

## Emmett's Shoes

Bigger waits patiently underneath the sentinel longleaf pine, his back against the flared base. Three days from Thanksgiving, wet snow has already come; dirty-white layers balanced precariously on the fern-like branches of the pines. Needles and cones litter the sheltered ground around him. He ignores the cold that nips at the bare skin between his sock and pants leg. A WWII aviator's hat sits snug over his close-shaven head, the flaps pulled down over his ears. Bare fingers, wide as hammer handles, on hands crisscrossed with nicks and scars, caress a small rectangular piece of engraved aluminum, a dog tag. His lap cradles a bolt action 30.06 rifle he's owned as long as he can remember. It's loaded. Loose bullets clink dully in his jacket pockets when he shifts his weight.

Occasionally, his eyes drift to a sharp dip on the ridge above. When the setting sun sits over the notch, the boys will begin to drift down through the trees on the opposing hillside, to the natural amphitheater at the bottom. They come around four in the afternoon this time of year. By January it will be three. *Timed for the sun*, he thinks. He likes to get here early, to this small meadow at the end of the valley, to watch their casual descent. To think about beginnings. Endings, he's not so good at. This is his valley, his farm—his and Ellie's. It's been in his family for five generations. He dreamed—no, expected—that it would pass to a sixth.

And in a curious way, he has gotten his wish.

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Frank Morganthal, carrying a hundred-pound sack of feed on each shoulder, walked into his son in the doorway of Jensen's Grain & Mill and knocked him flat. The boy got up without a word, his eyes still focused on the poster nailed up just inside the door.

"You okay?" said Frank, his entire body turning with the feed sacks so he could watch his son get up.

"Sure."

Frank walked over to stand behind the boy so he could see what held his son's attention: a Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey circus poster—elephants, trapeze flyers and a ringmaster with a whip. Across the top right-hand corner was an angled announcement: *Coming October 5-7, 1954*.

He stood, unconcerned with the weight on his shoulders. "Circus, huh. Where's it at?"

"Charlottesville."

"Maybe we should go?"

Frank never did anything this impractical. The boy knew better than to ask. "Really?"

"Why not? We've had a good run." Frank turned and headed out the door. It had taken him six years after the end of the war to pay off the loans his father accumulated over a span of twenty years. Finally, this year, they'd done better than break even. Money in the bank. The Morganthal farm, two hundred-eighty acres in the heart of the

Allegheny Mountains in Northern Virginia, was ten miles from the nearest town. The soil was shallow and rocky. With perseverance, Frank had coaxed good crops from the ribbons of valley land which held onto what topsoil runoff there was. On the hills, he raised sheep.

“Hey, Bigger.” Sollie Meltzer, owner of the feed store, came out of an office behind the counter, addressing Frank by his nickname, “Got a man over near Windsor needs a wall he wants built. Told him I’d pass it on to you.” He waited a few beats. “Small commission, of course.”

Besides farming, Frank Morgenthal built fences and walls of dry-laid stone, a craft his father had taught him. “He pay anything?” Frank had turned his body again, blocking the doorway. The boy hadn’t moved, his eyes still devouring the circus poster.

“Probably not much,” said Meltzer, wheezing from a resident chest cough. “But he’s got plenty of stone.” He snorted at his own wit. “You let me know, I’ll get you his name.”

Frank had to call his son out of the store when he was ready to leave.

Three tents had been raised in a field on the outskirts of Charlottesville. Frank and the boy were two hours early for the one o’clock matinee, so they wandered around the grounds, watching the hawkers work the early crowd; the boy taking shots with a BB gun at ping-pong balls bouncing in a wire frame, propelled by the air from a fan underneath. The boy was good with the rifle and won himself a stuffed bear that he held self-consciously in the crook of an arm. When they tired of walking, Frank bought hot dogs and cotton candy for the boy. They ate their food in the first row of bleachers in the big tent, waiting.

Performers and animals came in a seemingly unending stream: bareback riders, gymnasts, a column of elephants, sword-swallowers, jugglers. And in the far ring, a cage of lions and tigers, a man in white satin tights and tails with a whip to control them. But the boy watched very little of this. He kept his eyes on a sad-faced clown: white greasepaint circling the mouth, lower face blackened to the sideburns, broad bushy eyebrows, bulbous nose, a polka-dotted tie with a clothespin for a tie clip, a smashed-up gentleman’s hat, stitched-together rags for clothes, and enormous, floppy black splats that raised tiny clouds of red dust when he moved.

This little fellow was totally serious as he cracked a peanut with a sledgehammer and picked in consternation through the obliterated pieces for the nut. He blew up a balloon, totally shocked when it finally burst, then buried it in a small grave, accompanied by his own laments and a flower bouquet that appeared in his hand from nowhere. When the jugglers moved into one of the side rings, the clown waved a red bandana hesitantly at one of the juggler’s pretty assistants. Glaring at the clown, the juggler dropped a load of plates he was trying to keep in the air. “Get away, Willie. Get away,” he screamed at the clown, gesticulating wildly. The clown brought him a burlap bag to catch the plates. The juggler sternly ordered him out of the ring. Willie the Clown slouched away, crestfallen. Frank watched the boy watch the clown, wondering what he saw in the rags and hangdog expression. The rest of the audience offered encouragement, laughing at every attempt the inept fellow made to put things right. Just before the intermission, with the trapeze artists aloft, Willie stood three or four feet in front of the

boy, chewing on a cabbage leaf, regarding him with his sorrowful gaze. The boy looked back, just as seriously, not laughing like the people around him.

“Look at that.” Frank bounced his hand on the boy’s thigh, pointed upward to a man holding himself rigid, arms fully extended, between two rings. “Look.” The boy turned his head up dutifully. The flyer let go both rings at once, turned two somersaults in midair, and landed fully laid out in the catching net. The crowd applauded wildly. The boy turned wide blue eyes back to the clown who swept a curled bristle-broom at a spotlight that kept following him. The light faded and moved away at first, and the clown relaxed, swept slower, then leaned on his broom in satisfaction. The light-spot returned, snuck back over the tops of his flappers. The clown groaned in discouragement, swept harder, an air of desperation around him. Brighter and brighter it got. Faster and faster he swept. Until it was suddenly gone, and the boy gasped, relieved the clown had not swept himself away.

On their way out from the big tent, the boy stopped a peanut vendor. Frank reached for change in his pocket, but the boy said, “Excuse me, but can you tell me the name of the clown with the big shoes?”

“Him? Weary Willie.” The vendor nodded. “Pretty good ain’t he.”

“No . . . I mean his real name.”

“Kelly. Emmett Kelly. Best clown that ever was. Even been to Europe before the war. Performed for the King of England.” He held up a paper bag of peanuts. “Peanuts for the trip home?”

Frank gave the man a nickel for the bag.

The boy didn’t say much in the truck. Halfway home, Frank said, “Well, was it worth it? You didn’t watch much besides the clown.”

“That’s what I want to do.” The boy turned his eyes on Frank, eyes the aqua-blue of turquoise. “Make people laugh.”

After a time Frank said, “Well, maybe. But we got a farm to run.” Dreams of eight-year old boys were changeable as the weather.

When he was twelve, Ellie gave the boy a magic book she found in the library book sale. For Christmas he got a set of conjuring tricks from his grandmother. Frank looked upon these gifts with deep suspicion, as if somehow, these women were undermining his son’s place in the world. The boy was a farmer. Morgenthal men had been farmers for more than a hundred years. Raising sheep might be a mild departure, necessary for their own well-being, but it was what the land was suited for. In this country, tradition was not always a choice.

The boy asked to be excused from after-school chores for two weeks so he could participate in a school variety show. He had a magic act. Frank said no. There was farm work to do. The day of the show, the boy went anyway. It was the first time in his life he had disobeyed his father. Frank grounded him for a week, gave him extra chores. Ellie was the only one who noticed the boy’s eyes turn a darker shade of blue. He still laughed, drew laughter to him like water to a bucket. And spilled it out over the edges in a steady stream.

At sixteen he worked full time on the farm during the summer, his frame smaller than Frank’s, but just as determined. Frank thought the boy had finally turned the corner. Then he left with three other boys from school for a week-end in Richmond. It was as

close as the circus got that year. Went without asking. Just a note for Ellie on the kitchen table. Frank said nothing. But when the boy walked in the door late Saturday night, full of high spirits, almost exhilarated, Frank said, "This is your farm, as much as ours. You got responsibilities to us and to the farm."

The boy wasn't at all insolent. He seemed to understand. But he said, "I'm not a farmer."

"This is your farm, your life. You'll have a wife, children. This will be theirs."

The boy just shook his head.

When he was seventeen, his grandmother, who lived in the other house on the farm, died. After the funeral, Frank gave the boy the key to her house, though it was never locked. The boy put the key back on the fireplace mantel.

"I'm giving you responsibility for the sixty acres along the eastern fence line," Frank told his son, the summer of the boy's eighteenth birthday.

"Nope. I told you over and over. I'm not a farmer. Not going to be one."

"Then, I'll give you the sheep herd in Twoback Wash."

"Not a sheep-man, either." The boy's smile frayed at the corners of his mouth.

"On this farm you'll do as I say." Frank, uncharacteristically, shuffled his feet. He kept his eyes down, so he didn't see the boy's eyes go dark.

"The army's looking for men. If it comes to that."

"What's that supposed to mean? This is your home. You're needed here."

"I'm eighteen. Means I choose what I do, farm or not."

"I want you here working, just like always."

They left it there. Two weeks later the boy joined the army.

Read the complete story in *Irons in the Fire*

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