



[Home](#)

[Summer-Fall 2012](#)

[Spring-Summer 2012](#)

[Winter-Spring 2012](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011-12](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

Sometimes a Romantic Notion

by Richard Schmitt

At school today an esteemed member of my department said his grandfather, at age 18, “ran off” to join a circus. I thought: Why do people say it like that? Anyone who ever joined a circus seems to have run away to do it. My colleague is a poet, a wordsmith, a teacher of language, trained to be precise and accurate. I asked him why he said ran off. “Was your grandfather a runaway? A fugitive of some kind?”

“Well no,” he said. He didn’t know why he said ran off. “The romantic exotica we associate with circuses, I guess.”

We don’t say that about other institutions. No one says, run off to join a university, or a sport franchise, or a Fortune 500 company, but circus employees are deemed runaways. Even the word employee doesn’t jibe with public perception of circus workers. Circus people are not considered employed the way one works for AT&T or Wal-Mart. In a recent PBS documentary about New York’s Big Apple Circus, the initial segment was called Run Away. I can say for sure, because I know people on that show, very few of them, if any, are dyed-in-the-wool runaways. A few directionless young people? Sure. A middle-age crisis or two? Maybe. As Washington Post reviewer, Hank Stuever, said: “Though the dream may be very much intact as a metaphor for escaping life’s monotony, people don’t run away and join the circus much anymore.”

Did they ever? I’ve not mentioned to my colleagues that, by the time I was 17, I’d run away from home three times. It was not romantic. I lied about my age, worked shit jobs, paid rent on squalid apartments with degenerate roommates. No car, no girlfriend. One morning in 1970, riding in the back of a flatbed truck on the way to a jobsite, I saw the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus train parked under an I-95 overpass in Providence, Rhode Island. The train was white. The trainyard black. I was a brick washer then. I spent my days at a construction site with a hose and a wire brush scrubbing dried cement off of red bricks. Before that, I had a job pulling bent nails from boards and pounding them straight with a hammer. Minimum wage was \$1.60 an hour. My roommate was huddled in the back of the truck, a junkie, hugging himself and shivering, the wind roaring and whipping. I pointed down at the trainyard. “A white train,” I yelled. The kid stared at me. He was drooling. All he heard was the word white.

After eight hours of brick scrubbing, blue jeans covered with red dust, I walked under the I-95 overpass, the steel stanchions droning with rush-hour traffic, and into the trainyard. The white train was long, split in two sections, and lined up on parallel tracks. I walked between the cars on a concrete walkway receding to a common vanishing point. I looked in the windows and open vestibules. I saw a tanned woman in gold thong lying on her stomach on a plastic chaise lounge, the folding kind you take to the beach, it was August and she was gleaming in the late afternoon sun. Aside her on the concrete was a can of Pepsi in a Styrofoam cooler and next to that were the shining steel wheels of the train. I walked by in my brick-dust sneakers. She didn’t budge. I passed a small cast iron barbecue grill and ducked under a makeshift clothesline with laundry drying in the sun. Regular laundry, no

spangles or sparkles. Further on a guy stood on a stepladder washing windows. He didn't look at me. It was very quiet. At some point I climbed three steps into one of the vestibules between cars and looked down the narrow hallways, carpeted, shoes outside doors. I hopped out the other side. There was nothing to see but this brilliant white train in the grimy Providence trainyard.

So the picture is clear; I was a directionless youth seduced by what my colleague referred to as romantic exotica. Fair enough. But I was already a runaway. I thought I might find a job here as a practical endeavor, to get away from brick washing and junkies. And though the train was ethereal in context, it seemed more military than magical, functional over fantastic. Bleached underwear hanging over a barbecue grill, a woman sunbathing, a guy washing windows. There were no skirt-swishing, heel-slapping, tambourine-shaking gypsies doing folk dances. No one played an accordion. I headed back to the civic center.

People say, "run away to join the circus," as if there is only one, and, as if there is no doubt about joining it. As if the option resides solely with the runaway. One is fed up, the need to escape strikes; you find this entity called circus and presto! you're embraced. I found this was not true.

When I got back to the civic center I saw piles of animal excrement steaming in the road, steel cargo wagons, elephants chained in a line, large cats in cages, men in blue work shirts with nifty patches: The Greatest Show on Earth. You think circus and expect this, but it was disorienting in dismal downtown Providence. The potpourri of people, animals, and apparatus squelched the mundane stench of diesel exhaust and roaring gears from the nearby Greyhound bus station. Workers, people, hustled through massive doors on the backside of the civic center; it seemed anyone could cruise on in. But when I tried I was halted abruptly by a stick across my chest, a cane wielded by an elderly white-haired gentleman with one leg about six inches longer than the other. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I was hoping to apply for a job," I said.

"A job, huh? What can you do?"

"I can do anything."

He scoffed.

What was I going to say? I'm a brick washer. A nail puller. Among the few things circuses do not have are bricks and nails.

"You gotta see Schwartzy, and you can't come in here until you do."

"Where might this Schwartzy be?"

"How the hell do I know?" His cane swept menacingly overhead. "What do I look like?" He was stout with his spinal cord warped like bow; his longer leg thrust out to one side to accommodate its extra length and a thick orthopedic shoe on the short leg. Later, I found out this was Backdoor Jack. An integral part of a system designed to make running away with the circus not as simple as people romantically believe.

I retreated. People scurrying about were unapproachable, they moved with purpose, function, with no intention of stopping to talk to a town punk. That was another thing I learned later, I was a town punk. A condition glaringly obvious to circus people. I approached a longhaired fellow. "Excuse me." He shouldered on, uttering guttural sounds. Of course, I thought, circus people are foreigners.

Among the array of wagons scattered behind the civic center was a diner on wheels, burgers sizzled, a line of people stood at a serving window, a woman with a beehive hairdo took money and handed out food and soft drinks. I got in line. I had 75 cents. When it was my turn the woman looked me in the eye. "Cup of coffee, please," I said.

She set down a Styrofoam cup. "Fifty," she said, holding out her palm.

I fumbled with my coins, making sure I had her attention. "Where's Schwartzy?" I said, as if I knew him.

"Train, probably," she said. "Where else would he be?"

I took my coffee and got out of the way.

Train probably. That was a long walk the first time. I headed back. Maybe I could be a window washer. I was qualified for that. I walked and spilled coffee as hot as molten lava over my hand. At the train, the window washer was gone; his stepladder was there, his bucket and squeegee. The tanning woman sunbathed; talking to her was out of the question. I walked between cars, had to be a mile of them. After a while the class of cars deteriorated, the spit polish and flash of the first few cars gave way to peeled paint and sooty squalor. There were garbage bags. The windows weren't washed. It was like walking from the good neighborhood to the bad, from wide lawns and barbered bushes to saltbox suburbs, to tenement walkups, to actual animal habitat. Stockcars, pervasive zoo odors, heavy wooden ramps soiled with various types of dried animal crap. Then from the underpinnings of the train a nest of gray hair atop stooped shoulders emerged, a hunched troll-like figure crawling from the black possum belly of the train, dragging a fat rubber hose, the type used for pumping septic tanks. An old man covered in soot and rail cinders. His face resembled a tire tread in dried mud. He chewed something.

"Schwartzy," I said. "I'm looking for Schwartzy."

"Pie car," the old man said, his gums working.

"What's a pie car?"

The old man considered this. "Pie car," he said, pointing back the way I'd come. "152."

I hadn't noticed the painted numbers next to the vestibules. The car we stood at was 101. I looked back down the line. The next one was 102. I turned and walked. Only 51 cars to go. The sunbather was at 137; the window washer at 148. Car 152 was in the good neighborhood. It was a dining car. Of course, circus people eat. Red vinyl booths, center aisle, Formica counter. A cook in a chef's hat scrubbed a grill. "Closed," he said.

"Schwartz here?"

The cook looked down the end of the car where a baldheaded man squinted from behind bars. I walked toward the barred window. I saw the sign, Paymaster. "Hi," I said. Schwartz was unusually short with one wayward eyeball, maybe made of glass.

Circus people don't meet and greet. No one says Hello, or Goodbye, or What's up? They tend to stare at you until you state your business, and if you don't, or if your business isn't particularly intriguing, they walk away. And many of the administrative circus people like Schwartz and Backdoor Jack, had physical afflictions: missing limbs, clubfeet, harelips, purple splotches on their faces, and they all limped. This guy Schwartz watched me through the bars. I tried to get a fix on which eye was doing the seeing, to which I should be directing my request.

"I was wondered," I said, "if you had any job openings?"

"Are you a diesel mechanic?"

"Ah, no."

"I need a diesel mechanic."

"I was once a dishwasher." I was in a dining car after all.

He shook his head. "Try concessions."

"Concessions?"

"At the building, see Bobby Johnson, he may have something for you."

"The building?"

He turned his back on the window.

I headed back to the civic center—the building.

Concessionaires were young and hung out front by the ticket windows, a bunch of them wearing candy cane striped smocks and setting up souvenir stands. They were hawkers, vendors, watching for anyone with money. "Hey you, come'er, how much money you got?"

"I'm looking for work," I said. "Do you know Bobby Johnson?"

"Do I know Bobby Johnson?" The kid was about my age, sitting on a box with his back to a wagon; he looked over at a tall black guy with a goatee who was piecing together a program display. "Hey Pierre, do we know Bobby Johnson?"

It was clear that they did. "Do you know where he is?" I said.

"Do we know where he is?" He turned face toward the open door of the wagon; inside I saw a desk, a swivel chair, a bunch of cardboard boxes. "Does anyone know Bobby Johnson?" It was clear too he was messing with

me.

Bobby Johnson, head of concessions, was inside the wagon, and, incredibly, he wore a black eye patch. He was tall, thin, and soft spoken. He shook his head sadly. "I got nothing now," he said. "Why don't you head over to the red show? They're right down the road in Philadelphia." Ringling had two traveling units back then, red and blue, now they have a third, gold show, traveling different routes simultaneously. I'd never been out of New England; Philadelphia, right down the road to this guy, might as well have been in Greece.

Not ten feet away the black guy, Pierre, suddenly bellowed: "Programs! Get Your Programs!" There were absolutely no ticket buyers; the show didn't start for 3 hours. The front of the building overlooked a plaza facing downtown Providence. Men and women in business suits slogged out of office buildings and headed for parking garages. The black guy kept roaring "PROGRAMS!" It was baffling and earsplitting. People two blocks away turned their heads.

At one point his boss, Bobby Johnson, poked his head out the door of the wagon and said: "Pierre, shut up, please." But the guy kept hollering. Johnson was a quiet man, I bent to hear what he said, which was: "Sorry, no jobs." At that point I gave up. In spite of romantic notions to the contrary, it seemed clear that one didn't simply decide to join the circus and have them issue you a bandanna and a tambourine. I was doomed to my squalid apartment, junkie roommate, and brick washing.

But when I turned to go the black guy, Pierre, stopped shouting and said. "Half these guys will quit when we go west."

"What?"

"What do you mean 'What'?" You want a job don't you? All the guys you see here will quit when we go west." He raised his voice, shouting into the wagon. "Won't they Bobby? Won't they quit when we go west?" Then to me: "Happens every year. You come to Albuquerque he'll put you on." He gave me a reassuring nod. "Won't you Bobby? Won't you put him on if he comes to Albuquerque?"

The boss poked his head out the door again. I watched his one good eye. Was he nodding? He was nodding. "Yeah," he said. "We always need help in Albuquerque."

"See, told you, come to Albuquerque you'll have a job. PROGRAMS!"

Upon further questioning it became clear that this show was about to make one of their longest jumps of the season, a 3-day run from the next town, Boston, across the country to Albuquerque, New Mexico. They rarely had runs that long and when they did they always lost a lot of help. "Most of these guys are easterners," Pierre said, "they don't want to go out west, happens when we come back too, the westerners all quit."

If Philadelphia was Greece, Albuquerque another planet. I was raised in Rhode Island; my travel experience was limited to six hour traffic jams each summer when my parents tried to get us to Cape Cod in July. I had twenty-five cents to my name. All I knew about Albuquerque was I'd need a plane

to get there, and I knew plane tickets cost more than a quarter. Walking back to my apartment I reasoned it out. The circus was in Boston two weeks, two brick-washer paychecks at 60 bucks each, if I held out on the rent, paid weekly, I'd have \$120. I stopped at a phone and invested 10 of my 25 cents to discover that one-way to Albuquerque was \$80. Euerka! If I could dodge my landlord and roommates for a couple weeks I'd run away to join the circus.

I know you're thinking: What an idiot. What a ridiculous plan. But I had nothing in Providence. Is it possible to run away from nothing to something? Is that a romantic notion? Or a rational decision for a teenage brick washer earning \$1.60 per hour and living with junkies? I wasn't a junkie myself, though I tried heroin a couple times when it was free. You can see why I shy from revealing this information to my esteemed colleagues. Why I leave the segment of my life called circus off my curriculum vitae.

My plan, desperate, idiotic, or otherwise, did work. Two weeks after spotting that alluring white train in the grimy Providence trainyard, I arrived in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It wasn't easy dodging my landlord; in fact I spend the final two nights before departure sleeping at the airport. I landed in Albuquerque with seven dollars—and here is where luck kicked in, here is where a truly romantic notion surfaced: a notion that there is a benevolent God somewhere watching over idiots, drunks, children, innocents of all types. Certainly I fit the category. If the circus people had turned me away in Albuquerque that day I don't know what I'd have done with seven dollars and no return ticket. As it was, I'd been worried about where the circus building was located and how I would get there, and lo and behold, divine intervention, the old Albuquerque civic auditorium, long since torn down, was within sight of the airport. The circus was in full view when I stepped off the plane into the dry New Mexico heat.

You're thinking, here, this is where it turns romantic, right? Now we get the story as seen on TV: My Season Under the Big Top. But no. I did get a job that day. I found Bobby Johnson. He seemed only mildly surprised to see me, and he turned me over to a Mexican who handed me a heavy red board with 25 puffy beehives of cotton candy stuck to it. "Fifty cents," he said. "Come back when they're gone."

"Come back?" He pointed to blue doors leading into the arena. I heard the music blasting; the ringmaster's garbled exclamations, the applause and exhortations of the crowd. I headed out, in actually, to the beginning of my circus career. I stayed ten years. That first day I earned about two dollars and it was harder than brick washing. My last day, just shy of my 28th birthday, I declined a contract guaranteeing me six figures over ten months where I would work a total of 16 minutes a day. By then I'd had about every circus job available except animal training. I was on concessions, wardrobe, ringcurb, transportation, rigging. Finally, highwire walking was as high as I cared to go. I could have gone for a management position, show director, or a job at the main office in Washington D.C., I could have made a life of it. Ringling is a solid organization, the core of Feld Entertainment, the largest producer of live family entertainment in the world. They own all the ice show you've ever heard of, as well as Disney on Parade, plus permanent shows in Vegas and Atlantic City, and two traveling units overseas. Working for them is not much different than working at A&TT or Wal-Mart. They have benefits and retirement plans, a credit union, organizations to protect retired animals and performers, and lobbyists to check the PETA people. But I'd had enough of it. In ten years on the show I'd saved enough money to pay for a

college education and that's what I wanted. So I ran off to join a school. It's worked out. I'm still here, after 15 years no longer first-of-May teacher, I have tenure, people call me Professor, I no longer succumb to the allure of white trains.

It is not that romantic notions didn't crop up along the way, especially with the wire walking; it was just that when they did I found them hard to relate to, absurd even. Once, being interviewed by a young blonde newspaper reporter I let it slip that my wire-walking days were nearing an end. The poor girl, wide eyed, wouldn't accept it. "No," she said. "It's your life! Well, okay, if that's what she wanted to believe. When seeking to charm young blonde newspaper reporters any romantic notion will do. But it wasn't my life. It was something I learned by steadfast practice, worked at for seven years, got paid well for and quit.

About romance there are a lot of misconceptions.

True story, back in the eighties, I knew a hairdresser in New York, a young man with his own shop on the Upper East Side, a great business, appointments a month in advance, no new clients—this guy was talented and booked solid, \$85 dollar haircuts. One day, while cutting my hair, he told me he was closing the business, moving to Orlando, Florida. I naturally figured he was going to more lucrative market. "That's sad news for me," I said, "but great for you, cutting the hair of Disney stars at \$200 bucks a pop."

"Oh, no," he said, "I'm done with hair."

"What! You're a genius stylist. You've got people begging you to cut their hair. How can you give up something you're born to do?"

He flabbergasted me by stating he had enrolled in lion-training school. Citing my circus background, I expressed doubt about the existence of such a thing. "It exists," he told me. "Magicians and wild cats, like Siegfried & Roy, making tigers disappear and whatnot."

Realizing he was serious I suggested that such an outlandish, long shot, unstable vocation was a major departure from the dependable occupation he enjoyed as a topnotch New York hairdresser. "Hairdresser," he said "Big deal."

"Think of your future, man!"

"That's what I'm thinking about," he said. "I'm married. I'm going to have a kid." He stopped cutting and pointed his scissors at me. "And no kid, wants a dad who is a hairdresser." He paused, stared up at the ceiling, as if at any moment the spotlight might find him. "A lion tamer," he said. "That's something a kid can state with pride. My dad is lion tamer!"

It was hard to argue.

That was the end of a great hairdresser. I don't know if he ever made it in the land of Siegfried & Roy. Even Siegfried & Roy didn't make it in the land of Siegfried & Roy, whose show by the way, was owned by Feld Entertainment. The problem with romantic notions is the notion part. Notions are fleeting, they go away. One minute you're making a tiger vanish, the

next moment he's having you for dinner. Being eaten by tigers is not romantic

I knew another guy, a 5th generation circus performer in Italy who dreamt about running away to join a town, an American town, specifically, Reno, Nevada. He wanted to dress up like an old-west gambler with a black vest and bolero tie and deal cards in a casino. That was his dream. All day, when he wasn't working in his family's show, he practiced card tricks, card shuffling, card manipulations. He was good at it. But he couldn't leave his family because for 200 years they'd run this tent show all over Europe. The family needed him to work. It wasn't in his blood, his parents told him, to immigrate to America and become a card shark. He was a circus person, of an old and respected family, it was inconceivable that he slip fate and fly to Reno. There was a loyalty issue, he felt guilty for abandoning his family even in spirit. The circus bored him to death; literally, he became depressed and after many years committed suicide. His way of running away, I guess. Suicide is not romantic.

Some people, usually young males, think it's romantic to go to war, to be honorable and brave with your buddies in glorious battle. But when your balls are blown off it's not romantic. What will Dad say to the guys at the VFW? My son got his nuts shot off? Even if Dad's own balls are sufficient to say that, it won't be glorious. He'll cry in his beer. His buddies will think poor bastard and pat his back. That's not romantic. That's pitiful. How will Junior get a girlfriend now? How will Dad be grandpappy? How will progeny be maintained? What will Mom say to the neighbors? There are many questions when romantic notions are dashed.

Maybe romantic is going out to Wyoming and roping a wild bronco. But after you get out of the hospital you have to feed the son-of-a-bitch. He bites and kicks and doesn't take kindly to the saddle and after you get out of the hospital again you neglect and abandon him and the PETA people haul your ass into court—there is no romance in court, ever.

Maybe all this romantic crap is Hollywood's fault, our need to escape by sitting before a television. In real life, romantic heroes are unclean. Cowboys, pirates, explorers, soldiers—those guys never bathe. Audie Murphy was famous for playing himself in movies. Who knows Robert L. Howard or Joe Hooper? Both soldiers more decorated than Murphy. Sports heroes are sweaty and full of chemicals. Astronauts in tight capsules do not have Jacuzzis. In real life heroes stink. But, we have Hollywood to keep them fresh and wholesome. John Wayne was a bigot, but not on the big screen, his white hat didn't even pick up dust when he rode across the desert, he didn't bleed or sweat. Ted Williams was too cheap to eat at restaurants; he gave Boston baseball fans the finger. Joe DiMaggio was moody and mean spirited. He was mentally cruel to poor Marilyn, one of our most fragile and enduring romantic legends.

When I questioned my poet friend carefully, it turned out that his grandfather, age 18, hadn't actually run off at all. His mother knew exactly where he was all the time. In fact, he saved his dirty laundry in duffel bag until the circus came within hoofing distance of his home and then he'd meet mom and exchange his dirty clothes for clean and folded. Mom probably had an apple pie and a couple sandwiches in her cache as well. Why did you say "run off" I asked the poet. He suggested circus, like gypsy life, is simply associated with footloose freedom by those of us earning a living in

cubicles and classrooms. "Metaphorical freedom," he said, "we're susceptible to it." Thomas Moore, author of *Care of the Soul*, seems to agree. "Circuses attract that element in the psyche that craves symbolic and dreamlike experiences. When work, facts, and literal issues are our main focus, we have a desperate need for liberation."

My esteemed colleague admitted the cliché of it all, the romantic nonsense of the possibility of escaping who we are. He told me about walking his dog outside on a very clear winter night—he lives out in the country, and he was dazzled by, actually, literally, star struck, by the vivid constellations. He said words were not failing him, he kept thinking dazzling, alluring, glittering, transcending. He thought: Andromeda. Cepheus. Ursa Major, Canis Minor. And then he thought: What the hell am I thinking? I can't write a poem about the stars! That's the ultimate cliché, the most romantic nonsense going. I'm turning into one of my students. What's next? Hallmark cards? He chuckled and called his dog. Where are you hound major? He walked home, watching his snowy boots.

As a writer, I spent years hiding and denying my connection to circus because I had the romantic notion that fiction writers simply made things up out of thin air or their intrinsic God-given genius. An idea, I see now, about as crazy as running away to join the circus.

Richard Schmitt is the author of *The Aerialist*, a novel, Harcourt Brace 2002, and many short stories and essays in such publications as *New Stories of the South: The Year's Best* 1999, *Cimarron Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Gulf Coast*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and online at www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v6n2/fiction/schmitt_r/flashpoint.htm, www.waccamawjournal.com, www.marlbororeview.com/issue6.html.

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