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opening extract from

The Palace of Laughter

written by

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published by

Simon & Schuster

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CHAPTER ONE

A BOY IN A BARREL



On a blustery October night the Circus Oscuro came to town. It was clear from the start that this was no ordinary circus. It did not roll into town with fanfares and cartwheeling clowns. No one handed out flyers or announced the show through squawking loudspeakers. Instead, the circus came in the dead of night, when all the townspeople were asleep. Its wagons crept and rumbled down the winding road and across the old stone bridge while the town's fat mayor, who normally had to give his permission before anyone could set up as much as a fruit stall, was snoring in his bed. The circus wagons turned in to the long field at the bottom of the hill that overlooked the

town of Larde, and creaked to a halt in neat rows with barely a sound.

From the wagons and trucks a strange crew emerged into the moonlight – great muscled men with sun-darkened faces, a tattooed giantess with a booming voice who could lift three of the men at once, small wiry boys dragging coils of rope and buckets of sawdust. They began to set up their enormous tent there and then by the light of flickering lanterns, with the wind whipping at the stripy canvas and cracking the ropes across the men's hairy arms. Their shouts and curses were snatched from their throats by the wind and flung up over the hill. Two elephants were led from one of the wagons and set to work, lifting wooden poles into place and pushing them upright with their stubbly foreheads. Acrobats ran up the swaying poles like monkeys, fixing ropes and leaping from point to point as though they were only inches from the ground, gripping lanterns in their strong teeth. A thin man on stilts 20 feet high checked blocks and pulleys and shouted orders to the men below. Slowly the huge tent rose from the grassy field like a great beast awakening, and still the townspeople slept, and the fat mayor's snores ruffled his walrus moustache and rumbled through his wife's dreams.

There was just one witness to the arrival of the circus. A small boy, huddled in a large wooden barrel high on the

side of the hill, watched the raising of the big top, awakened from his sleep by the shouts of the circus people and the occasional trumpeting of the elephants. The boy's name was Miles, and the barrel was his home.

Now if you are picturing a shivering boy standing knee-deep in slimy rainwater in an upright barrel, you will need to turn that picture sideways and let the water run out for a start. This barrel lay on its side under a low-spreading pine tree, which provided shelter from the wind and the rain. It was an enormous barrel that had once held a fine vintage wine, and Miles could almost stand upright in it, although he was nearly eleven. It was dry and warm inside. In the barrel was an old mattress that had been thrown out by Piven, the baker, and which still gave out a cloud of fine flour when you sat on it. A candle stub in a fat bottle served as a lamp, and an old biscuit tin with the paint worn off as a larder.

Miles had lived in his barrel on the side of the hill since escaping (for the seventh time) from Pinchbucket House, the county orphanage. He shared his wooden home with a small stuffed bear named Tangerine, no larger than a tall man's hand. When Tangerine wasn't out and about with his owner, he lived in a deep pocket of the old overcoat that Miles used as a blanket. Some of Tangerine's stuffing had escaped, which made him a little floppy. His

fur, which had once been the colour of a tangerine, was now a kind of orangey grey. His mouth wore a crooked smile, and although he never said a word, he was a good listener.

Under a silver moon Miles, curled up in the mouth of his barrel, watched as the circus tent grew fatter and taller and the thick ropes that anchored it grew tauter. The hypnotic ringing of sledgehammers on iron pegs and the snatches of strange music that floated from the trailers made his eyes heavy and his head nod with sleep. He pulled the old overcoat tighter around him, and closed his eyes for a moment.

When he opened them again he did not know how much time had passed, but everything seemed strangely still. Not an owl's hoot or mouse's rustle broke the silence, and the pine tree stood silently, undisturbed by the faintest breeze. Miles rubbed his eyes and looked out to see if work on the circus tent had ceased, but his eye was caught by something that had not been there before. A large shape crouched in the grass not twenty paces from where he sat in the mouth of his barrel. A shape with a huge head, enormous paws and a long striped tail. It was a fully grown Bengal tiger, stretched out motionless except for the tip of his tail, which twitched from side to side in the silvery grass.

The tiger was so close Miles could almost count his whiskers. His inky stripes seemed to shift and breathe as the thin clouds swept across the moon. Miles held his breath. It was no use crying out; no one would hear him. He had never been face to face with a tiger before, but he was pretty sure that to the magnificent striped beast who sat a stone's throw from his barrel, he must look like a sandwich whose bread had fallen off.

The tiger yawned, his teeth like yellow knives in the red cave of his mouth, and gave a loud but oddly human sigh that made his whiskers shiver. His massive head turned and he stared directly at Miles with his amber eyes. The world turned and the grass grew, and still the tiger regarded the boy silently. Although he had never seen a tiger before, Miles found his gaze strangely familiar, like an echo of a dream often visited and always forgotten. He could feel his heart thumping, and realised that he had not taken a breath since the tiger had appeared.

"Most people run," said the tiger at last, in a deep smooth voice. He flicked the tip of his tail.

Miles said nothing for a moment. Obviously the tiger could not really have spoken to him. Everyone knows that tigers can't talk. Except for the tiger himself it seems, who was waiting for an answer.

"I have nowhere to run to," said Miles, his voice barely

above a whisper. "So if you are going to eat me," he added after a moment, "please make it quick."

The tiger gazed at the skinny boy, wrapped in an oversized overcoat and curled up in the mouth of a barrel. "Now that you mention it," he said, "I do get a little peckish at this time of the morning, but you wouldn't make much of a snack."

"You're right about that," said Miles in a slightly stronger voice. "I am very thin, and . . . and my feet smell terrible! I don't think you'd like them at all, unless you like strong cheese."

The tiger made a rumbling noise, which might have been a chuckle, or the sound of an empty stomach. "I've eaten far fouler things than you, tub boy," he said. "I once ate a health and safety inspector, clipboard, bowler hat and all. I had stomach cramps for a week."

"D-didn't that get you into terrible trouble?" asked Miles.

"On the contrary," rumbled the tiger. "I was given a week off from performances, and a whole wagon to myself."

He got to his feet and stretched himself, five hundred pounds of teeth and muscle rippling in the moonlight. "All this talk of food is making me hungry after all," he said, taking a step towards the barrel and fixing Miles with his steady gaze. "And one can't be too choosy when there's only one item on the menu."

Miles shrank down into the overcoat, trying to look stringy and unappetising. He had often wished he were anywhere but inside a wooden barrel on the side of a hill, but it had to be better than being inside a large tiger's stomach. He groped desperately behind him on the untidy floor of the barrel. His fingers closed on the stub of a candle. No good. He dropped it and groped again, finding one of his threadbare socks. "Maybe I can stink him to death," he thought as the tiger padded closer. He was only a few whisker lengths away now. His hot musty breath warmed the boy's face, and his eyes burned like cold fire, but Miles could not look away. The tiger stopped, the rising sun giving him a halo of fur the colour of flame.

"You can stop scrabbling, little tub boy," he said. "There are some hungers too deep to be satisfied by skin and bones." His nose twitched slightly. "Besides," he said, "I never had a taste for circus people."

"What do you mean?" asked Miles, the words barely escaping his dry throat.

"What I say," said the tiger. "I can smell the circus in you, though you don't look like you could even stand on your head."

"I can't," said Miles, "and I've never even been to a circus."

"Believe what you will," said the tiger, and he turned slowly

and began to pad down the grassy slope without a backward glance. The circus was quiet now, its people hidden in their wagons as the town began to stretch and wake in the dawn. The only sound from below was the faint cracking of the long black pennant that fluttered from the peak of the big top, and the squeaking of a rusty wheelbarrow in which a tiny man carried large slabs of red meat between the animal cages, shoving them through the bars with a stout pole and whistling softly to himself.

Miles rubbed his eyes, which smarted from lack of sleep. He shook his head and looked down the hill, but the tiger was nowhere to be seen, and the wheelbarrow sat empty and unattended in the shadow of the farthest wagon.

Miles woke again when the morning sun was already high in the sky. He was stiff from sleeping curled up in the mouth of his barrel, and his hungry stomach grumbled. He looked down to the bottom of the hill, half expecting to see nothing but an empty field, but there it was, the enormous black and red tent with its rows of silent wagons. "At least that part wasn't a dream," he said to Tangerine, whose head poked from the overcoat pocket. Tangerine just smiled.

In the daylight Miles could see more clearly what a strange circus it was. The wagons were painted in dark and lurid colours, with patterns that were spiky and tangled.

Their wooden wheels were studded with iron hobnails. The largest wagon was decorated with an enormous clown's face, his eyes and black-lipped mouth wide open in a silent laugh, and his electric-blue hair standing out from his head, like a hungry crocodile that had been struck by lightning. There was a painted scroll beneath the clown's head, and Miles squinted as he read the letters. "The Great Cortado," said the scroll. The name was somehow ominous. *The Great Cortado.* He shivered in the thin sunlight.

The two elephants were tethered to a tree at the edge of the field, where they stood patiently resting from their labours of the night before. Other beasts could be half seen in their cages. Several monkeys screeched insults at the haughty camels next door. Another wagon housed a pair of zebras whose stripes blended with the shadows of the bars, so that you could only see them when they moved. A long scaly tail hung through the bars of one cage almost to the ground. Miles searched for any sign of a tiger.

There was one wagon set apart from the others in a corner of the field. It was painted entirely in red, except for black frames on the door and on the tiny barred windows. The door was fitted with three strong bolts, each with a padlock the size of a man's fist. The dogs that ran in circles, barking at the flapping canvas and stealing scraps of meat that had dropped from the cages, steered well clear of the

corner where the red wagon stood. It seemed a strange sort of housing for a tiger.

"As soon as it gets dark," said Miles to Tangerine, "we're going to sneak into that circus, and we're going to find that tiger, if he really exists."