

Against The Odds

The first thing they did after moving in was tear down old man Barnum's high wire. Waldo watched them from his upstairs window; like he'd watched as a boy when Bill Barnum had first put it up. He remembered the parties and performances that Bill had staged in his back garden for his family and friends and how, in his later years, the great man had sagged as low as the wire he could no longer use. As a piece of history was coiled for scrap, one neighbour, a beanpole of a woman, nudged her equally gangly partner and pointed up at Waldo. The mirth on their faces contrasted with the black teardrops Waldo had painted beneath his eyes out of respect for his deceased friend.

Bella, the postwoman, informed Waldo that their names were Mr and Mrs Odd. Balancing expertly on her unicycle whilst riffling through her shoulder bag for Waldo's mail, she told him that they'd already upset several townsfolk. 'The Alvarez brothers stopped by the other day,' she said, handing Waldo his subscription to *Big Top Monthly*, 'but they couldn't get a civil word out of 'em. Said it became embarrassing. Felt they were being looked down on even though *they* were the ones on stilts.' Bella jiggled from side to side to keep her balance and said in a stage-whisper, 'There's a rumour going round that they might be *Normals*.'

Waldo gasped. Satisfied with her special delivery, Bella pedalled off to complete her round. Waldo spent the morning polishing his size twenty shoes. He felt sick at the thought of having Normals as neighbours. Normals, with their scathing comments and fleeting interest in others. Normals, who claimed to love animals but refused to train any of their own. Normals, who were so hard to please yet so easy to criticise. A jet of water squirted over Waldo's shoes from the fake flower on his lapel and he threw down his polishing rag in disgust. How could he live next door to people who refused to wear make-up or costumes? Needing someone to talk to, Waldo phoned Kitty Le Mar and arranged to meet at Rollo's Diner.

'Darling, it's all over town,' said Kitty, sliding sensuously into the seat opposite Waldo. The waitress came to take their order, tripped over one of Waldo's feet, executed a perfect forward roll

and followed it up with a back flip, before whipping out her notepad and pen as if nothing had happened. There was a ripple of applause from the diners.

Kitty, conscious The Great Heraldo had booked her for his levitation trick that evening, ordered black coffee, while Waldo opted for his usual custard pie.

‘Fancy them turning up here,’ she said. ‘Must have been drum-rolled out of every other town. You *are* certain they’re Normals?’

‘Wei Ling confirmed it when I bumped into her outside the costume shop...’

‘She gets her leotards there like me,’ interrupted Kitty. ‘Only she’s double-jointed which means double the wear and tear.’ Kitty winked. ‘She says it has its consolations though.’

Waldo blushed under his face paint. ‘Wei Ling said she’d seen an order from the Odd woman for a dozen pairs of white gloves, and it’s well known Normals don’t like getting their hands dirty.’

‘How could anyone not like good old spit and sawdust?’ said Kitty. ‘Freaks like that should be locked up.’ The waitress returned and served their order. Kitty sipped her coffee while Waldo licked the pie off his face.

‘Have you spoken to the cops?’

Waldo snorted. ‘Those Keystone cowboys? They’d run a mile rather than face a couple of Normals.’ He slammed his fist on the table causing his knife to fall on the floor. There was a flash of silver and a clean one thudded into the wood by Waldo’s right hand. He grasped it tightly before saying, ‘Bill would turn in his grave if he knew Normals were living in his house.’

Kitty eyed the knife. ‘Then why don’t you do something about it?’

That evening found Waldo’s house packed with people. The Ringling Troupe had turned up ready to flex their muscles; Marvin and his midgets occupied high stools in the kitchen and slurped on milk shakes while Waldo discussed tactics in the lounge with his workmates, Coco, and the Chipperfield twins – one of whom was sharpening a sword he didn’t intend to swallow.

As night fell, there was a gathering of shadows in the Odds' front garden. 'Remember,' whispered Waldo, 'we're only going to scare them off. No rough stuff...unless they ask for it.' He nodded at the Ringlings, who quickly assembled a human pyramid. Their lightest member clambered up and in through an open window. Shortly after, there was a *snick* of a bolt being drawn on the other side of the front door. It flew open and everyone instinctively stood tall in the spotlight spilling from the hall.

Someone shouted, 'Get 'em!' and there was a rush inside. Coco immediately fell over one of the midgets, and Waldo and the Chipperfields tumbled after. When the Ringlings tried to clamber over, they made matters worse. Mr and Mrs Odd, dressed in black and wearing white gloves, appeared from their lounge and looked in horror at the pin cushion of arms, elbows, and feet filling their hall. Everyone froze, until Coco cried, 'There they are. Grab 'em!' Mr and Mrs Odd opened their mouths to form a perfect pair of 'O's before fleeing upstairs.

Waldo's gang raced after the Odds and soon had them cornered in an upstairs study. Mr Odd waved his lanky arms in an effort to keep the baying crowd away. Waldo honked his hooter for quiet.

'We don't want Normals in our town,' he said in his least clownish voice. Mr Odd looked surprised then made a grab for something off his desk.

'Watch out! He's got a pen!' cried Marvin.

Mr Odd snatched up a pile of white cards and began scribbling. He held one up for everyone to see. It said, 'WE'RE NOT NORMALS'.

There was a ripple of confusion before Waldo asked, 'What are you then?'

Mr Odd scribbled on the next card. Everyone gasped when they saw what he'd written.

'MIME ARTISTS!'

Waldo watched as Mrs Odd gingerly used her white-gloved hands to feel for an invisible wall. He sighed, 'Then why the bloody hell didn't you say so?!'
