

THE PICKLED PUNK SOLUTION

They came while the town slept – rolling up from Indiana in wheezing Diamond T and Reo trucks riding on balding pre-war tires and long-expired Florida plates: Overloaded flatbeds and ancient Fruehauf semi-trailers carrying sideshow tents, a disassembled tilt-a-whirl, a merry-go-round and a Ferris wheel. Painted on each trailer's corrugated flanks in faded red and blue lettering were the words:

ALL STAR AMUSEMENTS

&

TRAVELING CARNIVAL

Strung out for five miles in the wake of the convoy were Cadillac and Lincoln automobiles towing popcorn wagons, grab shacks, cotton candy booths on wheels and road-weary travel trailers. The ragged procession closed ranks as it neared town – passing through the narrow concrete bridges spanning the Indian Pete River and on to the flats where the cattails grew.

The lead trucks shifted to a lower gear as they entered the silent town – rolling on past the three traffic lights blinking yellow to empty streets until finally slowing and turning into the open field where they assembled by orderly rows in the dark. The last vehicle to enter was a coal-black 1949 Packard towing a sun-dulled Airstream trailer with the legend **The Krit Twins** painted on each side. The owner of both car and trailer was

sixty-year old Helga Krit, a former vaudeville stripper whose professional name was Lilly Lipps, and the mother of the Krit Twins, Drago and Deena.

As a brother and sister co-joined from shoulder to hip, Drago and Deena were not only physically inseparable – they were also the carnival’s biggest draw. Born in 1927 against astronomical odds, they two shared different fathers, neither of whom would marry the woman they’d only known professionally as Lilly Lipps. Drago was pale and gray-eyed like the burlesque comedian who’d fathered him. Deena was sloe-eyed and dark, like her Chinese father, a candy butcher who also sold pornographic comics during intermission. When Helga told the two that the twins were theirs, both disappeared before she could sue them for child support. Now that she was burdened with two freaks of nature, she dropped her stage name and left the business determined to squeeze lemonade from the two lemons a capricious fate had dropped in her lap.

Helga began on a modest scale by charging curious neighbors nickels and dimes to observe the co-joined twins in their oversized crib. As the twins grew, so did the price of admission, until Helga was able to move out of the New Orleans flat she rented and into a two-story colonial in Iberia Parrish that had indoor plumbing and a fenced-in backyard expansive enough to accommodate the twins as they grew into their teens. Home-schooled yet intelligent, Drago was more of a follower, while Deena was the instigator in all that they did. It was she who initiated their nightly forays into the neighboring countryside while their mother drank herself into an alcoholic stupor and the rest of the world slept.

And that was when the trouble started. First it was the dogs. Disappearing one by one, until fewer than several dozen mangy and half-starved dogs remained in Iberia

Parrish. Superstitions being what they were in Louisiana during those early days; many believed voodoo and spirit worship were to blame. Others blamed the times, unsettled as they were, with money hard and distemper running unchecked among animals both domestic and wild. Predictably, it wasn't long before accusing fingers were pointed toward the twins, and people believing them to be the spawn of the devil himself. When talk of a dual lynching or burning them at the stake began to gain currency, Helga knew they had to leave Louisiana before real harm came to the twins.

When posters began appearing around town, announcing that a traveling carnival featuring freaks of various descriptions and disorders was coming to Iberia Parrish, Helga understood that a capricious fate had once again intervened. Even before the final tent had been set up she herded Drago and Deena into a Studebaker touring sedan with its windows curtained to hide them from prying eyes and set off to present them to carnival owner Impresario Zoltan Zug.

"I am familiar with co-joined twins," Zug told Helga. They sat in his lavishly-appointed trailer sipping tea, yet his tone was dismissive. "They are all variations on a common theme. Heng and Chang are perhaps the most well-known Siamese twins. Joined at the hip by a slender strip of flesh, they toured the county during the late 1880s. Before they died, they had sired twenty-two children between them."

"But mine are very different," Helga argued. "Wait until you see them before judging."

"Dear lady, I have more than enough freaks already. Hermaphrodite dwarfs, a seven-hundred pound fat lady whose appetite threatens to bankrupt the carnival; a Mexican dog-faced boy, a tattooed serpent lady, an alligator boy, an Indian rubber man,

and a pair of pickled punks; two deformed fetuses I've owned before Bonnie knew Clyde.”

Helga smiled tolerantly. “Still, you mention co-joined twins as if wishing you had such an attraction. Apart from their being joined shoulder to hip, and having but one hand and arm apiece, they are normal in everyway except three.”

Zug reached for the pack of Sweet Caporal cigarettes at his elbow and shook one out. He fitted it into an ivory cigarette holder and lit it off a gold lighter of Art Deco design. “And what exactly would those be?”

“Before I begin, would you consider offering me a ‘gasper’?” Helga asked with an exaggerated pout. “Or do you disapprove of modern-day women smoking?”

“My apologies, Madame. You may blame my old world upbringing and values.” Zug tapped out a second cigarette, handed it to her and lit it off the lighter with the flick of a manicured thumbnail.

“To your question,” Helga said through a thick cloud of acrid cigarette smoke. “First, my twins are of normal intelligence, yet they are easily manipulated and eager to do the bidding of those who can afford the basest kinds of entertainment.”

Impresario Zug's dark eyes glittered. “Indeed? And what pray tell are the other two differences?”

Helga tapped an ash into the heavy lead-crystal ashtray at her elbow and smiled to reveal an uneven row of a chain smoker's nicotine-stained teeth. “For one, they have developed a taste for dog meat. Especially poodles.”

“I see no advantage,” Zug said, “as I have a geek who devours live chickens brought in by farmers in exchange for admission.”

Helga offered a conspiratorial smile. “Chickens can be had for a song. Consider what you lose by allowing farmers free access to watch a fool eating one.”

“There is nothing to lose, my dear lady. Whatever the geek doesn’t eat goes into the community soup pot.”

Helga rose to leave, “It appears we have reached an impasse, Impresario Zug. It is late, and the twins will be getting restless.”

“Just to satisfy my curiosity, how old are they?”

“They will be twenty-two this year; at an age when young bodies have matured and self-exploration becomes the most natural thing in the world. Oh, and did I happen to mention that the boy is Caucasian, and the girl Chinese?”

Zug smiled. “Let’s not be hasty, shall we, Madame? Please, have a seat and allow me to offer you something a bit more stimulating than tea.”

Helga returned to her seat and said, “Brandy would be appropriate while we negotiate a price.”

“A price?”

“Yes, a price for the three of us.”

Zug smirked. “What you are suggesting is not only insane; it is undoubtedly illegal as well.”

“You are a fine one to talk of illegality,” Helga said. “I’m guessing your entire enterprise is illegal, from the expired license plates on your vehicles, to the crooked grab shacks, to the tainted hotdogs you sell, to the rides that wouldn’t pass a Chinaman’s inspection. Dare I suggest that more than a few of the roustabouts we passed coming in are either parolees, child molesters, or both?”

Zug sat back and tented his manicured fingers under his Fu Manchu goatee. “Perhaps I have underestimated you. What you say is true enough. However, I’ve learned that a small town sheriff usually looks the other way when money comes into play.”

Helga nodded knowingly. “Imagine what the rubes will pay to watch the twins as they display their differences. Naturally they could be made available for private showings at a fee of your choosing.”

Zug stood and turned for a glass-fronted cabinet that held an array of bottled spirits. He unlocked it with a key strung on a golden chain and selected a bottle of Napoleon brandy and two crystal goblets. He decanted three fingers of the amber liquid into each and handed one to Helga.

“Now then,” he began while swirling the brandy to release its bouquet, “Where were we?”

“I believe we were discussing the future of the All Star Amusements and Traveling Carnival.”

“Indeed we were, but for a price yet to be determined? How am I to know what is fair?”

Helga raised the snifter and inhaled noisily through a nose swollen by seasonal allergies. “Allow me to suggest a trial engagement.”

“A trial?”

“It seems only fair, Impresario Zug. Shall we say for a week, from Sunday to close of business next Sunday? Such a trial would give you adequate time to properly determine their value and mine.”

Zug gave his brandy a final swirl before raising the goblet to his fleshy lips. He took a thoughtful sip, smiled, and said, "I accept your proposal, Madam, but first, when may I see them?"

"I have brought them with me. The answer is now."

When a week's trial run brought in more rubes than all the other geek shows combined, Impresario Zug and Helga struck their deal. Henceforth Helga would be known as Madame Krit, a name more in keeping with her new status as the carnival's top money maker. The deal also provided Madame Krit with a new 1949 Packard sedan and an Airstream trailer outfitted to comfortably accommodate the twins during their travels around the country. And that included a privacy curtain to shield the two from each other when they used a specially installed toilet, entertained, and slept.

After several months on the road had passed, rumors that Deena was pregnant began circulating among the freaks and carnies on a summer morning in Michigan when Impresario Zug's roustabouts, already brick red from too many months under a hot Midwestern sun, were unloading the trailers and flatbeds. Some handled the sideshow tents, waterproofed with kerosene and paraffin to keep out the dreaded rain, something Impresario Zug loathed because rain kept the rubes away. A wet summer could ruin even the best run carnival, no matter how many freak shows and rigged games of skill it offered.

Other roustabouts were erecting the Ferris wheel, the Merry-go-round, the tilt-a-whirl, the bumper cars, and the motor-drome. The grab shacks, the popcorn, the hotdog and cotton candy booths were the responsibility of their respective owners. When word of Deena's assumed pregnancy finally reached Impresario Zug's ears, he flew into a

towering rage. To think of his biggest co-money maker being sidelined while she had a baby was impossible to contemplate. But when Deena admitted to being two months pregnant by a roustabout named Ace, and included detailed physical description, Impresario Zug sent for Luther Till.

Luther Till, a hot-tempered WWI Army veteran and Impresario Zoltan Zug's general foreman and enforcer, was feared by all. He ruled his domain with hard-knuckled fists and a finely-honed taste for violence. That day he wore his standard garb, a western-style shirt, jodhpurs, riding boots, and a broad-brimmed campaign hat. He also carried a riding crop, an affectation better suited to a cavalry officer, rather than a retired Army top-kick with a bottle-a-day drinking habit. And today he was under Impresario Zug's orders to find the unlucky man who had impregnated Deena.

"You!" Till shouted to the tattooed roustabout who stood on a ladder while attempting to string together a series of midway lights.

"Who, me?" the roustabout asked with a look of presumed innocence.

"Yes, you, you imbecile. Come down here."

The man clambered down the ladder to face Till. "What is it, boss?"

"Impresario Zug wishes to see you in his quarters, now!"

"What have I done?"

"Two months ago you signed your death warrant. Today is the execution."

The guilty roustabout had little choice but to follow the enforcer across the bustling midway to the luxurious trailer where Impresario Zug waited. Luther knocked until hearing the order to enter, and then kicked the roustabout sprawling through the open door with the admonishment, "I would not wish to be in your shoes."

The roustabout blinked to clear his eyes in the gloomy smoke-filled trailer where Impresario Zug sat behind an ornate desk counting stacks of coins and bills of various denominations. The woman he knew only as Madame Krit occupied a director's chair next to him. Both were smoking cigarettes and looked ready to kill.

“You wished to see me, sir?” the roustabout asked in a tentative voice.

“Are you Ace?”

“Yes sir.”

“My carnival's biggest co-money maker, Deena, accuses you of impregnating her. What do you say to that?”

“I'd say it could've been somebody else.”

“She described your anatomy in considerable detail, to include a certain tattoo that lengthens to reveal the iconic Marine Corps legend ‘Semper Fidelis.’”

“I din't say I din't have sex with her. I'm jus' sayin' somebody else could be the daddy, is all.”

“And just exactly who would that be, do you suppose?”

“Could've been the India Rubber Man. Could've been the Alligator Boy. Hell, it could've been the guy who never leaves her side.”

Madame Krit exploded upon hearing Ace's accusation. “Drago could not have done this! A physical impossibility!”

“He looked pretty capable when I was with Deena, Madame Krit. ‘Course, I had to throw a sheet over him for privacy.”

Madame Krit turned to Impresario Zug. “Don't just sit there! The twins are your responsibility now. Do something!”

“I am thinking, Madame Krit, of how we might turn this unfortunate event to our advantage.”

“Now yer talkin’,” Ace said.

“Shut up, you,” Madame Krit snarled.

“Shut up, both of you,” Impresario Zug said, and turned to Madame Krit. “Bring me the twins.”

She did as ordered, and upon their return the impresario was pacing back and forth, hands behind his back, and chewing on his ivory cigarette holder. He stopped to face Deena, whose brown eyes half-hidden under her epicanthic eyelids seemed to be smiling. “Is this man who impregnated you?” He gestured toward Ace.

“I guess so,” she replied.

“For God’s sake, woman. Is he or isn’t he?”

“I can answer that,” Drago said.

“Never mind,” the impresario said. “It’s immaterial. Besides, you were apparently under a sheet. How well do you know the Serpent Lady?”

“We get along well enough.”

“I can vouch for that,” Deena said with a telling smile. “They get along really well, except when her snake is molting.”

“Well enough to have a baby with him?”

“What are you getting at?” Madame Krit asked.

“There will be two babies born into this carnival, dear lady. And they will be co-joined just as Deena and Drago are co-joined.”

“How’re you gonna make that happen?” Ace said.

“When the infants are ready to be presented to the public, flesh-colored latex will bind them side by each; so that the rubes will think they are the legitimate and genetically flawed offspring of yours and your sisters. The draw will be irresistible.”

Madame Krit smiled. “You’re certifiably mad, but a genius all the same.”

“Can I ask a stupid question?” Ace said, and without receiving a go-ahead he went on. “I doubt if any lawman would look kindly on such an inhumane setup, even if they were on the pad. How’re you gonna get around that?”

“Madame Krit will be dressed in a nurse’s outfit when we show the infants alongside the twins. It will appear as if they are under her professional and loving care.”

“Do I have a say in this?” Deena asked. “After all, one of ‘em would be mine.”

“An’ maybe mine too,” Ace added.

“You, get back to whatever you were doing,” Impresario Zug said. “Your usefulness here is over. Go. And find the Serpent Lady on your way out. If she’s charming a snake, tell her it’s urgent and to come here immediately.”

“Yes sir,” Ace muttered, and left.

“I think you’re barking up the wrong tree if you think she’s gonna have a baby,” Drago said.

“She will do as I say. Besides, it would seem that the three of you sex addicts already have carnal knowledge of each other.”

Madame Krit picked up an open pack of Sweet Caporals from among the stacked coins and bills on Impresario Zug’s desk. She shook one out and lit it off his gold lighter. “May I suggest another idea, and one that will not raise the unwelcome attention of the authorities?”

“Please do, Madame. I am all ears.”

“Your pickled punks are the solution.”

“I’m not sure I follow you, but go on.”

“I’m guessing that the local mortician would make himself available to create a four-legged, two armed pair out of your two punks, and for a fee that would overcome any ethical objections.”

Impresario Zug stroked his goatee and smiled. “And the idea is to present them as Deena and Drago’s deformed but similarly co-joined twins?”

“Yes. And the benefit would be immediate, not six months from now. Even better, there would be no need to swaddle two presumably normal infants in latex and pass them off as co-joined. As your roustabout pointed out, that would be ‘an inhumane setup.’”

“A brilliant solution to our little problem, Madame Krit,” Impresario Zug said. Admiration sounded in his voice. “I will take it from here.”

The four turned as one when the Serpent Lady entered the trailer. She wore a snake charmer’s diaphanous outfit that exposed tattoos covering every inch of her curvaceous body, even to the red Mohawk that contrasted sharply with the albino boa constrictor coiled around her slender neck.

“Ace said you wanted to see me,” she said, stroking the serpent. “He said it was urgent.”

“The urgency has passed,” the impresario replied easily. “You may return to whatever you were doing.”

She glanced toward Drago Krit and smiled a co-conspirator's smile. "What I was doing, Excellency, was figuring on the calendar how long it's been since my last menses." The snake flicked its forked tongue to taste the air.

Impresario Zug slammed a fist down on his desk hard enough to topple the stacked coins. "I won't allow it! First one freak threatens to bring down my carnival because of a reckless and unauthorized sex act. Now you! What comes next, rain?"

"But only moments ago, you yourself suggested that the Serpent Lady become pregnant for the act," Madame Krit said.

"What are you all talking about?" the Serpent Lady asked, "'cause it sounds like I should be offended."

"Offended?" Zug raged. "Why, perish the thought. It is I who should be the offended party, considering that I'm overseeing a breeding enterprise. Who comes next? The fat lady? Why, it wouldn't surprise me to learn that even your snake is gravid."

"Calm yourself, Impresario Zug," Madame Krit said. "We have a show to prepare for, and rides and tents to set up before the rubes begin arriving at noon." A deep rumble that sounded like heavy artillery on a distant battlefield seemed to underscore the urgency of her words.

Zoltan Zug rolled his obsidian eyes upward and growled, "What was that?"

"Thunder, Excellency," the Serpent Lady replied. "It's going to rain."

