

THE ONLY HEROICS I had in mind that day were of the self-gratifying variety most preferably performed on a good sturdy bed. Said bed was to be housed in an establishment dubbed the Milkud Chateau, and my voluptuous bedfellow was to be none other than one Velva Velvetonia – a one-legged whore whose word-of-mouth advertising had reached the farthest corners of the Territories. The contortional capabilities of this boudoir artiste were reputed to be the stuff of a man's most creative carnal imagination. Especially if the man involved had been traveling for the last month with no company but his horse and lonesome meditations.

Such was my case.

And such were my intentions.

Until I was distracted by that damn placard.

"Hmm!"

Meet the Marvel from the Moon, it read, Poppy the Pinheaded Poet.

Beneath the words on the signboard was painted the rather crude image of a man with an absurdly small head. A handful of folks milled in front of the sign before the doorway of a large oilcloth tent. They chortled and pointed at the picture.

It was not the concept of microcephaly itself that held me enthralled. I had been to enough carnivals to suspect there was something illegitimate about the placard's freakish claim. Sideshows had a reputation for being disreputable. When the skirts are lifted on a bearded lady, she more often than not turns out to be no lady after all. And those Siamese twins who make the gullible gape in wonder prove typically to be conjoined by no more than an elaborate strapwork cinched up tight beneath their shared clothes.

But people want to believe the unbelievable, and I suppose I am just as vulnerable as the next earthling when tested on this particular aspect of my human nature. At any rate, there I stood, scratching my jaw while wondering what a fellow bard from the moon might have to teach me about our common craft. For above all my other aspirations in life, I – Mister Didier Rain – fancied myself a romantic poet.

I shoved my hand into my pocket and fondled my purse. I was fresh back from a job delivering a government surveyor to Fort Boise and had most of my payment still with me. Of course, said coin was meant to go to Velva. I would need every penny to get in her door and fulfill the fantasies for horizontal refreshment I had so intricately developed over the last weeks.

Although she was a debatably reduced woman, Miss Velvetonia's monopodial services did not come at a reduced rate.

I was about to continue on my way to the Chateau when a man in a bowler hat stepped from the tent and started in with his promotional enticements.

"Fair citizens of Milkud!" he barked. "Prepare yourselves to be astonished!"

"You say this little head is from the moon?" asked a man.

"He is indeed!"

The man snorted incredulously. "And so how the hell did he ever get down here on earth?"

Everyone laughed.

Bowler Hat smiled. "Fair people, I assure you that you will understand completely once you lay eyes on dear Poppy and hear him speak. For God himself likely sent the pinheaded angel down to grace us with his wise and lovely poems."

"Is his head really all that tiny?" asked a lady.

"See for yourself." Bowler Hat held his arm to the tent door. "Only one dollar."

About half the crowd scoffed and wandered away into the streets of Milkud. The other hapless half paid up its money and entered the patch-worn marquee.

Rather fortuitously, I somehow found myself in the latter group.