

## THE FREAKS

by Poppy Z. Brite

On a cold January afternoon in the coal valleys of Kentucky, two people emerged from a fairground and began walking toward the middle of town. There was nothing to do there, since the town was too small and too Baptist to have even so much as a pool hall, but anything was better than staying at the fairground among the empty stalls and rotten-smelling wastecans. Today was Sunday, and the carnival was not allowed to open on the Lord's day.

The two people were employees of the carnival. They were freaks. The smaller one, with slim hands pushed deep into the pockets of his long scarlet coat, was a creature known as a hermaphrodite. He had been doubly endowed by God. The carnival sideshow gave him an opportunity to parade his fortune before the masses. He had seen fit to make the right side of his body seem male, and the left, female. His yellow hair was long and wavy on one side and cropped short on the other. When he sat in his stall in the freak tent, he rouged the left side of his lips and put mascara and shadow on his left eye. He had slight swellings on his chest that, with the use of imagination, could

pass for a woman's breasts. Since the left one was slightly larger and better-shaped, his costume left it exposed. He usually touched the nipple with rouge. His stall was the most popular one in the show. For an additional four dollars, men were allowed to come to a private show in the hermaphrodite's stall after carnival hours.

His name was Nonny.

His companion was called Zorro, the Skeleton Man. No one at the carnival knew who had given him the name Zorro, or why, and no one remembered his real name, which was Bill. In his stall he wore a black cat's-eye mask and a loincloth to chow off his bones. Now he was wearing a threadbare black coat which hung on him like a shroud. He had a large head covered with short, sleek dark hair, and his wrists were no thicker than broom handles. Most of the other freaks shunned him -- his sticklike limbs and sunken, glowing eyes reminded them of death -- so when Nonny had asked him to go for a walk, he had been surprised into accepting.

As they turned onto the deserted main street, a cold wind hit them with such force that they staggered backwards. Zorro felt as if an icy blade had gone through him. Nonny, swearing, pushed his hair back into place. He dealt a vicious kick to the door of a feed store. The door rattled dully. The store was empty.

"Godforsaken place." Nonny spat out the words. "Who wants to see a carnival in January? Why am I wasting my time in this goddamn Jesus town?" Nonny had never said two words to Zorro before today, but Zorro had heard him bragging to some of the others about New Orleans. Nonny said he came from New Orleans, where it was always warm, where you could go down to the French Quarter and hear jazz music in little dark nightclubs and find as many lovers as you wanted. It sounded like a place where Nonny might belong, maybe the only place Nonny could belong.

"That place is open," said Zorro, pointing. "I bet it's warm in there." Of course it was a diner, because people had to have somewhere to go after church.

"Great. Anywhere's better than the street." Nonny grabbed Zorro's arm, which felt like nothing but a bone under the thick cloth sleeve of his coat. "Come on."

Zorro had a second thought. "I don't know if I want to. Think how they'll stare."

"Let them eat shit. I'm hungry." With Zorro in tow, Nonny barged into the diner. They got a few stares, but that was mainly because they were strangers. Neither of them looked so odd with his clothes on. Zorro's coat hid his stick-thin arms. Nonny was wearing a scarf around his head to hide the short hair on the right side, and he had lipstick and makeup on both sides of his face; he could easily pass for a woman. They slid into a

booth by the window and looked at the menus. When the waitress came, Nonny ordered a glass of milk, the roast beef dinner, and a slice of cherry pie. Zorro asked for a cup of black coffee. He had never been able to eat more than one meal a day. When their orders arrived, the sight of all that food nauseated Zorro so badly that he could hardly drink his coffee. Nonny, shoveling in forkfuls of meat and gravy, didn't notice. Only after he had finished his meal and patted his lips demurely with his napkin did he ask, "Where you from?"

Zorro hesitated, then said, "Omaha." Omaha was a safe place; Nonny would never have been there, wouldn't be able to question him about it. The truth was that he remembered nothing before the night he had found himself wandering outside a huge building with many windows. It looked like a hospital, but he didn't know for sure. He was wearing only an old, ragged pair of pants, and the moonlight was cold. He'd huddled in a doorway and tried to sleep, and when he woke up, a hand was shaking him roughly and a voice was saying, "Kid, hey, kid!"

All he could see was a pair of fat knees clad in yellow-and-black checkered trousers. Policemen did not wear checkered trousers, so this could only be a thief or worse. He looked up fearfully into the face of an enormous leprechaun. The man was balding, with a fringe of wiry orange hair that flowed nearly to his shoulders, a bushy orange beard that grew in clumps like a

number of carrot-colored toothbrushes, and chubby, pouchy cheeks. He was too funny-looking to scare anyone but this boy.

"Don't pull away. You ain't going to be hurt. What's your name?"

"Bill." At least he still knew his name, although even that was fading, becoming an echo of something someone had once told him.

"Willie McGruder." The leprechaun stuck out a green mitten and they shook hands. "Now, how come you're out wandering all alone? You lost your folks?"

Folks? The word made his throat feel tight, but he didn't know why. "I don't have any," he said.

"Sounds like you might be needing some help." The man stared at him. Bill said nothing. There was nothing to say. Who could help him?

Abruptly, the man asked, "How come you're so skinny?"

He looked down at himself. He was skinny; his ribs and collarbones jutted out, shiny and stark. But he didn't feel hungry; being so thin felt natural. "I don't know," he told the man.

The man looked at him keenly. "Might be you just don't get enough to eat. Might be if somebody fed you right, you'd fatten up like any other kid."

He shook his head. "Nossir. I'm not hungry. I don't like to eat."

The man's eyes strayed to the silvery-dark windows of the big building, then moved back to the boy's small Venetian blind of a ribcage, seeming to study each tight slat and delicate shadowed hollow. A linking took place in the man's face; all at once he had made a deduction and a decision. "Well, you got to eat a little to stay alive. How'd you like a job?"

"What kind of a job?"

"You don't have to do a blessed thing. All you got to do is sit there and let people look at you."

He'd gone with the man, who was half of McGruder and Lark's Carnival Show, and somehow he had changed from Bill the nighttime wanderer into Zorro the Skeleton Boy. Things had changed somewhat since then; he had become Zorro the Skeleton Man, and Willie McGruder had died, leaving the carnival to be run by Lark, who was little and greasy, but Zorro's job had stayed the same. As McGruder had promised, he had only to sit there and let people look at him. Nonny was looking at him now, as if expecting an answer to something.

"What?" Zorro asked.

"I said, have you got folks in Omaha?"

"They're dead."

Nonny wanted Zorro to ask him questions. When Zorro didn't, Nonny began to talk anyway. "I was born in New Orleans. My parents were real proud of me at first. They showed me off to

all their friends and tried to get the newspaper to write a story about me. Pretty soon they got tired of me and left me with this old uncle while they went to California. Well, this uncle liked boys and girls, so he thought I was a gift from Heaven. Old fart was always pawing at me, you know, gimme a kiss, come sit on my lap, that kind of shit. When I was thirteen I got sick of it and ran off. You know where I ended up. Well, it's not so bad. I hate playing the South, though. All those rednecks come to the private shows smelling like sweat and chewing tobacco. Personally, I'd rather screw a chair leg. Be about as much fun."

Nonny would talk your ear off, but Zorro had to admit he was interesting. "Can you?" he asked.

"Can I what?"

"You know."

"Screw? Oh. Yeah. I can screw men, but not girls. One part works, the other doesn't." Nonny said all this carelessly, as if he were talking about the weather. Zorro shook his head in amazement.

Nonny leaned across the table. "Zorro."

"What?"

"Away from the carnival?" Zorro thought about it. "I get sick of being stared at sometimes. But where else could we go?"

"I been thinking I'd like to go back to New Orleans." Nonny

studied the blood-red fingernails on his left hand. "Good food, good times. I'm already a hooker -- hell, I got a commodity. In New Orleans I could do better than four bucks a throw. And at least the damn weather's pretty." Now that Nonny actually was talking about the weather, he seemed wistful and quiet. Zorro almost felt sorry for him.

"Is it nice?" he said gently.

"It's the only worthwhile place in the whole rotten South." Zorro noticed that the more vehemently Nonny spoke against rednecks and the South, the more pronounced his Southern twang became.

He smiled. "Tell me about it. I might like to go there too."

So Nonny began to talk. Contrary to popular opinion at the carnival, talking was what he did best. More eloquently than ever he spun his descriptions of healing sunlight, of curly wrought-iron balconies hung here and there with bright flapping tatters of silk, of sweet amber poisons that warmed you like no blanket, however thick or soft, could ever hope to do. And so it went, and half an hour later they were tramping along the flat, rocky road that led out of town to the highway. They had not even returned to the fairground; Nonny apparently carried most of his possessions in his coat pockets, and Zorro had nothing worth keeping except his money, which was sewn into the lining

of his coat. They had no goodbyes to say.

They reached the crossroads. Nonny planted himself on the highway shoulder as if he intended to set up housekeeping there. Zorro sat carefully on an old broken piece of guardrail. The walk had been hard on his legs; he thought he could feel the bones scraping against each other. "Will we be catching a bus here?"

Nonny shook his head. "I changed my mind. Can't spare the money. We're thumbing."

"Hitchhiking? That's crazy. Who'll stop for us?"

"They'll stop for me," said Nonny with a half-smile, unbuttoning his red coat. Underneath it he wore a low-cut black silk wrapper and loose, flowing black pants. He shook his hair and combed it with his fingers, but Zorro could see that he was shivering. Nonny had been right about getting a ride, though. Within ten minutes a huge brown Thunderbird pulled up beside them. A man leaned over to open the passenger door and called, "Need a ride, miss?"

They started toward the car. "This is my brother," Nonny explained to the man, settling himself in the front seat. Zorro climbed into the back. A tire iron gouged his leg, and he put it on the floor. He was glad to have so much space to himself.

"Where you headed?" asked the man, one eye on the road and one on Nonny's legs sprawled across the seat.

"Where you headed?" Nonny countered, grinning at him.

"Memphis."

"We're trying for Tuscaloosa. We'll go as far as Memphis with you, if that's okay."

"Glad to have you along." The man grinned back at Nonny.

"Russell Sheffland's the name."

"I'm Nancy Calhoun. This here's my brother Orris. We just got done visiting our cousins."

"You hitchhiked all the way up from Tuscaloosa to visit your cousins?"

"Uh-uh. Our car broke down while we were there. We couldn't wait for them to fix it. Our daddy just took sick back home."

Zorro marveled at Nonny's glibness. How could he pass himself off as a woman and make up a halfway-convincing story at the same time? Nonny was a wonder, biologically and otherwise. Zorro looked at Sheffland in the rearview mirror. Middle thirties, brown hair going silver at the temples, somewhat jowly, not yet fat. Boring, but at least he wasn't a redneck. Zorro had seen, and been seen by, too many rednecks in the past week.

"Married?" Nonny asked Sheffland.

"Divorced." That might or might not be true. "You?"

Nonny laughed and shook his head. "Who'd marry me?"

"Well, I don't know. Lots of people. You're a nice-looking

girl." Nonny smiled to himself.

They drove for about three hours. Sheffland kept up his oily banter and Nonny gave it right back to him. Zorro would have been bored to tears, except that he was intrigued by Nonny's acting ability. Or lying ability. It amounted to the same thing.

When the sky began to darken, Sheffland turned onto a side road and parked at the edge of a field. "I can't really afford a motel. Okay with you if we sleep in the car?"

"Fine with me. That be okay with you, Orris?" Nonny's voice was sugary-sweet, but when he turned to look at Zorro in the back seat, he made a crazy face.

Zorro tried to keep from laughing. "Fine."

Now came the bad part. Zorro knew he was expected to shut his eyes and ignore anything that went on in the front seat. He stretched out and actually did manage to fall into a light doze. A while later he was awakened by giggling. At the sight of Sheffland's head bowed over Nonny's open wrapper he shut his eyes quickly, but he couldn't block out the slurps and rustles of cloth from the front seat. Zorro opened his eyes again. He felt a sense of impending disaster. Nonny could carry off his female pose from the waist up, but what happened after that? Nonny, eyes closed and head thrown back against the window, didn't appear worried. Fool. Zorro cringed. Sheffland's hands

were moving down from Nonny's chest, across his belly, over his thighs. Now back up. The purring sound of a zipper being undone. A few silent seconds of groping. Then the roar.

"You filthy little bastard! You freak! Christ, I touched you!" Sheffland stared at his suddenly unclean hands, then slapped Nonny. Nonny's head snapped back and banged against the window. Zorro saw blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. Now the unclean hands were around Nonny's throat. Above the growling of the enraged man, Zorro could hear Nonny choking. If he didn't do something, Sheffland would kill Nonny. Zorro could escape now, but Nonny would be dead. Zorro felt more calm and lucid than ever before in his life. He groped for the tire iron and raised it high above his head.

Several seconds later he found himself staring down at Sheffland's brown hair. Blood darkened it in a widening stain. The tire iron was still in his hand. Zorro stared at it dumbly. What had he done? He remembered. Sheffland was going to kill Nonny. In that case, Zorro had not done a bad thing. Nonny reached over the seat and laid a shaky hand on Zorro's arm. "Jesus, you really cracked him, didn't you? His head's split right open."

"He's dead. His ears are bleeding."

"Thanks," said Nonny quietly. Zorro shook his head, embarrassed, as if Nonny were a girl thanking him for a bunch of

flowers. Nonny leaned back against the window, rubbing his throat. Then suddenly he said, "Oh shit."

"What?"

"We got this dead body, Zorro. We got to get rid of it."

"If it was my choice, I'd burn him."

"You know, I think that might attract just a little too much attention." Nonny smiled. "This is a pretty out-of-the-way place. We'll just stick him behind a tree and cover him up with weeds. Like as not, dogs'll find him first."

So that was what they did. The only bad part was when Zorro thought he saw Sheffland move and they had to crack him over the head with a rock, just to make sure. They cleaned out his pockets and ran back to the car.

"How much?" asked Zorro.

Nonny checked Sheffland's wallet. "Three hundred dollars and a note from Elsie. 'Russ, I miss you something awful. Please call when you get into Nashville. I haven't had a real man in months.' " They laughed. Nonny couldn't stop; he was hysterical. Zorro knew that Sheffland's attack had shaken Nonny more than he cared to let on. He gingerly put his arms around Nonny. Nonny leaned against him and the laughter turned to sobs, muffled at first, then loud and wet. After he had cried himself out, they sat that way for a while. Nonny managed to rest his head comfortably against Zorro's jutting shoulder.

"Do you want to sleep here?" Zorro asked.

"No. Let's drive till we find a town. I want a motel room and some fried chicken. I'm starving."

"Again?"

"Just because you don't eat doesn't mean nobody else wants to." The attack had put an uncharacteristic droop in Nonny's shoulders, but his sass had returned bright as ever.

An hour later they had their motel room and no trace was left of the fried chicken except a few patches of grease on Nonny's lips. Zorro had taken one bite of a wing, but left the rest to Nonny; the grease was too much for him. Zorro took the bed on the right side of the room, Nonny the one on the left. The lamp went off, and except for the VACANCY sign flashing on and off outside the window, the room was dark and still.

"Nonny?" said Zorro five minutes later.

"Ummm?"

"Is there a heater in this room? I can't stop shivering."

Nonny snapped the lamp back on. "Well yeah, Zorro, with no meat on your bones you got to expect to shiver." Nonny's tone softened abruptly. "I guess it is cold in here. Want to share my bed?"

Zorro thought he was being teased, but when he saw that Nonny meant it, he climbed into the other bed and lay sharing Nonny's warmth in the dark. When Nonny's hand touched his arm,

he reached out blindly and pulled Nonny to him. He would discover the secret of this strange body. He would love this man-woman. The mouth was soft and warm and wet. Zorro could have spent all night there, but his curiosity and Nonny's hands urged him on. The throat was sweet. Zorro bit it gently. He wanted to bury his mouth in the firm flesh and suck little bits of it in, but that could be done later, after the purple finger-shaped bruises had faded from Nonny's neck. The breasts were small but smooth. Zorro spent a long time stroking them. In the dark he couldn't tell what color the nipples were, but they tasted a deep pink. The stomach was a flat, terribly long expanse. Suspense was racking Zorro, but he forced his hands and lips to move slowly down. He was afraid to part Nonny's thighs. Instead he rubbed his lips against the lower part of Nonny's stomach. Nonny made a small sound, something like a moan or a sigh, and that decided him. He would do anything to hear that sound again. He moved quickly down and did it without thinking about it. It was ... It was ridiculous, really. What had he been so afraid of? It was wonderful. Once he got past everything else, there was only softness, open and sweet. He could lose himself here. Nonny moaned again and tugged at him, and he was buried in the softness. He was safe.

"Safe!" he said into Nonny's ear.

"Safe, love. Me too. Safe."

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They drove the brown Thunderbird all the way to New Orleans, and when Nonny saw that there was no longer anything he wanted or needed in that city, they went on driving until they reached the coast of the Gulf of Mexico and took a cottage in a motel-like seaside complex. When they had not been seen for a week and refused to answer all knocks on their door, the owners of the complex summoned the police and opened the door with the passkey. The acrid smell of gas rushed out at them. When they entered the tiny cottage with wet towels over their faces, they found two small bodies huddled together on the bed. Zorro was wrapped in a mustard-colored blanket to keep his bones warm. Nonny, his golden head in Zorro's lap, was discreetly covered with a flowered bedspread -- he no longer had to parade his fortune before the masses.

Written in soap on the dresser mirror, in a scrawling, looping, extravagant hand that no one knew was Nonny's, was a message:

We lived as freaks, but we died as people.