

Life Sized

by Katrina Dessavre

The first time I saw Little Man was on a bright, hot afternoon near the end of November, when the trains had just pulled into the fair grounds and the familiar smell of upturned turf and sun-basked animals returned to Sarasota. The stutters of tractors hauling cages had quieted down enough to hear the soft cries of trainers encouraging the elephants to rehearse their steps to Stravinsky. I wandered past the perimeter of cars humming with air conditioning, a novelty back then, and followed the railroad tracks to a row of carved wooden wagons. I must have spent several minutes examining the decorative motifs, running my fingers against the flaking gilded paint, before I noticed him leaning against a particularly ornate caryatid.

"Almost life-sized," he said, "Like me."

The white chalk on his face looked patchy and faded in the harsh light.

"I'm Jimmy," he said, reaching up for a handshake. I moved towards him but stumbled on a cast-concrete putto buried in weeds.

"That's my lawn decoration," he said with a laugh that did not disturb the black arches disappearing into his bowler hat. "Reminds me that this is home. For the next few months, anyway."

He looked me up and down. I began to feel self-conscious of my paint-splattered work clothes against his pristine and impeccably pressed shirt.

"The grounds aren't open to the public yet. But you're far too ordinary to belong here."

"I'm usually up there," I said, pointing across the stretch of canvas tops shimmering with silver paint and red trim.

"The Greatest Show On Ea--," he read.

"I still have the last three letters to finish."

"So they have money to hire a sign painter but not enough to give these old wagons a fresh coat."

I told him that they pay me less than the price of admission, that I would gladly paint his wagon, but he waved me off.

"Don't," he said, peeling off a chip of paint and throwing it in the grass. "It suits me. Soon I'll be too old to live in this row of left-behinds, and then I'll be asking you for a job. I don't know about climbing up that ladder, though." Laughter left deep creases on his whitened face.

The next time I saw Jimmy was in late March, during one of their last shows of the season. I looked through the program but couldn't find his name. I found him outside the main tent, handing out balloons and trying not to tangle himself in their strings.

"I'm billed as Little Man," he said over the roars of children. "Watch me ride an elephant in the second act."

