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At the Funeral of Christopher James Honeycut, aka Stiltso, the World's Tallest Man

TOM FLEISCHMANN

The immediate family arrives to pay respects

Early Thursday morning, the day of the funeral for the World's Tallest Man, the parking lot of the Fortier Family Funeral Home in Maple, Michigan goes from empty (sparing the car of proprietor Keith Fortier) to full in less than five minutes. As the sun rises behind the gas station across the one lane street, shining through the pillars that hold gas nozzles and blurring the edges of the building with a white glow, twenty-two silver bullet motor homes file into the lot, methodically taking up two spots each. In the middle of the procession rides one extended motor home (metallic blue with black trimming to give it some extra flair) that takes the front spot, immediately across from the funeral home door and intentionally left free by the other drivers. For a moment the vehicles fill the lot, their engines clicked off with a turn of a key, the little remaining exhaust floating away, a respectful silence waiting beside a gas station. The only person awake to see this spectacle, this surreal arrangement of giant, glittering, wheeled pods, is instead behind the gas station counter, preoccupied with the story of a particularly fat baby in the Weekly World News. When a full five minutes have passed, the doors fly open and the members of The Spectacular Roaming Mitchell Sideshow, brothers and sisters and friends and parents and children, stand in the damp autumn morning.

The owner of the funeral home meets with a representative of the family to discuss finances

Both Keith Fortier, a fifty-year-old man with a thin mustache and weak shoulders that tend to droop inward, and Brett Mitchell, a man just shy of fifty with a comparably thick mustache that curls a bit at the ends, are men with enterprises named after them. Both Keith and Brett have wives with whom they are very much in love, although Keith's wife (Lisa) has little interest in his business and much interest in her own pursuits (amateur botany) while Brett's
wife (Sally) is as involved in his business as he is, although she ties her legs around her neck and files paycheck stubs while he barks at a podium and does financial estimations. Mr. Fortier, despite optimistically naming his business in such a way that he intended to pass it to his children, has no siblings or children and did not inherit his livelihood but rather created it himself; Mr. Mitchell, however, simply stepped into the role of ringmaster and carnival Barker when his father stepped down, and with his wife raised one boy (Mitchell), now in his teens and learning the trade that he will take when the proper time comes. When the men shake hands, discussing costs and floral arrangements and times, the obvious similarities and contrasts between their lives never surface.

“The coffin, of course, will cost extra, as it had to be augmented for your friend’s extraordinary size.” Keith’s voice is firm, direct in an emotionless way that he finds brings comfort to his customers.

“Yes, yes, no problem, we can handle that.” Brett’s voice, whether dealing with customers or seducing his wife or arranging a funeral, is loud and brisk as a carnival Barker’s should be.

“And the deceased’s family will arrive around eleven, I assume? Before the service?”

Brett laughs once, sharply. “We’re all here. As soon as you’re ready for the service, we’re ready to go.”

“Of course,” Keith agrees. “However, it is customary to wait for the specified time, in case any other friends or family...”

“All here, every one of us. And anyone that might not be here is so far away they couldn’t make it in time anyway.” Brett lets his voice drop for once. “All here.”

**Friends of the deceased prepare a special floral arrangement to frame the coffin**

Like some traditional bearded ladies, Alberta the Masculine Woman is in actuality Albert, a man with fine feminine features and a slight frame who grew out his tremendous beard and heightened her female aspects with falsies, dresses, and makeup to create the desired effect. Cutting and arranging flowers, Albert tilts his wrist at a dainty, upward angle and occasionally holds a white tulip to her nose so that, when he inhales, the petals brush against the rouged meat of her cheeks and pick up a pink blush. So accustomed is she to his persona, so comfortable in the light steps of women, that years ago he grew to hate the beard, a heavy-hanging roughness that “Conceals the charmed curve of his neck and sharp lines of her jaw.

At his side, dressed for the occasion in a dark brown suit and complementary leopard-skin tie (authentic), Torro uses his long hunting knife to slice the ends off of stems, a pile of tiny green tips gathering at his boots. Although the hair on his chest and arms grows thick and black, and the curls on his head gather over the tops of his ears, Torro opts to shave his beard daily and meticulously,
never leaving either the suggestion of stubble or the small pink nicks that dot
the flesh of most shavers. He never lifts a flower to his nose to inhale, smell
being the least developed sense of one who lives and works with filthy animals,
but instead focuses on the beauty of Albert’s arrangements, the contrast between
white petals and green stems and pale blue vases.

No words are exchanged between the two—just the steady swish of Torro’s
knife and the quick plopping of stem in vase as Albert arranges petals. Occa-
sionally, one glances at the other’s hands, fixated with either thin fingers and
long, purple nails or white palms and thick, pad-like calluses. Then, he smiles,
concentrating on her work.

_Across the room, a pair of twins escapes into their mundane morning routine_

Because, like many trapeze artists, she is prone to shin splints—those wide,
burning aches on the lower legs—Emma spends an extra fifteen minutes stretch-
ing her leg in a long, slender line on her brother’s shoulder. Until several days
ago, she would take advantage of Stilto’s exaggerated body—resting her foot
on his knee, bending backward, and grasping his ankle to form a lowercase “d”
with their bodies. Now, she naturally turns to her brother’s shoulder for this step
of the routine. Both she and Edward wear black tights for the somber occasion,
which makes their skin appear even paler than normal. Her shoe, a gray ballet
slipper with a firm, cushioned sole, lightly brushes against his light-red hair. In
the ways of some twins, perhaps a few more identical twins, and likely all circus
twins, they communicate rarely with words but more often with gestures, slight
movements, and glances:

Emma, her neck arched, glances beyond her foot and Edward’s shoulder,
her gaze settling on Torro across the room.

Edward follows her glance and breathes in deeply through his nose.

Emma turns her head, angling it to the side, to face her brother.

Edward lifts his own leg, placing it on Emma’s shoulder—they are a single
structure, one right leg firmly planted across from one left leg, firmly planted.

Emma grasps and lifts Edward’s foot, arching her back to lower
it to the
ground.

Edward runs his finger lightly over Emma’s foot.

Emma removed her foot and walks away, her tall slender form a shadow
with sequins.

_An apathetic youth temporarily escapes the funeral, loosening his tie as he walks out the door_

It is not that Mitchell Mitchell was not fond of Stilto (who often, in
Mitchell’s youth, held him high above a basketball hoop so that he might drop
balls straight through the net), or that he doesn’t want to spend time with the
family. And it is certainly not that he isn't comfortable with funerals, as he was there to pay respects when Samuel Centaur fell off his horse and onto a burning loop he had jumped through a thousand times before, and he carried the tiny casket when Midge the Ancient Forest Elf passed quietly in her sleep, and he even shed a few tears only a year ago when the Amazing Amazo accidentally cut his assistant in half in such a way that he was unable to restore her to her full person. Mitchell is familiar with the funerals and the circus and the calm circus funerals, but he is not comfortable with how he knows the outsiders see the circus funerals, not comfortable that their surreal spectacle of grief will surely become dinner-party conversation for years. Walking to the gas station, buying a Coke, sitting in the shade of a tree down the block and enjoying the quiet, Mitchell is all the time aware that his family has never lived in such a town. Even in his plain gray suit and black tie, his hair neatly combed to the side, he is still separate from the shingled roofs and public schools, still a temporary Sight.

He closes his eyes and tries to nap in the tree's shadow.

An easily excited relative feels the need to relive memories she associates with the deceased

Were there social castes in the circus, Tina Tambourine would be of the lowest. She has no particular talent like the jugglers and animal wranglers and acrobats, and she has no physical specialty like the giants and the Siamese twins—she simply stands beside the ticket booth and looks appealing (a task she accomplished much more gracefully twenty-five years ago). Luckily for her, this particular circus-carnival hybrid welcomes everyone with equal enthusiasm and worth, as the founder four generations past was a near visionary in the world of socialist thought. So Tina—her sagging breasts heaved into a firm clasping black bra and her slightly pudgy legs covered by a long, flowing black skirt—is able to corner Alberta by the sign-in table.

"He was old, that's for sure," Tina sighs deeply, tapping her tambourine against her hip. "As old as most people of his height get. And a shame, really, a true shame that he never found a woman to love. He was a lot of man to offer, in body and in heart and in mind. Don't you agree?"

Alberta smiles thinly, her lips parting to show specks of white teeth. "Of course."

"Always willing to lend a hand beyond his role on the stage. A real worker, that Stiltso. Truly dedicated to the Sideshow like few of us are. I don't think I've ever woken up in a new city without looking out my trailer window and seeing him lifting the tent above his head while five or ten men on ladders hurried to support it with poles."

Brushing lint of the shoulder of his dress, Alberta again agrees. "Of course."

"And the elephants! My lord, the elephants! That man would scoop up a
couple buckets of water and clean the backs of those beasts like he was washing a puppy. The way that they cleaned them before he came here..."

Alberta stops listening, her shoulders stiffening, his tongue clicking against the roof of her mouth, as he notices Emma sitting beside Torro.

*The owner of the funeral home checks in with the familial representative once more before the service begins*

Again in Keith's office, with its suitably serious mahogany desk and stiff red chair and photographs of landscapes framed on the wall, the two men chat casually. Despite the office being his domain—that place where he spends evenings listening to radio static when his wife vacations with friends, where every morning he adds a cinnamon stick to his coffee and slowly sips while reading the business mail—Brett makes him feel out of his comfort zone. It's the way he relaxes, pressing his feet against the front of Keith's desk and leaning the chair back on its two hind legs when most people rest on the edge of the seat, their bodies straight with grief and tension. And it's the way he laughs easily, talks loosely about the weather, the fishing in Michigan, instead of tersely covering the financial details and obligations. He's had customers before who embraced his office as a sanctuary away from the grieving family, the presence of the body, but never in such a friendly, joyful way.

*Two mourners step outside for a cigarette*

Torro smokes a Marlboro Red, a harsh smoke that hits his tongue like charcoal and gives his voice a deeper, raspier tone, suitable for yelling at lions. He holds the cigarette between his ring and middle finger, down at the base of his hand, so that when he inhales he has to cover his mouth, mustache, and chin with his palm. It is an inconvenient way to hold his cigarette, as the last few puffs always bring the burning ember too close to his hand, forcing him to breathe deeply and immediately toss the butt away.

Emma smokes short, thin, imported cigarettes with a minty flavor. But, as she has done since she was fifteen, she only puffs lightly and never inhales, her lungs being as valuable as her legs and posture. She does not consider this a waste of cigarettes, but rather an aid to her feminine, affected beauty. Still, some in the circus encourage her to quit, and exhaling she is aware that never again will a giant hand lower from above, plucking a lit cigarette from her hand and tossing it aside.

"Is Luna overcoming her disease?" Emma asks, resting her hand on the cool brick of the building.

"Nicely, yes. Her fur is full again."

"She always had a naturally beautiful coat. Isn't that what you loved about her best?" Emma ran her free hand through her hair, aware of how the fine red
streaks played against her white skin.

"Perhaps." Torro stares behind Emma, into the distance.

"There's nothing quite as stunning as natural beauty. Artificial looks, in animals or people, always fall flat. Wouldn't you agree?"

Torro snubs his cigarette out on the brick, tosses it aside.

**The eulogy, as delivered by a close friend**

Gone is the tallest man in the world. Gone are the knees that rise to many of our shoulders. Gone is the longest shadow, across tents and cotton candy stands and podiums with barkers and stray dogs. The eyes, gone, although before so high no man and no woman had ever truly met their gaze. And gone are the shirts, billowing from behind the trailer like sails to dry on long drives. Gone is the closeness we all felt to Heaven and the stars, and wider the space between our show and God. The hand that would reach around the coop, grabbing a hiding chicken before my show so that I might bite its head off—gone as well. Gone the footprints that gathered rain. Gone the great wind from his strides. Gone the tallest man in the world.

And the mourners rise, cheering, tossing coins toward the geek at the podium.

**The pallbearers carry the body away from the funeral home**

Mitchell, awake from his nap minutes before the eulogy, walks the giant casket down the aisle, fourth in a row of fifteen men on each side. He stares down at his scuffed shoes so that he will not see the owner of the funeral home—the only norm in the room—and his reaction to the smiling, waving faces of the dead man's family. His father, constantly talking, might have mentioned that the family didn't mourn deaths the way most people do, that they would have a bonfire that night to celebrate Stilts's life and accomplishments, that orange and pink lights would twinkle on the Siamese twins' beer cans as they recalled their attempts to seduce Stilts so many times ("Only a man that tall would have enough equipment to satisfy two women!"). But even with the explanation, their rituals and outfits and gestures and lives would still seem foreign—Mitchell was young enough, aware enough of the world by passing through it, to know these things. So he stares down, seeing only his shoes but smelling the light lavender spray of the bearded woman, the rotting fish smell of so many geeks, and stale caramel corn scent on the suit of a tattooed vendor.
Moments after the service, two mourners stand before a bathroom mirror, washing their hands

"I've learned before that you can't trust no man these days," Alberta proclaims.
"You'd think you could at least trust family," Edward replies.

Choosing not to follow through with a traditional burial, the mourners leave the coffin for the funeral home to bury

Keith stands beside the casket with a couple of lingering mourners, waiting for his men to show up, load the casket into the rented U-Haul (the hearse having been too small, even with Stilts' legs folded at the knees and his head resting on his shoulders), and take it to the nearest Protestant cemetery. He rests a hand on the box and contemplates how much larger the happiness of the service felt compared to the many woeful, traditional, forgettable services he had already thrown that month. He hears the light shaking of bells, turns, and Tina is beside him.
"Hello," Keith says, smiling. He notices the other mourners disperse.
"Hello darling," Tina smiles back. She notices at once the imperfections of his body—the sagging of his shoulders, the speckles of darker brown on his cheeks and the fine skin beneath his eyes, the slight yellow to his eyes, the slight yellow to his teeth, the slight yellow to his hair, the nose and ears that have continued expanding with age when the rest of his body stopped, the nostril hairs that sprout downward, the lump where his abs once probably were—and she smiles wider. As a woman who sees a lot of men, she knows these are the signs of a man who has lived enough to forego perfection, but not enough to truly enjoy his life. That is, she also notices the lack of imperfections on his body—the lack of long, straight scars on his face, the lack of tight muscles on his lower arms and hands, the lack of wrinkles formed from squinting into the sun, the lack of tiny chips in his front teeth, the lack of grit blown permanently into his skin from motorcycles and burning wood. "You threw this show, didn't you?"
"Yes," Keith chuckles. "Although I've never thought of it that way."
"Fortier Family Funeral Home." She lifts her tambourine and bounced it against her hip so it clings, clings, clings. "The rest of the family helping you out?"
"Not much else of a family. Just my wife and I, and she rarely finds occasion to come to the home these days." Keith is suddenly aware of his suit, plain and professional; he can't decide if he wants his men to show up sooner to remove the casket or if he might, in some way, rather avoid the next average-sized box for a few more minutes.
“Well that’s a shame. I tell you what—” Tina pulls her bra up without attempting to hide the action. “You come down to the diner in town, the little blue one, and get some lunch with me. We’re not taking off until tomorrow morning anyway.”

Keith stammers, his words dropping off into syllables before he knows what they even are. “Oh, I, emmm...”

Tina grabs his arm, gives him the grin she uses to coax middle-aged men into seeing the mermaid twins. “It’s okay honey. I’ll be there anyway. You just stop by if you get the hunger to.” And before Keith can respond, can think of his wife and the leaves she carefully folds into books, the tambourine shakes itself away.

**The mourners load into their vehicles and depart**

Brett returns to his trailer and starts it in two tries, and the low rumble signals everyone else to do the same. His wife—her feet on the steering wheel and one hand on the gas pedals, the other rubbing his back—waits to lead the parade back to the campground. Emma and Edward walk side-by-side, in step as perfectly as any two soldiers, their matching black leotards slightly dampened with sweat and their faces flushed, out of their home and (once they see the situation) immediately back in. Torro rolls down his window and on seeing the twins lights two cigarettes in his left hand while running his right hand back and forth across his smooth chin. Tina notices that a sequin has fallen off of her steering wheel and, instead of reattaching it, licks its back and presses it firmly onto the space between her tits. Alberta uses his long, fine fingernails to massage her beard, thinking how balance and flexibility are superficial compared to natural, animal instincts—the real raw power of the sideshow.

Brett reaches over his wife’s contorted form and presses down hard on the horn three times. The engines start. The eggs roll away from the funeral home. Keith stands outside and watches them shimmering out of sight, then wonders at the empty pavement, the absence. He presses the flat of his hand against his crotch and tries to feel his sterility, but knowing how odd he must look, stops. He realizes that the dead pulse he has grown familiar with does not make him sad today; instead, he decides to lock the funeral home early and go for a drive in the country. He might find some leaves or flowers, full and bright and beautiful, something he can bring home and talk about over dinner. He imagines he can reach the top of the trees today, pluck the most vibrant and sun-drenched leaves—he imagines that, if he wants to, he might tower above most men.