



TICKET WINDOW, ST. LOUIS, MO.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY ROGER PFINGSTON.

# The Greatest Show

MICHAEL DOWNS

*No circus today.*

That's what we wrote on sheets of scratch paper. We used square-tipped marking pens that squeaked on the slick poster board and gave off fumes. We wrote in red and purple and blue. We knew the circus couldn't happen. Not that day.

Violetta was twelve then, a pixie in star-embroidered bell bottoms and threadbare ballet slippers, pit-patting on concrete floors, through tunnels and concourses and the exhibition hall, whispering at everybody to hurry. We'd only begun to set up for that night's show, the first of a three-day stand. Ring carpets needed mopping, and the trapeze was a half-erected tangle of cables and pulleys and ropes. But we stopped everything to gather around television sets—in the dressing room, in Fritz's trailer office—and watch. We covered our mouths with our hands or pressed fists against our eyes, just as people did everywhere, and in the dressing room Schmautz demanded we turn it off, but we didn't turn it off.

*No circus today. Postponed. New Dates and Times TBA.*

On with the show means something to us, it really does, but times come when what matters doesn't. Carrying our signs and tape, we crisscrossed the downtown of that week's stop—Hartford, the capital of Connecticut—and we posted the announcements that our show would not go on. The pointless paperwork of bystanders.

In the arena, the bears ate dried fruit, and the lions tore at deer carcasses—roadkill Marcus had bought from New York's highway department. Fritz watched the news in his trailer office. Fritz is our ringmaster. It's difficult to guess his age because he shaves his head twice each day. Fritz carries such girth, he leans back when he walks; his chest holds lungs you'd swear could inflate truck tires. Fritz wrestled in college until he broke a man's back. They had been opponents since high school and competed with the fierceness of brothers. The man lived, but neither he nor Fritz ever wrestled again. Fritz flunked out of school because it was the easiest way to leave, and he picked up as a roustabout with a show that came through Iowa City.

That afternoon, after we had finished posting signs, Fritz wandered alone through Hartford's downtown. On an overpass, he leaned into the chain-link meant to keep suicides off the interstate below, and he bird's-eyed the traffic, loud and hot. He looked hard to see people, it mattered to him that he see people and not just cars, and he picked up flashes of a woman's long hair, of an elbow propped where the driver's window had been lowered, of a hand that tossed a cigarette butt. He imagined a heart attack, onset of diabetic coma, a lunge for a ringing cell phone dropped too near the brake pedal, and he pictured cars spinning into each other and past each other, steel tearing, horns wailing, asphalt gouged, a work boot divorced of a body lying on its side near a painted white line. He saw this so clearly that he was suddenly surprised to notice traffic traveling

unimpeded. He let go of the fence links, and his skin had creased where he'd gripped too hard.

In front of a closed and caged store stocked with athletic shoes and imitation Rolex watches, he met a fellow with a West Indian lilt who sold electronics from the back of a white and rusted van. Fritz dickered because Fritz always dickers. The electronics salesman smoothed his Old Testament beard and said, "None of this haggling, mister. Not today. It's not right. Take the price or leave it," and Fritz felt a prick of shame that turned his ears hot and, he felt certain, red. He decided to buy two portable TVs instead of just one, as if twice the purchase could atone for his mistake. But walking away with two TVs he didn't need, he felt stupid. In his trailer office he moved aside his checkerboard and his portable whiskey bar to make room for the extra sets. A couple of roustabouts helped him rewire the satellite connections, and he was pleased to find his new TVs worked. He watched his old set and his two new ones at the same time, a different news network on each. The electronics salesman, he decided, was a cynic but clever in how he got his asking price. What people won't do on the worst days. He dialed his mother's number in Des Moines, but her phone line answered busy.

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