



HOMUNCULUS





Homunculus

Didi sits on a three-legged stool on the stage in a sideshow tent. It's the third show of the night. She listens to the barker, Captain Withers, as he gathers a new crowd outside. "Didi, the Dynamic Dwarf! The doll of the midway!"

On stage, Didi is hidden behind the wooden façade of a miniature house with a hinged door and two fake windows and an angled roofline bent on each side of the peak. The tent air is hot and stuffy, and sweat trickles from her armpit down her side. She wonders if it is due to nerves or the weather.

"This tiny morsel – born of ancient royal heritage – is the reincarnation of Cleopatra, an Egyptian goddess. The smallest woman in the world. Thirty-two inches low. You will see every detail, of God's amazing work. Right here, tonight, gentlemen, and for two nights only."

Didi's real name – Gloria Pinkham – is rarely used, a smudged memory from the real world. After eight years with the circus, she barely remembers the shape of her mama's house on a side street in Lewiston, Maine. She carries a scratched daguerreotype of her mother sitting in a chair; her father, stiff as a cigar-store Indian, stands by her side with a hat in his hand. The war killed him when Didi was four; he faded away in some Georgia prison. He left her no memories.

Captain Withers yells until he fills the first four rows of the twelve benches with customers. Didi doesn't care how many; she gets food, shelter, and a few dollars every month if there are two, ten or twenty. These farmers and farmers' boys are like fish in a pond – different sizes and hard to tell apart. They've never been more than twenty miles from their mothers or wives, and they clump together like curdled cream to gawk at something from away. She sees in their gaze how they undress her, their curious glares often speckled with desire. She loves to be wanted and she wants to be loved. But she hates pity; when she sees it in a sucker's eyes she looks away and pretends it's not there.

Captain Withers signals those inside when he yells, "You're lucky, my friends, the show is just starting," and blows his whistle. Didi opens the hinged door in the house facade and steps out onto a stage that dances with the shadows of four flickering torches. Wisps of smoke cloud the air. Growls, shrieks and cries pulse from the midway and dampen the scattered applause. The eighteen-by-twelve foot stage with collapsible support beams rises three feet above the ground. The front is slightly lower than the back, and there is barely enough room for the miniature dogcart in front of the dollhouse façade. To make Didi look smaller, the cart has oversized wheels and a single seat on a small frame. Didi mounts the single step, and sits on the seat and waves. She wants them to enjoy her. She watches the faces of the men and boys with the same intensity as they watch her. Men mystify her. Didi wants a husband to pamper, children to correct, a house to come home to even if it is just during the winter when the circus doesn't travel. She dreams of Lazlo the Hungarian trapeze artist.

Rudy, the Daring Dwarf, handles Terry the Terrier, who is harnessed in front of the cart. With a leash, Rudy leads the dog through a tight figure-eight journey around the

stage. Then Didi steps down. Rudy picks up a half-sized banjo from behind the house facade and strums. Didi sings a song – "Wandering in the Garden of My Mother's Withered Roses." When Rudy signals with his hand, Terry wags his tail. Didi unhooks her gown and it falls away; Rudy dashes to collect it. Terry barks. Didi wears a see-through costume over white under garments that resembles a nightgown and glitters with sequined trim. Her breasts swell in the golden silk of the fabric. Didi pulls up the hem, shows her baby-like ankle, part of her stubby leg. She climbs back into her dogcart carriage holding her nightgown so that much of her backside is exposed. Seated, she crosses her legs so her dress rides up her thighs and Rudy comes over and kisses her on the cheek. Off they go. Off the stage. Behind the facade. The act takes less than five minutes.

As Rudy and Didi leave the stage, Billy Batton, the full-size sideshow buffoon, walks up and down the rows of spectators whispering, "You want to see Didi's thing? Her woman stuff? Over there." Billy collects additional money and points to the tent flap where gentlemen go, one at a time, into a booth the size of a one-hole outhouse. In the dark, a two-inch diameter hole glows weakly from candle light on the other side. It's on the back wall, about four feet above the ground, and easy to find.

With one eye pressed to the hole, a customer sees Didi's feminine parts. They are perched on a table covered with purple-red velvet drapes mounded to suggest that Didi is lying on her back with her knees raised and her legs spread apart. The edge of the drape can't quite cover a little piece of gold cloth with sequins – the same cut of cloth as Didi's gown. Between the two leg-mounds is a slit the size of the spine of a small hymnal that reveals moist flesh poorly illuminated by two candles in glass hurricane shades on a side

table. These are really the private parts of a freshly killed lamb.

In the dressing tent, Didi is folding up her white dress to place it in the trunk with her golden gown when Captain Withers grabs her by the arm. “Tell Rudy one more show.”

“We ain’t finished?”

“You talk too much for a runt.”

Didi wishes Captain Withers would drop dead. She hates his voice. She hates his yellow teeth and his breath that stinks like the floor of a chicken coop. And she hates what he makes up about her. About her savage beginnings. About how all the dwarves crave her. And she’s thirty-four inches, not thirty-two. One time in Indiana, when Didi tried to run away to marry a barber’s son, Captain Withers whipped her.

Rudy stamps his feet when she tells him about the show. It’s something a full-grown man wouldn’t do, and she feels embarrassed for Rudy – and for herself. “It’s not fair,” he says.

“Of course it’s not fair. It’s not fair being some shrunk-up freak either.”

After the last show, Rudy helps Didi fold her costumes. He walks her back to the wagon where six of the thirteen circus dwarves sleep. Rudy touches Didi’s bare arm and tries to hold her hand, but she takes it away.

“Let’s get out,” he says. “You and me.”

Didi laughs. He is a funny little man, always dreaming the impossible. His only skills are making Terry the Terrier do its tricks and making people smile with his curious thoughts. And he wants to hold her in the night, he says, forever, and keep her warm when the drafts sneak through the boards of the wagon.

Rudy stops her near the utility wagon. He grabs her shoulders and turns her small body toward him. His wide face is round with teeth that are too big and lips too small to hide them. His eyes are wide apart and give him a dull-witted look, although Didi knows he is very smart. He writes letters for her, and reads the ones that come from her mother.

“I’m going. With or without you.”

“Poof,” says Didi.

“I mean it.”

“Where would you go?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“And you’ll starve. You’ll be eaten by wolves.”

“You’ll see,” says Rudy. Didi hears a resolve in his voice. Would he really leave without her? She has assumed that he will always be there for her, always leading her wagon. But she says nothing, and they turn to climb the small closely spaced steps into the wagon where four dwarves play cards and a fifth is playing “Oh! Susanna” on a harmonica, a sweet and lively tune that makes Didi happy and sad at the same time. “It rained all day the day I left, the weather it was dry . . . Susanna, don’t you cry.”

That night Captain Withers dies. He does not drop dead exactly, but he is found on his cot in his wagon, twisted at the waist, his legs in a grotesque pose of writhing. Most circus people think it was some sort of fit. He’s lost all control of his bowels and bladder and snot hangs out his nose. With her low vantage point, Didi gets a direct peek at dead Captain Withers' open eyes. He looks afraid. She whimpers to impress the other circus people who are near, but she wants to laugh and clap at the same time.

“He did the best he could,” says Rudy.

“You’re crazy,” says Didi. A crew from the animal wagons takes Captain Withers out near the river and buries him and his soiled nightclothes in a damp shallow grave. Some sideshow people watch; Didi doesn’t go, but Rudy tells her, and she worries that the hasty grave is too shallow to bury the mean spirit of Captain Withers. She dreads his image in nightmares, and fears wicked spirit visitations from his black soul. She asks Rudy about the grave.

“Graves don’t matter. I’ll take care of you,” he says. But Didi wants Lazlo the trapeze artist, not Rudy. And she doesn’t want the ghost of Captain Withers to haunt her.

The next morning the new barker, Colonel Phister, who is part owner, starts to make changes. “To not go broke,” he says, “not to belly up.” He does not like Didi’s act. “Never have,” he says. He wants an act that will make the farmers and their boys come back the same night to see it, as he puts it, “again.” Pay more money. At first Didi is excited; she dreams of a better position on the midway, with new costumes. But Colonel Phister wants to double bill her. “We’ll make more money with the giant,” he says.

“Gargantuan does his own act,” Didi complains.

“He’s a dud. There ain’t no surprise. No one pays to see a giant in a tent when you can’t miss seeing him outside on the midway. We got to do something original.”

Colonel Phister thinks Gargu the Giant should be the one to unloose Didi’s dress. Fumble a little. Build some tension.

“What about the dog?” Rudy asks.

“No dog. Just play that goddamn banjo. And change that stupid song. Get one of them nigger tunes.”

Gargu the Giant is slow to think. “Why you want to change the act?” he asks

when he looks down on Didi, Rudy and Colonel Phister. Didi thinks if she's got to share billing, she'd rather it be in the big tent with Lazlo.

"I could work with Lazlo and the trapeze family."

"That's stupid. Ain't no runts in the big tent."

"We work with the clowns," Rudy replies.

"That's different," says Colonel Phister.

"Can't we wait for winter quarters?" says Didi. "Take some time to work things out?"

But Colonel Phister sees economic potential. "Now," he responds. They change the act on the road. Didi has new billing: "GARGU the GIANT and DIDI the DYNAMIC DWARF with Rudy the Daring Dwarf playing BANJO."

They decide to have Didi enter on the dogcart after all, and do away with the dollhouse facade that needs painting anyway. When Gargu the giant tries to pick up Didi, he grips her waist so hard she cries out. She refuses to let him touch her. So they get an eight-rung little ladder that they prop against Gargu's chest. Rudy holds the base of the ladder steady. Didi climbs up, and when she is almost to the top, Gargu kisses her and puts her on his shoulder. Rudy takes the ladder away. It is from there, holding onto Gargu's hair on the back of his head for support, that Didi sings her new song, "Oh, Susanna."

"The sun so hot I froze to death...Susanna, don't you cry."

Colonel Phister wants Didi to show her body. He gives her a shorter see-through gown and he has Gargu hold her up and look up under her dress. "Make 'em want to pay to see," Colonel Phister says. To dismount from Gargu's shoulder, Colonel Phister thinks

Didi needs to have a whiz-bang ending. “Jump.”

“I’ll kill myself,” Didi protests.

“We’ll borrow a trampoline from the Wondrous Polenskys.”

“You can’t make her jump. It’s too dangerous. She’s the star,” says Rudy to Colonel Phister.

“She ain’t no star. She’s a runt on the midway.”

Because the Polensky trampolines are too big for the stage, Colonel Phister has the carpenter build a circular wooden frame with a diameter the size of two barrelheads and stretch a canvas over the top. Didi jumps to fall on her back and spring up so she lands on her feet on the stage. She can’t get the timing right, and she bounces crooked and lands in a heap.

“That’s great,” laughs Colonel Phister. But it hurts to fall wrong and Didi practices every day to get it right. She jumps off the water wagon onto the new special dwarf trampoline to practice landing on soft grass. Then she climbs back up an iron ladder bolted to the side of the wagon and jumps again. And again. Until she can land standing up almost every time.

Rudy is a pest. He finds flowers in the fields or next to the rivers, and brings them to Didi to celebrate the new act. In the mess tent, he offers part of his apple pan dowdy to Didi. He says he loves her. She smiles at his passion, but thinks he is short and ugly. She is ashamed of him; he is a joke of a man no one could love. And she resents his advances because he could never be Lazlo the Hungarian trapeze artist.

Lazlo wears white tights trimmed with sequins. Although he is barely five feet tall, he has wide shoulders and strong arms that hang down, each bent like a tightly strung

bow. On each arm, a bicep bulges big as a potato. His black hair is cut short, and his small ears are low on his skull. His eyes are dark and close together. He is clean-shaven except for a thin mustache, and he has a big smile and good teeth that are only a little uneven in spacing. He flies through the air and the crowds hush so that Didi fears they might hear her heart racing. Every unmarried girl likes him. A lot of marrieds too. Many give themselves to him hoping he will marry them. Didi knows that Khatooma the Cat Woman and Rhonda, who is second billing for the Flying Rolands' horse riding act, both had to get their babies stopped. Lazlo's babies.

Didi is sure that Lazlo could love her if he knew her. Big people have loved little people. She's heard of long, happy lives together. And Lazlo isn't that big. He just needs to get to know her. And isn't she pretty? Doesn't she have long hair that flows to her waist? He could comb it for her. She could sew his costumes. They could have a house somewhere with china plates.

She has a plan. She hopes to talk to Lazlo alone, as if by accident. She will meet him after a show when he is going back to his family's wagon. She is smaller than a wagon wheel so that she can fit under many wagons without bending. She waits hidden in the shadow of the tent-pole wagon every evening for a time when Lazlo might walk by alone on his way from the main tent. For two nights, he is with someone. Then the third night he is alone, and she pops out and acts as if she is walking the other way.

"Hi, Lazlo. You did real good tonight."

"You think so?" Lazlo says. And he smiles. "You're mighty cute down there on the edge of center circle," he says. When she goes back to the wagon where the dwarves sleep, she smiles to herself and hums her new tune, "Oh, Susanna."

Each night, Didi goes back under the wagon to wait for accidental time with Lazlo. When Didi and Lazlo are alone, she tells him how accomplished he is, and she makes him laugh with stories about little Rudy and Rudy's silly ways.

In the tent where Madame Fortuna does her séances to talk with the dead, Didi climbs into the red velvet upholstered chair used for soul seekers. Madame Fortuna is Didi's big friend, and Didi talks to her often about Lazlo, about making a family.

"I love him," Didi says.

"Ah, vat eeze luf?" Schenectady-born Madame says in her European accent that Didi wishes she could learn. Didi practices alone, away from the others, dreaming she might have a real speaking part in the act some day. Lazlo has an accent.

"I want to be his wife."

Madame Fortuna takes off her turban and shakes out her thin hair. It is black, streaked with gray. Hidden in a wash of French perfume, Didi smells a mixture of sweat, mold, and dead shellfish.

Didi tells her about her meetings with Lazlo.

"You've got to make him want you," Madame Fortuna says.

Didi thinks for a moment. "He likes me. I know it."

"He's got to crave your body. Wake up in the night hot for your wares."

"You mean down there?" Didi nods to her private parts.

"Do you know a man can fit?"

"I've heard."

Madame Fortuna unties the sash that holds her robe. Her large breasts hang loose, ballooning her undershirt. "I mean did you make love to a big man? Did it work?"

Didi doesn't speak. She does not want to say she has never made love to any man. Big or small.

"Being with a man hurts me, Didi. And I ain't small by a long shot."

Didi squirms in her chair. She believes that when you love someone it can never hurt.

Madame clears her throat. "I'd forget it."

"I can do it," Didi blurts out.

"Look, honey, don't get mad. It just ain't possible."

"I'm a real girl. It ain't just lamb parts."

"Well, he's had every girl who would let him. He'd be glad to add you. With women, he's like Bill Cody shooting buffalo."

"I know he's not like that."

"He's an uncaring bastard, Didi. The worst kind of man."

"I could make him want me," Didi mumbles.

Madame Fortuna has not said what Didi wanted to hear. Now Didi thinks Madame is too old to know of these things about love, although she has been helpful before. Does she have a man? No. Besides, her tealeaves are tobacco, and she smells bad.

Didi is so angry with Madame Fortuna, she goes directly to Lazlo. She finds him practicing on a bar propped between wagons. Didi says she needs to talk to him.

"Of course." He smiles.

"Alone," says Didi.

Later that night, she meets him behind the laundry wagon. She is there early and

he comes late. He slides down on the grass beside her and sits with his ankles crossed and his knees apart.

Didi tells him about the new act. She talks about Captain Withers dying before she says, “Do you think I’m pretty?”

“Exquisite,” Lazlo says, and smiles down into her eyes.

“Could you love me, Lazlo?”

“I love you. Naturally.” His accent seems thicker now.

“Really love me. Like a wife?”

“Ah. That is the question?”

“Of course it’s the question, you oaf. It’s what’s important to me.”

“You’re a very pretty woman.”

“But I’m too small.” Didi pouts.

“No, you are very attractive. Desirable.”

Didi takes his hand, feels the calluses on his palm, rough like cured leather and harder than amber. “Make love to me, Lazlo.”

“Here?”

“No. We’ll go over near the edge of the woods.”

Lazlo squats to look into Didi’s face. “You mean it?”

Didi nods. She looks up into his eyes. He still grins, but she is sure he is not making fun of her. He seems interested. Curious, maybe. She wonders – wasn't this what she wanted? She reaches out to put her finger on his lips. She feels the scratch of his waxed mustache.

“It is not possible?” Lazlo asks.

“Of course it is. I’ve known lots of small people who love big people.”

“We must be quick.”

“Of course.”

“Be sure no one knows.”

“Absolutely.”

“I’ll get a blanket,” Lazlo says.

“Yes. Hurry,” she says.

As Didi waits, Lazlo finds a washed blanket on a line strung between two wagons. It is dark among the wagons, and he touches the blanket’s lower edge to see if it is dry. He yanks it off the line. Together they walk. Didi hurries to keep up. He reaches down and grabs her by her shoulders. Lifts her.

“Put me down.”

Lazlo laughs. He walks a little faster. Didi twists out of his grip, sputtering, and when she is free she has to trot to keep up.

Lazlo finds a dark spot and throws the blanket onto a grassless patch of dirt under a tree. There is a late quarter moon and a faint glow from the cooking fires from the circus. She sees the mussed blanket. From each corner she works to the center and smooths it as best she can.

Lazlo has taken off his pants. Didi looks away, embarrassed and afraid, and sees the low branch of a tree move. It could not be the wind.

“Lie down,” she says.

“No. You.” He still has on a tight shirt. He has kicked off his slippers.

She fears his weight. Her bones are easy to break. “I can’t.” When he bends

slightly, she thinks it is to find his pants to leave, and she is surprised that she feels relief. But Lazlo moves his pants off the blanket and lies down on his back. His member looks different – still hard, but pointing to his chin and pulsating a little. Didi smiles because it looks silly.

She takes off her dress, but keeps her shoes on. She presses her palms together to keep from shaking. She pulls her undershirt overhead and stands next to Lazlo, who is looking at the stars with his hands locked behind his head. She straightens her back so her breasts jut out a little more, and she moves a few steps toward him.

Lazlo reaches up and touches her left breast, scratching her nipple with his rough skin. Didi senses his disappointment as he pulls away his hand. Did he expect more?

She reaches over to take his organ in her right hand. Her stubby fingers can't get around it so she uses both hands. It is warm, but not as hot as she expected. And she can feel the surge of Lazlo's heart pumping the blood into his organ. "Damn it. Be careful," he says.

"What happened?"

"It's tender sometimes," he says. "Ain't you had it before?"

Didi wonders why she feels dread instead of excitement. She tries to touch Lazlo carefully, standing next to him, barely needing to bend. She strokes his member with the tip of her finger.

"You jump on," he says.

"Do you love me?" Didi says. But he doesn't answer.

She strokes him a few more times and he moans. He breathes hard. He tries to grab her breasts, but he can't get a hold of the little mounds. He grips her arm, draws her

closer to him. His member is still between her palms, and it squirts like a cannon – three times she thinks, but maybe four. She is so surprised she squeezes. He swats her hands away.

“I didn’t ...”

“Shit,” says Lazlo.

She wipes her hands on her hip, then picks up her nightshirt and cleans off each finger of her left hand.

Didi tries to take his hand, but he jumps to his feet, puts on his pants, pulls the blanket from under her so fast she tumbles down, hurting her shoulder.

“Lazlo,” she says softly, but he is too far away to hear. “Lazlo.”

She stays on the ground, rolls onto her back in the same position Lazlo waited for her. She rubs the sore shoulder until the pain is dull. She looks to the sky and the stars. Follows the outlines of the Big Dipper and Orion’s belt. Some stars twinkle in pairs, like eyes watching. In a few minutes, she is cold, and she rises to put on her clothes. Then she lies back down, still chilled, but not wanting to return to the cluster of wagons and tents. She watches the sky change, the moon covered by swirling clouds. She waits to go back until the sky is black and the fires among the wagons die to embers. From the woods, she walks slowly, her arms stretched out in front for protection, but she still trips on an unseen tree root. As she approaches the circus tents and wagons, the light is better, and she moves without stumbling. The sounds of the circus are muted, and she hears only the snorts of sleep and the restless pacing of animals in their cages. She opens the door and enters the dwarves’ wagon. From the way they breathe, she knows they only pretend to be asleep. In the frail light coming through the open door, she sees the twisted

blankets near the door where Rudy sleeps. He is not there. His satchel is gone. The nail where Terry the Terrier's leash hangs is empty. She feels the urgency in the way every dwarf is holding his or her breath, trying to be silent. She closes the door and gropes her way to her spot on the floor. When she lies on her pallet and closes her eyes, she hears a train whistle, a discharge of steam, and the stutter of steel wheels on iron rails, and she does not know if it is real or imagined.

She sits up. "Where is Rudy?"

"He's gone. We don't know," someone says.

"We can get someone to fill in for the act," whispers another.

"It's not the act," Didi cries, surprised at her anger. She lies back down, facing the bleak silence of harried dwarves, and the dark. Her shoulder throbs, and the pain seems to march into her chest, toward her heart.