

THE
FIRST
BRIGHT
THING



J . R . D A W S O N



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THE FIRST BRIGHT THING

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*This one is for the children masquerading as adults
who recognize the names of these towns,
the warmth of this family,
and the shadows of these villains.*

*And to J.
This is a love story.*

“ . . . the misfits, the rebels, the dreamers, the joyous . . . find
your way to the circus.”

—Advertisement bill for Windy Van Hooten’s
Circus of the Fantastics, dated April 1926

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THE RINGMASTER, 1926

The Spark Circus arrived when no one was looking, early in the morning. The well-worn train snuck onto the tracks right outside of town, as the birds woke and the dawn broke through the sleepy shadows of trees cloaked in an early mist.

Train spotters didn't notice the train's approach until it was nearly upon them, appearing in a blink and charging into town, the cars red and gold and blue with a name written along the side: WINDY VAN HOOTEN'S CIRCUS OF THE FANTASTICALS. The last two cars were purple and gold with flowers painted on their thick, sturdy wood siding, the windows laced with red curtains.

Today, here in Des Moines, there had been tracks for the train to appear on. On other days, in other towns, the train simply arrived in the middle of a field, with not a railyard around for miles. Like magic.

But no, it was Sparks.

The Circus of The Fantasticals worked on up-front deposits, meticulous yet flexible planning, and well-placed advertisements, like all circuses; but something more than a seasonal schedule also drove this particular train. The Spark Circus always arrived at the right place at the right time, even if it was just for one person who needed to see their show that night.

In a decade where the past was a nightmare and the future was a dream, the present was an unknown sort of way station where everyone seemed a little lost. Some would recall their visit to the Circus of the Fantasticals vividly as a pivot in their lives; others would simply be inspired to do better or think differently, with no catalyst they could quite put their finger on but would likely trace back to that one time they went to see the circus.

Today, June 8, 1926, was Des Moines, Iowa's turn.

By the time the city awoke, the circus was set up in their rented plot near

the tracks. Some townsfolk skipped work and most children ran from chores to watch on the plot's outskirts while the Sparks emerged from the train cars and put up the Big Top, made the midway appear. One Spark changed into an animal, another multiplied themselves to get things done faster, while another lifted wagons above their head. The townsfolk might have been slightly afraid, but as the day got older and the posters went up all over town, as they watched with growing fascination, they realized this might be their only chance to see something extraordinary, and so they went to the circus.

The midway held the youth of smoky July evenings and the feeling of a young body rushing down a very steep hill. Something in the electric string lights hanging above, the musical chime of carnival games and candy carts, brought back a safe home that everyone seemed to remember but had never been able to find. Until tonight.

There was a squeal and a small stampede of children dragging their mothers to follow them up a little wooden bridge. The bridge led to the sideshow, which was for everyone, not just gentlemen. And it wasn't a cheap exploitation. It may have only been made of plyboard and luminescent paint, but it still held something exciting in the way it invited the audience to run through it, to explore in their own way. Halfway through, giggling children bounced on a rubber bridge with just enough give, and their parents stood in awe inside a tunnel that looked like it spun through outer space. It was technology carved and moved by wooden gears, like something out of Georges Méliès's dreams.

But the Big Top itself—the archetypal main event—was admittedly nothing special. In fact, it looked more beaten down than other passing circuses the townspeople had seen before. The tent was tattered red-and-white canvas and muslin; thriftily yet expertly sewn together. The audience seats were only benches on bleachers set in a circle, outside rings of flimsy painted sawdust curbs with areas on the ground level for those who would have trouble climbing up the rickety steps. The floor was dust that was easy to traverse but still coated boots and wheels and nice Sunday shoes all the same. The lights were too sharp, too few, and seemed mostly to spotlight just how dirty and ramshackle the inside of this Big Top was. It seemed to resemble a barn more than a theater, held together by spit and glue rather than nails.

But that was just the preshow.

When the tent went to blackout, when the audience hushed and the spotlight clicked on, there, in the halo of illumination, stood the Ringmaster.

Commanding in a bright red velvet coat, the Ringmaster looked out to the

audience from the center of a large ring. Middle-aged and looking every bit a lioness, the Ringmaster had a wild mane of golden-brown hair that frizzed in the heat, didn't dry fast enough in the cold, and was somehow always getting in her white face, which was either sunburned with a thousand freckles or as pale as a ghost in winter. She had black eyes, unheard of, that either glimmered with possibility or dulled with the density of a black hole. Some thought she was beautiful, some thought she was brash, but it was undeniable that she would take them on an adventure.

When she smiled, it seemed to the crowd like she was looking at the world for the first time. As if she had just caught her first glimpse of them, saw the brilliance of their hearts, and had known what great things they'd already done and would do. The smile was a genuine embrace, the first bright thing in this dark, dusty place.

"Welcome," she said, to every single person in the audience, "Welcome home."

The Ringmaster had run this show from spring to fall for the last six years. Its rhythms shifted slightly from season to season, making room for new Spark performers as their family grew, as their tent got more threadbare, and as she learned more and more what she was doing. She had to remember that, didn't she? That she knew what she was doing.

She fixed the cuffs of her jacket and gave a small bow to the audience, her top hat appearing in her hand. The audience sounded with a small wave of surprise, and her smile grew. "We are honored to be with you for this precious hour." To the side, the Ringmaster saw the interpreter repeat her words in sign language. It looked like a confident dance. "Before this, we may have been strangers. After this, we may never see one another again. But what happens tonight, we will hold together in our memory. And so we are family. The acts you will see may seem out of the limits of this world. But I assure you, this circus is as real as you and me. When we dream for something to be beautiful, it can be. When we wish for the impossible, the impossible can find us. If we just want it loud enough."

That was Mr. Calliope's cue. He was a man made of pipes and strings, and now he smashed down on his brass bones, creating wind that rang out in chords and cadences. The sound enveloped the audience in a well-timed crescendo as the spec parade made its way from the wings and into the hipodrome, dancing in time with the music.

Kell swooped above on his wings.

Tina, a menagerie all her own, transformed from one animal to another.

The fire-breathing archer, the tumblers that floated in the air, the clowns that grew and shrank, all of it a dream.

All of it heaving, flying, singing, pounding with the cheers of the audience. The Ringmaster couldn't see their faces beyond the spotlight, but she could feel the energy radiating onto the arena's stage.

It felt like wonder.

The Ringmaster raised her arms, as if wrapping them around the audience. "Tonight, we celebrate us! We celebrate you! And what we can do together!"

Above, on cue, flew Odette, the blond-bobbed trapeze swinger who looked like an ivory doll. From the platform beside Odette came Mauve, her deep umber skin draped in purple silks, singing with a voice as smooth as a maestro playing her violin. She hit each note then glided to the next as Odette soared on silks.

The Ringmaster loved seeing Odette joyful. The trapeze swinger wore happiness like she wore her sequins, bright and shining and refracting light off her curves like she herself was a star bursting to connect with the dark world around them. Odette had a kind and hopeful soul. And the Ringmaster was lucky enough to hold her heart.

The Ringmaster ran to where Odette would soon descend. She took the bottom of the silk and swung it in a circle as Odette danced high above. The spotlight cut through the dust, illuminating them both, their dislodged locks of hair like golden crowns.

The Ringmaster held the silk steady while Odette flew in circles. The spec parade faded away, back offstage, while Mauve still sang above. The Ringmaster knew the others were getting ready for their next cue. This was Odette's moment.

Here, in the shadow of Odette's love, lived the life the Ringmaster had never been promised. As she held tight to the silk, the Ringmaster imagined herself looking back down a mountain to see how far she'd come. When she had started climbing, she couldn't have imagined this view. And she didn't know when she'd gotten here, when she'd grown up and solidified a kindness around her. She didn't yell anymore. She didn't wake up with the world feeling like cardboard scraping against a concrete sidewalk.

In most Midwestern towns, you'd find a broken street full of potholes and dried up weeds. A street with no shade, hot and stagnant, like a boring Sunday afternoon before a stressful Monday. The feeling of not enough water and being too far away to find any. That used to be how the Ringmaster's life felt; a scratchy vest made of Sunday afternoons.

But now she had learned to take joy for granted.

Odette slipped down the silk, lowering herself slowly, almost sensuously, into the Ringmaster's waiting arms.

"You're doing wonderfully, Rin," Odette whispered.

Rin was the name used by those who knew her best, and her wife knew her better than G-d.

Rin held Odette's firm hips, her fingers feeling the rough sequin hems. Odette smiled, sweat beading down her rosy cheeks, and gave a breathy laugh as the audience swelled in cheers. Rin had nearly forgotten there was anyone else in this tent.

"Amazing job," Rin whispered.

"Love you," Odette said, squeezing her hand before bouncing away and waving emphatically at the audience. She bowed. And Rin felt a hook cut into her gut. If Rin had been a boy, or if Odette had been a boy, they could have kissed in front of these people. In fact, the crowd would have positively swooned for the two of them. Roaring into whistles and croons as they'd have held each other closer.

But even with all the love threaded between them, Rin reminded herself that she couldn't hold Odette for too long in the spotlight.

The audience was enchanted by them; their magic, their different-ness. But a kiss would break the spell, and the audience would realize the magic was no show. This was real. And it was all right to be different, until it wasn't.

The same people who cheered for the Sparks in the Big Top could send them to the sanitariums, where all the bright yellow wagons ended up. The same people in the audience who felt warmth in these lights could go home, realize they had previously been taught that these circus Sparks weren't special, they were freaks. And if the freaks weren't gone by the next morning, there may be a mob.

Rin knew there was a line to toe.

But that didn't mean she couldn't smile. So she did. They had made a home here in their circus, despite the world that did not want them to find a home.

But it was about to all get torn away.

As she smiled, as she looked out into the audience, Rin felt a piercing, cold stare among the many eyes watching her from beyond the spotlight. Like ice running down her back. It was unnerving, how quick the fear rolled back into her heart. How easily the past tore into the present.

Rin could only make out faces for a moment as the spotlight ran from her to Mauve, whose set was now beginning. She saw the usual crowd,

families with children, young people on dates. Old women staring at the beauty with awe and old men trying not to cry. But there was someone else in there, someone who stood at attention, staring right at her.

A familiar dark brow. Sharp, angry eyes. A dangerous man. The Circus King.

Something in Rin seized. She waited, as the spotlight passed and shadow fell. But when the bright beam swooped once more across that section, he was gone.

He wasn't here. She was allowing him to infiltrate places he would never be. It was a phantom, a trick of the light. It wasn't real.

I'll find you. I'll find you, and I'll ruin you.

The show carried on.

She couldn't let his memory scare her any longer. He would not turn this into his. He was not a part of this life. She had made a new place for herself, far from him and anything he'd ever seen. This was her story. This was her circus, full of bright colored lights like rainbows, sequined costumes that reflected like prisms, and beautiful horses who could shift into beautiful women that could fly as high in the air as a dove.

This was her home.

*

As the show ended, the Sparks froze and held their final position while Mr. Calliope struck a final triumphant chord. Right on cue, three copies of Maynard shut off all the lights (the spots, the board, and that one pesky ellipsoidal that wouldn't cooperate with the board). The performers on the floor had fifteen seconds of applause and blackout to vamoose, so they rushed out, disappearing as quickly as they had stormed onto the scene.

When the lights came back up, Rin watched as the crowd dispersed and stopped to poke at the props and set pieces, trying to spot any tricks up the circus's sleeves. Some circuses didn't allow audience members on the main floor after the show, but it was part of Rin's nightly ritual; to watch from the wings as the audience spilled onto the floor like the end of a baseball game, intoxicated and invigorated by what they'd just witnessed. Real magic was a strong drink to take in.

But tonight, there was a young woman who didn't look at the set. She stared right past the ring, past the hippodrome, and her eyes connected with Rin who stood to the side.

The girl was dressed in an ill-fitting red smock. Her eyes were so empty,

she could have been a doll. The smock she wore was not hers; it was Rin's. Rin had left it behind long ago, and now here it was, resurrected and worn like an omen. A threat.

Something deep in Rin told her to turn away, to run. If she acknowledged this woman, her worlds would collide. The façade would end.

Which was why she had to step forward.

"Hello?" Rin said. "Are you all right?"

The girl smiled, like a marionette with too many strings pulling at her cheeks, at the corners of her eyes, to make her face look like . . . his.

"There you are," the girl whispered.

It was all real.

The Ringmaster waited for the girl to take out a knife. To attack her. To hurt herself. To do something angry and unpredictable. To explode in a rage.

But she didn't. The girl only turned and walked away.

Before Rin could react, to call out or move to follow, the girl had disappeared into the crowd.

"Wait." Rin heard her own voice as if from far away. "Wait . . ."

It would have been easier if the girl had stabbed at her, or struck her with a fist, or *something*. Rin remembered the familiarity of him standing above her, saying nothing. He'd smile at her, soaking in her fear, as she waited for him to move, to speak. But he'd never had to do anything; he'd always known she was his. And he would make her rot.

She couldn't breathe. She stumbled back, and Odette grabbed her as she started to fall.

"Rin, darling, what is it? What's wrong?"

Rin shook her head, looking frantically at the faces in the crowd. He was here. He was here, in her home. He had been at her circus.

"He knows I'm alive," she said.