

Sara Gruen

Water for Elephants: A Novel

Prologue

Only three people were left under the red and white awning of the grease joint: Grady, me, and the fry cook.

Grady and I sat at a battered wooden table, each facing a burger on a dented tin plate. The cook was behind the counter, scraping his griddle with the edge of a spatula. He had turned off the fryer some time ago, but the odor of grease lingered.

The rest of the midway—so recently writhing with people—was empty but for a handful of employees and a small group of men waiting to be led to the cooch tent. They glanced nervously from side to side, with hats pulled low and hands thrust deep in their pockets. They wouldn't be disappointed: somewhere in the back Barbara and her ample charms awaited.

The other townsfolk—rubes, as Uncle Al called them—had already made their way through the menagerie tent and into the big top, which pulsed with frenetic music. The band was whipping through its repertoire at the usual earsplitting volume. I knew the routine by heart—at this very moment, the tail end of the Grand Spectacle was exiting and Lottie, the aerialist, was ascending her rigging in the center ring.

I stared at Grady, trying to process what he was saying. He glanced around and leaned in closer.

"Besides," he said, locking eyes with me, "it seems to me you've got a lot to lose right now."



He raised his eyebrows for emphasis. My heart skipped a beat.

Thunderous applause exploded from the big top, and the band slid seamlessly into the Gounod waltz. I turned instinctively toward the menagerie because this was the cue for the elephant act. Marlena was either preparing to mount or was already sitting on Rosie's head.

"I've got to go," I said.

"Sit," said Grady. "Eat. If you're thinking of clearing out, it may be a while before you see food again."

That moment, the music screeched to a halt. There was an ugly collision of brass, reed, and percussion—trombones and piccolos skidded into cacophony, a tuba farted, and the hollow clang of a cymbal wavered out of the big top, over our heads and into oblivion.

Grady froze, crouched over his burger with his pinkies extended and lips spread wide.

I looked from side to side. No one moved a muscle—all eyes were directed at the big top. A few wisps of hay swirled lazily across the hard dirt.

"What is it? What's going on?" I said.

"Shh," Grady hissed.

The band started up again, playing "Stars and

Stripes Forever."

"Oh Christ. Oh shit!" Grady tossed his food onto the table and leapt up, knocking over the bench.

"What? What is it?" I yelled, because he was already running away from me.

"The Disaster March!" he screamed over his shoulder.

I jerked around to the fry cook, who was ripping off his apron. "What the hell's he talking about?"

"The Disaster March," he said, wrestling the apron over his head. "Means something's gone bad—real bad."

"Like what?"

"Could be anything—fire in the big top, stampede, whatever. Aw sweet Jesus. The poor rubes probably don't even know it yet." He ducked under the hinged door and took off.

Chaos—candy butchers vaulting over counters, workmen staggering out from under tent flaps, roustabouts racing headlong across the lot. Anyone and everyone associated with the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth barreled toward the big top.

Diamond Joe passed me at the human equivalent of a full gallop. "Jacob—it's the menagerie," he screamed. "The animals are loose. Go, go, go!"

He didn't need to tell me twice. Marlana was in that tent.

A rumble coursed through me as I approached, and it scared the hell out of me because it was

on a register lower than noise. The ground was vibrating.

I staggered inside and met a wall of yak—a great expanse of curly-haired chest and churning hooves, of flared red nostrils and spinning eyes. It galloped past so close I leapt backward on tiptoe, flush with the canvas to avoid being impaled on one of its crooked horns. A terrified hyena clung to its shoulders.

The concession stand in the center of the tent had been flattened, and in its place was a roiling mass of spots and stripes—of haunches, heels, tails, and claws, all of it roaring, screeching, bellowing, or whinnying. A polar bear towered above it all, slashing blindly with skillet-sized paws. It made contact with a llama and knocked it flat—BOOM. The llama hit the ground, its neck and legs splayed like the five points of a star. Chimps screamed and chattered, swinging on ropes to stay above the cats. A wild-eyed zebra zigzagged too close to a crouching lion, who swiped, missed, and darted away, his belly close to the ground.

My eyes swept the tent, desperate to find Marlana. Instead I saw a cat slide through the connection leading to the big top—it was a panther, and as its lithe black body disappeared into the canvas tunnel I braced myself. If the rubes didn't know, they were about to find out. It took several seconds to come, but come it did—one prolonged shriek followed by another, and then another, and then the whole place exploded with the thunderous sound of bodies trying to shove past other bodies and off the stands. The band screeched to a halt for a second time, and this time stayed silent. I shut my eyes: Please God let them leave by the back end. Please God don't let them try to come through here.

I opened my eyes again and scanned the

menagerie, frantic to find her. How hard can it be to find a girl and an elephant, for Christ's sake?

When I caught sight of her pink sequins, I nearly cried out in relief - maybe I did. I don't remember.

She was on the opposite side, standing against the sidewall, calm as a summer day. Her sequins flashed like liquid diamonds, a shimmering beacon between the multicolored hides. She saw me, too, and held my gaze for what seemed like forever. She was cool, languid. Smiling even. I started pushing my way toward her, but something about her expression stopped me cold.

That son of a bitch was standing with his back to her, red-faced and bellowing, flapping his arms and swinging his silver-tipped cane. His high-topped silk hat lay on the straw beside him.

She reached for something. A giraffe passed between us—its long neck bobbing gracefully even in panic—and when it was gone I saw that she'd picked up an iron stake. She held it loosely, resting its end on the hard dirt. She looked at me again, bemused. Then her gaze shifted to the back of his bare head.

"Oh Jesus," I said, suddenly understanding. I stumbled forward, screaming even though there was no hope of my voice reaching her. "Don't do it! Don't do it!"

She lifted the stake high in the air and brought it down, splitting his head like a watermelon. His pate opened, his eyes grew wide, and his mouth froze into an O. He fell to his knees and then toppled forward into the straw.

I was too stunned to move, even as a young

orangutan flung its elastic arms around my legs.

So long ago. So long. But still it haunts me.

I DON'T TALK MUCH about those days. Never did. I don't know why—I worked on circuses for nearly seven years, and if that isn't fodder for conversation, I don't know what is.

Actually I do know why: I never trusted myself. I was afraid I'd let it slip. I knew how important it was to keep her secret, and keep it I did—for the rest of her life, and then beyond.

In seventy years, I've never told a blessed soul.

One

I am ninety. Or ninety-three. One or the other.

When you're five, you know your age down to the month. Even in your twenties you know how old you are. I'm twenty-three, you say, or maybe twenty-seven. But then in your thirties something strange starts to happen. It's a mere hiccup at first, an instant of hesitation. How old are you? Oh, I'm—you start confidently, but then you stop. You were going to say thirty-three, but you're not. You're thirty-five. And then you're bothered, because you wonder if this is the beginning of the end. It is, of course, but it's decades before you admit it.

You start to forget words: they're on the tip of your tongue, but instead of eventually dislodging, they stay there. You go upstairs to fetch something, and by the time you get there you can't remember what it was you were after. You call your child by the names of all your other children and finally the dog before you get to his. Sometimes you forget what day it is. And finally you forget the year.

Actually, it's not so much that I've forgotten. It's more like I've stopped keeping track. We're past the millennium, that much I know—such a fuss and bother over nothing, all those young folks clucking with worry and buying canned food because somebody was too lazy to leave space for four digits instead of two—but that could have been last month or three years ago. And besides, what does it really matter? What's the difference between three weeks or three years or even three decades of mushy peas, tapioca, and Depends undergarments?

I am ninety. Or ninety-three. One or the other.

EITHER THERE'S BEEN an accident or there's roadwork, because a gaggle of old ladies is glued to the window at the end of the hall like children or jailbirds. They're spidery and frail, their hair as fine as mist. Most of them are a good decade younger than me, and this astounds me. Even as your body betrays you, your mind denies it.

I'm parked in the hallway with my walker. I've come a long way since my hip fracture, and thank the Lord for that. For a while it looked like I wouldn't walk again—that's how I got talked into coming here in the first place—but every couple of hours I get up and walk a few steps, and with every day I get a little bit farther before feeling the need to turn around. There may be life in the old dog yet.

There are five of them now, white-headed old things huddled together and pointing crooked fingers at the glass. I wait a while to see if they wander off. They don't.

I glance down, check that my brakes are on, and rise carefully, steadying myself on the wheelchair's arm while making the perilous transfer to the walker. Once I'm squared away, I clutch the gray rubber pads on the arms and

shove it forward until my elbows are extended, which turns out to be exactly one floor tile. I drag my left foot forward, make sure it's steady, and then pull the other up beside it. Shove, drag, wait, drag. Shove, drag, wait, drag.

The hallway is long and my feet don't respond the way they used to. It's not Camel's kind of lameness, thank God, but it slows me down nonetheless. Poor old Camel—it's been years since I thought of him. His feet flopped loosely at the end of his legs so he had to lift his knees high and throw them forward. My feet drag, as though they're weighted, and because my back is stooped I end up looking down at my slippers framed by the walker.

It takes a while to get to the end of the hall, but I do—and on my own pins, too. I'm pleased as punch, although once there I realize I still have to find my way back.

They part for me, these old ladies. These are the vital ones, the ones who can either move on their own steam or have friends to wheel them around. These old girls still have their marbles, and they're good to me. I'm a rarity here—an old man among a sea of widows whose hearts still ache for their lost men.

"Oh, here," clucks Hazel. "Let's give Jacob a look."

She pulls Dolly's wheelchair a few feet back and shuffles up beside me, clasping her hands, her milky eyes flashing. "Oh, it's so exciting! They've been at it all morning!"

I edge up to the glass and raise my face, squinting against the sunlight. It's so bright it takes a moment for me to make out what's happening. Then the forms take shape.

In the park at the end of the block is an

enormous canvas tent, thickly striped in white and magenta with an unmistakable peaked top—

My ticker lurches so hard I clutch a fist to my chest.

"Jacob! Oh, Jacob!" cries Hazel. "Oh dear! Oh dear!" Her hands flutter in confusion, and she turns toward the hall. "Nurse! Nurse! Hurry! It's Mr. Jankowski!"

"I'm fine," I say, coughing and pounding my chest. That's the problem with these old ladies. They're always afraid you're about to keel over. "Hazel! I'm fine!"

But it's too late. I hear the squeak-squeak-squeak of rubber soles, and moments later I'm engulfed by nurses. I guess I won't have to worry about getting back to my chair after all.

"SO WHAT'S ON the menu tonight?" I grumble as I'm steered into the dining room. "Porridge? Mushy peas? Pablum? Oh, let me guess, it's tapioca isn't it? Is it tapioca? Or are we calling it rice pudding tonight?"

"Oh, Mr. Jankowski, you are a card," the nurse says flatly. She doesn't need to answer, and she knows it. This being Friday, we're having the usual nutritious but uninteresting combination of meat loaf, creamed corn, reconstituted mashed potatoes, and gravy that may have been waved over a piece of beef at some point in its life. And they wonder why I lose weight.

I know some of us don't have teeth, but I do, and I want pot roast. My wife's, complete with leathery bay leaves. I want carrots. I want potatoes boiled in their skins. And I want a deep, rich cabernet sauvignon to wash it all down, not apple juice from a tin. But above all, I want corn on the cob.

Sometimes I think that if I had to choose between an ear of corn or making love to a woman, I'd choose the corn. Not that I wouldn't love to have a final roll in the hay—I am a man yet, and some things never die—but the thought of those sweet kernels bursting between my teeth sure sets my mouth to watering. It's fantasy, I know that. Neither will happen. I just like to weigh the options, as though I were standing in front of Solomon: a final roll in the hay or an ear of corn. What a wonderful dilemma. Sometimes I substitute an apple for the corn.

Everyone at every table is talking about the circus—those who can talk, that is. The silent ones, the ones with frozen faces and withered limbs or whose heads and hands shake too violently to hold utensils, sit around the edges of the room accompanied by aides who spoon little bits of food into their mouths and then coax them into masticating. They remind me of baby birds, except they're lacking all enthusiasm. With the exception of a slight grinding of the jaw, their faces remain still and horrifyingly vacant. Horrifying because I'm well aware of the road I'm on. I'm not there yet, but it's coming. There's only one way to avoid it, and I can't say I much care for that option either.

The nurse parks me in front of my meal. The gravy on the meat loaf has already formed a skin. I poke experimentally with my fork. Its meniscus jiggles, mocking me. Disgusted, I look up and lock eyes with Joseph McGuinty.

He's sitting opposite, a newcomer, an interloper—a retired barrister with a square jaw, pitted nose, and great floppy ears. The ears remind me of Rosie, although nothing else does. She was a fine soul, and he's—well, he's a retired lawyer. I can't imagine what the nurses thought a lawyer and a veterinarian would have

in common, but they wheeled him on over to sit opposite me that first night, and here he's been ever since.

He glares at me, his jaw moving back and forth like a cow chewing cud. Incredible. He's actually eating the stuff.

The old ladies chatter like schoolgirls, blissfully unaware.

"They're here until Sunday," says Doris. "Billy stopped to find out."

"Yes, two shows on Saturday and one on Sunday. Randall and his girls are taking me tomorrow," says Norma. She turns to me. "Jacob, will you be going?"

I open my mouth to answer, but before I can Doris blurts out, "And did you see those horses? My word, they're pretty. We had horses when I was a girl. Oh, how I loved to ride." She looks into the distance, and for a split second I can see how lovely she was as a young woman.

"Do you remember when the circus traveled by train?" says Hazel. "The posters would appear a few days ahead—they'd cover every surface in town! You couldn't see a brick in between!"

"Golly, yes. I certainly do," Norma says. "They put posters on the side of our barn one year. The men told Father they used a special glue that would dissolve two days after the show, but darned if our barn wasn't still plastered with them months later!" She chuckles, shaking her head. "Father was fit to be tied!"

"And then a few days later the train would pull in. Always at the crack of dawn."

"My father used to take us down to the tracks to watch them unload. Gosh, that was

something to see. And then the parade! And the smell of peanuts roasting—"

"And Cracker Jack!"

"And candy apples, and ice cream, and lemonade!"

"And the sawdust! It would get in your nose!"

"I used to carry water for the elephants," says McGuinty.

I drop my fork and look up. He is positively dripping with self-satisfaction,

just waiting for the girls to fawn over him.

"You did not," I say.

There is a beat of silence.

"I beg your pardon?" he says.

"You did not carry water for the elephants."

"Yes, I most certainly did."

"No you didn't."

"Are you calling me a liar?" he says slowly.

"If you say you carried water for elephants, I am."

The girls stare at me with open mouths. My heart's pounding. I know I shouldn't do this, but somehow I can't help myself.

"How dare you!" McGuinty braces his knobby hands on the edge of the table. Stringy tendons appear in his forearms.

"Listen pal," I say. "For decades I've heard old

coots like you talk about carrying water for elephants and I'm telling you now, it never happened."

"Old coot? Old coot?" McGuinty pushes himself upright, sending his wheelchair flying backward. He points a gnarled finger at me and then drops as though felled by dynamite. He vanishes beneath the edge of the table, his eyes perplexed, his mouth still open.

"Nurse! Oh, Nurse!" cry the old ladies.

There's the familiar patter of crepe-soled shoes and moments later two nurses haul McGuinty up by the arms. He grumbles, making feeble attempts to shake them off.

A third nurse, a pneumatic black girl in pale pink, stands at the end of the table with her hands on her hips. "What on earth is going on?" she asks.

"That old S-O-B called me a liar, that's what," says McGuinty, safely restored to his chair. He straightens his shirt, lifts his grizzled chin, and crosses his arms in front of him. "And an old coot."

"Oh, I'm sure that's not what Mr. Jankowski meant," the girl in pink says.

"It most certainly is," I say. "And he is, too. Pffffft. Carried water for the elephants indeed. Do you have any idea how much an elephant drinks?"

"Well, I never," says Norma, pursing her lips and shaking her head. "I'm sure I don't know what's gotten into you, Mr. Jankowski."

Oh, I see, I see. So that's how it is.

"It's an outrage!" says McGuinty, leaning slightly

toward Norma now that he sees he's got the popular vote. "I don't see why I should have to put up with being called a liar!"

"And an old coot," I remind him.

"Mr. Jankowski!" says the black girl, her voice raised. She comes behind me and releases the brakes on my wheelchair. "I think maybe you should spend some time in your room. Until you calm down."

"Now wait just a minute!" I shout as she swings me away from the table and toward the door. "I don't need to calm down. And besides, I haven't eaten!"

"I'll bring your dinner in," she says from behind.

"I don't want it in my room! Take me back! You can't do this to me!"

But it appears she can. She wheels me down the hall at lightning speed and turns sharply into my room. She jams the brakes on so hard the whole chair jars.

"I'll just go back," I say as she raises my footrests.

"You'll do no such thing," she says, setting my feet on the floor.

"This isn't fair!" I say, my voice rising in a whine. "I've been sitting at that

table forever. He's been there two weeks. Why is everyone siding with him?"

"Nobody's siding with anyone." She leans forward, slinging her shoulder under mine. As she lifts me, my head rests next to hers. Her hair is chemically straightened and smells of flowers. When she sets me on the edge of the

bed, I am at eye level with her pale pink bosom.
And her name tag.

"Rosemary," I say.

"Yes, Mr. Jankowski?" she says.

"He is lying, you know."

"I know no such thing. And neither do you."

"I do, though. I was on a show."

She blinks, irritated. "How do you mean?"

I hesitate and then change my mind. "Never mind," I say.

"Did you work on a circus?"

"I said never mind."

There's a heartbeat of uncomfortable silence.

"Mr. McGuinty could have been seriously hurt, you know," she says, arranging my legs. She works quickly, efficiently, but stops just short of being summary.

"No he couldn't. Lawyers are indestructible."

She stares at me for a long time, actually looking at me as a person. For a moment I think I sense a chink. Then she snaps back into action. "Is your family taking you to the circus this weekend?"

"Oh yes," I say with some pride. "Someone comes every Sunday. Like clockwork."

She shakes out a blanket and spreads it over my legs. "Would you like me to get your dinner?"

"No," I say.

There's an awkward silence. I realize I should have added "thank you," but it's too late now.

"All right then," she says. "I'll be back in a while to see if you need anything else."

Yup. Sure she will. That's what they always say.

BUT DAGNAMMIT, HERE SHE IS.

"Now don't tell anyone," she says, bustling in and sliding my dinner-table-cum-vanity over my lap. She sets down a paper napkin, plastic fork, and a bowl of fruit that actually looks appetizing, with strawberries, melon, and apple. "I packed it for my break. I'm on a diet. Do you like fruit, Mr. Jankowski?"

I would answer except that my hand is over my mouth and it's trembling. Apple, for God's sake.

She pats my other hand and leaves the room, discreetly ignoring my tears.

I slip a piece of apple into my mouth, savoring its juices. The buzzing fluorescent fixture above me casts its harsh light on my crooked fingers as they pluck pieces of fruit from the bowl. They look foreign to me. Surely they can't be mine.

Age is a terrible thief. Just when you're getting the hang of life, it knocks your legs out from under you and stoops your back. It makes you ache and muddies your head and silently spreads cancer throughout your spouse.

Metastatic, the doctor said. A matter of weeks or months. But my darling was as frail as a bird. She died nine days later. After sixty-one years together, she simply clutched my hand and exhaled.

Although there are times I'd give anything to have her back, I'm glad she went first. Losing

her was like being cleft down the middle. It was the moment it all ended for me, and I wouldn't have wanted her to go through that. Being the survivor stinks.

I used to think I preferred getting old to the alternative, but now I'm not sure. Sometimes the monotony of bingo and sing-alongs and ancient dusty people parked in the hallway in wheelchairs makes me long for death. Particularly when I remember that I'm one of the ancient dusty people, filed away like some worthless tchotchke.

But there's nothing to be done about it. All I can do is put in time waiting for the inevitable, observing as the ghosts of my past rattle around my vacuous present. They crash and bang and make themselves at home, mostly because there's no competition. I've stopped fighting them.

They're crashing and banging around in there now.

Make yourselves at home, boys. Stay awhile. Oh, sorry—I see you already have.

Damn ghosts.