

Sheila Arndt

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Cherchez la Femmes

Stella was hungry. So hungry it felt like her head had disconnected from her body and was floating far above, somewhere near the peak in the ceiling's center. It was easier to be up there, watching her skin slowly shrink and pinch, her collar bones protrude, her thighs become slightly sinewed. It was better to be out of her body as much as possible, because soon she'd have to go all the way back in and hold it tight and fast and get it as small as possible for the grand finale in an almost impossible act of contortionism. Right now this abundance of metaphorical space was a blessing, just as much as the feast in front of her was a curse. 1898 New Orleans was a town of great abundance, but it was also a town of want, so she was a part of a complicated tableau that was performed only at this yearly visitation timed to coincide with the Lenten fast.

Stella stared at the food spread out before her on the long table. Just thirty-nine days prior, on Mardi Gras day itself, Stella would have eaten most of the strawberry covered chocolate cake, a piece of the golden peach pie if not two, and as many of the ribs, dripping with sauce and glistening with fat, as she could stomach. She might have tried a bite of the turkey, roasted to a rich brown, and at least a nibble of the prime rib, sliced to reveal the deep pink of the perfect medium rare. And she would have absolutely tried to eat at least a spoonful or three of the mashed potatoes, even as she started to sweat from the overload. They were rich with butter and cream and cream cheese—they were, in a word: glorious. She would have washed it all down with half a bottle of Raleigh Rye, just so she could sleep through the discomfort of a distended belly. The feast phase of her act, pure gluttony and sloth, was an uncomfortable pleasure at best. Eating to excess could be a comfort at times, and she was familiar with that kind of sadness, but having to do it day in, day out, became work. And yet, as she always reminded herself, it sure beat the middle section: famine.

This starving while seated in front of abundance and audience was the second part of a three-part act—a long play. Part one was expansion, although this happened off stage as it were. Stella knew from experience that gluttony wasn't nearly as interesting to watch as it was to practice. Parts two and three did take place in front of the crowds: starve and shrink for the 40 days of Lent, and then, after Easter Sunday services and the crowds had arrived to see this version of a miracle, to twist and fold herself into an impossibly small glass jar and be paraded around the big top only to emerge again at the end, victorious. Although Stella knew she was an essential part of the performance, half of the time she thought that people came to stare at the food as much as they did at her.

New Orleans was always a longer stay than any other town, not only because it was the exception to the rule of “get out before the audiences get bored.” Of equal significance was the fact that the girls of the sideshow had all left New Orleans together some years

prior, fleeing dreary dramas and seeking new lives, and, so, they wanted to stay a little longer than they might normally in a town in, say, the middle of Ohio. Some of the girls wanted to see the families they'd left behind. Some of them just wanted to stay in one place for more than a few days. Some had scores to settle. Stella was a combination of all three and would be on display for the entirety of their stay at Spanish Fort in New Orleans, all hours, awake or asleep, the rubes getting to look at her 24/7 for the price of a penny.

When the bigtop went up, bright yellow and red, and the ladies had staked and hoisted their series of smaller tents—a makeshift tiny town complete with a mess hall and even a doctor of sorts in case a girl was sick or in trouble—it was time to start the “shrinking.” Stella hoped this time maybe, just maybe, if she shrunk enough, if she could squeeze into the smallest space possible, it could be the last time she'd have to use her body in this way, but it was hard to know what number would be enough for all the girls to retire and grow fat and old. And then there was the question of happiness ... she'd left Emma Johnson's brothel and had no intention of going back, but it turned out it was impossible to really leave a certain kind of life, a way of seeing the world, behind.

Stella never started the New Orleans set too fat—there was only so much weight a person could lose, even when literally starving—so she'd designed her costume to give her the appearance of some extra weight using all the little tricks she'd learned as a young working girl, years before, at Emma Johnson's house on Basin Street. Illusions were part of the game. It had been a weird lesson to learn at age 12. Emma wasn't the worst of the Storyville madams, nor was she the best, but she loved money and a girl could earn there. She was known for often offering items that were off the menu at other houses. While they weren't everyday affairs, for the right price, a well-heeled customer could buy two sisters at once, could buy a virgin's first night, could even buy an animal show.

Stella remembered the night Emma had auctioned her virginity off to the highest bidder. At first a young man had offered one measly dollar, but Emma was humorless that night and suffered no fools—he was thrown out the front door hard and into the muck below. When bidding started in earnest, Emma had told Stella to “perform.” She had always loved dancing and had picked up the routine from the hired dance instructor quickly, but what Emma had taught was that what people really wanted, in their heart of hearts, in the places they had but didn't want to admit to, was spectacle and the more outlandish the better, and, so, Stella had started to work on becoming a contortionist. She had always been flexible, even as a child.

That night she learned that even the sheer implication of what she *could* do mattered more than what she actually did. Answering Emma's questions about her youth—“I'll be 13 next month,” while she was actually 15—her purity—“I've only ever kissed my momma on the mouth,” while her boyfriend, the second man she'd ever slept with, watched her from the growing crowd—and her interests—“I like riding ponies and dancing and chocolates,” the only true answer—all the while lying on her belly on a red velvet divan, chin propped up by both hands, and her legs curved all the way around and over as to rest on either side of her ears—earned her \$250 of the final \$1000 bid.

The spectacle of this circus, this traveling band of women she'd taken up with when she'd left Emma's, was also based on illusion and lies. But they always knew there had to be a little truth to get them in the door, to get them to hand over their time, attention, and cash. The rubes wanted to believe just as much in magic and the fantastic as the men who frequented Emma Johnson's circus wanted to be sold a fantasy about eagerness and virginity.

The women of *Cherchez Les Femmes*, Stella included, had left their previous lives behind—lives in various brothels and cribs—but had found it hard to integrate into “proper” society in the years that followed. Just buying the right clothing and trying to find employment in a shop or the like wasn't enough to pass. There was little respectability for a single woman to find without family and money to protect her from the rest of the world. And so Stella had decided to form the sideshow. It was a way to insulate them from the world while exploiting their own talents and the desires of others. The girls could still have sex for money if they wanted to but now they had other means of emptying pockets.

The reality of Stella's act was that she had to start the forty-day fast just plump enough to make people wonder how she'd ever fit into the glass jar that sat on the table next to her. It had to feel worthwhile, like a potential miracle. It had to excite, and horrify, at least just a little. So at the beginning of the Lenten set, she was propped up on velvet pillows, all thick flesh and breast and thigh and sparkle, spilling out of her crystal bra and wrapped in ostrich feathers to “hide her modesty.” The feathers added the appearance of at least another 20 pounds to her already lush body. And she'd answer questions, just like she had while on display at Emma's. It really was no different—even the questions were mostly the same.

“How old are you?”

“I'll be 27 next month.” Even though Stella was only 33, she always lied about her age. It was part of selling the fantasy. It helped if the rubes thought she was fuckable, if she still felt fresh. They needed to feel like they were buying a little piece of her body.

“Can you put your leg behind your head?”

She would slowly push away from the table and move to the divan, dark purple this time, and sit down. She would stretch out onto her left side and face the crowd. Then, looking as bored as possible, she'd point both of her toes, and bend her right knee, pulling it to her chest before extending it again forward toward the crowd and then up to the tent top, holding the pose for a moment. She'd then lower her leg until her ankle was touching her ear and then reverse the process.

“How did you find out you were so flexible?”

At that question, Stella would just smile, wink, and place a finger against her lips as if it was a secret too precious (or scandalous) to tell. And then the viewing time would be up and the people would shuffle out, giving her a few minutes to reset before then next batch came in and she had to repeat the performance. After thirty-nine days of this, she was ready for the triptych to be completed with the finale tomorrow.

Stella rose early to stretch. She had long ago quit feeling hungry, but, no matter how many cycles of feast and famine she engaged in, it was impossible to get used to feeling like she was floating most of the time. There was a thing about this kind of hunger, this kind of determined denial that, sometimes, made her wonder if the hunger strikes of the saints she'd studied as a child were actually acts of suffering. There was something about the way the brain masked the pain of the body that was euphoric.

Once, when she was living and working at Emma's, she had snuck out into the night, a few dollars in hand, and found her way into an opium den. She'd heard the older working girls talking about it, about how smoking made the world fall away. The opium had made her cough so much she threw up on the first inhalation, but after that, after she'd slowed down and sucked in the white smoke slowly, holding it as long as she could before releasing, she understood. It was something like lying in a lukewarm bath, where nothing really mattered and nothing could hurt you. It was heaven.

This hunger wasn't quite heaven, but her brain worked hard to protect her so it transcended the suffering. And today she would, going back into her body, all the way, stripping down into almost nothing in front of a yelling crowd, and then forcing herself into yet another space not meant for her.

Only the ringmaster standing next to the large glass jar heard the pop of Stella's shoulders dislocating. They were two medium pitched fleshy thuds as the sockets released—one and then the other—and Stella was able to slip her shoulders past the lip of the vessel. She bowed her head, slowly pressing it into the slight space between her knees, and waited for the clink of the lid, sealing her in from above. She kept her eyes closed—there would have been nothing to see anyway, nothing but her own flesh—as the two strong men picked up the jar and paraded it around the ring.

"Behold the amazing shrinking woman—Miss Stella coming to you all the way from Paris! She can fit into almost any space, twist herself into almost any position ... well versed in the French, ahem ... gentlemen ... and she does this all without mussing her lipstick! A true physical genius!"

The applause from the crowd in the small arena was loud enough for her to hear, even through the glass and with ears pressed into knees, her knees hugging her head. This was the hardest part of the show; shallow breathing that made her feel like she was about to disappear. She counted—it was the only thing that got her through it—1, 2, 3 ... 44, 45 'til she could feel by the slowing of the plodding that she was about to be placed back on the platform for the viewings. She was lightheaded. *Only a few more minutes 'til I'm free again. Only a few more minutes.*

They put her back on the platform rough. A clunk and then what sounded like a little crackle. Sometimes the base of the jar would crack and she'd have to sit as tightly as possible so that the whole thing wouldn't spiderweb and shatter. Someone tapped on the glass. They always did. And it wasn't usually the kids. The kids who came to see her on the final day were respectful—she could hear the wonder in their voices as they looked at her, figuring out how she moved her body into such a small space.

The women sometimes tapped, but mostly they marveled at her body and the ways it folded in onto itself. The women understood things about the body, too. Stella liked listening in these moments to the things they would say. “I wonder if I could fold like that, be that flexible, if John would come home earlier at night. He never used to stay out late and come home and turn away from me.” Or “Look at the way she can bend her hips—I bet she can keep any man she wants. She can probably steal them, too.” Or “I bet she was a whore.” Or “A woman just doesn’t learn to move like that naturally.” Or, simply, “Filthy.”

The men tapped the jar the most.

It was slippery in the jar now, her sweat making her skin slip as she tried to stay tucked as tightly as she could. The crack in the glass rubbed against her back and she could feel her skin on her left shoulder blade start to split ever so slightly. She knew that there was a slight line of bright red now between her body and the glass and, over the next few seconds, it would smear and grow and start to pool under her buttocks and feet. The crowd grew louder with each second as they turned the jar so that the audience in the round could see the blossoming streak. The more she bled, the more cash they threw.

Shifting ever so slightly as she didn’t want to crack the jar completely open, she worked her left foot to a spot slightly under her right buttock—there was a tiny raised bump there, smooth on the top but curved over with a little snaggle to it that she could catch the skin on the bottom of her foot and tear it open and begin filling the bottom of the jar more quickly. It really wasn’t a lot of blood, to be honest, but the effect. Well, the effect. The ladies in the audience would all gasp, but all the while remember the blood in their own lives, whether monthly or as it related to childbirth, and they would marvel at the way such a private thing, such a vulgar thing as a woman’s blood, was here on display. They hated it and loved it as they hated and loved themselves.

The children would either stare transfixed and silent or would begin to cry.

The men simply stared and opened their wallets even further.

Pressing her fingers to her forehead ever so slowly and slightly, she dug her fingernails into her skin. Earlier that day she had filed little pin-like points into the nails on her index fingers. She could feel the warm drip coming down her forehead. It was almost time and there just had to be enough money covering the ground inside the ring by now. It was either time to rise, now, or risk finally passing out and shattering the glass and possibly doing real damage to herself. She knew the crowds were hoping for her to be flayed open and destroyed. As long as she stayed alive and mostly whole they’d come back next year, if she needed them to, hoping that maybe the next time would be the time they would get the big death, instead of a teased little one.

Her head pushed against the top of the jar, raising the lid up and to the left. The ringmaster let it fall onto the ground with a clatter.

“Behold, the amazing shrinking woman is about to arise! She has suffered for you these past forty days and forty nights, going without and then going into her glass jar coffin. Behold her flesh! See her blood! She bleeds for you!”

Stella slipped one shoulder out and then the other. Her arms hung limply at her sides, numb. The ringmaster slipped one arm under her armpit and slowly pulled her up

and to her feet. Stella was slick and shiny with sweat and blood, her skin shades of pink and deep red, her formally white costume now dyed with her fluids.

“It is finished,” Stella thought to herself, as the ringmaster grabbed her hand in his and pulled it to the sky, victorious. She raised her eyes to the sea of paper and coins strewn before her. She hoped this time might have been enough.