

TITLE: The Tall Man

SYNOPSIS: A mysterious man intrigues a hot dog stand operator, leading to a fantastic voyage that culminates in a surreal negotiation.

"Hey, zit-face! Will ya get me my damn hot dog, already!"

Jack sighed in response, pumping condiments as fast as he could.

Jack worked in a hot dog stand on carnival grounds. He hated it. He hated the stench, hated the hot dogs, and hated the customers. Especially pudgy jerks who only cared about getting "the works" on their all-beef franks.

"Here you go, sir," Jack said to the impatient fat man, handing him his fully-loaded dog. "Sorry about the wait."

"Yeah, you'll be sorry," the man mumbled as the steaming hot dog filled his mouth. He turned away, lost in loud, sloppy mastication. Enthralled by the mix of tasty flavors, fatty didn't see the tall man directly behind him. Jack smirked as the fat man's shoulder plowed into the tall man's chest. The fat man's face turned red as he jerked a stiff glare upward, rude commentary at the ready.

His rant never got started, however, as he choked down fear (and some barely-chewed frankfurter) when he looked into the tall man's face.

Jack had seen the tall man around. He was easy to identify with his long black coat, black boots, and wide-brimmed black hat shadowing an unknown form. People were often caught off guard by the tall man's visage because he was hard to look at. Literally. His face had the unreal quality of seeming veiled, too slick for eyes to focus upon. In fair turn, the tall man never really looked at anyone else, either.

Jack watched, amused as the fat man's gaping stare slid around the tall man's face and neck, unable to find purchase. Grimacing, the fat man dropped what was left of

his hot dog, backed away slowly, then shambled off. Jack lost sight of him almost instantly in the throng of fair-goers.

When Jack brought his attention back, he was alarmed to see the tall man looming next to him in the stand, a tape measure in his hands. The tall man proceeded to measure Jack's arms, legs, torso, and the circumference of his paper-hat-adorned head.

"Do I need new clothes?" Jack asked the tall man's indiscernible face.

"Performance," the tall man's voice replied.

"Performance?"

"Measuring for performance." With that, the tall man released the end of the tape. Before it had recoiled into itself, the tall man had whirled out the back of the hot dog stand.

Jack needed to follow him.

The tall man's height helped. Jack was able to see his hat above the sea of milling people. But the tall man moved fast, forcing Jack to duck, jump, and slide sideways while keeping up. Jack couldn't pay attention to where they were headed. Before long, the crowd had thinned to practically nothing. Night had fallen, and Jack was in a part of the carnival he had never been before.

The acts were stranger, darker here -- the main focus: juggling. A small group of men was keeping aloft what appeared to be an entire petting zoo, pausing at times to let strangely misshapen children caress and feed the animals. Another show involved several women juggling *each other* -- it was hard to tell when that act ended. Finally, the largest troupe was tossing fire, water, and clay in a dazzling display of elemental grandeur. Buckets of water

arced through the air to douse blazing sticks while lit torches flew in from the other side to re-ignite them. As the jugglers finished, everything was flung skyward. Objects mixed with the clay and fell to the ground, transformed into unrecognizable refuse. Everyone vanished into the night as Jack approached.

This was a shame. Jack absolutely loved juggling.

Jack stumbled through the dark, suddenly remembering the tall man. Where had he gone? Jack was immediately answered by an eerie glow directly ahead. Jack made out a thin figure surrounded by what appeared to be a solid circle of motion. A lone performer, spinning objects so quickly that only their wake could be discerned.

It was the tall man, and he was looking directly at Jack.

Really looking. Jack could finally focus on the tall man's face. The tall man's squinted eyes burned like flecks of yellow ochre, piercing outward above a crooked nose and thin, flat lips. The tall man's slitted stare never veered from Jack as he propelled his juggled artifacts in a whirling dervish surrounding him.

"Do you seek the ultimate performance?" the tall man asked.

'Measured for performance'. Jack managed an imperceptible nod.

The tall man widened his eyes a bit and slightly slowed his motion so Jack could make out six objects kept airborne.

"Will you pay any price?" the tall man asked.

"Yes," Jack replied, finding his voice.

The tall man slowed the objects further: four long cylinders, an irregular ball, and something larger, barrel-shaped.

"Tell me your desire to continue, and confirm your willingness to make payment." The tall man's yellow eyes were now wide open and glowing like suns.

"I want you to continue," Jack said, "and I'll make any payment."

"Then, BEHOLD!" The tall man boomed as he raised and expanded his perpetual arc, freezing each object in place for an impossible instant. At last, Jack saw the true magnificence of the tall man's act, and Jack saw the price he would pay. As quickly as the tall man had paused the circle, he resumed his rapid spinning.

In that instant, Jack had seen the tall man was juggling human arms, legs, a head, and torso. And looking more closely at the head, even without its paper hat, Jack recognized the parts as his own.

"But how have you taken payment...when I'm standing right here?" Jack asked quietly.

The tall man closed his eyes in response. Jack watched the tall man's divine, measured performance for what seemed like hours -- maybe even days. Mesmerized, Jack had no idea when or how the tall man would collect on his debt, and it never occurred to him to care.