

ONE

THE WORLD
IN A GLOBE

YOU WOULD THINK *it would be impossible to find anything new in the world, creatures no man has ever seen before, one-of-a-kind oddities in which nature has taken a backseat to the coursing pulse of the fantastical and the marvelous. I can tell you with certainty that such things exist, for beneath the water there are beasts as huge as elephants with hundreds of legs, and in the skies, rocks thrown alit from the heavens burn through the bright air and fall to earth. There are men with such odd characteristics they must hide their faces in order to pass through the streets unmolested, and women who have such peculiar features they live in rooms without mirrors. My father kept me away from such anomalies when I was young, though I lived above the exhibition that he owned in Coney Island, the Museum of Extraordinary Things. Our house was divided into two distinct sections; half we lived in, the other half housed the exhibitions. In this way, my father never had to leave what he loved best in the world. He had added on to the original house, built in 1862, the year the Coney Island and Brooklyn Railroad began the first horse-*

drawn carriage line to our city. My father created the large hall in which to display the living wonders he employed, all of whom performed unusual acts or were born with curious attributes that made others willing to pay to see them.



My father was both a scientist and a magician, but he declared that it was in literature wherein we discovered our truest natures. When I was only a child he gave me the poet Whitman to read, along with the plays of Shakespeare. In such great works I found enlightenment and came to understand that everything God creates is a miracle, individually and unto itself. A rose is the pinnacle of beauty, but no more so than the exhibits in my father's museum, each artfully arranged in a wash of formaldehyde inside a large glass container. The displays my father presented were unique in all the world: the preserved body of a perfectly formed infant without eyes, unborn monkey twins holding hands, a tiny snow-white alligator with enormous jaws. I often sat upon the stairs and strained to catch a glimpse of such marvels through the dark. I believed that each remarkable creature had been touched by God's hand, and that anything singular was an amazement to humankind, a hymn to our maker.

When I needed to go through the museum to the small wood-paneled room where my father kept his library, so that he might read to me, he would blindfold me so I wouldn't be shocked by the shelves of curiosities that brought throngs of customers through the doors, especially in the summertime, when the beaches and the grander parks were filled with crowds from Manhattan, who came by carriage and ferry, day-trip steamship or streetcar. But the blindfold my father used was made of thin muslin, and I could see through the fabric if I kept my eyes wide. There before me were the many treasures my father had collected over the years: the hand with eight fingers, the human skull with horns, the preserved remains of

a scarlet-colored long-legged bird called a spoonbill, rocks veined with luminous markings that glowed yellow in the dark, as if stars themselves had been trapped inside stone. I was fascinated by all that was strange: the jaw of an ancient elephant called a mastodon and the shoes of a giant found in the mountains of Switzerland. Though these exhibits made my skin prickle with fear, I felt at home among such things. Yet I knew that a life spent inside a museum is not a life like any other. Sometimes I had dreams in which the jars broke and the floor was awash with a murky green mixture of water and salt and formaldehyde. When I woke from such nightmares, the hem of my nightgown would be soaking wet. It made me wonder how far the waking world was from the world of dreams.



My mother died of influenza when I was only an infant, and although I never knew her, whenever I dreamed of terrible, monstrous creatures and awoke shivering and crying in my bed, I wished I had a mother who loved me. I always hoped my father would sing me to sleep, and treat me as if I were a treasure, as valued as the museum exhibits he often paid huge sums to buy, but he was too busy and preoccupied, and I understood his life's work was what mattered most. I was a dutiful daughter, at least until I reached a certain age. I was not allowed to play with other children, who would not have understood where I lived or how I'd been raised, nor could I go upon the streets of Brooklyn on my own, where there were men who were waiting to molest innocent girls like me.



Long ago what the Indians called Narrioch was a deserted land, used in winter for grazing cattle and horses and oxen. The Dutch referred to it as Konijn Eylandt, Rabbit Island, and had little interest in its sandy shores. Now there were those who said Coney Island had become a vile

place, much like Sodom, where people thought only of pleasure. Some communities, like Brighton Beach and Manhattan Beach, where the millionaires built their estates, had their own trains with paid conductors to keep out the riffraff. Trains for the masses left from the Brooklyn Bridge Terminal and took little more than half an hour to reach the beachfront communities. The subway was being built, to begin running beneath the East River in 1908, so that more and more throngs would be able to leave the brutal heat of Manhattan in the summertime. The island was a place of contradiction, stretching from the wicked areas where men were alternately entertained and cheated in houses of ill repute and saloons, to the iron pavilions and piers where the great John Philip Sousa had brought his orchestra to play beneath the stars in the year I was born. Coney Island was, above all else, a place of dreams, with amusements like no others, rides that defied the rules of gravity, concerts and games of chance, ballrooms with so many electric lights they glowed as if on fire. It was here that there had once been a hotel in the shape of an elephant which proudly stood 162 feet high until it burned to the ground, here the world's first roller coaster, the Switchback Railway, gave birth to more and more elaborate and wilder rides.

The great parks were the Steeplechase and Luna Park, whose star attraction, the famous horse King, dove from a high platform into a pool of water. On Surf Avenue was the aptly named Dreamland, which was being built and would soon rise across the street, so that we could see its towers from our garden path. There were hundreds of other attractions along Surf Avenue, up to Ocean Parkway, so many entertainments I didn't know how people chose. For me the most beautiful constructions were the carousels, with their magical bejeweled carved animals, many created by Jewish craftsmen from the Ukraine. The El Dorado, which was being installed at the foot of Dreamland Park, was a true amazement, three-tiered and teeming with animals of every sort. My favorites

were the tigers, so fierce their green eyes sparked with an inner light, and, of course, the horses with their manes flying out behind them, so real I imagined that if I were ever allowed onto one, I might ride away and never return.

Electricity was everywhere, snaking through Brooklyn, turning night into day. Its power was evident in a showing made by electrocuting a poor elephant named Topsy, who had turned on a cruel, abusive trainer. I was not yet ten when Edison planned to prove that his form of electricity was safe, while declaring that his rival, Westinghouse, had produced something that was a danger to the world. If Westinghouse's method could kill a pachyderm, what might it do to the common man? I happened to be there on that day, walking home from the market with our housekeeper, Maureen. There was a huge, feverish crowd gathered, all waiting to see the execution, though it was January and the chill was everywhere.

"Keep walking," Maureen said, not breaking her stride, pulling me along by my arm. She had on a wool coat and a green felt hat, her most prized possession, bought from a famed milliner on Twenty-third Street in Manhattan. She was clearly disgusted by the bloodthirsty atmosphere. "People will disappoint you with their cruelty every time."

I wasn't so sure Maureen was right, for there was compassion to be found among the crowd as well. I had spied a girl on a bench with her mother. She was staring at poor Topsy and crying. She appeared to be keeping a vigil, a soulful little angel with a fierce expression. I, myself, did not dare to show my fury or indulge in my true emotions. I wished I might have sat beside this other girl, and held her hand, and had her as my friend, but I was forced away from the dreadful scene. In truth, I never had a friend of my own age, though I longed for one.

All the same, I loved Brooklyn and the magic it contained. The city was my school, for although compulsory education laws had gone into effect in 1894, no one enforced them, and it was easy enough to escape public

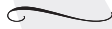
education. My father, for instance, sent a note to the local school board stating I was disabled, and this was accepted without requirement of any further proof. Coney Island then was my classroom, and it was a wondrous one. The parks were made of papier-mâché, steel, and electricity, and their glow could be seen for miles, as though our city was a fairyland. Another girl in my constrained circumstances might have made a ladder out of strips torn from a quilt, or formed a rope fashioned of her own braided hair so she might let herself out the window and experience the enchantment of the shore. But whenever I had such disobedient thoughts, I would close my eyes and tell myself I was ungrateful. I was convinced that my mother, were she still alive, would be disappointed in me if I failed to do as I was told.



My father's museum employed a dozen or more living players during the season. Each summer the acts of wonder performed in the exhibition hall several times a day, in the afternoon and in the evenings, each displaying his or her own rare qualities. I was not allowed to speak to them, though I longed to hear the stories of their lives and learn how they came to be in Brooklyn. I was too young, my father said. Children under the age of ten were not allowed inside the museum, owing to their impressionable natures. My father included me in this delicate group. If one of the wonders was to pass I was to lower my eyes, count to fifty, and pretend that person didn't exist. They came and went over the years, some returning for more seasons, others vanishing without a word. I never got to know the Siamese twins who were mirror images of each other, their complexions veined with pallor, or the man with a pointed head, who drowsed between his performances, or the woman who grew her hair so long she could step on it. They all left before I could speak my first words. My memories were of glances, for such people were never gruesome to me,

they were unique and fascinating, and terribly brave in the ways they revealed their most secret selves.

Despite my father's rules, as I grew older I would peer down from my window in the early mornings, when the employees arrived in the summer light, many wearing cloaks despite the mild weather, to ensure they would not be gawked at, perhaps even beaten, on their way to their employment. My father called them wonders, but to the world they were freaks. They hid their features so that there would be no stones flung, no sheriff's men called in, no children crying out in terror and surprise. In the streets of New York they were considered abominations, and because there were no laws to protect them, they were often ill used. I hoped that on our porch, beneath the shade of the pear tree, they would find some peace.



My father had come to this country from France. He called himself Professor Sardie, though that was not in fact his name. When I asked what his given name had been, he said it was nobody's business. We all have secrets, he'd told me often enough, nodding at my gloved hands.

I believed my father to be a wise and brilliant man, as I believed Brooklyn to be a place not unlike heaven, where miracles were wrought. The Professor had principles that others might easily call strange, his own personal philosophy of health and well-being. He had been pulled away from magic by science, which he considered far more wondrous than card tricks and sleight of hand. This was why he had become a collector of the rare and unusual, and why he so strictly oversaw the personal details of our lives. Fish was a part of our daily nourishment, for my father believed that we took on the attributes of our diet, and he made certain I ate a meal of fish every day so my constitution might echo the abilities of these creatures. We bathed in ice water, good for the skin and inner organs. My father had a breathing tube constructed so that I could remain

soaking underwater in the claw-foot tub, and soon my baths lasted an hour or more. I had only to take a puff of air in order to remain beneath the surface. I felt comfortable in this element, a sort of girlfish, and soon I didn't feel the cold as others did, becoming more and more accustomed to temperatures that would chill others to the bone.

In the summer my father and I swam in the sea together each night, braving the waves until November, when the tides became too frigid. Several times we nearly reached Dead Horse Bay, more than five miles away, a far journey for even the most experienced swimmer. We continued an exercise routine all through the winter so that we might increase our breathing capacity, sprinting along the shore. "Superior health calls for superior action," my father assured me. He believed running would maintain our health and vigor when it was too cold to swim. We trotted along the shore in the evenings, our skins shimmering with sweat, ignoring people in hats and overcoats who laughed at us and shouted out the same half-baked joke over and over again: What are you running from? You, my father would mutter. Fools not worth listening to, he told me.

Sometimes it would snow, but we would run despite the weather, for our regimen was strict. All the same, on snowy nights I would lag behind so I might appreciate the beauty of the beach. I would reach into the snow-dotted water. The frozen shore made me think of diamonds. I was enchanted by these evenings. The ebb and flow at the shore was bone white, asparkle. My breath came out in a fog and rose into the milky sky. Snow fell on my eyelashes, and all of Brooklyn turned white, a world in a globe. Every snowflake that I caught was a miracle unlike any other.



I had long black hair that I wore braided, and I possessed a serious and quiet demeanor. I understood my place in the world and was grateful to be in Brooklyn, my home and the city that Whitman himself had loved

so well. I was well spoken and looked older than my age. Because of my serious nature, few would guess I was not yet ten. My father preferred that I wear black, even in the summertime. He told me that in the village in France where he'd grown up, all the girls did so. I suppose my mother, long gone, had dressed in this fashion as a young girl, when my father had first fallen in love with her. Perhaps he was reminded of her when I donned a black dress that resembled the one she wore. I was nothing like my mother, however. I'd been told she was a great beauty, with pale honey-colored hair and a calm disposition. I was dark and plain. When I looked at the ugly twisted cactus my father kept in our parlor, I thought I more likely resembled this plant, with its gray ropy stems. My father swore it bloomed once a year with one glorious blossom, but I was always asleep on those occasions, and I didn't quite believe him.

Although I was shy, I did have a curious side, even though I had been told a dozen times over that curiosity could be a girl's ruination. I wondered if I had inherited this single trait from my mother. Our housekeeper, Maureen Higgins, who had all but raised me, had warned me often enough that I should keep my thoughts simple and not ask too many questions or allow my mind to wander. And yet Maureen herself had a dreamy look when she instructed me, which led me to presume that she didn't follow her own dictates. When Maureen began to allow me to run errands and help with the shopping, I meandered through Brooklyn, as far as Brighton Beach, little over a mile away. I liked to sit by the docks and listen to the fishermen, despite the rough language they used, for they spoke of their travels across the world when I had never even been as far as Manhattan, though it was easy enough to walk across the Brooklyn Bridge or the newer, gleaming Williamsburg Bridge.

Though I had an inquisitive soul, I was always obedient when it came to the Professor's rules. My father insisted I wear white cotton gloves in the summer and a creamy kid leather pair when the chill set in. I toler-

ated this rule and did as I was told, even though the gloves felt scratchy on summer days and in winter chafed and left red marks on my skin. My hands had suffered a deformity at birth, and I understood that my father did not wish me to be thought of with the disdain that greeted the living wonders he employed.



Our housekeeper was my only connection to the outside world. An Irish woman of no more than thirty, Maureen had once had a boyfriend who had burned her face with sulfuric acid in a fit of jealous rage. I didn't care that she was marked by scars. Maureen had seen to my upbringing ever since I was an infant. She'd been my only company, and I adored her, even though I knew my father thought her to be uneducated and not worth speaking to about issues of the mind. He preferred her to wear a gray dress and a white apron, a proper maid's uniform. My father paid Maureen's rent in a rooming house near the docks, a cheap and unpleasant place she always said was not for the likes of me. I never knew where she went after washing up our dinner plates, for she was quick to reach for her coat and slip out the door, and I hadn't the courage to run after her.

Maureen was smart and quick, despite my father's opinion, and she often treated me as an equal. I liked to sit on the back steps beside her as we took our lunch together. She fixed lettuce and butter sandwiches to share with me. I thought she was quite beautiful, despite her scars.

She was the one person other than my father who knew of my deformity, and she concocted a mixture of aloe and mint to rub between my fingers. I was grateful for both her kindness and her matter-of-fact air. "It fixes most things," she said knowingly of the salve. "Except for my face."

Unfortunately, the elixir did nothing for me either, yet I grew accustomed to its scent and used it nightly. Maureen smoked cigarettes in the

backyard although my father had expressly forbidden her to do so. Only whores had such habits, he said, and besides, he had a tremendous dread of fire, for a single spark could ignite the entire museum and we would lose everything. He stood on the roof with buckets of water during summer storms, keeping a close watch on the movement of the lightning when it split through the sky. His collection was irreplaceable. In the off months, when the museum was shuttered, he covered the glass cases with white linen, as if putting the mummified creatures on display to bed for a long winter's rest. He was surprisingly gentle at these times. "I'll sneak you into the exhibits if you want," Maureen offered every now and then, though she was well aware that children under the age of ten were banned from entrance.

"I think I'll wait," I remarked when Maureen suggested I break my father's rules and enter the museum. I was not the rebel I later came to be. I was nine and three quarters at the time and hadn't much longer to wait before I was old enough to gain entrance to the museum. I wore my black dress and buttoned leather boots. My black stockings were made of wool, but I never complained when they itched. If anyone had asked what was the first word I would use to describe myself, I would have immediately answered well-behaved. But of course, few people know their true natures at such a tender age.

"Waiters wait and doers don't." Maureen's skin was mottled as if she were half in shadow, half in sunlight. At certain hours of the day, noon, for instance, when the sun broke through, she looked illuminated, as if the beauty inside her was rising up through her ravaged complexion. She gazed at me with sympathy. "Afraid your daddy will make you pay if you misbehave?"

I was, of course. I'd seen my father enraged when a player came to work late or broke one of his rules, smoking cigars in public, for instance, or forming a romantic entanglement with a member of the audience.

He'd taken his cane to a fellow from England who called himself the King of the Ducks, for this gentleman had flesh in the shape of wings instead of arms. My father told the King never to return, all because he suspected him of sipping from a flask of whiskey during museum hours. It was unfair, of course, considering how much my father liked his rum.

I didn't need to explain my hesitation to our housekeeper.

"I don't blame you." Maureen sighed. Her breath smelled like mint and rosemary, her favorite kitchen seasonings. "He'd probably have you running up and down the beach for a whole night without a bit of rest to punish you. You'd be limping at the end of it, panting for water, and he might not forgive you even then. He's a serious man, and serious men have serious rules. If you defy them, there will be consequences."

"Was your boyfriend serious?" I dared to ask. It was a topic Maureen usually did not speak of.

"Hell, yes," she said.

I loved the way she used the word hell; it came naturally to her, the way it did to the men who worked on the docks loading herring and bluefish.

"What was his name?"

"Son of shit," Maureen said evenly.

She always made me laugh.

"Son of a dog's mother," she went on, and I laughed again, which egged her on. "Son of Satan." I loved it when she grinned. "Son of hell."


We both stopped laughing then. I understood what she meant. He'd been a bad man. I'd seen such men on Surf Avenue and along the pier. Con artists and thieves, the sort a girl learned to stay away from early on. Coney Island was full of them, and everyone knew the police often looked the other way when paid off by these crooks. A fiver would get you pretty much anything you wanted on the streets of Brooklyn, and there were girls my age who were bought and sold for much less. Some bad fellows

looked friendly, others looked like demons. Maureen always told me you couldn't judge a book by its cover, but if anyone should ever call me into an alleyway, I was to run, no matter what gifts I might be offered. If the need arose, I could kick a fellow in his knees or in his private parts, and that would most likely force such an individual to keep his distance.

"You know what love is?" Maureen said to me that day. Usually she went about her work and was somewhat tight-lipped regarding the larger issues of life. Now she became more open than usual, perhaps more like the person she'd been before she'd been scarred.

I swung my legs and shrugged. I didn't know if I was old enough to discuss such matters. Maureen tenderly ran a hand through my long hair as she dropped her hard veneer.

"It's what you least expect."



WHEN I turned ten my father called me to him. My birthday was in March, and I never knew what to expect from that month. Sometimes it snowed on my birthday, other times there'd be the green haze of spring. I don't remember the weather on this particular occasion, during the year of 1903. I was too excited at having my father focus on me, a circumstance that was rare due to the hold his work had over him. Sometimes he labored in the cellar all night long and didn't get to his bed until dawn. And so it was a special event for him to turn his attentions to me. When I approached him shyly, he told me that in good time every secret must be shared and every miracle called into question. He made a grand event of my entrance into the museum. We went onto the path outside so we might go through the front door, as customers did. My father wore a black coat with tails, very formal, and a top hat he'd brought from France. He had sharp all-seeing blue eyes and white hair and he spoke with an accent. He had set globes of electric lights outside the entranceway to the museum.

Sphinx moths floated near, drawn to the bright flares, and I ignored an urge to catch one in my cupped hands. I was wearing my black dress and a strand of pearls my mother had left me. I treasured them, but now my father told me to remove the necklace. He said I should leave off my gloves as well, which surprised me. I didn't like to look at my hands.

It was midnight, an hour when the neighborhood was quiet, as it was the off-season. In the summers there were crowds all night long, and great waves of excitement and noise in the air. But those hordes of pleasure seekers would not arrive until the end of May and would continue on until the new Mardi Gras celebration to be held in September, a wild gathering that would become a yearly event where those celebrating lost all control, and the police Strong-arm Squad would have to be called out to beat them back to their senses. The construction in Dreamland was going ahead full steam as the owners built more and more rides and exhibitions that would rival any entertainment palace in the world and be even more impressive than Luna Park. Unlike the other amusement parks, which some of the wealthier residents of the island called vulgar and pandering, this one would be as splendid as any entertainment found in the capitals of Europe, the buildings all starkly white, as if made for the angels. Because it would be west of us on Surf Avenue, my father feared it would put us out of business. At night we could hear the roaring of the lions and tigers in their cages, attractions being trained to be more like dogs or house cats than wild beasts. In this quiet time of the year, seagulls and terns gathered at twilight in huge calling flocks above the park. The steel skeletons of the rides still being constructed were silver in the dark. I imagined they shivered in anticipation of all they would become.



My father opened the curtains made of heavy plum-colored damask that hung across the entranceway to the Museum of Extraordinary Things.

He said I was the evening's only guest, then bowed and gestured for me to step over the threshold. I went inside for the first time. Though I had managed to spy a few rows of the exhibits from occasionally sneaking a look, the contents of most had been a bit cloudy from my vantage point and I could never distinguish a green viper from a poisonous tree frog. Tonight the glass jars glittered. There was the sweet scent of camphor. I had looked forward to this day for so long, but now I was faint with nerves and could hardly take it all in.

There was a hired man who often came to care for the living beasts. I'd observed him arriving in a horse-drawn hansom carriage delivering crates of food for the mysterious inhabitants of the museum. A whirl of incredible creatures was before me as I stood there: a dragon lizard who flared his scarlet throat, an enormous tortoise who seemed like a monster of the deep, red-throated hummingbirds that were let out of their cages on leashes made of string. When I looked past this dizzying array, I spied my father's birthday surprise decorated with blue silk ribbons and garlands of paper stars. It stood in a place of honor: a large tank of water. On the bottom there were shells gathered from all over the world, from the Indian Ocean to the China Sea. I did not need my father to tell me what would be displayed, for there was the sign he'd commissioned an expert craftsman to fashion out of chestnut wood and hand-paint in gold leaf.

THE HUMAN MERMAID.

Beneath that title was carved one word alone, my name, Coralie.

I did not need further instructions. I understood that all of my life had been mere practice for this very moment. Without being asked, I slipped off my shoes.

I knew how to swim.