

My earliest memories are of Prohibition days, of men in dark coats and snap-brim felt hats standing in our kitchen, exchanging bundled packages and urgent whispers with my father, Ben Derrick, gambler, actor, inventor, bootlegger, and occasional gangster. There I am, Thatcher Derrick, wedged between the refrigerator and stove, five years old and not scared at all. This would have been the apartment above the gas station, where everything smelled like gasoline, all the time. I never knew my mother.

The gas station burned down when I was ten, and over the next fourteen months, my father started a restaurant in Providence, invested in a knife factory in Albany, opened a hotel in Boston, and launched a newspaper in Philadelphia. He undertook each new enterprise with indefatigable enthusiasm, assuring me each time that this would be the one that would make us, as if his last project hadn't just failed spectacularly. There were so many different jobs that year, my father liked to joke that he wore more hats than Hydra. Still, with all those balls in the air, there was always a little something coming in, no matter how often a new venture soured.

We were never outright poor, I don't think, though the creditors we left behind might have been. I never saw in my father's eyes the desperation that flickered in the eyes of men I passed on the street. Men who wore threadbare suits as they shuffled down sidewalks to jobs that didn't exist anymore.

The summer I turned twelve, my father took me to the Baraboo Big Top Circus, its tents pitched just outside of Portland, Maine. That was the day everything — everything — changed. That first day comes back to me now in jumbled flashes of memory: The smell of cotton candy, cloying and sweet, the sweat on the animals, the pervasive heat. But what I remember most—

Three times in my life, I've witnessed physical feats so extraordinary, they seemed to me evidence of the divine made manifest in the movements of a human being. In reverse order: