

Janet Slike

The Trouble Started When the Albino Died

Mr. Devereaux waited until after they had submerged the Albino's oak casket in the fertile soil of the town that held no meaning for the dead man. Randolph, Georgia, I think they called it, but it had no meaning for me either. It was just where the fire licked his skin down to his organs. We saw no reason to cart him to the next town on the sideshow circuit. Mr. Devereaux waited until after the Bearded Lady had mournfully shuffled away with the breeze slapping her black dress against her legs. Her arm circled Madame Zorzka's waist for support. Mr. Devereaux waited as the man from the funeral home ushered us away from the mourning tent and out of earshot of all circus workers. Then he confronted me.

"Just what were you thinking, Lydia? When did you start smoking? The damage that fire did!" He rubbed the back of his pudgy neck, easing the protruding veins into relaxed submission. "I'll be taking a little out of your check for a while. That's not so bad. I'll be watching you closely though. One false move and you're out of here, though you do bring the people in. At least no one's pressing charges." His voice lowered to a slithery hiss. "Good God, woman, you killed a man."

No, I did not! I wasn't there, but I couldn't tell him my alibi; it was just too embarrassing. Besides it wouldn't bring the Albino back from the dead.

The fire occurred nine days ago on a Tuesday when I had seen three crows circling a lilac bush. I had learned as a child that crows were a bad omen for me.

"Charmaine told me she saw you toss your cigarette on the ground by the gas pump," he said, using the Bearded Lady's given name. The Albi



no was the love of her life.

I never smoked a day in my life. My mama claimed smoking ruined one's complexion by causing wrinkles. Without my skin I wasn't Lydia the Lizard Queen, star of any traveling sideshow. Why would I have taken such a chance by taking up that disgusting habit? I was a professional. Moisturizer never touched my scales. I maintained my image. I even drank gallons of that putrid spinach strength elixir hawked by Wyatt Watterson hoping it might add a green tinge, sure to intrigue curious boys and disgust squeamish girls. My condition, ichthyosis, was my blessing. Every night I prayed they would never find a cure. Yes, I was the star, and the other freaks knew it.

I entered Madame Zorzka's tent as she was stuffing her gray tangled hair into a paisley turban and I told her what had happened.

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“That man! He is just trying to find a way to get money out of you. He must know you didn’t do it. He has no loyalty to his staff. It’s all about money with him,” she said. “I’ll curse him for you if you want, honey. Bring me a lock of his hair. That gives the curse more oomph. And don’t you worry about the cost. We’ll come up with a payment plan.”



Madame Zorzka’s first day in the sideshow was my third, so she knew I wasn’t going to buy a curse. She knew that almost all my salary went straight to my sister Becca for her daughter Christina. The poor child was born with legs limp as noodles. True, a lot of children had polio, but the doctors called Christina’s case *tragic* and *complicated*, deserving of their most experimental treatments.

During the Depression, we all helped our families as much as we could. I believed my sacrifice would be rewarded in heaven, which was fortunate because the tithes and then some that I would have given to a church went to Becca for Christina, a niece I never met, born after my career was well established. Becca sent me a head shot every Christmas, sparing me the pain of seeing the child’s useless limbs. Poor Becca. She had a plateful of work pushing Christina about in her wheelchair and rubbing the salves in,

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the ones with the rare imported herbs. No, Becca couldn't have held a job, so she stretched the dollars from mine.

My busy career never allowed me the luxury of taking time off for visiting. Even when the sideshow went through Becca's hometown, as it did off and on through the years, I didn't stop by her humble house to visit. I was never the kind of aunt who comes calling loaded down with red velvet cake, trinkets, and stories of my youth anyway. I bid my youth good-bye the day I stayed silent as Mr. Devereaux leered at me during my job interview. I was a woman, therefore a temptation.

I always loved being the crowd's favorite. I went too far when I affixed the tail to my bottom, but I felt threatened. I had heard Mr. Devereaux asking the locals, "Are there any unusual folks around here? I'll pay them a fair wage and treat them right. My associates see the country from a trailer fit for a king. Most of them don't do much on the job. They just have to tolerate being gawked at." He was always looking for new talent. All us freaks were proud to be chosen and ever-mindful that we needed to give the best performances possible. Like I said, I just went too far.

Mr. Devereaux called me into his trailer. He looked dapper in his blue and white seersucker suit, but he smelled of nervous sweat.

"Care for a ginger ale, Lydia?"

I accepted the beverage from his assistant Shirley and set it on the cork coaster on the gray metal desk. When Shirley patted my shoulder, I knew something was up.

"Lydia, you've been with us for a long time and I've appreciated your dedication, but situations change and, well, we need to let you go. We want to do right by you though. You have family here in town, right? Your sister and her husband, right?" Mr. Devereaux said.

"And their daughter," I replied.

"We'll drop you off right at the house as we head out of town the day after tomorrow."

"I didn't kill the Albino," I stated in a quivering voice. With a shaky hand I reached for the ginger ale, then took a gulp. Ginger's known to soothe the stomach, but did nothing for my nerves.

"That death was just the start of our trouble with you."

It was not a good time to be looking for work. When I heard President Roosevelt's voice boom from the radio saying, "The only thing we have

to fear is fear itself,” I wanted to believe. But when I heard him say “Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment,” I knew it was truth with a capital T. I simply couldn’t stay with Becca and add to her burden. I needed to find another job fast. Becca had said the doctor thought some sort of experimental infusion therapy would be just what Christina needed. Since the therapy was only done in New York, I needed to get her there.

Mr. Devereaux ran his hand through his slicked-back auburn hair. He yanked open the desk drawer because it stuck sometimes and retrieved an envelope with Hospitality City Bank printed in forest green.

“I’ve got a longevity bonus for you to help tide you over until something else comes along,” he said. He handed me a crisp fifty-dollar bill.

“I didn’t kill the Albino,” I repeated. “Why not let someone else go? Why me?”

“Times are tough. And some kids saw you put on your tail. Their pa hollered that we were all a bunch of fakes and that his lawyer could shut us down. I run a top-notch operation. I will not let some rube cause trouble. You can understand that.”

“I suppose so,” I replied, too stunned to spit in his face, which I would have done if Mama hadn’t raised me as a lady. Well, not just a lady. She raised me to be a queen.

I took the check and left the office with my dignity intact.

I’ve been the Lizard Queen since I left home. It was more than a job; it was a persona. Being exotic, I didn’t have the sort of non-threatening good looks that would allow me to fit in at a diner or a dress shop. I tried to imagine being a secretary or a bank teller and I snorted. Office people probably don’t snort.

If I wasn’t the Lizard Queen, who was I?

I considered applying to another sideshow, but I loved the batch of freaks I was with, especially The Merman. When he first heard from that blabbermouth Charmaine that I was leaving, he put his newspaper-ink-stained hand in mine and squeezed tight. The man who quoted Shakespeare and sang arias to the crowd was robbed of all words and music. The twinkle in his eye vanished, leaving a somber solid circle.

“I just don’t know who would be hiring. Sideshows aren’t as popular as they used to be. People these days crave different entertainment, I

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guess, movies and such. But I'll check the classifieds for you, and if there's anything I can do to help, you know I will," he said.

The Merman always read the newspaper of the town we were in, gathering up tales of what was happening in places beyond the two-bit towns we traveled to. He informed me wistfully when Wily Post flew solo around the world and joyously when sales of 3.2 beer and wine was legalized. He was the smartest man I've ever known.



I didn't worry about whether the Merman's job was secure. Other sideshows might have a mermaid, but a merman was rare indeed. When he first came into the show he thought of himself the way the Irish mythology views mermen: ugly and cruel. But soon, with the freaks' encouragement, he saw himself the way the Finn mythology views mermen: powerful and enchanting.

We bonded at first because we have the same skin condition, but we discovered we have similar habits of thinking and feeling. His legs were pretty much fused together, so his fishy tail was legitimate.

The Merman was my secret alibi. As the fire raged, so did my hor-

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mones because I was watching him. I walked past the men's trailer and peered through the window, not expecting to see anything other than the Merman, the Albino, Fireswallower Fred, and Pretzel Boy sitting down for a fried chicken dinner. But Merman was there alone, listening to Guy Lombardo's orchestra on the radio. He wasn't wearing a shirt. His taut stomach shimmered with pellets of sweat. That wiry man made my scales tingle.

I told Shirley that I didn't own a suitcase, so she drove into town and bought me a drab beige one at the general store. Just wen I was thinking she honestly cared she said, "Remember that Lizard Queen crown is company property. You need to return it before you leave."



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After my final shift, I tossed my few belongings into the suitcase; it didn't take long. Then I prepared to walk among my fans. I dabbed on red lipstick and slipped on my big rings, the red, the green, and the blue. My tail was straight and secure.

I emerged fresh and fabulous from the women's trailer. Pretzel Boy parked himself smack outside the door. I cleared my throat. He untwisted to clear a path. "Could you bring back some ice cream, Lydia? My throat is parched."

"Sure, kid. The heat's fierce today."

"We could use some rain," he answered, stating the obvious. Perhaps Pretzel Boy should wrap his brain around an idea, instead of his leg around his arm, I thought.

As always, people jealously stared as I walked amongst them. I waved as I sauntered, risking blinding them with the glare from my rings.

I stopped for cotton candy, a favorite indulgence. Lo and behold, raindrops hit my arm. Maybe Madame Zorzkka could teach Pretzel Boy the timeless scam of making predictions.

I suddenly wondered if the epoxy holding my tail was waterproof. I hadn't read the tube. I wanted to do my best for Mr. Devereaux until the very end; maybe my professionalism would save my job.

I licked pink sugar crystals from my fingertips and shifted my focus to finding some shelter. I dashed into the nearest red-and-white striped tent. A rambunctious teenager slammed into me, but caused neither true pain to my body nor disruption to my tail.

She looked up and smiled apologetically.

I knew her. To be more accurate I knew her face from thirteen-years of Christmas updates. I knew the blond ponytail with straight bangs, the full lips, the sparse eyebrows. I didn't know the perfect posture and muscular legs.

I squealed, "It's you! Christina, what are you doing here? Where's your mother?"

"Aunt Lydia?" She recognized me from pictures too.

I hugged her, dropping my cotton candy, and tears streamed down my face. "You can walk! You've been cured! I knew those doctors would come up with something."

She laughed. "What are you talking about? I'm never sick and, of

course, I can walk. I'm here because I'm riding my horse in the jumping competition. This fair has one every year and I always beat that bratty Mary Sue Walker. Will you watch? Mom couldn't come because she's at the beauty parlor getting a perm.

My mouth filled with the vinegary taste of betrayal where before I had such grainy sweetness. "Of course," I answered as the short-lived shower ceased.

Without asking, Christina polished off the new cotton candy I bought as she waited her turn to ride. She spoke nonstop about horses and horse shows, not having the manners to ask one question about my life. The blue ribbon she won will go on top of the stack of ribbons in her closet, a dust-gathering token to her rather than something to stroke for comfort when the world serves her disappointment. From how she talked, she had only experienced the cream at the top of the milk bottle, not the spit left after gratefully slurping only the last gulp. I tried to rejoice in her victory, but this spoiled, self-centered child seemed too much like her greedy mother. Even if I still had a job, they wouldn't get another cent.

I waited for Christina to stop eating the cotton candy. I waited for Christina to show that she had one whit of interest in my life, but she didn't. I waited for Becca and she eventually waltzed onto the scene, clasping a sheer yellow scarf over her artificial curls.

"How's my winner?" was her greeting as she hugged her daughter. Then she saw me and mumbled a few choice curse words.

"Lydia, look at her! That last treatment did the trick. She'll need some maintenance treatments, of course. Same price, I'm afraid."

"Then get a job. You will never hear from me again." With that, I turned away with no regrets.

Back at the trailer, Pretzel Boy thanked me for the ice cream. He smacked his lips after finishing it though it had melted into soup and it was nearly time for my farewell dinner.

I told everyone about Becca and Christina.

"You know, I had a vision of that last night. Meant to tell you, but you were still asleep when I left this morning," Madame Zorzka said. She handed me a slice of her homemade apple pie, foreseeing that I needed dessert before dinner.

"Pretty coincidental that you have that vision right before I meet the

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girl, Gladys, and not during all those years I was sending them money.”

“Haven’t you learned a thing from me, Lydia? There are no coincidences. I was picking up the girl’s negative energy because she was so close.”

“If you say so,” I replied.

Fireswallower Fred finished his fifth beer, so he was on schedule to do something stupid. He staggered until he was in front of me and forced his doughy body against mine. He pursed his pale, skinny lips.

“How about a kiss, pretty lady? Let’s say goodbye the right way.” I wriggled free and smacked his face, not too hard, but you’d have thought I was Charles Atlas the way he rubbed it.

“You know we’re just friends. Why don’t you sleep off those beers?” I suggested.

“Can’t,” he said. “I would never miss your celebration, sugar. You are my very best friend.”



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The Merman's face was beet-red; I hadn't noticed that before. Sunburn seemed unlikely.



The Bearded Lady stroked her chin, like she usually did before her infrequent attempts at conversation.

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“I suppose I should tell you now, Lydia,” she began. “It was my cigarette that started the fire.”

Her cigarette! What sort of person lets another’s reputation go through the mud to save her own skin? I didn’t understand why people kept treating me like I was a piece of dirt to be trampled on? Did they forget that queens do not have everything important in the lives snatched away. Queens conquer and acquire. They are never diminished by the petty actions of commoners.

“Yours! Why didn’t you say so?”

“I felt so guilty,” she continued sheepishly. “It was a horrible accident and I was jealous of all the attention you got. I guess I thought if I blamed you, people wouldn’t think you were so wonderful. Nobody except Mr. Devereaux really believed me when I said you smoked in secret.”

“Charmaine, I tell you what. Life’s too short to hold grudges. Let’s have a old-fashioned girls’ night of beauty treatments before I leave. I’ve got a great new skin cream you’ll just love.” I suppressed a chuckle. The cream, Zip, was a hair remover. I saw the ad in *Harper’s Bazaar*. Once I slathered it all over her chin and rinsed it off, we were even. No one bothered to see her act for a while.

After dinner, Pretzel Boy nudged the Merman. “Do it. Ask her now.”

The Merman nervously approached me in his wheelchair, identical to the one Becca claimed she bought for Christina. He dropped to one knee and it cracked. I opened my mouth to tell that his bones were too brittle for sudden movements, but I noticed his watery eyes and I sensed it was not the time to be bossy.

He cleared his throat. “Lydia, I’ve always loved you and I think you’re a bit sweet on me. Would you do me the honor of being my wife? The ring’s not much, not as flashy as your others...”

“It’s beautiful,” I interrupted, already seeing it on my finger, already thinking that I could spend a lifetime with this kind, intelligent man.

“Will you marry me?” he repeated. “Don’t worry about not having a job. I want to take care of you.”

“Of course!” I answered and we kissed with a shocking intensity.

Pretzel Boy slapped the Merman on the shoulder.

“Hope I find myself a good woman like you did, old man,” he said

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and the Merman responded with a grin. I never saw a more handsome man.

Madame Zorzka claimed she predicted this marriage to me a while back.

“You must have forgotten, Lydia,” she said.

I shrugged, content in the cocoon of my true family with its exaggerations, lies, and facts. After the wedding, I sorted them out. It seemed like a good way to spend the days while I waited to give birth.

Becca never learned she was aunt to a princess.



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