Geek Love by Katherine Dunn

Chapter 1: The Nuclear Family:

His Talk, Her Teeth

When your mama was the geek, my dreamlets," Papa would say, "she made the nipping off of noggins such a crystal mystery that the hens themselves yearned toward her, waltzing around her, hypnotized with longing. 'Spread your lips, sweet Lil,' they'd cluck, 'and show us your choppers!' "

This same Crystal Lil, our star-haired mama, sitting snug on the built-in sofa that was Arty's bed at night, would chuckle at the sewing in her lap and shake her head. "Don't piffle to the children, Al. Those hens ran like whiteheads."

Nights on the road this would be, between shows and towns in some campground or pull-off, with the other vans and trucks and trailers of Binewski's Carnival Fabulon ranged up around us, safe in our portable village.

After supper, sitting with full bellies in the lamp glow, we Binewskis were supposed to read and study. But if it rained the story mood would sneak up on Papa. The hiss and tick on the metal of our big living van distracted him from his papers. Rain on a show night was catastrophe. Rain on the road meant talk, which, for Papa, was pure pleasure.

"It's a shame and a pity, Lil," he'd say, "that these offspring of yours should only know the slumming summer geeks from Yale."

"Princeton, dear," Mama would correct him mildly. "Randall will be a sophomore this fall. I believe he's our first Princeton boy."

We children would sense our story slipping away to trivia. Arty would nudge me and I'd pipe up with, "Tell about the time when Mama was the geek!" and Arty and Elly and Iphy and Chick would all slide into line with me on the floor between Papa's chair and Mama.

Mama would pretend to be fascinated by her sewing and Papa would tweak his swooping mustache and vibrate his tangled eyebrows, pretending reluctance. "Wellllll ..." he'd begin, "it was a long time ago ..."

"Before we were born!"

"Before ..." he'd proclaim, waving an arm in his grandest ringmaster style, "before I even dreamed you, my dreamlets!"

"I was still Lillian Hinchcliff in those days," mused Mama. "And when your father spoke to me, which was seldom and reluctantly, he called me 'Miss.' "

"Miss!" we would giggle. Papa would whisper to us loudly, as though Mama couldn't hear, "Terrified! I was so smitten I'd stutter when I tried to talk to her. 'M-M-M-Miss ...' I'd say."

We'd giggle helplessly at the idea of Papa, the GREAT TALKER, so flummoxed.

"I, of course, addressed your father as Mister Binewski."

"There I was," said Papa, "hosing the old chicken blood and feathers out of the geek pit on the morning of July 3rd and congratulating myself for having good geek posters, telling myself I was going to sell tickets by the bale because the weekend of the Fourth is the hottest time for geeks and I had a fine, brawny geek that year. Enthusiastic about the work, he was. So I'm hosing away, feeling very comfortable and proud of myself, when up trips your mama, looking like angelfood, and tells me my geek has done a flit in the night, folded his rags as you might say, and hailed a taxi for the airport. He leaves a note claiming his pop is very sick and he, the geek, must retire from the pit and take his fangs home to Philadelphia to run the family bank."

"Brokerage, dear," corrects Mama.

"And with your mama, Miss Hinchcliff, standing there like three scoops of vanilla I can't even cuss! What am I gonna do? The geek posters are all over town!"

"It was during a war, darlings," explains Mama. "I forget which one precisely. Your father had difficulty getting help at that time or he never would have hired me, even to make costumes, as inexperienced as I was."

"So I'm standing there fuddled from breathing Miss Hinchcliff's Midnight Marzipan perfume and cross-eyed with figuring. I couldn't climb into the pit myself because I was doing twenty jobs already. I couldn't ask Horst the Cat Man because he was a vegetarianto begin with, and his dentures would disintegrate the first time he hit a

chicken neck anyhow. Suddenly your mama pops up for all the world like she was offering me sherry and biscuits. 'I'll do it, Mr. Binewski,' she says, and I just about sent a present to my laundryman."

Mama smiled sweetly into her sewing and nodded. "I was anxious to prove myself useful to the show. I'd been with Binewski's Fabulon only two weeks at the time and I felt very keenly that I was on trial."

"So I says," interrupts Papa, " 'But, miss, what about your teeth?' Meaning she might break 'em or chip 'em, and she smiles wide, just like she's smiling now, and says, 'They're sharp enough, I think!' "

We looked at Mama and her teeth were white and straight, but of course by that time they were all false.

"I looked at her delicate little jaw and I just groaned. 'No,' I says, 'I couldn't ask you to …' but it did flash into my mind that a blonde and lovely geek with legs—I mean your mama has what we refer to in the trade as LEGS—would do the business no real harm. I'd never heard of a girl geek before and the poster possibilities were glorious. Then I thought again, No … she couldn't …"

"What your papa didn't know was that I'd watched the geek several times and of course I'd often helped Minna, our cook at home, when she slaughtered a fowl for the table. I had him. He had no choice but to give me a try."

"Oh, but I was scared spitless when her first show came up that afternoon! Scared she'd be disgusted and go home to Boston. Scared she'd flub the deal and have the crowd screaming for their money back. Scared she'd get hurt … A chicken could scratch her or peck an eye out quick as a blink."

"I was quite nervous myself," nodded Mama.

"The crowd was good. A hot Saturday that was, and the Fourth of July was the Sunday. I was running like a geeked bird the whole day myself, and just had time to duck behind the pit for one second before I stood up front to lead in the mugs. There she was like a butterfly …"

"I wore tatters really, white because it shows the blood so well even in the dark of the pit."

“But such artful tatters! Such low-necked, slit-to-the-thigh, silky tatters! So I took a deep breath and went out to talk ’em in. And in they went. A lot of soldiers in the crowd. I was still selling tickets when the cheers and whistles started inside and the whooping and stomping on those old wood bleachers drew even more people. I finally grabbed a popcorn kid to sell tickets and went inside to see for myself.”

Papa grinned at Mama and twiddled his mustache.

“I’ll never forget,” he chuckled.

“I couldn’t growl, you see, or snarl convincingly. So I sang,” explained Mama.

“Happy little German songs! In a high, thin voice!”

“Franz Schubert, my dears.”

“She fluttered around like a dainty bird, and when she caught those ugly squawking hens you couldn’t believe she’d actually do anything. When she went right ahead and geeked ’em that whole larruping crowd went bonzo wild. There never was such a snap and twist of the wrist, such a vampire flick of the jaws over a neck or such a champagne approach to the blood. She’d shake her star-white hair and the bitten-off chicken head would skew off into the corner while she dug her rosy little fingernails in and lifted the flopping, jittering carcass like a golden goblet, and sipped! Absolutely sipped at the wriggling guts! She was magnificent, a princess, a Cleopatra, an elfin queen! That was your mama in the geek pit.

“People swarmed her act. We built more bleachers, moved her into the biggest top we had, eleven hundred capacity, and it was always jammed.”

“It was fun.” Lil nodded. “But I felt that it wasn’t my true métier.”

“Yeah.” Papa would half frown, looking down at his hands, quieted suddenly.

Feeling the story mood evaporate, one of us children would coax, “What made you quit, Mama?”

She would sigh and look up from under her spun-glass eyebrows at Papa and then turn to where we were huddled on the floor in a heap and say softly, “I had always dreamed of flying. The Antifermos, the Italian trapeze clan, joined the show in

Abilene and I begged them to teach me." Then she wasn't talking to us anymore but to Papa. "And, Al, you know you would never have got up the nerve to ask for my hand if I hadn't fallen and got so bunged up. Where would we be now if I hadn't?"

Papa nodded, "Yes, yes, and I made you walk again just fine, didn't I?" But his face went flat and smileless and his eyes went to the poster on the sliding door to their bedroom. It was old silvered paper, expensive, with the lone lush figure of Mama in spangles and smile, high-stepping with arms thrown up so her fingers, in red elbow-length gloves, touched the starry letters arching "CRYSTAL LIL" above her.

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My father's name was Aloysius Binewski. He was raised in a traveling carnival owned by his father and called "Binewski's Fabulon." Papa was twenty-four years old when Grandpa died and the carnival fell into his hands. Al carefully bolted the silver urn containing his father's ashes to the hood of the generator truck that powered the midway. The old manhad wandered with the show for so long that his dust would have been miserable left behind in some stationary vault.

Times were hard and, through no fault of young Al's, business began to decline. Five years after Grandpa died, the once flourishing carnival was fading.

The show was burdened with an aging lion that repeatedly broke expensive dentures by gnawing the bars of his cage; demands for cost-of-living increases from the fat lady, whose food supply was written into her contract; and the midnight defection of an entire family of animal eroticists, taking their donkey, goat, and Great Dane with them.

The fat lady eventually jumped ship to become a model for a magazine called Chubby Chaser. My father was left with a cut-rate, diesel-fueled fire-eater and the prospect of a very long stretch in a trailer park outside of Fort Lauderdale.

Al was a standard-issue Yankee, set on self-determination and independence, but in that crisis his core of genius revealed itself. He decided to breed his own freak show.

My mother, Lillian Hinchcliff, was a water-cool aristocrat from the fastidious side of Boston's Beacon Hill, who had abandoned her heritage and joined the carnival to become an aerialist. Nineteen is late to learn to fly and Lillian fell, smashing her elegant

nose and her collarbones. She lost her nerve but not her lust for sawdust and honky-tonk lights. It was this passion that made her an eager partner in Al's scheme. She was willing to chip in on any effort to renew public interest in the show. Then, too, the idea of inherited security was ingrained from her childhood. As she often said, "What greater gift could you offeryour children than an inherent ability to earn a living just by being themselves?"

The resourceful pair began experimenting with illicit and prescription drugs, insecticides, and eventually radioisotopes. My mother developed a complex dependency on various drugs during this process, but she didn't mind. Relying on Papa's ingenuity to keep her supplied, Lily seemed to view her addiction as a minor by-product of their creative collaboration.

Their firstborn was my brother Arturo, usually known as Aqua Boy. His hands and feet were in the form of flippers that sprouted directly from his torso without intervening arms or legs. He was taught to swim in infancy and was displayed nude in a big clear-sided tanklike an aquarium. His favorite trick at the ages of three and four was to put his face close to the glass, bulging his eyes out at the audience, opening and closing his mouth like a river bass, and then to turn his back and paddle off, revealing the turd trailing from his muscular little buttocks. Al and Lil laughed about it later, but at the time it caused them great consternation as well as the nuisance of sterilizing the tank more often than usual. As the years passed, Arty donned trunks and became more sophisticated, but it's been said, with some truth, that his attitude never really changed.

My sisters, Electra and Iphigenia, were born when Arturo was two years old and starting to haul in crowds. The girls were Siamese twins with perfect upper bodies joined at the waist and sharing one set of hips and legs. They usually sat and walked and slept with their long arms around each other. They were, however, able to face directly forward by allowing the shoulder of one to overlap the other. They were always beautiful, slim, and huge-eyed. They studied the piano and began performing piano duets at an early age. Their compositions for four hands were thought by some to have revolutionized the twelve-tone scale.

I was born three years after my sisters. My father spared no expense in these experiments. My mother had been liberally dosed with cocaine, amphetamines, and arsenic during her ovulation and throughout her pregnancy with me. It was a

disappointment when I emerged with such commonplace deformities. My albinism is the regular pink-eyed variety and my hump, though pronounced, is not remarkable in size or shape as humps go. My situation was far too humdrum to be marketable on the same scale as my brother's and sisters'. Still, my parents noted that I had a strong voice and decided I might be an appropriate shill and talker for the business. A bald albino hunchback seemed the right enticement toward the esoteric talents of the rest of the family. The dwarfism, which was very apparent by my third birthday, came as a pleasant surprise to the patient pair and increased my value. From the beginning I slept in the built-in cupboard beneath the sink in the family living van, and had a collection of exotic sunglasses to shield my sensitive eyes.

Despite the expensive radium treatments incorporated in his design, my younger brother, Fortunato, had a close call in being born to apparent normalcy. That drab state so depressed my enterprising parents that they immediately prepared to abandon him on the doorstep of a closed service station as we passed through Green River, Wyoming, late one night. My father had actually parked the van for a quick getaway and had stepped down to help my mother deposit the baby in the cardboard box on some safe part of the pavement. At that precise moment the two-week-old baby stared vaguely at my mother and in a matter of seconds revealed himself as not a failure at all, but in fact my parents' masterwork. It was lucky, so they named him Fortunato. For one reason and another we always called him Chick.

"Papa," said Iphy. "Yes," said Elly. They were behind his big chair, four arms sliding to tangle his neck, two faces framed in smooth black hair peering at him from either side.

"What are you up to, girlies?" He would laugh and put his magazine down.

"Tell us how you thought of us," they demanded.

I leaned on his knee and looked into his good heavy face. "Please, Papa," I begged, "tell us the Rose Garden."

He would puff and tease and refuse and we would coax. Finally Arty would be sitting in his lap with Papa's arms around him and Chick would be in Lily's lap, and I would lean against Lily's shoulder while Elly and Iphy sat cross-legged on the floor with their four arms behind them like Gothic struts supporting their hunched shoulders, and Al would laugh and tell the story.

“It was in Oregon, up in Portland, which they call the Rose City, though I never got in gear to do anything about it until a year or so later when we were stuck in Fort Lauderdale.”

He had been restless one day, troubled by business boondoggles. He drove up into a park on a hillside and got out for a walk. “You could see for miles from up there. And there was a big rose garden with arbors and trellises and fountains. The paths were brick and wound in and out.” He sat on a step leading from one terrace to another and stared listlessly at the experimental roses. “It was a test garden, and the colors were … designed. Striped and layered. One color inside the petal and another color outside.

“I was mad at Maribelle. She was a pinhead who’d been with your mother and me for a long while. She was trying to hold me up for a raise I couldn’t afford.”

The roses started him thinking, how the oddity of them was beautiful and how that oddity was contrived to give them value. “It just struck me—clear and complete all at once—no long figuring about it.” He realized that children could be designed. “And I thought to myself, now that would be a rose garden worthy of a man’s interest!”

We children would smile and hug him and he would grin around at us and send the twins for a pot of cocoa from the drink wagon and me for a bag of popcorn because the red-haired girls would just throw it out when they finished closing the concession anyway. And we would all be cozy in the warm booth of the van, eating popcorn and drinking cocoa and feeling like Papa’s roses.