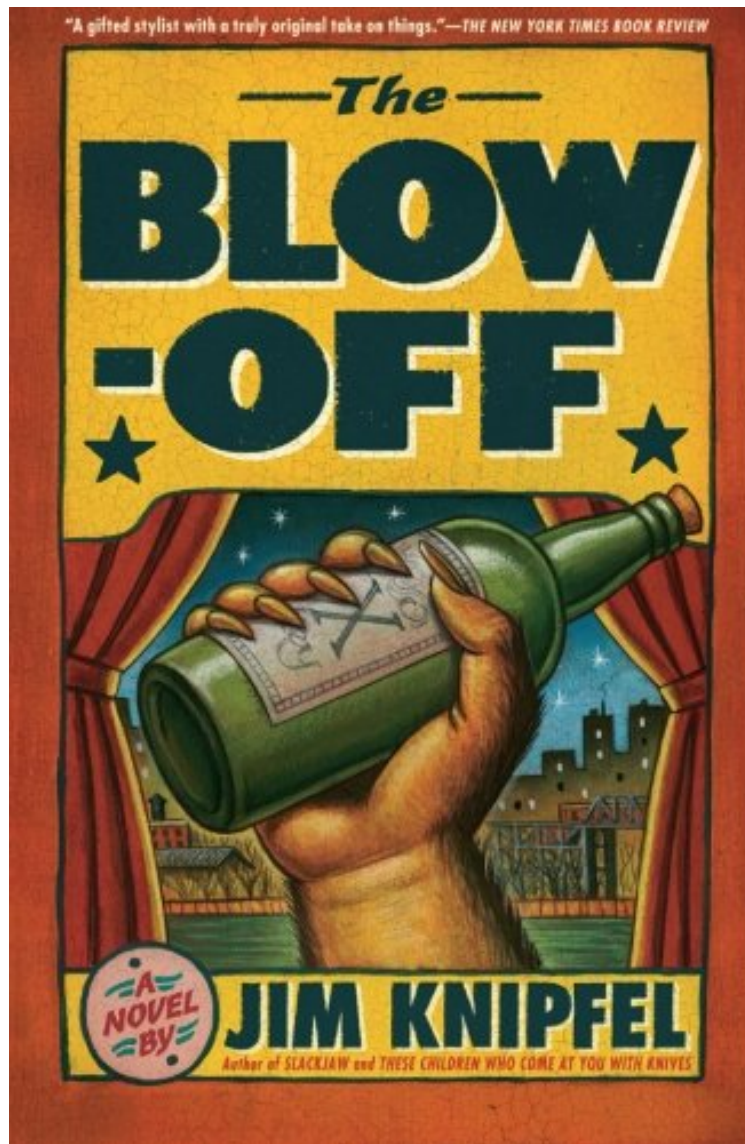


[Read and download] The Blow-off: A Novel

## The Blow-off: A Novel

*Jim Knipfel*

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**Jim Knipfel : The Blow-off: A Novel** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Blow-off: A Novel:

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. This book is completely out of bounds. I loved it.By EJLet me begin by saying that I think "The Blow Off" may turn out to be an American classic, or the Great American Novel, or something equally as esteemed, because it is absolutely fantastic. However, I say this with a word of caution, because this book is so offensive to just about every demographic group in the country that if you don't know what you are

getting into, you might not enjoy it. Nonetheless, it delivers a massive wallop of societal introspection, and does so with such delicious wit that it was truly the best book I've read in ages. On the surface, this story follows Hank Kalabander, a Brooklyn crime blotter writer for, shall we say, a questionable magazine. Hank's police blotter entries are nothing short of laugh-out-loud hysterical, but are not widely read until a blogger steals one of his pieces and unwittingly sets off a search for a monster on the loose in New York City. Tied in with this are glimpses of Hank's earlier escapades as a carny, with clues to his past given with a velvet touch that helps you understand where this guy is coming from. This book is the absolute definition of dark humor, coming off like the love child of *A Confederacy of Dunces* and *The Ask: A Novel*. It nonchalantly saunters up to the boundaries of good taste and then throws kerosene on them and lights them afire. However, in addition to the humor, there is so much truth in this book that I definitely felt the spanking underneath the laughter. The commentary on our modern society with its 60-second news cycle and all-too-common failure of common sense is like a knife through ribs already sore from laughing. It's absolutely brilliant.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Terrible. Totally incomprehensible. Buy at your own risk!

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Loved it - Do not miss out on this one!

By R. M. D. I recommend this novel without hesitation. The descriptions and characters are all so well drawn out that I was fully immersed the whole time I was reading. I felt easily carried along by the humor and the carefully crafted plot. And the plot's conclusion is brilliant and left me dazed and grasping for words. The main character, Hank Kalabander, is fascinating, sardonic, and (in his own warped way) profoundly insightful. I was entertained throughout, and then blown away by the large scale of novel's ending that reminded me of Ellison's *The Invisible Man* or of a Nathanael West novel. I think it is one of this author's best works to date, and I can't wait for more because he seems to just keep getting better.

**Monster Stalks NYC** When a local drunk is mugged near the toxic Gowanus Canal by “a hulking, hairy beast who smells really bad,” Hank Kalabander thinks nothing of blaming the assault on the legendary Bigfoot. His sardonic crime blotter for *The Hornet*, a local Brooklyn rag, often gleefully recounts the tragedies that befall the borough's dimmer residents. But when an upstart reporter from *The Eagle*, a tabloid paper, lifts his piece and implicates Bigfoot in two more attacks, the crimes become local news fodder and the hunt for the “Gowanus Beast” takes off. Pretty soon the G.B. is to blame for everything from murder and robberies to playground scuffles and a pie's disappearance—and neighborhood watch patrols have taken to the streets. Alarmed by the populace's response, Hank decides it's his responsibility to disprove the existence of this menacing beast and, with the help of an old carny colleague, put an end to the growing hysteria. In *The Blow-off*, acclaimed writer Jim Knipfel has crafted an astoundingly funny send-up of our current times—an intoxicating blend of sharp cultural references, wildly comical scenes, discerning commentary, and unforgettable characters.

“A gritty, satirical thriller that wonderfully echoes H.L. Mencken's views on the American public. . . . Knipfel's characters are delightfully pitch-perfect. . . . *The Blow-Off* is laugh-out-loud funny.” —John Wilwol, *The Washington Post* “[A] hilariously sardonic shake of the head at the media and the public's willingness, even outright desire, to get riled up over nothing in particular. . . . Knipfel's writing has quite a bite.” —Keith Staskiewicz, *Entertainment Weekly* “Forget the Loch Ness monster. There's a beast lurking by the Gowanus Canal, and he may be responsible for a crime wave. In this fun novel. . . every incident in the city is lain at his big, fictional feet.” —Billy Heller, *The New York Post* “An engrossing, hilarious novel that also has bite and wonderfully paced dialogue. Through Hank, Knipfel—a Brooklyn-based former newspaper columnist himself—makes insightful and humorous observations on a number of annoyances threatening to make the world a beastlier place.” —Michelle Jones, *The Dallas Morning News* “Knipfel takes hilarious aim at the ravaging New York media and what Knipfel portrays as the desperately thin veneer of reason and public order in the Big Apple. . . dark, and quirky humor animates all his writing.” —Booklist “Knipfel gets to wax poetic on the (d)evolution of journalism and the media's appetite for sensationalism. But he does it with the same pointed humor that made *These Children* such a treat. A funny and subversive caper novel that speaks the language of days gone by.” —Kirkus s “Knipfel balances the ugly, the frightening, and the unseemly to give readers a morbidly playful story with a surprising amount of heart.” —Publishers Weekly “You read [Knipfel] for the spell under which his prose can place you. At this, he has only gotten better with time.” —Roy Edroso, *The Village Voice*

**About the Author** Jim Knipfel is the author of three memoirs, *Slackjaw*, *Quitting the Nairobi Trio*, and *Ruining It for Everybody*, and three novels, *Noogie's Time to Shine*, *The Buzzing*, and *Unplugging Philco*. He lives in Brooklyn.

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. One “Inside this tent! You will SEE... before your very eyes! This beautiful, luscious young lady transformed into a snarling, hideous, three-hundred-pound gorilla!... ALIVE! ALIVE! ALIVE!... You will SEE the clothing fall from her young and supple body! You will SEE thick black hair sprout from her tender bare flesh! The long black hair of a GORILLA covering her entire body! Her teeth will grow into dripping yellow fangs! She will—before your eyes!—become a BEAST of the jungle! But don't worry, folks. All the while she will be confined within an iron cage lined with reinforced steel bars! Only the bravest of the brave are invited inside! So step right up and buy your tickets... ALIVE! ALIVE! ALIVE!” The recording

started once again from the beginning. “No,” was all she said. The limp and faded banner hanging over the entrance to the tent featured a screaming, bikini-clad beauty held loosely in the clutches of what appeared to be a twelve-foot-tall gorilla who, likewise, was screaming about something. His (as promised) wicked yellow fangs were dripping blood. Behind them, for some reason, stood a single palm tree. “C’mon,” he said, his voice distant, his eyes fixed on the crudely painted banner. His legs were already moving toward the tent, and he was tugging at her immovable arm like a Jack Russell terrier who’d just spotted something in the gutter. A slice of pizza or the severed wing of a pigeon. “No,” Annie repeated more firmly. She leaned back, digging her heels into the blacktop, which had softened in the unbearable heat of the past three days. She wrenched her arm free from his sweaty grip. There was no question or hesitation in her tone, no opening for negotiations. She folded her arms and waited for him to turn around and meet her unwavering gaze. The heavy air around them reeked of burnt sugar and sweat and howled with a collision of warped calliope music, classic rock, and screams. Where they stood, they were hemmed in on all sides by thousands of dancing and whirling and throbbing pinpoint lights. Hank’s eyes snapped away from the banner and back to his wife, his confusion deepening. “No? Whaddya mean no? It’s a Girl-to-Gorilla show.” He spoke the term as if merely uttering it aloud would clarify everything. “No.” “Look, sweetie—Annie—like the tape says, there’s nothing to worry about. It’s in a cage. I’ve seen this show a dozen times and it gets me every time. Great little trick. It’s done with mirrors, you know.” He stared at her expectantly. “That’s great, Marv. Really. But no.” “Marv was your first husband,” Hank gently corrected. He bit his lip, his eyes drifting involuntarily back toward the ticket booth outside the Girl-to-Gorilla tent. “I just don’t see the attraction.” “Fine, I can accept that,” he said. “But would you mind if I went in? You can wait out here, and I’ll be back in ten—” From inside the tent came the squeal and crash of a metal cage door torn from its hinges and tossed to the ground. Annie jumped a step closer to Hank as, at that instant, the piercing shrieks of half a dozen teenage girls erupted inside. One of the tent’s nylon side panels billowed outward, went taut, and focused nearly to a point before a small, almost delicate black fist punched through the orange fabric. The screams from inside the tent were growing more frenzied. There was a tearing sound as those same girls, blind with panic, ripped their way through the tent wall and poured out onto the midway, stumbling over one another, still screaming and laughing, before scattering in half a dozen different directions. Hank watched a few of them go, shaking his head in quiet, resigned amusement, knowing for certain there was now no way in hell he’d get Annie into the show. “They’re a superstitious people,” he explained. “They always overreact to these things.” “Shhhh.” His wife glowered at him and pinched his arm for the third time that night. There was nothing playful about it. Hank winced and pulled his arm away. “All right, then. Let’s move on. We’ll see the gorilla show later. Great show. Trust me. Used to see it when I was a kid.” She took his arm and they moved down the midway away from the ripped tent, weaving their way through the thick Jersey crowds, trying to avoid the dropped ice-cream cones and puddles of cotton candy vomit as they went. The rides they were passing grew more rickety and treacherous with each passing year. Or maybe, Annie sometimes thought, she and Hank were just getting older. “Why do you suppose they call that one the Black Hole?” Annie shouted into his ear in an effort to be heard over the tedious, thumping rhythms of the ride’s soundtrack—some insipid pop tune or another—blasting at jet engine levels. The “ride” itself appeared to be nothing more than a small wooden shack capable of holding no more than five or six people at a time, so long as none of those people moved. Yet there was a line of ticket holders twenty or thirty long, eagerly awaiting a chance to step inside. “You’d be surprised,” he shouted back. The Saturday night crowd was a swamp of hairy arms and soiled logo T-shirts, wailing children, haggard sundresses, drooping bellies, body odor, and cigar smoke. “What’s with you, you hit your head on something?” Annie asked once the noise had faded to tolerable levels. She’d noticed his face and it worried her. At first she thought he might be having a stroke. “What’s wrong?” “You’re smiling.” Hank stopped walking to assess what his face was up to, examining it with his free hand. She was right. The smile dropped away. “Sorry,” he said. He looked around. “C’mon, let’s find a beer stand. Maybe that Chinaman who was here last year’s still around someplace.” She twisted the flesh of his upper arm again. She wasn’t fooling around. “Ow! Christ,” he yelped, yanking his arm away and rubbing the point of assault. “Why do you keep doing that?” “Don’t use that word in public.” Her whisper was fierce. “Take a look around you. You shouldn’t even use it at home.” “What word? That’s the fourth time tonight and I don’t even know what I’m saying.” Despite the repeated attacks, Henry (“Hank”) Kalabander was in his element. It might have been his second or third element in terms of priorities, but it was without question one of the top five. He brought Annie to the Meadowlands Fair every year. Before Annie, he’d brought his first wife. And before his first wife, he brought whoever was handy. Or he came alone. Annie had caught him smiling the first year he’d brought her here, too. It was the first time she’d seen him do that in public. “But you hate crowds,” she’d pointed out back then. “Yes... yes I do. But I live in New York.” “And you hate New York. So why do you like it here? It’s more crowded than Midtown, and you haven’t been to Midtown in seventeen years.” “I’m not so inflexible that there can’t be exceptions to the rule.” “Bullshit.” “Okay then, I’m not so inflexible that there can’t be this one single exception to the rule. More going on here than in goddamn Times Square.” “I might almost accept that,” she finally conceded. That was some seven or eight years back. He knew in his heart it wasn’t a real explanation, that nothing had been settled, and that he’d be back the following year and the year after that (as he had been ever since), trying to figure out the answer for himself. “Where’s that fuckin’ Chinaman?” He was swinging his head from side to

side, peering through the crowds, the rides, the game booths with each futile pass in search of a beer shack. Annie refrained from pinching him this time, afraid she might do some real damage. “Hank, we talked about this a few months ago, remember? It was on the news. They don’t sell beer here anymore. Some kind of statute—like they did in the city with the street fairs.” His head stopped swinging and he stared at her with deeply saddened eyes. “You’re kidding.” “I’m pretty sure it was passed. Too many people were getting shot. Or having fun, something like that. If we see one, we’ll stop. I just don’t think you should get obsessed with finding one if it’s just not here.” She looked at her watch. “They close in an hour and a half. What else do you want to see?” He gave her a weak smile. “You’re right, kid,” he said, lightly crossing her chin with his fist. “Let’s see what they got at the back end this year. Maybe we’ll grab a couple corn dogs on the way. I’m trusting they haven’t banned those yet.” She raised one eyebrow. “You know what your doctor said.” He took her arm and headed toward one of the far corners of the midway, past the balloon race and the Billy the Drug Addict exhibit. “My doctor says a lot of things, most of them involving the terms ‘heart attack,’ ‘stroke,’ and ‘death.’ Which is why I prefer not to talk to him much anymore. C’mon, let’s see if we can find a Chinaman who’ll sell us a couple corn dogs.” Ten minutes later they turned a corner and Hank slowed to a stop. In front of them was another orange and yellow striped tent. Hanging along the side were ten fifteen-foot-tall banners, obviously painted by the same artist responsible for the Girl-to-Gorilla banner. In this case, things were a bit harder to figure out. There was a banner for Zumelda, the Egyptian Mummy Princess, and another for Monster McGee, King of the Sea, featuring a giant, snarling polar bear snatching up a paw full of tiny Eskimos. At the bottom of each were two round red logos promising that the creatures in question were both “Real!” and “Inside!” The banner that caught Hank’s eye was to the far right of the line. The central image was of a hideous creature, part ape, part wolf, it looked like, with shaggy hair, pointed ears, a long snout, and dripping, bloody fangs. In one bloody claw it clutched a disemboweled sheep. The legend across the bottom identified the horrible beast as Giles Goat Sucker. “Oh, that’s too good for a place like this,” Hank said with quiet admiration. Another warped tape loop was blaring a pitch through speakers poised above the entrance. “... collection of marvels will astound you and confound you! Confuse you and amuse you! And they’re all guaranteed one HUNDRED percent real! Get close enough to touch Monster McGee, King of the Sea. IF... YOU... DARE! You will never be the same again! And if you can prove beyond a doubt that any of the wonders you see inside this tent aren’t as REAL as YOU and ME—I will personally pay you ten THOUSAND dollars in cash! So come inside, folks, and SEE the Egyptian mummy! SEE the world famous CHUPA... CAAAHBRAAA! The terror of Mexico! SEE—” Hank’s eyes drifted down to the ticket stand and focused on the short, bald man who ran the show. He wore a glittering purple vest and red and white striped pants. To take a wild guess, he might have been in his late fifties. Or he could’ve been a lot older or a lot younger. It was hard to tell with someone that short. The face was squashed and heavily lined, and the nose, flat and askew, seemed to have been broken more than once. He was chomping on a long black unlit cigar. “Well, I’ll be damned,” Hank said. “I thought I recognized that voice.” “You know him?” Annie asked, moving closer, casting a doubtful glance at the little man. “Fortunately or unfortunately, yeah. Name’s Rocky. Rocky Roccoco.” “Why does none of this surprise me?” “His real name’s Archie but he’s gone by Rocky for as long as I’ve known him. Ain’t seen him in years. Eight or ten at least. Always figured he was dead.” By way of explanation, he leaned down and whispered into Annie’s ear. “He’s not really a midget but he keeps trying.” “Isn’t the more correct term nowadays ‘little person’?” “Yeah, probably. Something like that, anyway. That’s why he’s trying to be a midget.” Annie looked up at Hank, trying to read his face. “So is he someone you want to say hi to or someone you’d rather avoid?” With Hank, she knew, it was usually the latter, but it was always good to check first. He paused a moment in deliberation, considering the banners. “I can’t honestly say that you’ll want to meet him yourself? But I think he’s someone you should meet. If that makes sense. He’s... yeah, he’s really something.” She saw a mysterious and mischievous flicker in Hank’s eyes, and that always worried her a bit. “Besides, I really want to see his show. C’mon, we’ll help him turn the tip.” “We’ll what?” She hesitated. “Don’t worry,” he assured her. “No gorillas’ll grab you in here. It’s a museum show. C’mon.” Before she could ask what a museum show was, he took her hand and began dragging her through the smelly, slow-moving crowd toward the ticket stand. There’s that Jack Russell again, Annie thought. There was nothing in his mind or his field of vision but that tent, and nothing was going to stop him from reaching it. Above them, the recorded pitch rolled on. “... will make you quiver and shiver and shrivel your liver! You will SEE!” They joined the drunk, the bored, the nostalgic, and the merely curious and took their spot at the end of the line. Hank winked at Annie. “I wanna see how long it takes him.” Annie looked at Rocky, who didn’t seem to be looking at anyone. His eyes were on the till and he chewed furiously on that cold cigar while mechanically repeating, “Two George Washington dollars, folks, that’s all it takes... Two George Washington dollars...” When it was their turn Hank slid four singles toward the short bald man. “That’s exact change there, stubby. You can try that drop counter on some other sucker.” “Never heard of such a thing, officer,” Rocky said without looking up. He snatched the bills away. “I run a straight-up operation here.” “Aw, c’mon there, short stuff, you ain’t run a legit operation since before you was swimmin’ around in your daddy’s balls.” Rocky looked up only when he noticed this jackass wasn’t moving. The gnarled face squinted at the man who was grinning down at him like some godforsaken half-wit. It took a moment before his eyes widened in recognition. “Why you yallah rat bastard,” he said, removing the cigar so he could sneer. “Whaddya dirtyin’ up my air for?” Hank hissed out a

small laugh. “Don’t want to hold up the line, newtling. We’ll be inside. Pop in, you get a chance. And if not, go fuck yourself.” He turned to Annie and pointed her toward the tent flaps. “Don’t count on it, asshole!” Rocky shouted behind them. Annie had never seen Hank in this mode before. It was a little disconcerting. “Should we be sticking around here?” she asked. “He didn’t sound too happy to see you.” “Just wait,” Hank replied as he led the way inside. The interior was illuminated by four overhead strings of bare incandescent bulbs stretching the length of the tent, together with a handful of small spotlights trained on the individual roped-off exhibits. The floor was covered with an inch of sawdust. The moist air smelled of mildew, urine, and popcorn. Fifteen other curiosity seekers milled about, younger couples mostly, thin, rodent-faced boys with halfhearted mustaches and blank-eyed, gum-cracking girls clutching small, cheap stuffed animals. They were shuffling slowly through the sawdust from exhibit to exhibit, saying little, their expressions impassive. Too young to be that dead, Hank thought. The sides of the tent were lined with meager displays, mostly poster-sized black and white photos of classic sideshow freaks of yore: Johnny Eck, Chang and Eng the Original Siamese Twins, and Percilla the Monkey Girl. One glass case held a stuffed perch covered in rabbit fur. Another, according to the hand-lettered placard next to it, held the three-thousand-year-old mummy of an Egyptian princess named Marcella. “Was that the name on the poster outside?” Annie asked. “It isn’t, is it?” “Dunno,” Hank replied. “But Marcella was the name of Rocky’s second wife.” He leaned in closer to the glass, trying to get a better look at the face. “With all that makeup, can’t tell if it’s really her in there or not.” Annie took a closer look herself. “Not unless his second wife was plastic.” Next to Marcella was a six-foot-tall stuffed polar bear, looking only vaguely ferocious. The once white fur was yellowed and reeked of cigar smoke. It was thinning in patches, leaving the stitching down his belly and around his mouth clearly visible. Next to him was a sign reading, simply, “Monster McGee, King of the Sea.” “I don’t get that at all,” Annie confessed. “Ah, very simple,” Hank said, turning to her. “Let me try to explain. Now this guy here, see,” he gestured at the bear, “this guy here is Monster McGee. And he’s whatcha might call King of—” “All right,” she cut him off. “Just shut up.” Hank glanced around again and saw what he was looking for on the other side of the tent. “C’mere,” he said, taking Annie’s hand and leading her through the sawdust. The posterboard legend on the easel next to the aluminum cage read: GILES GOAT SUCKER (Chupacabra) This legendary beast has terrified farmers and ranchers in South America for generations! For killing and eating livestock and devouring the blood of animals! Scientists say the monster never existed, but this one was captured in the Yucatán in 2001, while eating a live sheep, but it soon died in captivity! Inside the cage was propped a department-store mannequin draped in a shabby, ill-fitting gorilla suit that gathered at the elbows and ankles. In place of the head was a stuffed wolf’s head, its lips stretched back to bare the fangs. Strapped to each of its hands was a leather glove equipped with four long blades—a favorite Halloween costume accessory in the late 1980s. Hank shook his head and sighed. “What,” Annie asked, “you expected them to have a real live monster in here?” “No.” His voice was oddly sad as he scrutinized the piecemeal creature in the cage. “Not really. Suspension of disbelief problems, I guess. I’ve always been a sucker for sideshow banners. They promise so much, and they get me every single goddamn time. Ever since I was a kid.” The tent flap flew back and an unmistakably nasal voice burst in their ears. “Well, if that ain’t the home cookin’! As I live an’ breathe, it’s ole Hank Kalabander-Rhymes-With-Salamander!” They both turned and saw Rocky Roccoco marching toward them, cigar in hand. “Hey Salamander, you ole so-an’-so. You with it and for it?” “You know I am, Rock.” Rocky drew within a few inches of Hank and glared up at him as all the good humor suddenly drained away into the sawdust. “No, you’re not,” he scowled, replacing the cigar in his mouth. “You’re just a chump. A lügen. Come here every year, get your fill in a couple hours, then go home to the suburbs with your lawns an’ your clean sheets. You’re no different from the rest of the townies.” Annie looked at Hank, nervous, not knowing what to make of this. She saw the hurt pass across his face, but it was gone in an instant. Hank took a step closer to Rocky and bent down, grabbing the front of his shirt. “Better watch your step there, Rochester,” he said. “Remember, I can still pick you up, turn you upside down, and shake you like a fish.” “I wouldn’t suggest it,” Rocky shot back, removing the cigar again, drawing out a thin string of spittle from his lower lip to the stogie’s slick, well-chewed end. “Not with your back, old man. Liable to land you in traction.” Hank cocked his head slightly to the right and released Rocky’s shirt. He turned to Annie. “I think he has a point.” He straightened himself. “Rock, want you to meet my wife, Annie. We got hitched... ah...” “Six years ago,” Annie said. “Yeah. Like she said.” Rocky stuck out a rough hand. “Annie, pleased to mee’cha.” His bloodshot eyes scanned her up and down in an obvious and less than gentlemanly fashion. “Roccoco’s the name, and any wife of Hank Salamander’s a wife of mine. But I’ll tell ya, toots, you’re wastin’ your time with this mug. He’s old and he’s slow and he’s a nasty bastard.” “I know that already,” she countered. “See that Rock? She knows already.” Hank was beginning to recall why he hadn’t bothered talking to his friend for almost a decade. More rubes were drifting in through the tent entrance, and as they did most cast Rocky a curious look before moving on to Marcella. “So,” Hank said, “I had no idea you were with this outfit. Haven’t seen you here for the past few years. Last I saw you, you were with Serpentine Brothers, weren’t you?” “Probably.” Rocky was keeping an eye on the newcomers just to make sure none of these damn kids started messing with his attractions. Guessing it might not be the time to push for details, Hank moved on. “Nice show you got here—and I gotta hand it to you on this.” He waved at the sign next to the Chupacabra cage. “Very literary of you. Postmodern, even.” “What the fuck are you talking about?” Rocky looked at the sign, then back to Hank. “Just the name, I mean.” “What about it?”

“Well, there’s a novel by…” Then he thought better of it. “Yeah, never mind. Kind of a shoddy job on the presentation, though, don’t you think?” Rocky’s face tightened. It was apparently Hank’s turn to jab a sore spot. “What the fuck do you expect? Three days before season opens, you got a banner, you got a legend, but you got no Chupacabra. Let’s see you pull something outa your ass, Einstein. I had to improvise. Still got you in here, didn’t it?” He glanced at his watch. “I gotta get back out front, make sure that pinhead ain’t pocketing too much of the take. But hang out for a while if you like.” “Maybe let’s grab a drink after you close up?” Rocky nodded. “Solid, Jackson. Gate closes at ten. I could be outa here by ten-thirty. We’ll go cut up a few jackpots.” As he turned to leave, Hank stopped him. “Heya, Rock. What’s your blow-off this season? If it’s Miracle of Life, I’ll save my fifty cents.” Rocky looked confused for a moment, then the contempt returned. The cigar came out again. “Only get blow-offs with live acts, dummy,” he said, before adding, “With it and for it, my ass.” He turned and stepped through the tent flaps, out into the thump and scream of the dark midway. © 2011 Jim Knipfel