

# East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

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### The Can By: Vanessa Jasek

Her pale blonde hair reflected glowing pink from the neon sign that read, "Funk's Flowers" in the front window. She carefully pulled one side behind her ear as she swept the floor. It was 4:30AM. Most girls her age were sleeping soundly in their beds, likely sleeping in that day after all, it was Saturday. But, Jessica Wolf was not most girls. She was Bob Funk's Step-Daughter, and with that came a certain amount of responsibility.

Bob woke Jessica up about half an hour earlier, having just returned from a night of bar hopping with the good ole neighborhood boys.

"Get up!" he yelled from her bedroom door. She knew better than to let out a groan of protest.

"I'll be right there," Jessica whispered, trying not to wake her baby sister with whom she shared a bedroom. Bob was satisfied with that, and wandered off, back towards the shop that was built as an addition to the back of their large home. She silently wished to herself that he would just pass out soon, leave her be.

She swept in silence for a period of time, bending down with the rickety old dustpan, though they could certainly afford a nicer one. Bob Funk was the kind of man who bought round after round at the bar, yet would not part with pennies for a new dustpan.

"Don't you be thinkin' you're finished here Missy, jus' the sweepin' is done," his speech still slightly slurred. "I'm teachin' you a valuable lesson, you know, hard work!" Jessica stopped to look at Bob, something she did cautiously, as she emptied out the last of the shop's dust bunnies.

"I understand," she whispered.

"Speak up!" he roared at her as she flinched and took a step back.

"I understand," Jessica spoke loud enough for him to hear, but not loud enough to be construed as raising her voice at him. She knew this dance, and she knew it well.

"You don't understand nothin'," he shouted at her.

"I'm sorry," She tried to use a neutral tone knowing this would go down one of two ways, and she just wanted to get through it. Soon, her mom and siblings would be awake. She would not be alone with him; alone when it is still dark outside and your fears are creeping up the back of your neck. It was 4:45AM.

"You're sorry all right. Sorry just like your Mother. Scurrying about like the rats in the corncribs, Vermin. Both of ya!" Bob sneered, as Jessica quickly came to realize which one of the two ways this had gone, and not to her favor.

"What would you like me to do next, Bob?" Jessica asked, looking at him carefully. She knew to make eye contact. He demanded it.

"Get some glass cleaner and clean all the glass cases," Bob told her, rubbing his beard. When she was a little girl, she used to love to tug on his beard. He would make loud "Ouchie!" calls and she would fall into a fit of giggles.

Jessica went down to the cleaning closet and got some rags and the glass cleaner. She could hear Bob still grumbling at her, or rather, about her. Either way, what did it matter? She felt a moment of brief anger. Why did things have to be this way? Why was he allowed to be so mean and hateful towards her? She knew she needed to squash those thoughts back down in her skull unless she wanted serious trouble, should Bob see the fire in her eyes. It was 4:57AM.

Jessica started cleaning the glass and admired the colorful beauty of the many flowers in her Mom's shop. Just when it was almost enough to make her feel a bit better, the bloom of all the colors, the pinks, the oranges, the deep reds, Bob's voice came booming across the shop. "You hear me, you little twit? Don't you ignore me! I will not be ignored."

She shook as his voice boomed down upon her. She tried to soak up all the colors before she shut her eyes. "I'm ok," she whispered to herself. He was there now, yelling in her face, spit splashing on her fair skin. It all ran together, the same-as-it-ever-was, just as suddenly as he came upon her, he loomed away, huffing and puffing. Before she could stop the words just came tumbling out.

"Why do you hate me?" She asked. Not a whisper to be belittled, not too loud to be admonished, but just right. Just the way Bob had taught her.

He stopped in his tracks. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest, desperate to escape whatever was to come next. Time surely stood still, frozen in the moment of right before something happens that you just can't take back, not ever in a lifetime.

She saw his hand reach for the can on the counter as if in slow motion and instinctively knew he was going to throw it at her. In that split second she knew she didn't have time to run. She turned her head and tried to put up an arm as protection but it was a fruitless effort. The heavy can hit the back of her skull with enough power to ratchet and shatter one of the glass doors on the flower cases. It was 5:12AM.

Jessica fell forward, into the wall, a ringing sound in her ears. Her hands went to her hair, feeling her skull. So much pain, it was just so much pain. She felt a warm feeling and pulled her hands down. They were covered in blood, both of them, running down her wrists and she began to scream.

Bob left out the side door of the shop, but she could hear yelling, a woman's voice, "You're going to kill that girl, Bob, it just ain't right!" Bob's voice was there, but his words were muddled.

Suddenly, her Mother was there, frantic, dragging her away from the flower shop, a trail of blood following them to the upstairs bathroom.

"Oh my God! Jessica, what has he done to you?" her Mother pleaded.

All she could do was sob. She was falling into a million little pieces. The blood, the pain, her Mom's screaming at her younger siblings to go back to their rooms, no focus. It was everything and nothing all at once.

Her Mother held a washcloth over the gaping wound on her head, her pale blonde hair now a deep, dark crimson. Mother and daughter sat in silence occasionally marred by a snuffle, or a hiccup from the silent sobs between them. They both waited for the next thing. It was 5:36AM.

Soon, the sound of heavy work boots could be heard, storming through the flower shop and then the house. Her mother wrapped around Jessica, ready to protect any further onslaught of violence. Both women were shaking but were ready to fight if expecting how this was going to go.

"I love you, Momma," Jessica whispered just as the bathroom door flew open and there stood Bob Funk, looking like a wild animal that had just been let loose from its cage.

"How bad is it?" he demanded.

"So bad you damn near killed her, Bob. That's how bad it is!" her Mother spat at him.

He took a few steps closer and his own eyes grew big as saucers. There they were the three of them. Just like that in the blood, the tears, the pain, the fight, the abuse, the injustice for Jessica. Just like that.

Bob took a step towards Jessica, "Come on, Girl. I gotta take you to the damn hospital to get you stitched up." Jessica recoiled and her mother stepped between them.

"Don't you dare touch her, Bob, you've done enough. I will take her." Bob began to raise hell when Jessica spoke up -

"I'm not going to the hospital with either of you." Her mother started to speak, but Jessica cut her off, "No, Mom, how do we explain my injury anyway? Oh, yes, ladies and gents, 'Family-Man Bob Funk Abuses his Step Daughter, Went in for the Kill, and Nearly Missed!' Or, how about this, 'Charming Bob Funk hits and Scores in Flower Shop's Toss the Can Family Fun Night!'" Jessica could feel all of her anger boiling up to the surface, the years of emotions, the years of hiding a secret that everybody in town knew was no damn secret.

Jessica Wolf had had enough. It was 6:12AM.

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### [back](#) **The Greatest Show On Earth** By: Jasmine Griffin

He had never liked the circus. He was a sensible man by nature. Not one to be amused by such things. Or rather he had been sensible once upon a time. Before the doctor had given him a death sentence.

The bench where he sat on the wooden bleachers was cramped. The air stifling. The smell of sweat, stale popcorn, and cotton candy suffocating. The sound of chatter, laughing, and infants crying was jarring. Too many bodies. Too much noise. Too many orders. But it was expected from the most visited carnival to ever surface since the nineteenth century and into the thirties.

It had been twenty two years since his birth in the year nineteen eleven. It that time medicine had not come far enough for Marvin Abrams's liking. Weeks was why he was forced to find an unorthodox means to cure his disease. He was tired, fatigued. He had been at this for days. Weeks. There was little time to rest. But rest and survival could not always exist within the same plane.

He tugged the handkerchief from his pocket, using a clean corner to dab the sweat from his forehead. The leftover blood stains from his earlier coughing were a reminder of how far his health had declined. Tuberculosis. Consumption. Whatever one wanted to call it, it was a monster. A horrid slow killer that made Marvin wish he had taken his healthy days for granted.

His brown eyes cut to the side as the man beside him laughed uproariously at the painted clown below. Before the whole lot, he thought. He had always been one for solitude. A good book, a few smokes, silence. These were the only companions that Marvin had ever needed. Even now while he was dying he didn't regret his isolation. His introversion. Even if he had someone like a doctor to turn to they couldn't do anything. That was the reason why Marvin was under the big circus tent.

When modern medicine had failed him, Marvin became desperate. He wanted to live, even if he was alone. Death was not an option; he was too young. There was too much to see, too much to do, and in his desperation Marvin's sensibilities had gone out the window.

He had begun reading outside of his usual spectrum of fiction. Instead he read books, newspaper articles, religious pamphlets. Searching for alternative forms of medicine was when his traveling began. Marvin had left his home in Ohio with nothing but a small brown suitcase full of more books than anything, his clothes on his back, a pack of cigarettes, a pair of loafers, fifty dollars, and a wool newsboy cap.

He went to a faith healer in Virginia. A portbellied man with too loud of a voice that spee'd sped when he spoke. That only left Marvin splashed with 'body water' and a nasty bruise on his pale skin where the man had laid hands on him. He had had a coughing fit only two hours after getting back to his motel.

Next was the wooden priestess in Louisiana. She was a creole woman of Haitian descent with a fire about her that Marvin admired. She was all dark skin and bright colors. Her hair a tangled mess of dark curls as she cut off the head of a dove and smeared the blood over Marvin's face. She murmured rather fervently in Haitian Creole for two hours in a trance like state. Nothing happened. She blamed Marvin's lack of belief. "Your mood is not for the skeptic," she had told him.

The next stop was Illinois. He had gone to visit an acupuncture in Chicago's Chinatown. The man was a second generation immigrant whose family had been merchants since the eighteenth century. While the man had not cured him, the treatments had bought him some time. His health had improved some and he was sent off with a great variety of books on Chinese medicine. The only thing about the experience that Marvin had not liked was the dimness with the man's large family. Marvin had only his father, growing up. When the man was not working he was drinking. His mother had died during childbirth. He had never had a family dinner and didn't even enjoy eating lunch with the men at the factory where he had once worked.

But it was one of the workers (whose name Marvin could not recall) who fancied himself Marvin's friend and given his last lead. He had mailed Marvin and advices from his travels. Marvin had left his home in Ohio with nothing but a small brown suitcase full of more books than anything, his clothes on his back, a pack of cigarettes, a pair of loafers, fifty dollars, and a wool newsboy cap. He had had a coughing fit only two hours after getting back to his motel.

However, Marvin was not there for the macabre exhibition. He was there for the headline. A woman by the name of Lilith Baptiste, a trapeze artist. A multi woman who had become a sensation with the traveling circus first surfaced near New Orleans just three years ago. It wasn't her aerial acrobatics that made her so popular. It was the finale that consistently wowed the crowd.

Marvin's attention perked up as the lights lowered. The crowd quieted suddenly. He was grateful for the silence. Then the announcer introduced her. The Amazing Miss Lilith Baptiste. She was beautiful. Even in the glittering blue monstrosity she wore. She stood high above the crowd with her black hair pinned up and her brown hand waving to her public.

There was a dangerous air about her that Marvin didn't quite understand. It made him uneasy, but he was as riveted as the rest of the crowd as she swung out and began her routine on the rope.

She flew through the air all grace and all grace. Then suddenly her hand began to slip. Marvin looked down and realized that there was no net, but there was a reason, he reminded himself. This was a part of the act. Soon would come the finale.

Her hands slipped from the bar completely and she plummeted toward the ground. She screamed. Marvin held his breath. She landed on the ground with a loud thud with a nauseating crack as her neck snapped. She could not have survived, he thought. There was no way. Not unless the myth were true.

The silence stretched. Cold and long. Then after what seemed like forever, her fingers twitched. Her body came back to life in pieces. Limb after limb. She stood slowly, her neck still broken and awoke. Marvin watched in wide-eyed horror with the rest of the crowd as she reached up with her hands and twisted her neck until it popped back in place. She was absolutely fine as if nothing had happened.

The crowd stood. Everyone was in an uproar as she smiled and waved once more. Marvin remained seated. Stunned. It was true then, he thought, this woman had the secret to immortality. He promised himself silently that no matter what it took he would get it out of her.

Marvin was led to Miss Baptiste's trailer by a woman with an unformed resemblance to a mouse, with a tail and all. The long pink appendage dragged behind her as they walked. Marvin tried not to show how disturbed he was by this as she smiled at him, showing off her black front teeth she was just one of many. Marvin spoke among freaks. A terror among terrors. Her rounded ears perked up and she tucked a stray strand of blonde hair behind it as Marvin spoke. "Will she see me do you think?" he asked.

A nod and then she was focused on him with her black beady eyes. "She sees everyone," she squeaked. "Especially those who want to know her secret."

Marvin raised a brow at the statement. "Will she tell me? Do you think?" Silence. He decided to change the subject. "Were you born with the tail?"

A pause. "Can't say really," she peeped after a moment. He wanted to ask her what he could say but they came to trailer and she gestured toward the door. "If you ask her for something," she said, her face suddenly serious (as serious as a rat woman could look Marvin supposed). "Make sure you be specific."

"Thanks," he muttered with a nod.

As she disappeared Marvin's excitement got the better of him. He had finally found his answer. A smooth voice ordered him to enter and he did so without hesitation.

The trailer was meticulously organized. Costumes in a chest in one corner. A desk with chairs behind and in front. A curtain separating the office like space from what Marvin supposed was where she slept. There was order. Nothing out of place.

Lilith sat behind the desk, still in costume though her black hair was now down. She eyed him over the smoke coming from her cove cigarette she was smoking. Her lips unwrapped themselves from around the black holder and Marvin waited for her to speak. "You're dying," she said.

Marvin blinked. He would have asked how she knew but there was something unearthly about her. About everyone in the circus. It was all ethereal. "And you cannot," he replied, deciding to be just as blunt.

"How could the two of us die?" Lilith chimed. She was giving him confirmation without confirming outright. "What is your name?"

"Marvin Abrams," he told her, and then, "I wish to know the secret behind your immortality."

Lilith frowned. "I am not human," she stated. "You are. Therefore you cannot achieve immortality by my means. But that does not mean that you cannot live forever."

Marvin was not as surprised as he should have been at her statement. The reason their circus was a sensation was because they had members in place of men after all. "What are you?"

Lilith's black eyes narrowed. "I've been called many things," she revealed. "Devil. Angel. Goddess. I prefer the last one, but I am closer to the first. If you must know, I am a demon. One of the more benevolent ones really." There was a pause. She waved her hand dismissively in the air. "But what I am is not important," she said. "And it doesn't really matter to you. What matters is what I can do for you. Am I right?"

Marvin nodded. He adjusted the jacket he was wearing and forgot aloud. "What can you do for me Miss Baptiste?"

She took another drag of the cigarette before she spoke. "In exchange for your soul, anything you wish Mr. Abrams."

My soul, he thought, of course there was a price. One could not cheat death without making some sacrifice. What did he really need with a soul anyhow? He had had none enough good in life to go to heaven and would most likely end up in purgatory. Would that be so much better than rotting with demons like this woman in hell?

He could ask for a cure and long life. That could buy himself more time on earth before he had to pay his debt. He would be specific like the mouse-girl said and not let himself be tricked.

"There are a few things I want," he started. "I want to be cured of my disease. I want to live a long life, much longer than that of a normal man. I want to live in solitude, have time to think, to read, to travel. I want to be more than a man. I want to be more than a pale, sickly creature who ran out of time."

She raised a brow at him when he stopped. "Is that it?" she asked. He nodded. He was a simple man, desperate, and dying. "Very well then," she agreed.

Lilith snapped her fingers together and a paper appeared on her desk in a puff of black smoke. He leaned over and looked at the page. The print was too fine for him to make out, but he made out key words here and there. Care. Live. Travel.

"It's a contract," she explained. "A mere technicality. Nothing to worry your ailing little head over."

Marvin frowned as she held out a pen to him a moment later. But there was no going back now. He had tried everything else. He had a few more weeks left. If that. This was it. This would work. He could feel it. "Where do I sign?" he asked.

"Initial on the short lines," Lilith smiled. "And sign at the bottom."

Marvin did as he was told. As his hand completed the last pen stroke he felt a bout of nausea. It was painful and dizzy. Hair began to sprout up on his arms and hands. His bones broke into a new anatomy. The pain grew just below his spine as a tail burst through his black trousers from behind.

"Don't worry Mr. Abrams," Lilith's voice came through the fog. "The pain will soon end."

Marvin's mind worked, even as he screamed. He tried to figure out what was happening. What he had done. As his feet burst through his shoes he looked down. They were not the feet of a man but those of a chimp. He knew then. The circus. The deformities. The freaks were all Lilith's doing. The rat woman had been trying to warn him, be specific she had advised.

But it had been specific. Marvin thought as the pain ebbed and his body had settled into its new form. He had asked to be cured. He realized then that he did not feel sick. He had asked to be more than a mortal man and now he was. But this was not what he had wanted.

Lilith stared him down with a smug expression. It was clear that she was pleased with her handiwork. "I think I will call you Marvin the Monkey," she nodded to herself, undisturbed by his transformation. "It has a nice ring to it."

Marvin tried to scream but his voice came out in unintelligible hoars and grunts.

"Don't be that way," Lilith pouted. "You were one of the easier ones, so don't start giving me attitude now. I gave you what you want. A cure and a long life. You're more than a man now, you're a chimp as well. And now that your soul belongs to me, you're a part of the circus. That means that you go wherever we go. You were very specific indeed Mr. Abrams."

Marvin beat on her desk with the flats of his hands and screamed. He cursed her with his thoughts but his mind told him the truth. He had done this. He was to blame.

"You're going to make me cage you, aren't you?" Lilith smirked. "You will be with us a very long time. You should really try and stay on my good side."

Lilith laughed that she would take advantage of owning his soul despite his now extended life.

Sunlight shone in through the bars of his cage. Marvin rolled over on the hay covered bottom as he heard the jingling of keys. He glanced mournfully at the books he had his solitude. When the circus traveled so did he. Just like he had stipulated. He had learned to be grateful for the little things.

Lilith had been right. Marvin was alive. The sickness was gone. Still had his mind even with the deformation of his body. He could still read. While in his cage he had his solitude. When the circus traveled so did he. Just like he had stipulated. He had learned to be grateful for the little things.

The shackles around his feet were unlocked and Marvin shuffled forward. As he stepped out of the cage he was greeted by Lilith. She wore a glaring purple corset and a smile. He might have strangled her with his newly closed hands were it not for the fact that she owned him now. Even if he managed to kill her she would rise again a moment later. He would simply have to settle for dropping her prematurely during their trapeze act. It would not kill her. But it would hurt, he knew. He took some gratification in the thought as she placed a purple pepper cap atop his head.

"Show time, my little monkey man," Lilith beamed. She walked away, her hips swaying gracefully. Marvin sighed knowing he had no choice but to follow.

