

[HED]

Step Right Up

[BYLINE]

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[BODY]

I spent a good chunk of 2011 and 2012 trying to peel back the grease-smearred curtains of the modern sideshow and curiosity circuit in order to take a look at the outcasts, showmen and technicians that have kept a slow dying art form alive, albeit bleeding, on the fringe of the entertainment scene. It's my kink. I dig it, and that's all there is to it.

When you're chasing down stories about showfolk and their craft, you have to beat the historians and (and tourists like me) willing to have a jaw-wag about gaffed freaks, pickled punks, dog faced boys and the Fiji Mermaid off with a stick. Everyone thinks they're an expert. But ask most of the performers about the technique, skills and years of training that go into surviving some of their more dangerous acts? In my experience, you typically don't get too far. I reckon it has something to do with never having earned it. I've never attempted to eat a lightbulb, or pierced my scrotum so I could slide a stainless steel ring through the hole and lift a cinderblock with it, so fuck me, I guess.

Well, mostly fuck me.

A few performers have been willing to talk to me about their careers and some of the crazy crap they've seen or endured for their art. The good stories involve pain. The better ones typically end in massive blood loss and minor reconstructive surgery. But I'm not going to talk to you about good or better.

I want to talk about the best sideshow story I've ever heard.

Karl was wired for show business. Not the gossamer foo-foo bullshit that comes with being in the movies or on TV, but the hard, often thankless graft that comes with time spent schlepping about in live theatre. He started as a stage hand, and fought his way into stage management. He learned lighting and sound design. He wasn't screwing around. But after a stint goofing on street theatre in his native England with a few friends, he woke up hooked on performing.

It wasn't long before street theatre gave way to a darker, more flamboyant yen. He took out a loan and used his borrowed scratch to board a plane to the 'States, where he spent some time studying under Tom Robbins at the Coney Island Sideshow School. Sword swallowing. Fire Eating. Snake charming. Hammering a ten penny nail into your head. It was all homework. He brought fresh-honed skills back to the island he grew up on, and started piecing an act together.

Lesley was a Canadian, but like most Canadians, her people came from elsewhere.

Lesley's younger years were filled with stories told by her grandmother. She'd moved to Canada from Liverpool while she was in her twenties, but her people, family long dead now, were gypsies and showfolk who used to travel with the fairgrounds as they shifted from town to town across Britain. The claws of her grandmother's stories were sunk deep into Lesley's shoulders and back by the time she was old enough to ramble on her own. So, like her grandmother, she left her home when she was in her twenties. Not to settle down, but to gather the strings of a heritage she'd known only through her grandmother's regaled memories.

It was while she was researching dead showmen that she met a live one.

Lesley found Karl in an English nightclub seven years ago. It'd been a few months since he returned home from Coney Island. As Lesley waded through the well-sloshed late evening throng of the club, she saw Karl up on stage, laying himself out on a bed of nails. It was the first time he'd plied his new act in front of an audience, but he felt confident his skills would bring him through the other side of his time on stage unscathed.

You see, a bed of nails isn't as shit awful as it sounds.

You'd think a nail, being sharp enough to be driven through hardwood, would sink right into your meat if you laid back on one. And you'd be right. But there's more than one nail in a whole bed of nails: we're talking hundreds of the little bastards here. So the weight of your body gets evenly distributed across all of the nails, resulting in minimal penetration. If you're careful about it, you can even lay on the nail bed with the weight of another man piled on top of you and suffer no ill effects.

This fact was the core of feat Karl was setting up that night.

Karl beckoned to the largest man in the audience to be a sport, come up on stage and stand on his chest. He was counting on the fact that physics would prevail: his weight of that of the Huge Bastard standing on him, would be distributed across the tips of the hundreds of nails nestled hard up against back.

What Karl wasn't counting on was that the Huge Bastard who had just stepped onto his chest, had a few pints before coming on stage and was something of a showman himself. Feet planted on Karl's chest, he yelled three words to the audience that just about made Karl shit himself.

“Should I jump?”

The audience, full of craven pricks that had more than a few pints of brew into them as well, of course answered ‘yes.’ Lesley looked on in horror, as Karl laid helplessly underneath the weight of the Huge Bastard. The Huge Bastard, with a shit eating grin, briefly took to the air before coming down hard once more with all of his considerable weight on Karl’s chest.

Karl told me that he was crying as he laid on the bed, full of terror and on fire with pain.

It was a moment that would set the stage for the rest of Karl and Lesley’s lives.

At the end of Karl’s act, Lesley walked up to him and told him, “You need a beautiful assistant. You need to have someone there to control the situation when you’re not able to.” Karl agreed. It took him six weeks to recover from the shit kicking he’d suffered from the Huge Bastard and the nail bed. Seven years past that, Karl and Lesley--who never had any intention of pursuing a life in show business--were still together, married and performing full-time as Prof. Archibald Floss and Dr. Charlotte Tann in the Mental Floss Sideshow.

Shortly after talking to Karl and Lesley about their story, I found myself in an unusual position for a freelance writer: I had so much work coming in that I didn’t have the time to chase down any more showfolk stories or sideshow history. They were the last act I had the opportunity to speak with. I figure it’s for the best.

Honestly, a love story pulled from the jaws of massive bodily injuries, drunken fools, an international journey of familial exploration and a bed of nails?

I'd have to be some kind of asshole to think I'd ever find anything to top it.