all.”

Grey Wolf picked up Jules’s step, and they walked through the woods side by side, Grey Wolf hopping at Jules’s ankles. “I suppose so,” he said. “Anyway, I could have found you anywhere, even if these weren’t my woods.”

“I’m sure you could have,” Jules told him. “Have you found any food today?”

“Not yet,” Grey Wolf said. “Let’s go off and look.”

So the two boys traipsed off the trail for a bit, foraging amongst the ground cover until they finally found a large blackberry bush under a big oak tree. Here they sat on the ground, careful to avoid brambles and bees’ nests, and Jules ate until content on the sweet blackberries.

“You’re not eating?” Jules asked.

“I’m not hungry,” Grey Wolf said, and they soon rose, returned to the trail, and continued walking.

It was wonderful to travel with Grey Wolf. And, Grey Wolf had stories about all of the plants along the road. There was one that the Indians called Pipsissiwa, because it helped to cure kidney stones, and they called it that because it sounded like the passing of water. There was one that could be crushed and chewed to treat bee stings and burns, like a soothing balm or salve. One, he claimed, could make any woman in the world fall instantly in love with you, but he wouldn’t tell Jules which one it was.

About three miles down the road, the forest began to thin, and it became clear that the boys were nearing the small farms that often populated the outskirts of cities. Here there were fields plowed over gently rolling hills, and the smell of animals was in the air. There were a few cows, and some horses in one field, and rows upon rows of tobacco that left a deep musky odor in the air. Here, the road spread out in many directions.

“This way,” the impulsive Grey Wolf said, and he bounded down a road that lead slightly to the east, but still north. Jules followed, and within an hour, the boys found themselves in a small city, where once again the rhythms of daily life picked up around them. Grey Wolf was uncomfortable in the city, and he scurried off to hide behind bushes, always in sight of Jules, but out of everyone else’s.

- How far could I be from the circus? – Jules thought. He thought of asking Grey Wolf, but for everything that Grey Wolf knew, he could not possibly know how far ahead of them something had gotten.

The boys walked through town, and Jules followed the cable for the trams, hoping that it might lead them to a train station. From there, Jules reasoned, they could hop another train and make up a lot of the time they’d lost. And, indeed, following the cables led the boys, eventually, to a large, nondescript, square building made of bricks with tracks radiating from it in all directions. They could go anywhere.

Jules walked up towards the station, while Grey Wolf slipped around behind, to where the trains were, so that he might case the station. There was no reason to get caught before they’d even gotten anywhere. Jules walked into the station that opened up into a small room.

There were crude sets of chairs for waiting, and a big board that displayed the departures in block letters and numbers. Behind a set of metal bars was the attendant, who sat at a desk, and Jules walked up to the small ticket window.

“Which way is the circus?” Jules said, and only after saying it did he realize that the question might make no sense to the man.

But in a stroke of luck, perhaps the first of the trip for Jules, the man said, “Well, boy, that ain’t for two days.”

“Yes,” Jules answered, trying to show that he was aware of his own error in time calculation. “But I like to get there early, so that I can watch them set up the tents.”

This was a reasonable enough answer, and the man said, “Well, you want to take the eight train to the fourth stop, then.” And the man pointed out the platform. “Will you be buying a ticket?”

Jules had forgotten himself for a moment, and he realized that he had no money for a ticket. “Um, no, sir,” he said. “I’ll be back in later with my papa. We’re going together,” he told the man. And then Jules walked outside and around to the back side of the station, where he found Grey Wolf, already smartly hidden and ready to board the number eight train northbound.

“Good work,” Jules said. “This is the perfect spot.” And they both snuck aboard, choosing a grain car so that they might sleep pressed up against bales of hay and wheat until the train left the station. Like this, they might also hide themselves among the itching stalks where no one was likely to search for stowaways. This was Grey Wolf’s idea, and for as much as he seemed at home in the wild and in the woods, he was proving himself, as Jules had already done, a natural train traveler, ready to find the world a much larger place than either of them could have imagined.

The train rolled out of station, and the boys lay underneath the pile of straw, slowly drifting off into a sleep that was made deeper by the constant rhythm of the train, a constant roaring that seemed to suggest snoring. Through the afternoon, the train crept along the countryside, passing the fields of tobacco, and of livestock. Cotton fields, like rolling waves of snow capped stalks. Finally, as the afternoon began to fade into evening, the train pulled into a large station, where there were rows of quiet trains, empty of people, and they sat still along the tracks in the waning light.

Jules and Grey Wolf woke to the slowing of the train, the rhythm of everything relaxing around them. They waited until the train was just slow enough, and then jumped from it, landing with a quick roll so as not to get hurt. They ran off towards the back end of the train, and then around, and up to the low fence that lined the station and the train graveyard. They jumped over the fence and ran off into the distance, where, with the sun setting behind everything, like a huge orange ember sinking into the blue sea of the horizon, were the first solemn tents of the circus, raised only that day, and etched against the bright sky like black, angular cathedral domes. In two days this quiet landscape would be filled with the sounds and smells and visions of the circus, the vast openness that the boys now saw, filled with the elephants, the parades, and the clowns teetering atop tall unicycles.

The boys ran until they came up to a small rise, which they then climbed. They looked out over it all and there were a few circus men putting the final spikes in the ground to hold up the tents. Then, they took the big railroad hammers and packed them into wooden crates. They

milled around amongst each other. They spoke of beer and of warm meals. As they spoke, they kicked the dirt, and clouds of it leapt into the air so that in the failing light of dusk there was an orange mist around them.

“The circus,” Jules said, and his eyes were wide and filled with the coming night. He could taste the dirt and grass in his teeth. His heart rushed inside of his chest, and he felt his blood growing hot.

“The circus,” Grey Wolf agreed, and he looked over at Jules, and they both picked up pace again, walking off and towards the small, temporary village, their silhouettes, the tall and broad Jules and the skittering, bounding Grey Wolf, black shapes in the sky growing ever smaller as they walked away from the train station and neared ever closer to the dormant circus.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jordan Lari grew up in Atlanta where he attended suburban Roswell High School. He then attended Appalachian State University; his sophomore year was spent abroad. After completing his degree in English he returned to Atlanta and also abroad before studying at Florida State University, the completion of that program resulting in this manuscript.