



# The Ugliness of the Everyday World Transformed, or Something My life as a runaway in the traveling circus

By Deirdre Guthrie Photographs by Kimberly Gremillion



I GOT A CARD LAST WEEK FROM KAREN, THE CIRCUS SCHOOLTEACHER. The cover showed an eerie, black-and-white shot of a carousel in Paris during winter; the painted horses straining at their reins, eyes rolled back, against a backdrop of leafless trees and snow. Inside, she wrote: "This reminded me of the circus—dormant, dreamy, stagnant, still." When she left, she'd warned me not to let the constant motion of circus life trick me into thinking I was getting somewhere.

The Big Tent Circus pitches its tent every winter at Lincoln Center in Manhattan, its fun-house splotches of primary colors, fluttering flags, and shimmering yellow lights lodged in front of the classical opera house and ballet theater. A year ago, I stood behind its painted gates, staring up at that billowing tent while ragtime spilled from speakers hidden in trees, and the smell of cotton candy overpowered me with its sweetness. Inside, darkened figures shuddered in their jackets, coughed out steamy breath, and slipped in and out of trailers. Underneath, tangles of ropes, tubes, and cables writhed like worms. A large Latino man, grinning under his top hat, invited me to sneak in and see a show.

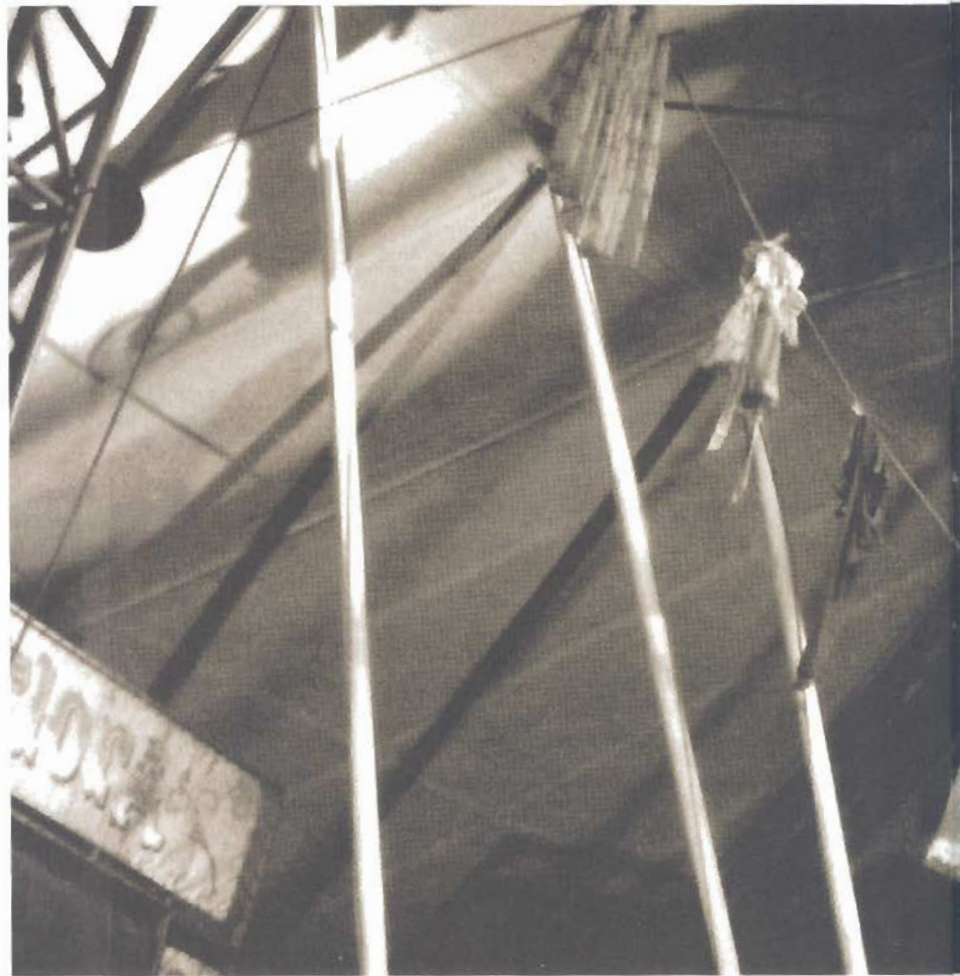
Later that night, I told my lover I was considering abandoning East Village squalor to join the circus. "But of course," he said, "You love to immerse yourself in the grotesque."



**T**HE BIG TENT CIRCUS' TRAVELING CAST AND CREW CONSIST OF ABOUT 120 PEOPLE who regularly tour 13 cities nationwide, playing to as many as 500,000 people a year. The traveling show began in 1977 and represented a new kind of American circus. It was a reaction to the "Greatest Show on Earth" commercialism of Ringling Bros. and was intended to be a more traditional, European-style circus (along the lines of Pickle Family and Cirque du Soleil) that stressed art over spectacle. Big Tent, with its intimate, solitary ring, was to draw its inspiration from high-energy Broadway shows and a romantic street-performer spirit—the circus as modern-day tribal ritual and tonic.

"We transform the audience," its founder once said, "taking it to another dimension... We create magic... The ugliness of the everyday world is transformed..." About the way of life, he said: "Circus, more than any other art form, requires us to be a community. We build our lives around its nomadic existence."

When I went to see about a job, the house manager, a former clown, put a more realistic spin on it, and I soon learned this "way of life" included eating cookhouse slop, sleeping in walk-in closets and squatting like trailer-park trash.



INSIDE THE COOKHOUSE, AN OLDER BLACK MAN WINKED FROM BEHIND THE COUNTER AS I SCOOPED SOME FOOD ONTO MY PAPER PLATE. THE LENSES IN HIS EYEGGLASSES WERE CRACKED AND HAD THE EFFECT OF FRAGMENTING ONE EYEBALL INTO PIECES. AS I LOOKED FOR A SEAT, A SCRAWNY, UNSHAVEN MAN ACROSS THE ROOM LEERED AND LICKED HIS LIPS.

**I**T WAS DURING THE IDLE HOURS BETWEEN SHOWS when I first followed the smell of burnt beans to the blue-tarped tent of the cookhouse. I walked through the narrow alleyways between trailers, pitted with workers resting on metal steps, cracking open bottles of beer and smoking thick, brown blunts. Music pulsed behind curtained doors—rap, punk, blues. Rowdy voices lowered conspicuously as I walked past; I was new.

I caught snatches of scenes from inside the sleeper compartments: a golden-boy Deadhead peering over a girl's exposed belly, examining the tattoo he was drawing on her with his buzzing pen; a Mexican cook, who doubled as a loan shark, slowly licking his thumb

while counting out bills to a teen-age black kid with a striped Dr. Seuss hat; a chubby wardrobe girl from the Jersey suburbs reading palms in her ritzy trailer, complete with satellite dish and laptop.

Inside the cookhouse, an older black man winked from behind the counter as I scooped some food onto my paper plate. The lenses in his eyeglasses were cracked and had the effect of fragmenting one eyeball into pieces. As I looked for a seat, a scrawny, unshaven man across the room leered and licked his lips. I sat down and stared out the screen door, swallowing spoonfuls of soggy rice drenched in bean juice, until Tess came in and took the seat next to mine.

Tess was my roommate, a big, rowdy girl with wild, frizzy hair and a massive cast on her leg. She came from Oklahoma

and liked to show me pictures of her family—lots of kids with home perms and ruddy cheeks. She was a beer drinker and teased me for drinking wine. She stayed out sometimes; late at night I'd hear her heavy breathing and spat curses as she limped up the wooden block steps of our sleeper. Before she went to bed she'd puke in a plastic bag, neatly tie it up, and then set it on the floor beside her before she passed out in her bunk.

"This is my best friend's wedding," she said to me one night, pointing to a fuzzy photo. "She married an Indian. Cute, huh?" she asked. I nodded.

"Yeah, but he beat the shit out of her, so they got divorced."

Back home, Tess had worked five years disassembling chickens on the night shift at a processing plant, until a bit of





bone flew into her eye and she had to have it removed at the hospital. She had been with Big Tent for three years. During the day, she sold stuffed clowns and T-shirts. At night, she was a roustabout.

For the most part, roustabouts—the circus' behind-the-scenes laborers—didn't mix socially with the performers, and vice versa. It had a lot to do with living quarters. The roustabouts squeezed

TESS WAS MY ROOMMATE, A BIG, ROWDY BEER DRINKER WITH WILD, FRIZZY HAIR AND A MASSIVE CAST ON HER LEG. SOMETIMES, LATE AT NIGHT, SHE'D PUKE IN A PLASTIC BAG, NEATLY TIE IT UP, AND THEN SET IT ON THE FLOOR BESIDE HER BEFORE SHE PASSED OUT IN HER BUNK.



into trailer compartments along Sleeper Row, sometimes referred to as the "projects," while the performers lived in show or private trailers lined up in "avenues." There also were cultural and language barriers. The performers were often from Russia, Asia, and Europe, and an underlying caste system placed performers above laborers. Living as a pack broke down some separations. Cultures inevitably collided as black boys mingled with French ballerinas, and Harvard graduates ate in the cookhouse with high-school dropouts. But the two worlds, for the most part, stayed separate.

Although I lived with the roustabouts in Sleeper Row, I was known as a "box-office babe," working in a separate trailer with three retired showgirls. They were careful about their appearance, wearing their purple shirts tucked in, and were known for ordering out for meals—they wouldn't touch the cookhouse fare. Having long paid their dues, they were exempt from performing "load ins" and "load outs."

"You don't load out with us?" Tess asked me one day in the cookhouse, her voice garbled with a mouthful of food.

"Don't have worker's comp like you guys," I answered. (I had

seen a fair share of roustabouts with sprained arms, broken legs, and bashed in shoulders dragged to the ER after load out; my job description didn't cover such injuries.) Tess smirked and looked across the table at Helen, a beautiful, 19-year-old horse groom from Denmark. Helen, who breathed out her words in a way that always made me sleepy, had a reckless habit of ordering rounds of screaming orgasms and falling in love

with strangers in neighborhood bars. She lived in the last compartment of our trailer, and Tess and I often felt the consummation of her passion vibrate through our sleeper late at night.

"Oh, leave her alone, Tess," Helen said. "You know you wouldn't do it if you didn't have to."

I was only required to "pop in" and "pop out" the box office. This usually took less than an hour and could be accomplished while wearing clogs. In the world of the Big Tent, load out is the litmus test for respect, of which I would get little until I passed.

**H**ISTORICALLY, TRAVELING CIRCUSES HAVE PROMISED more than just a chance to see exotic animals and performers doing tricks; they've offered work for society's orphans and wannabe orphans alike. As America's population spread westward, circus organizers realized that their shows would have to travel in order to tap new audiences. Portable tents replaced wooden amphitheaters, and a new labor force was born—that of the circus manual laborer, a.k.a. the roustabout.

At Big Tent, the roustabouts are spread among five different crews: electricians, maintenance, tent, ring, and house. During the shows, they masquerade as concession-stand salespeople, roving junk-food vendors, ushers, and stagehands, but their main task involves collapsing and reopening the mammoth big top, a process known as "load out" and "load in."

Load outs and load ins require rolling back props, raking garbage, cleaning septic tubes, installing electrical wiring, assembling the immense theater dome known as the circus tent, and erecting the bleachers, only to tear it all down again and start from scratch in the next town, usually the next day. Temps are hired as backup labor—virtually any able-bodied grunt willing to sweat it out for minimum wage—but the





roustabouts carry most of the load.

My initiation to load out came in Boston. I'd been on a food run and had an armful of chocolate cake and greasy mozzarella sticks when I ran into Manny, a husky 22-year-old from the Manhattan projects who was head of house crew. "Need some help?" he asked, eyeing my precariously balanced lunch.

"Nope, I got it," I said, walking on.

"Life as a box-office babe is pretty rough, huh?" he mumbled. I stopped, wanting to reply, but walked on instead.

As showgirls, the "box-office babes" I worked with had endured things I never could: too much exercise, too little eating, perpetual smiling through swollen arches crammed into high heels, and whip burns incurred during failed attempts to snatch lit cigarettes from puckered lips.

"Those roustabouts think it's a regular cakewalk being a showgirl," explained Yvonna, a former foot-juggler from Holland who giggled so much she always seemed on the verge of hysteria. "I wonder if they've ever foot-juggled with two sprained ankles," she snorted, as I doled out the hot food.

For all their burlesque airs, I admired the stamina of these women. Mostly around 40, they were unable to compete with their successors in bikini thongs, but nevertheless remained on the lot, more often than not because their husbands still worked for Big Tent. They

**T**HE AUDIENCE HADN'T EVEN EMPTIED FROM THE TENT WHEN ROARING CATERPILLARS AND SHOUTING workers descended on the lot, fanning out to uproot stakes and fencing. I heard Manny barking out orders to his crew.

Lenny, a scarecrow of a man with a bad knee, saw me standing there, befuddled in the chaos, and asked for my help rolling up the sewage tubing attached to each trailer. He offered his gloves, and together we pressed out the sewage from each tube and watched it ooze onto the cracked pavement, its acrid stench filling the air. Before long, I was gathering tangled cable marinated in Coca-Cola from under the bleachers and untying cord that strung the tent to the poles. Tess and I swept the ring and all the sticky debris around it, picked up and sorted the jacks, and loaded the heavy seatboards into the truck. I was breathing heavily, damp with sweat, and itchy from the coat of grime on my arms and face.

We'd started after the last show around 7 p.m. At 3:30 in the morning, we started to roll up the tent. We formed a line and unsnapped each of the tent's harnesses; threw the thick ropes up on the six, slick tent sections; and folded the heavy material inward until it enveloped the center pole like a fold-out Christmas tree. Afterward, we snacked on cold cuts and candy bars. It had become a humid, muggy morning. Manny approached me, shook my hand, and asked for a backrub. I pushed my grimy fingers into the contorted muscles of his back and arms. Everyone was tired and ate their food in silence. The only sound was Manny's muffled groans.

The roustabouts would continue working until sunup, get a few hours sleep in the

in, anticipating how well his crew would perform. Physically, he'd push himself to the limit. Afterward, I'd find him up in the bleachers, sitting alone, utterly spent in the stone, churchlike stillness of the big top.

**S**OME EARLY MORNINGS, WHEN THE LINGERING SMELL OF MUSKY ELEPHANT and rotting hot dog mingled with the chilled air, I would watch the white Arabian horses snorting and rolling in the sawdust ring. Sometimes Katja, the ringmaster's wife and head horse trainer, would be there, or Helen in her white tanktop, waving her arms at a stallion galloping toward an



GEORGE—SWEET, OLD, EPILEPTIC GEORGE—WAS WANTED IN BOSTON FOR DRUG TRAFFICKING. NATE FROM MAINTENANCE HAD READ ABOUT HIS FAMILY IN THE TABLOIDS. THEY WERE CONNECTED WITH SOME "BAD SICILIAN BUSINESS" BACK ON STATEN ISLAND. BUT FRANKLY, I'D SEEN A GREATER SHARE OF DEGENERATION BACK IN THE EAST VILLAGE.

had all adapted to the lifestyle, often raising kids amid it. Some had tried to settle down, become "townies" with 9-to-5 jobs and mortgage payments. But as Tina, a former bareback rider whose husband "caught the guy from the flying trapeze," said: "We got bored, restless; got that itch to move on the road."

"Don't let those roustabouts trick you into doing load out, girlie," Yvonna advised as I left. I waited for the familiar explosion of laughter before heading outside.

van driving to the next town, then begin loading in for the show that night. It wasn't hard to understand why some of them needed speed to stay awake, or why so many trips to the ER occurred as exhaustion set in. Later, when I asked Manny why he stayed, he just shrugged and smiled a slow, sideways smile.

When Manny was 12, he worked in a crackhouse making sure junkies didn't steal anything. When he was 13, he saw a kid get shot five times and "keep runnin' around like a chicken with his guts spillin' all out." He started with Big Tent at 18 as a grunt-laborer; three years later, he led house crew. He'd get nervous stomachs the night before load

exit. Ron, a security guard from Queens, once kept me company as his night shift drew to a close. He asked what a nice girl like me was doing in a place like this, and warned me that the circus was a dead end, a wasteland for burned-out hippies and society's rejects. He'd staked out circus lots for the past five years, and told me he'd seen enough to conclude that circus people were "a bunch of degenerates."

Indeed, many of them had greasy hands, dirty tattoos, and deadened eyes; most of them were runaways for whom shady pasts were common and dysfunctional families a given. The federal marshals had taken



George—sweet, old, epileptic George who spun the cotton candy. Apparently, he was wanted in Boston for drug trafficking. Before that, Nate from maintenance had read about his family in the tabloids. They were connected with some “bad Sicilian business” back on Staten Island. And most of the horsegrooms were perpetually stoned, passing around French novels and Dennis Hopper videos like they were hand-rolled cigarettes.

But frankly, I told Ron, I’d seen a greater share of degeneration back in the East Village.

**I**N CHARLESTOWN, THE RADIO WARNED THAT A TORNADO HAD HIT FIVE MILES DOWN THE ROAD, WITH WINDS CLOCKED AT 73 MPH. Word was the tent could

withstand up to 75. We had a full house, and the roustabouts had been working all day to secure the tent and its stakes, but the anxiety was palpable.

I left the box office to get some coffee, ran past the roaring hum of the generator in the pouring rain, through Sleeper Row—its trailers black with a thick coat of mosquitoes—and shot up the cookhouse steps. Inside, alone, sat Jumbo.

Jumbo was the son of roustabouts. His knuckles were swollen and blue; his face was scarred and coarse, weather-beaten. He kept himself satisfied with alcohol, local prostitutes, and bar fights. Everyone warned me he could get nasty when he was drunk, and might ask me to play “hide the sausage.” But he never

going on in this world?”

Jumbo was right. The winds rolled by us, and the big top held.

**D**IANA STARR COOPER, IN HER BOOK *NIGHT AFTER NIGHT*, DESCRIBES THE Circus as “a gathering of artists whose job is to fight despair.” It was a battle that seemed to inspire the roustabouts. One night, around a bonfire on the Long Island sand, they put on a cabaret: a little stand-up, some guitar and sax, and songs. Ron, a guy on electricians crew, read a poem that stayed with me long after the fire was doused. It was written by an old circus hack, Henry Ringling North.

“The circus,” Ron began, with a ringmaster’s strut and bellow, “is a jealous wench.” His audience responded with knowing snickers.

“Indeed, that is an understatement,” he continued. “She is a ravaging hag who sucks your vitality as a vampire drinks blood, who kills the brightest stars in her crown, and who will allow no private life to those who serve her.” Everyone fell silent. “Wrecking their homes, ruining their bodies, and destroying the happiness of their loved ones by her insatiable demands. She is all of these things, and yet,” he paused dramatically, “I love her as I love nothing else on earth.” When he was finished, he knelt in the cold sand, and the roustabouts hooted like banshees and raised their bottles in the air.

**O**N MY LAST STOP OF THE TOUR, IN SHELburne, VERMONT, I went to a pub with Helen. We spent most of the night spouting stories of our circus lives to a fascinated group of locals. (Tonight she was the trapeze artist, and I was the human cannonball.) Afterward, a middle-aged attorney who’d been listening over his scotch at the other side of the bar toasted us for having the “guts” to run away.

“Run away from what?” I asked, curious.

“You know, just up and leave everything behind, all attachments, all security,” he answered, before returning to his glass.

I wanted to laugh. It took more guts to stay in the world I’d run away from. But then Helen whispered hotly, like steam in my ear: “To runaways!” And I took the screaming orgasm she set before me and swallowed it whole.

WITH A WINDY ARMAGEDDON AT THE DOOR, JUMBO SAT WATCHING “AMERICA’S MOST WANTED,” DRINKING TEQUILA. “SHOW’S ABOUT THIS GRANNY WHO SEDUCES RICH TEXAN WIDOWERS AND THEN CHOPS ‘EM UP TO COLLECT,” HE SAID. “WHAT KIND OF CRAZINESS IS GOING ON IN THIS WORLD?”

did. Now, with the prospect of a windy Armageddon at the door, Jumbo sat watching “America’s Most Wanted,” drinking tequila and Coronas with lime.

He greeted me with his trademark high-pitched laugh, which didn’t suit his big frame. “You’re looking lovely tonight,” he slurred.

I was soaked. And I was worried about the tent. “I heard it might not hold. What do you think?”

“Nah,” he said. “Storm’ll blow over. You can tell by the way the clouds are rolling.” He sucked on his lime. “No, I’ve seen tents chewed up before; this one will hold. We’ve tied her down good. Don’t you worry.” And he turned back to the mottled reception on the TV set.

“Can you believe this shit?” he said, pointing at the screen. “Show’s about this granny who seduces rich Texan widowers and then chops ‘em up to collect.” Then, looking at me with an uneven grin, he added, “What kind of craziness is

