

DAVID FLEMING

The Big Tent, 2010
Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in



NOVE MEYERS

Carnival Therapy

The day we kidnapped
my elderly mother

For some people, dying once just isn't enough. How does one write an obituary for a woman whose life spanned most of the twentieth century, from the demise of the horse and buggy to the exploration of the stars? Her life saw the national angst of the Great Depression and the most horrific conflagration the human race has had the misfortune to visit upon itself. She first opened her eyes the year that women got the vote and last closed them during Obama's presidency. This is not to overlook the fact that she was born in a circus, named after an elephant, and orphaned at sixteen with three younger siblings to raise by herself.

When the phone rang at 2:45 A.M., I knew what I was going to hear. Two days previously, she had suffered another heart attack, and I had informed the surgeon that it was her wish that no extraordinary procedures be taken. It was the last in a chain of events that began when she was hit by a car five years earlier. Until then, she had seemingly defied aging, and most of her children half expected her to outlive us all. We debated as to which grandchild would take care of her after we were all gone. She was a "vegan," which seems to mean, a "vegetarian with an attitude"—eschewing eating anything that "ever had a mother or a face." Aside from the embarrassment it caused us at restaurants, this stood her in good stead, health-wise. But, the auto accident was followed by a heart attack, the loss of her independence, and later on, a broken hip, from which she was unable to recover. I often described my mother to strangers as someone "who began where eccentric leaves off," so it's difficult to know just when the dementia started.

After speaking with the hospital, I tried to go back to bed and let what I needed to do wait until morning; but I couldn't sleep and got back up to the stillness of the night. Hence the obituary. In the quiet and darkness, I opened my computer and watched the obit write itself. The lady at the newspaper told me that it was one of the best she had ever read. I insisted that it include a photo of Maxine being held aloft in the trunk of her namesake elephant.

She had claustrophobia and did not want to be buried. Like my father before her, she wanted her body donated to medical research and had made the arrangements when he'd died some thirty-five years earlier. In the morning,