

## CHROMOSOME CIRCUS

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Amy Casil's first professional sale was "Jonny Punkinhead" in our June 1996 issue. Since then, she has sold stories to Talebones, Zoetrope: All Story Extra, and several Writers of the Future anthologies and we'll be hearing more from her in the future (that's a promise). She lives in Southern California, where she has been working on several novels, teaching writing, conducting online workshops, and raising her daughter Meredith. Her new story takes us to the circus to look at some of the outcasts of that same society we first encountered in "Jonny Punkinhead."

MACADAM'S CIRCUS HAD played out their week in Fontana, forty miles east of L.A., when Joshie the Clown found Little Bear. Joshie was packing up the VR headsets in the Tokyo Tank trailer when he heard whimpering. He patrolled the rows of gummy plastic chairs until he found the source: a boy in a fuzzy blue sleepsuit, huddled in the next to the last seat in the back. The hood was pulled tight over the kid's head. He looked to be about four, and he stared up at Joshie with still brown eyes.

"Hey, don't be scared," Joshie said. He put on his best clown grin. The boy shrank away and tucked his chin into the suit.

Montego Bay, Macadam's hulking lead carny, came up at that moment. "Another lost kid," he said. "Better call the cops."

Joshie said, "I don't know, Monty. Look at his clothes."

The sleepsuit was smeared with yellow streaks of dried mustard. Joshie caught a whiff of sour child sweat as he loosened the knot at the boy's neck which held the hood tight. He pushed the soft fabric away from the boy's forehead to expose short, luxuriant golden fur.

"He's a freak," Montego said.

Amid the fur were two delicate pointed ears. The boy growled deep in his throat as Joshie touched the tip of his right ear.

"No point in calling the cops, is there?" Joshie put his arm around the boy and lifted him from the seat. The boy made little hooting noises as he nestled his head into Joshie's white and red striped ruff.

"Wonder if he can talk?" Montego stepped into the aisle. Montego was a normal, in the sense that his powerful chest and arms as thick as the average woman's waist were paid-for modifications, cosmetic only, as opposed to Joshie, who'd been born a clown, his nose ending in a tip the size and color of a ripe apricot. Joshie's most embarrassing disability was hidden beneath his red satin gloves: he had only three spatulate fingers and a thumb on each hand.

"Hootie-hoo! Hootie-hoo," said the boy.

"His parents must be real winners, dumping the kid here," Montego said.

Joshie shook his head. "Where else?"

Montego fingered his chin. "You got a point," he said. Then, his face darkened. "You're not thinking about keeping the kid?"

Joshie stroked the soft fur on the boy's head. The small legs tightened like a vice around his chest. "Maybe," he said. "You know what? I think he's a little bit like Gyla."

"Wrong color." Gyla was the silver wolf girl and her fur was all over her body. Montego crossed his arms and his bulging muscles tensed until it looked as though they'd leap from the skin. "Don't be stupid. Macadam will be royally pissed if you keep that kid."

The boy squirmed and Joshie got a whiff of the fur on his head. It was silky, but it smelled dark and oily, or maybe it was only the filthy smoke from the burning tires. "I know somebody who does child welfare in L.A. County. I'll call her when we get there."

Montego squinted at him. "Yeah? Well, maybe so. You'd better call her."

"Sure, Monty," Joshie said, grinning with his big red mouth. Montego cracked a smile and waved him off.

Joshie left the Tokyo Tank trailer and started across the lot, his big red shoes flapping and crunching in the pulverized blacktop. He started toward his own trailer, then paused a moment.

The boy said, "Hot! Hootie-hoo!"

"Yeah, I'll take you to see Gyla," Joshie told him. His heart skipped a beat at the thought of her, and he pushed the feeling away. Gyla could never, ever have any interest in Joshie other than friendship. He'd told himself that a million times. Gyla was beautiful, even though Gyla was, like Joshie and the kid and the majority of the people of Macadam's Circus, a freak. A vitally produced genetic accident, sterile, a sport, a loser. The big man, Macadam, had scales. A fish man. Gyla had silver fur, a heartshaped face and golden eyes.

Joshie crunched his way around the back of the trailers to Gyla's, which was pink, freshly painted, with a nice white awning over the door. The kid was getting heavy, and he was hooting loudly in Joshie's ear by the time Joshie knocked on the door.

Gyla wore only her bright blue g-string when she answered. Joshie tried to look at the pictures on her wall and not her breasts when he came inside.

"What's this?" she asked. She was buffing her silvery fur with a soft brush, the kind they made for horses. She looked curiously at the boy, who kept his face firmly pressed into Joshie's ruff.

"I found him in the last row in the Tokyo Tanks," Joshie said. "Look at his head."

Gyla smiled and petted the boy's head lightly. "Don't be afraid, little guy," she said. She gave Joshie one of her sharp, hundred-watt smiles and his cheeks flamed under his greaspaint. "Hey, you're just like me. Want to come to Auntie Gyla?" She held out her arms, and the boy hooted harder. Joshie grimaced because the kid was hooting right in his ear. His floppy cauliflower ears were more sensitive than average ears, and even though his rainbow wig gave some protection, it didn't make any difference when someone was making noises that loud, that close to his eardrum.

Then, the boy started to scramble against Joshie, his little feet digging like knives into Joshie's ribs. "Hey, easy," Joshie said, but the kid had already leapt away, into Gyla's arms. She grabbed him and stumbled.

"Gyla!" Joshie stepped forward, but she wasn't upset, she was laughing. She fell back on her blue velour couch with the boy, who was hooting fiercely and tugging at her silver fur wherever he could get a handful of it.

"Yeah, you are like me, little guy." She looked up at Joshie amid her wrestling with the child. "He's pretty dirty," she said. "Need to give him a bath."

Joshie nodded and sat on the edge of Gyla's dressing chair. "That's what I came for."

Gyla deftly began to unzip the boy's sleepsuit. "You'd better calm down now," she told him. "Auntie Gyla's going to get you cleaned up." The boy squirmed, joy obvious in every movement of his small, wriggling body, and tried to bury himself in Gyla's stomach.

"Help me out, Clown Boy," Gyla said. She was laughing.

Joshie got up, careful not to flap and break something with his big, ungainly feet, and held the boy around the waist as Gyla got him out of the suit. Save for his face, the child was covered completely in curly, golden fur.

"He looks like a teddy bear," Joshie said. Better than a clown, he thought. Even fish men like Macadam were better than clowns.

They got the boy into Gyla's clean, peach-colored bathroom and Joshie ran the water while Gyla poured pink bath crystals in the water. "See, it makes bubbles," she told the boy. He flapped his thin furry arms and gurgled.

Like a baby, Joshie thought. He wondered if the boy's parents had even tried to talk to him, or if they'd done as so many had done, treated the little freak kid like a pet. He seemed like an animal, but there was intelligence in his dark

brown eyes. He splashed in the water, and giggled, just like a regular kid.

Gyla leaned over the tub and her perfect round furry breasts looked so lovely that Joshie forgot to breathe for a moment. The boy splashed, and where the water hit Gyla's fur, she was dark and oily-sleek. Joshie sat on the toilet seat and bit his lip.

"Scrub his back, will you?" she asked. Joshie's hand trembled and he grimaced as he took off his glove. He didn't want Gyla to see his ugly hand. He grabbed a soft brush with a wooden handle and worked suds into the boy's fur.

Then, the boy reached over and pulled the glove from Joshie's other hand. "Clown, clown," he said.

Gyla gasped. "Hey, he can talk!"

"I guess so," Joshie said. He tucked his hand in the pocket of his striped satin pants.

Gyla's delicate face grew serious. "You're going to call someone about him, aren't you?"

Joshie shrugged, then lathered the boy's head, careful to keep the soap out of his eyes.

"He is like a little teddy bear," Joshie said. He had a sudden reverie, picturing a little white house with a picket fence, a mailbox, a revolving sprinkler in the front yard, watering a perfectly trimmed green lawn. He, Joshie, sitting in a swing on the front porch, and Gyla next to him, in a blue-and-white checked housedress and a white apron. White slippers on her tiny, furry feet. They were swinging, and the boy was wearing checked bermuda shorts, running through the sprinkler, laughing.

"You'd better call someone about him, Joshie," Gyla said, a little more firmly this time.

"I know someone in L.A. who helps kids like this," Joshie said.

"Well, good," Gyla said. She got a star-shaped sponge wet and began to dab at the boy's face. "He's a nice kid, but how would you take care of him? You don't know anything about kids."

"Yeah," Joshie said.

"Even though you did come from a normal family and all," she said.

"It wasn't all that normal," Joshie said.

Gyla's eyes narrowed. She bared her teeth. "You don't know, Clown Boy. You don't know nothing about it, being in a home."

Gyla, like most of the freaks of Macadam's Circus, were jealous of Joshie, who had lived with his parents until he was eighteen, in Orange County. He'd gone to school with normals, he even had his high school diploma. It had been hell, he tried to tell them, hell until he went to Clown College and discovered that there were whole societies of people like him, some of them even worse off than he, though in his heart, there was nothing worse than being a clown. But most of the freaks had been in homes, dorms, going to school all together. Their hurts were different from his, and even with Gyla, trying to talk about being a living clown in the endless purgatory of a public high school was like trying to explain sand dunes to an Eskimo.

"Please," the boy said. Joshie and Gyla both leaned over the tub. Gyla's ears pointed forward. "Please wanna stay," he said. "Like you." Then, he looked up into Gyla's face. "You pretty. Like you best."

"Aw, jeez," Gyla said. "Can you believe it?"

Joshie pictured the house again, then, as Gyla brushed against him and he felt her warm, damp fur against the back of his hand, he shuddered. He guessed he could find that social worker's number. She'd been a friend of his parents. His father, mother, it had been duty more than anything, keeping Joshie. The looks of disgust on his mother's face, when sometimes he came into a room and she hadn't been expecting him, or the beaten expression that his father had worn for years. A man who had wanted a son...who had instead gotten a clown. And the arguments. Late at night. Accusations. The virus came from sex, that was one thing everyone knew. Joshie's mother and father had invested a lifetime in accusing each other of being the one who'd picked it up, the one who'd contributed the tainted egg or sperm and made Joshie. He remembered one of his father's parting shots: "I'm just thankful you won't make another one like you, Josh. You won't be getting any girls pregnant." Joshie had thought for a long while his father had meant that Joshie was too ugly for anyone to make love with him, and the bitterness was almost palpable, but after a time he realized that his father had been talking about sterility. All freaks were sterile.

Maybe the white house with the picket fence (which was Joshie's house, until age five or so) was not such a good idea.

Gyla insisted on making a bed for the boy on her blue velvet couch. Joshie curled on the floor under a soft satin quilt that Gyla had sewn by hand. He listened to the boy's soft, contented breathing, and also to Gyla, who moved restlessly in her sleep, and who moaned, and with each moan, Joshie could not help thinking of going to her bed and forming his body around hers, then running his hands up and down her lean, furry flanks, stroking the soft, round breasts, but he willed this thought away by gazing at the boy's perfect, smooth little face, the way the fur curled away from his forehead in the moonlight and glinted off the tips of his small, pointed ears.

He did look like a teddy bear, Joshie thought, and at that moment, he decided to call him Little Bear. He told Gyla in the morning, and she agreed, while sipping coffee, that it was a fine name, very good, until they got to L.A. and Joshie called his friend from the child protection office.

The next day about four, they got to Long Beach, and everyone was grumbling because Macadam had picked a new spot for the circus, in the looming shadows of the huge waste conversion plant. It had been an oil refinery at one time, but as there was little oil left, it had been refitted for waste conversion. It was raining and the lights of the plant shone dimly through the fog. If Joshie squinted the right way, he could picture the high steel spires as the turrets of a castle.

"You're going to call?" Gyla had borrowed some clothes for Little Bear, who'd cooed and hooted as she'd dressed him. He was eating a corn dog in Gyla's trailer while Joshie stared out the plastic window at the waste plant.

"Yeah. Guess I'll use Macadam's phone."

"Good," Gyla said. "Why don't you go now? Before they come and get you to help set up. I've got to fix my costume. I'll watch him." She gestured at Little Bear, who grinned. His T-shirt was smeared with grease and fried batter crumbs. Mustard streaked the fur around his mouth.

Joshie found the social worker's number in the pocket of his green army jacket, the ugly one with sleeves long enough to cover his hands.

Probably the number wouldn't work. He considered returning to Gyla's trailer and telling her that he hadn't been able to reach the child welfare woman. No, he couldn't do that. He walked across the muddy yard to Macadam's.

Macadam was eating compressed soy pellets from a plastic container, pouring them directly into his mouth, then crunching them like peanuts.

"Hey, Joshie!" Macadam's head was slick and oval, hairless, greenish-white and delicately scaled. He had epicanthic folds around his eyes, and thin lips the color of spoiled knockwurst. Joshie had once watched Macadam lift the rear of a trailer out of the mud. That had been in Fresno. Macadam hadn't even gotten out of breath.

"I need to use the phone," Joshie said.

"Sure," Macadam said, his mouth full of pellets. "Heard about the kid."

Montego Bay had doubtless shared the story. Joshie now knew he had to make the call. The house with the white picket fence faded to a pinpoint, then blinked out. "Yeah, I know a lady who can take care of him."

"Should have called the cops back in Fontucky," Macadam said. Macadam had a derisive name for every town, and Fontucky was his for Fontana.

"Didn't want him to be taken to a home," Joshie said. He went to the phone and picked up a pencil, then began to punch the numbers.

"Where the hell do you think he'll end up? Little bastard's better off there

anyway." Macadam wiped his lips.

Joshie didn't bother to remind Macadam that he'd grown up in a house, with parents.

Someone answered the number with "L.A. County Special Services."

Joshie asked for the woman who'd been his mother's friend, Claire Brigham.

"She's not with us any longer."

"I needed to talk to her. It's a special case," Joshie said, feeling nervous twinges in his stomach.

"She's retired. What was your name?"

"Josh Petersen. She was a friend of my mother."

"Mr. Petersen, anyone here can help you. Do you have a child for placement?"

"I, uh," Joshie paused. Macadam was leaning over, listening in. "I might know of someone, yes. Mrs. Brigham is still in the area?"

"Yes. Look, is this about her volunteer work?"

Joshie heard rustling papers. "Sure," he said.

The woman gave him Claire Brigham's number and he clicked off and punched the numbers as quickly as he could, struggling with the pencil in his clumsy fingers. He turned so Macadam couldn't see his face, and he heard the big fish man chuckling. Laughing at his hands.

The number rang a long time before someone picked up the phone, an older woman, laughing. "Look, if you're trying to get Pizza Pirates, I guarantee this isn't the right number."

"Mrs. Brigham? I don't want Pizza Pirates, I wanted you," Joshie said.

Macadam said, "Ha!" and began rattling the drawers of his desk.

"I'm sorry, I can't hear you," the woman said. Her voice was a mature woman's light tremolo.

"This is Josh Petersen. Maybe you remember my mother, Shirley?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Yes, I do remember. You're the son, the one who..."

"I'm the clown," Joshie said.

"You got that right," Macadam interjected. Joshie's face grew fiery.

"Well, how may I help you, then? Is your mother in trouble? Has something happened?"

"No, nothing like that," Joshie said quickly. "It's just that, well, I'm with a circus now, a real circus. I'm a clown. And there's been something come up."

"I'm glad you found a place for yourself," Mrs. Brigham said. "Not many can say that."

Joshie turned to stare at Macadam, who was filing his nails to a point. He always kept them like that. Macadam had four long, slender fingers on each hand, but they were webbed. Maybe there were worse things than having only three big fat fingers.

"We found a boy abandoned yesterday, in Fontana. We're in Long Beach now. He's..."

"He's a changed child," Mrs. Brigham said.

Joshie had never heard that way of saying it before. He decided that he liked it. "He's got the virus, yes," he said.

"And you wanted to find a placement for him." Mrs. Brigham laughed, but not happily.

"Yes. We...I can't keep him."

"No," she said. "No, of course you can't. Well, you got me here at home, so you must have heard I'm no longer with the department."

"I did. I was calling because we don't want him to go to a home. I thought maybe there'd be somewhere else, something else."

"There are no families for children like this," she said.

"But maybe something better. Isn't there something that can be..."

Mrs. Brigham paused. "There is something, but it's only for the children with the greatest potential. I've been involved in a project for some time. It's called High Haven. In Lake Arrowhead. Maybe you've heard of it?"

Joshie hadn't. "High Haven?" It sounded wonderful.

"It's like a camp, only year-round. Run all by people who've been changed. Privately funded."

Joshie's heart leapt. Something like that for kids like Little Bear? "That's what I want," he said.

"It's not that simple. This boy has to have some support system outside of High



Haven. People who care about him, and a place to go when he turns eighteen."

Joshie's mother had packed his things and put them in a large cardboard box on the front porch on his eighteenth birthday. "I see," he said.

"I'll have to come see the boy, meet with him," Mrs. Brigham said.

"We're in Long Beach," Joshie told her.

"Quite a drive. I'm not sure I can make it."

"I'll pay for an electric cab," Joshie said. He thought of his meager stash of money. Macadam fed them and housed them, but he paid wretchedly. Still, his money should cover it, providing Mrs. Brigham didn't live very far away. Her number had been from the San Fernando Valley.

"That's very nice of you," Mrs. Brigham said.

"We're here for a week. When can you make it?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, most likely." She asked for directions, and laughed when he told her they were in the shadow of the waste plant. Awful area, she'd said. Of course it was. Those were the only areas where Macadam's Circus went.

When Joshie got off the phone, his heart was light. He could hardly wait to tell Gyla about High Haven. Somehow they'd work something out, convince Mrs. Brigham that there was a, what had she called it? A support system for Little Bear. Gyla would help, he knew it.

Macadam had finished filing his nails and was rearranging his desk. "Heard you talking about High Haven," he said. "Let me tell you kid, it's a ripoff."

Joshie bit his lip. "What do you know about it?"

"It's all a scare, Clown Boy. Ain't nothing up there. Didn't I ever tell you how lucky you were to be working for me? At least I pay."

Joshie put on his gloves. "Yeah, you told me," he said.

"Look, maybe I should just call the cops. That kid's gotta be in a home."

"Don't do it," Joshie said. His heart was racing and he couldn't fathom the expression on Macadam's face. "Don't you do anything like that. I'm taking care of the problem."

Macadam leaned back in his chair. It squealed from his weight. "You know what? After you screw this up, you'll be back, Clown Boy. It's me who takes care of all of you here. Don't forget it."

Joshie didn't trust himself to say anything else, so he just shook his head and stumbled from the trailer. He'd only gone a few steps when Montego Bay came

trotting up.

"Hey, I've been looking for you. We've got to get the Tanks set up, and the Abominable Snowman." It was drizzling rain and Montego's hair was slicked down over his forehead.

Joshie was still shaking from the run-in with Macadam. "I-- I wanted to tell Gyla I've got something great set up for Little Bear. I mean, the kid."

"No time," Montego said, then he grinned. He didn't seem to notice that Joshie was breathing like a bellows. "That's good news about the kid. Calling him Little Bear, huh? If he was a little older, you might get him set up as a clown. Think of that, did ya?" Montego grabbed Joshie's arm and led him away.

Joshie had no choice. He slapped the seats up as quickly as he could, and checked the VR connections, which had always been his job. His fingers were clumsy, but his brain wasn't, and no one knew the system better than Joshie. Montego then had him brush down the animated Abominable Snowman, which required little coordination, and check the dry ice bays not once, but three times. One of them was stuffed with wads of blue and orange chewing gum and sticky used cotton candy cones. Grumbling, Joshie scooped out the mess. Then, finally, Montego released him with a sharp slap between his shoulder blades that took his breath away.

Joshie rushed to Gyla's trailer. It was already so late, nearly dusk. He bounded up the steps and tried the door. It was locked. Maybe she'd taken Little Bear to get something else to eat, or to meet some of the other performers.

"Hey, Gyla," he called. There was no answer. Joshie went to the window, where the lace curtains Gyla had sewn on a windy night on the road between Escondido and El Centro were drawn. The lace was filmy, transparent, and Joshie could see shadows within.

Gyla was inside, moaning, and a man was behind her, a large man with slender, webbed, long-fingered hands, stroking her breasts in slow, circular motions.

"You hairy little whore," Macadam said.

Joshie watched Macadam's big, sleek, scaly body through the lace as he did barbed things to Gyla, and he listened to her soft moans and Macadam's wet grunting. Then, Joshie turned from the window and with a sudden, sharp pain deep in his gut, he bent near the steps and vomited. Thunder crashed and it began to rain, and he headed for the clown tent. At least Little Bear had not been in the trailer. Little Bear had been somewhere else, and for this tiny thing, Joshie was very grateful.

Little Bear was in the clown tent, sitting on Hunny the Pig Girl's lap.

She turned her smiling pink face to Joshie and said, "Gyla asked me to watch him. He's a real sweetie, isn't he?"

Little Bear saw Joshie and went, "Hootie-hoo! Hootie-hoo!" Then, he flapped his arms like wings.

"Come on," Joshie said, and he grabbed Little Bear, roughly, under the arms, and began to carry him off.

"Hey, something wrong, Joshie?" Hunny the Pig Girl's face was full of concern. Her small eyes were as wide as they could get.

"Nothing," Joshie said. "Thanks a lot, Hunny." He retreated to his trailer, where he tried to interest Little Bear in some cheese doodles and a game of go-fish with a crumpled deck of cards. Little Bear began to cry.

"Want my lady," he said.

"Aw, damn," Joshie said. Then, he remembered his balloons. He filled balloons and made animals for Little Bear, who cooed and hooted madly as he put a balloon hat on his head and pinched and squeezed the bright yellow rubber until it popped. When Little Bear tired of balloons, Joshie got out his makeup kit and made a sweet, smiling clown face on Little Bear, who sighed in wonder, then rubbed the red and the blue into the white greasepaint until his face turned into a pink and purple abstract work of art.

Joshie took Little Bear to get a bowl of soup and some crackers in the mess tent, then returned to the trailer. After Little Bear, who talked when he wanted to, begged and begged, Joshie allowed him to paint his face, or rather, smear greasepaint on with his soft little fingers.

"Like your nose," Little Bear said. "Funny."

"Yeah," Joshie said. "Real funny."

"Not sleep with lady tonight? My lady?"

"No, Little Bear," Joshie said. He turned away and Little Bear hooted softly. "Lady wants to be by herself."

Joshie tucked Little Bear into his own narrow bed and drew his rough green Army blanket around his neck. Little Bear complained about the scratchy wool so much that Joshie got out an old padded ski jacket and draped it over his small body. He took the blanket himself and sat in the folding chair by his card table, staring out the rain-streaked window.

Whenever Joshie closed his eyes, the image of Macadam bending over Gyla, kneading her soft, furred breasts, came to him like a cheap Polaroid snapshot. So, Joshie kept his eyes open and stared, a dry, empty feeling in his stomach. From time to time, he thought of what Macadam had called Gyla, and his stomach turned.

Joshie's only experiences with women had been of a business nature, quick, rough and dirty. And the women had never looked at his face, never. And he still

recalled the chili shudders of some of them when he'd touched them with his ugly hands.

Gyla had seemed to enjoy Macadam's hands, with those awful pointed nails, the webbing between the long fingers. Still, maybe he'd threatened her. Macadam was like that. Several women had left the circus, suddenly, in the middle of the night. All Macadam's doing, Joshie knew. But Gyla had been moaning, soft and pliant. Willing.

No one had ever moaned that way with him. Joshie put his head in his hands and rested his elbows on the unsteady card table, and thought, bitterly, that maybe Gyla might like to be hurt. He looked at his stubby hands, and wondered if he could hurt with them.

The next day the circus was open. Joshie had three shows. He made Little Bear up like a tiny clown and instructed him to sit quietly in a slat-sided red wagon and smile at the people as they came by. Little Bear hooted and cooed at everyone.

"He's darling," a woman in a leather bodysuit said. "Look at that little teddy bear clown." Children pointed at Little Bear and Joshie and giggled.

After a while, the clowns were finished and the acrobats came out. Gyla rode a unicycle and danced with hoops to delicate piano music. A hush came over the crowd when she came out in her pink costume, a little risqué for the young ones, with her pink g-string and a couple of patches over her breasts. But the circus got away with it because Gyla didn't expose smooth flesh, merely sleek, silver fur.

Joshie held Little Bear on his hip and worked quietly along the edges of the crowd, handing out neon plastic flowers to the kids. Joshie never talked to the crowd. He mimed everything.

"Look at that girl," a woman said softly. "She looks so strange."

"But she's beautiful," came a little girl's voice. "Her fur is so shiny and silvery. I wish I could dance like that."

"No, you don't," the woman said. "Don't say that, honey."

"Mama, she's pretty," the girl insisted.

Joshie stroked Little Bear behind his furry ears.

"We enjoy the circus, dear, but we don't want to be like them," the woman said.

Joshie could not bear to listen any longer, so he moved on. At last, the show was over. Macadam came out in his gleaming green suit, the bullet-headed fish man, and bade everyone a safe trip home after enjoying the sideshow.

Gyla caught up with Joshie and Little Bear on their way to the Clown tent.

"Hey! I missed you last night. Hunny told me you picked up Little Bear, and I waited for you all evening," Gyla said. Her tiara was crooked. Joshie reached over and straightened it.

"Sure," he said. "I bet you did." Couldn't she see him trembling?

Gyla stopped. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Joshie said. "Let's get something to eat. Look, that woman I told you about is coming today. She might take Little Bear."

"Really?" Gyla grinned. She tried to link her arm with Joshie, but he pulled away. She caught his eye. "Joshie, what's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter," he told her. She looked so beautiful, in her tiara and satin costume. Of course she wanted Macadam. He had the money, and he was powerful. Joshie didn't blame her, not at all. Probably it had been going on a long time. Macadam's hands had been familiar, knowing, as they ran along her slender body. "Let's get something to eat and we can talk about Little Bear."

"Sure," Gyla said, still uncertain. She walked silently with them into the tent.

Gyla fetched soup and crackers for her and Joshie, and another corn dog for Little Bear, along with plenty of mustard and napkins. She fussed with a napkin at Little Bear's neck while Joshie talked. It was better to talk about Little Bear. Better to talk about anything except Gyla.

The words rushed out. "Her name is Mrs. Brigham. She's coming this afternoon. She's older, didn't want to drive all the way out here. I told her I'd pay for her cab."

"That was sweet," Gyla said.

Joshie cleared his throat. "Look, she told me about a place called High Haven, up in the mountains. Little Bear could go there, if he's got...what did she call it? If he's got a support system."

"Oh," Gyla said. "I think I might have heard of it."

Joshie kept on talking. "We've got to convince her that Little Bear has some kind of home base here with us. Otherwise, I don't see as if he has much of a chance. After all, he doesn't talk very well. The noises, the crazy flapping. We know it's from how he was treated."

"Bad," Gyla said.

"Yeah," Joshie said. "Very bad. But I don't think Mrs. Brigham cares about that." Little Bear was gnawing on his corn dog and hooting happily. Joshie paused and wiped mustard from his chin.

"I have heard of this place," Gyla said. She crumbled a cracker into her soup. "It's run by people like us. All of them. Only...only they have educations. And money. And they care." Gyla stirred her soup.

"Where'd you hear about High Haven?"

"Somebody told me about it. Not in a nice way."

Joshie started to touch her delicate, furred hand, but he saw his big, ungainly red glove. Gyla liked sharp nails, webbed fingers. Not a baggy clown glove with only three fingers and a thumb.

"Seems to me that place takes money," Gyla said. "Donations and such. Maybe they'd be more likely to take Little Bear if we agreed to send money each month." Her head hung down now, and she was watching the crackers softening to white mush in the hot soup.

"Maybe," Joshie said. "I got the impression Mrs. Brigham meant that the kids needed to have a place to go after they turned eighteen and had to leave this High Haven. Like, a job and a home and such."

Gyla brightened. "I can ask Macadam. He likes the kid. He..."

"No!" Joshie shoved his soup away so hard that noodles and broth splattered over the table. "You damn well won't."

Gyla stared and started to say something, but Montego Bay interrupted.

"There's a woman here," he said. "Says she's here to see the kid."

Joshie leapt up and grabbed Little Bear. "Come on," he said. "There's a lady who wants to meet you. She's very nice, I promise."

Gyla followed, and Joshie didn't dare stop her. He couldn't chance upsetting Little Bear before Mrs. Brigham had a chance to talk to him.

Mrs. Brigham was outside the clown tent. She was a small, neat woman with a man's fishing hat pulled tight around her ears. The corners of her eyes crinkled.

"Josh Petersen? I didn't recognize you. You've grown up."

"They call me Joshie here. Joshie the Clown."

"Ah," Mrs. Brigham said. "This must be the boy."

"We're calling him Little Bear," Gyla said, stepping forward.

Mrs. Brigham smiled. "You're another friend, then?"

"I'm with Joshie," Gyla said. Joshie held Little Bear tighter, and Little Bear

began to squirm and hoot.

Mrs. Brigham extended her hand. "I'm Mrs. Brigham. Do you know your name?"

"Little Bear," Little Bear said.

Mrs. Brigham tried again. "Yes, I've heard that, but do you have another name?"

Little Bear shook his head and said, "Hootie-hoo!" Then, he flapped his free arm, instead of taking her hand.

Mrs. Brigham looked questioningly at Joshie. "Has he done this as long as you've had him?"

Joshie paused, then decided there was no reason for lying. "Yes."

"It's called autism of change. We see it in many changed children, especially those who've been neglected."

"Autism?" Joshie remembered hearing that word, it was something like retardation, or craziness.

"No, not to worry. It's not like classic autism. It's responsive to treatment and training. In fact, most outgrow it."

"If they go to a place like High Haven," Gyla said. Joshie thought that she looked like she wanted to cry.

"Yes, if they go to a place like High Haven." Mrs. Brigham crossed her arms and studied Gyla. "You've heard of High Haven, then?"

Gyla nodded. "Listen, I want you to know that Joshie and I are committed to Little Bear's future."

Little Bear scrambled so hard against Joshie's side that Joshie had to put him down. Little Bear ran immediately to Gyla and buried his face in the fur of her stomach. Gyla stroked the back of his head and kept talking. "You take donations, don't you?"

"I'm not precisely associated with them," Mrs. Brigham said. "You'd have to speak to the staff. All High Haven staff are changed."

"I like that word," Gyla said. "Better than freak, or differently abled. What I wanted you to know is that I make good money here. Good enough, anyway. I can afford to send money each month for Little Bear, if that's what you want."

Mrs. Brigham shook her head. "Donations are welcome, but High Haven is more interested in the human side of things."

"But I'm not human," Gyla said.

Joshie stepped between them. "Please, just talk to him," he said. "Can you do some tests here? See if he's...how you said to me...if he's got potential?"

"I'll come back another day," Mrs. Brigham said. Little Bear let go of Gyla and ran to Mrs. Brigham and held her leg. She looked down and tentatively stroked his head. "That's all right, Little Bear. I'll come back with some friends and we'll play games, okay?"

Joshie didn't know whether to cry out in anguish or relief. "Can't you take him? Take him now."

Mrs. Brigham shook her head, slowly. "No, I'll have to get some help for this. He obviously doesn't talk much. We have different tests for that. I'm not qualified."

"I remember," Gyla said. "I've taken all the tests. Little Bear is smart. And he's young enough. If you take him to your High Haven, he's got a chance." Joshie saw now that Gyla was crying. "You can have as much money as I earn. I don't care, just so long as he has a chance." Then, Gyla looked up at Joshie, straight in his face, and opened her mouth as if she was about to say more, but instead, she turned on her heels, in her delicate white slippers, and ran away, toward her trailer.

Joshie stood silently a while, then collected Little Bear and pressed his face into his ruff. "I'm sorry," he said to Mrs. Brigham. "She was raised in a home. Most of them around here were. She's..."

"Bitter," Mrs. Brigham said. "I can understand that."

Joshie examined her broad, honest face. "Are you coming back?"

Mrs. Brigham looked at her shoes, which were practical brown brogans. "Yes. I'll call some friends. They'll come back with me. Give me a couple of days."

"All right," Joshie said, because it was all that he could say.

Then, Mrs. Brigham walked back across the damp, packed dirt lot to her waiting cab. She hadn't asked Joshie for any money. He called after her and asked about the money, but she waved him off.

"Go and talk to your girl," she called. "I'm thinking right now she needs a friend, Josh."

"She's not my girl," Joshie said.

"My lady," Little Bear said in Joshie's ear.

Joshie knocked on Gyla's door with his red-gloved clown hand. He and Little Bear waited a long time before she answered.

"She's not going to take him," Gyla said when she opened the door.



"Hey, don't say that," Joshie said. "She's coming back with some other people, in a couple of days."

"I've got some money," Gyla said. "I can get more."

Macadam's money. Joshie put Little Bear down on the blue velour couch, more roughly than he should have. Gyla had been crying, and her golden eyes were red. Joshie wanted to feel sorry for her, but instead, here she was talking about Macadam's dirty money.

Little Bear ran to Gyla's bathroom.

Gyla rubbed her eyes, and Joshie heard the water running. "He wants another bubble bath," she said.

"Mrs. Brigham doesn't care about money," Joshie said. "You heard her."

Gyla bent over and unhooked her bra. Joshie had to look away, and she walked around him and sat on the blue velvet couch and crossed her legs, then rubbed her eyes.

"Everybody cares about money," she said. She crossed her arms behind her head and thrust her chest out at him.

Joshie sat in her dressing chair and fiddled with her combs and brushes. "Everybody doesn't care about it," he said. "Or selling themselves."

She gasped, a little gasp, then her face hardened. "What are you talking about, Joshie?"

He slammed the big brush down on her dressing table, then picked up one of her blue fringed bras which she had flung aside. He held it up. "This? How about your good friend, Macadam."

"He's not my friend," Gyla said.

"Yeah?" Her silky round breasts jutted out at him.

"One of us is going to have to go in and check on the kid," she said.

"You do it," Joshie said.

"All right." She stood, then sauntered past him.

As she walked by, Joshie reached out, with his awful clown glove, and grabbed her waist.

She gave a little cry, then said, "Joshie, don't play me that way. I like you too much."

He pushed her from him. "You don't like me," he said.

She ran her hands over her hips, then turned toward the window. "No," she said. "Maybe I don't. But I like your face."

Late afternoon light streamed in through the lace curtains and fell across her slender shoulders. She turned and straightened her g-string.

"Tell me that again," Joshie said. His voice sounded strange and rough.

She turned back and she was smiling. "I've always liked your face, Joshie."

He leaned forward and he touched her side, gently now, and stroked the soft fur.

"Hunny will watch Little Bear," she said. "I'm sure she will."

"That's not the right thing," Joshie said.

"Oh, yes it is," Gyla said. Then, she bent over and put her hand on Joshie's cheek and kissed him. Her fur smelled of sweet powder, like a baby. Her little tongue flicked in his mouth and Joshie felt the trailer spin around him.

Then, just as quickly as she'd kissed him, she pulled away and went to the bathroom. "Hurry up, Little Bear," he heard her say. "You're going to visit with Hunny tonight." Then, Joshie heard Little Bear's squeal of delight.

After the arrangements were made and Little Bear was left safely with Hunny, who'd been thrilled at the honor of keeping him, Gyla came to Joshie. His fingers played over Gyla's soft fur.

Gyla caressed his face, lightly touching the tip of his nose, and he hated it at first and wanted to turn away, but she would not let him.

"You're so gentle," she said, over and over.

Joshie, his heart slamming in his chest, ran his fingers over her thighs, feeling as though he would cry each time she cried out. And she did not shudder at the touch of his hands, his clown hands.

"My beautiful girl," he told her. "Beautiful Gyla."

Late in the evening, as he lay beside her and cradled her in her soft, sweet-smelling bed, she began to talk.

"I can get a lot of money," she said, and he put his hand on her cheek to hush her, but she turned, and kept talking. "They all give me money. Lots of it. But I'd never take it from you, Joshie. I care about you."

Joshie remembered Macadam, bending over Gyla, handling her so roughly and coldly. It had enraged him, but now, he felt only sadness. If Gyla had been a normal girl, she never would have had to endure something like Macadam. Joshie

couldn't think that Macadam was "someone."

"That place," Joshie said. "That High Haven. Maybe they wouldn't just take kids, Gyla. Maybe there'd be a place for us."

Gyla laughed. "No, I don't think so," she said.

"I meant it," Joshie said. "We can at least try."

"This place was freedom for me," Gyla said. "Can you understand that? To you, it's just a job."

What did she think he was? Where else would he earn a living, with his clown face and ugly hands and feet? Joshie ran his fingers along her flank and said, "I'm no different from you."

"Oh, yes you are, Joshie. You're a human being," she said.

"You're a human being, too," Joshie said. "Don't ever think you're not." Macadam's ugly words couldn't be how Gyla thought of herself. He stroked her back gently, until she fell asleep. Curled beside her, after a time, Joshie slept.

The next morning, he woke to the patter of rain on the roof of the trailer. Gyla was gone.

He dressed and ran out in search of Gyla and Little Bear. Macadam greeted him beside the Clown tent.

"You've got an appointment this morning," Macadam said.

"What? I'm looking for Gyla and Little Bear. The kid." Joshie rushed past him, fighting the desire to drive his fist into the big man's scaled gut.

"The boy is in my trailer. Lady says she has full payment for you and the boy to go to a place called High Haven." Macadam laughed. "I hear it's real nice up there."

Joshie stopped. "Where's Gyla?"

Macadam picked at one pointed nail. "She's taking a break."

Joshie rushed at him, his heart pounding. He grabbed Macadam's jacket. "Where is she?"

"She's fine, clown. Don't worry about her. Your ticket has been punched." Then, Macadam raised his arms and pushed Joshie away.

"You'd better not have hurt her," Joshie said.

Macadam shook his head. "I'd never hurt her. She's very special to me," he said.

His eyes were hard and blind-looking, like a shark.

Joshie ran past him to the trailer. He would grab Little Bear, then find Gyla, and they'd all get out of the circus. That was the right thing, he realized. The little house with the white picket fence. Gyla in the swing beside him, and Little Bear playing on the lawn.

When Joshie reached Macadam's trailer, Mrs. Brigham was there with a tall, red-haired man and short, dumpy woman in a caftan. Little Bear was playing with a set of colored blocks behind Macadam's desk.

"You're a very fortunate man, Josh," Mrs. Brigham said. "Someone has endowed you and Little Bear."

Joshie looked between the man and the other woman, then at Little Bear. "I don't understand."

"You and Little Bear will both be going to High Haven. Little Bear will start preschool there and you are to be trained as a cook."

"Cook?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it's the only opening they have right now."

"What about Gyla?"

"She's staying," Macadam said as he stomped into the trailer and pushed the blocks aside to sit at his desk. He smiled down at Little Bear with his sharklike smile.

"I won't leave without her," Joshie said.

"I'm afraid you have no choice," Mrs. Brigham said. She was still wearing the fisherman's hat. "The person who gave the endowment has stipulated that it's just you and Little Bear."

"Then just take the boy," Joshie said. "I'm not leaving without Gyla." He glared at Macadam, who merely smiled and toyed with the drawers of his desk. Macadam's nail file glittered on the desk. It had a sharp point, and Joshie was closer to it than Macadam. He could jump, grab it, hold it to Macadam's scaly fish throat.

Mrs. Brigham moved close and said very softly, so softly that Joshie might not have heard, had it not been for his over-large, sensitive ears, "Just come with us and it will be all right. Trust me."

Joshie nearly gasped, and he looked between her and the nail file. Macadam's neck...he was so close. Little Bear threw a block, and said, "Hot!"

Joshie decided he would have to trust Mrs. Brigham. "I'll be back for Gyla," he told Macadam. "You can count on that."

"Right," Macadam said, grinning. "You frighten me, Clown Boy."

"Let's go now, son," the red-haired man said. He leaned over and Little Bear scooted farther behind the desk.

"Come on, Little Bear," Joshie said. He squatted, and Little Bear looked up from the blocks, then reached for him. Joshie picked him up, feeling the familiar weight.

The woman in the caftan beamed. "You'll have a lovely time at High Haven," she said.

Macadam laughed as they left the trailer.

They walked toward the chain-link fence which surrounded the circus encampment. The waste conversion plant loomed overhead, spumes of white effluent smoking from its stacks. "Go ahead," Mrs. Brigham told Joshie. "Get in the van."

Joshie held Little Bear close. "You must think I'm crazy. I won't leave Gyla. Never."

"Just get in the van," Mrs. Brigham said.

The red-haired man stepped forward. "There's no cause for alarm," he said. The woman in the caftan patted his arm.

There was a driver in the van, and he opened the side for all of them. The others climbed in, and Joshie turned, looking back on the collection of circus tents and trailers. The sideshow lights flickered in the early morning light. The door to Macadam's trailer swung open, and he leapt down the steps.

"Please," Mrs. Brigham said.

The red-haired man pushed Joshie halfway into the van. "Didn't think he'd figure it out this quickly," he said.

Joshie looked around, confused, then the woman in the caftan and the red-haired man both forced him inside. Gasping, Joshie grabbed Little Bear as the red-haired man buckled them in their seat.

Mrs. Brigham slid to the front, then turned to the driver and said, "get going." Macadam was close enough that Joshie saw the gun in his hand.

"Let's hope he's a poor shot," the red-haired man said.

"Oh, he's a circus freak," the woman replied. "Not a professional."

Macadam crouched. Joshie bent over and tucked Little Bear's head into his chest. He heard popping noises, then dull whacks, and a few high, whining noises.

"He is a poor shot, isn't he?" the red-haired man said.

Joshie was completely huddled now, his breath coming in gasps. "You people are out of your minds," he said. The van jerked and threw Joshie against the door.

The red-haired man laughed. "You can sit up now. We're well out of range."

Joshie sat up and turned to see the circus lot fading in the distance. Little Bear curled against him, and he held him fast, then grabbed the red-haired man's shoulder. "Gyla's back there with Macadam. He'll kill her!" Joshie dug his fingers hard into the man's shoulder.

The red-haired man smiled. Joshie at first didn't understand when instead of replying, he reached with his free hand and tugged at the red hair. It peeled away to expose a perfectly smooth, white scalp. "I'm a clown too, friend," he said.

The woman in the caftan leaned across the seat. "And I'm porcine," she said, and she removed her face in one neat piece to show a round little pig snout and a pink rosebud mouth underneath it.

Little Bear said, "Hootie-hoo! hootie-hoo!" From the back of the van, Joshie heard a tearing noise. He turned and saw the carpet covering, lifting up. Joshie fumbled with his seat restraint.

Then, Joshie saw a pair of pointed gray ears above a delicate, heart-shaped face.

Mrs. Brigham was trying to say something. "I didn't think Macadam would figure it out so quickly," she said. "I'm sorry, Josh."

Joshie barely heard her. "Gyla," he whispered. Little Bear struggled to escape the seatbelt. His feet dug into Joshie's thighs.

"I gave them money to pay Macadam," Gyla said. "It didn't work out just like I'd thought."

Little Bear said, "Hootie-hoo! Hootie-hoo!"

"It worked out fine," Mrs. Brigham said. "You have a good friend in that man Montego Bay."

"Money doesn't matter to us," the other clown said. "But it mattered to Macadam."

"Even with the money, Macadam still tried to keep her," Mrs. Brigham said.

The blood was rushing in Joshie's ears. The other clown, the pig woman, they were so confident. Powerful. Gyla leaned over the seat and took Little Bear. Then, she kissed Joshie on the cheek.

"I love your face, Joshie," Gyla said. "I love your hands."

"Hootie hoo!" Little Bear shoved his furry head hard between the seats. Just for this one moment, Joshie paid no attention, except to Gyla's velvet fur, even when the tears stung his eyes and ran along his big clown nose into the short, soft fur of her exquisite face.