

Hal and Estelle

by Katy Bowman

Estelle seemed transfixed by the rings reflected in her coffee by the light hanging above the kitchen table.

"You want to go back." She said these words slowly, feeling the weight of each of them on her tongue. She looked up at her husband, who was leaning against the kitchen sink.

"Don't you, Estelle?" Hal paused a moment, trying to gauge his wife's response. "Ever since we left, everything has been difficult. You've been unable to find a suitable job, I have to work for a trucking company. We never see each other any more. It used to be that if I wanted to see you in the middle of the day all I had to do was take a five-minute break. Now, I'm only home one or two days a week. I miss you, I miss the life we had."

Estelle sighed and glanced out the kitchen window at the still-dark woods behind their small house. She knew what Hal was talking about, she missed him too. After he left this morning, she wouldn't see him for 3 days. The problem was that they were no longer welcome with the carnival. Bearded ladies and strong men had, it seemed, gone out of fashion. They hadn't just left, they had been fired. The people who went to carnivals these days wanted rides and fried food and maybe a few clowns. They felt uncomfortable looking at people who were different. Estelle had felt it especially the last few years. In the past, people celebrated her oddity, paid to see it, were fascinated by it. Now, mothers shielded their children's eyes as they passed by. On a few occasions several years before, people had approached her and offered their sympathy. They couldn't understand that someone would enjoy that life, enjoy having people come and stare at them, enjoy being different. Estelle did enjoy it, though. Especially now, she treasured the memory of being able to be who she was, not having to hide the fact that she was

different.

"We can't go back, you know that."

"Maybe we could find another carnival. I have some friends, I could make some calls."

"It's over, Hal." Estelle looked back into her coffee cup, unable to bear the look of despair in her husband's eyes.

Hal did not respond right away. He didn't want to accept that she was right. He hated being a trucker, but it was the only job he could work where people were not afraid of him. After leaving the carnival, he had first tried several more sedentary jobs, but they had all ended with him walking out, leaving broken fax machines, overturned vending machines, and gawking coworkers behind.

He had been the Strong Man at the carnival ever since he was twenty years old. He had met Estelle there. They were proud and unashamed then, on display because they chose to be. They had both discovered, though, that when people stared at them now, away from the carnival, it was very different. There, they were supposed to be odd, it was what people expected. Here, they were supposed to fit in. That was especially difficult for Estelle. Only weeks before, Hal had begged her to quit her job as a cashier at the grocery around the corner from their house. He couldn't stand to see her cry every morning with the pain of the razor on her sensitive skin or how she cried when she came home with the shame of not being accepted by her coworkers and customers. He knew she was depressed, and it pained him to know that there was nothing he could do about it.

"Can't we try, Estelle? What's the hurt in just making a few phone calls? Who knows, maybe we could find something?" Hal heard the desperation in his words and felt the air tense as Estelle stood and

faced him. As she looked up at him once again, he could see that she was beginning to cry and immediately he felt remorseful.

"Hal, I love you, but I can't do this again." She let the tears run down her face and into the hair that now grew thickly just below her cheek bones. "I can't be rejected again, I just can't. "

Hal gathered his wife in his thick arms, holding her as tight as he dared. A feeling of resignation came over him as he finally accepted the truth of the situation. It was over.

