

WINTER QUARTERS

by HOWARD WALDROP

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Perhaps I should start "When he was twelve, he ran away from the circus."
Maybe I should begin "As circuses go, it was a small one. It only had two mammoths."
I'll just start at the beginning: The phone rang.

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"Hey, Marie!" said the voice of my friend Dr. Bob the paleontologist. "Do you remember Arnaud?"
"Was the Pope Polish?" I asked.
"Well, the circus is in town, and he's in it. Susie Neruda took her nieces and nephews yesterday and recognized him. She just called me." Then he paused. "You want to go see him?"
"I didn't think you and circuses got along," I said.
"For this, I'll ignore everything in my peripheral vision."
"When would you like to go?"
"Next show's in forty-five minutes. I'll swing by and pick you up."
"Uh, sure," I said, looking at the stack of departmental memos on my desk. I threw the antimacassar from the back of my office chair over them.
He hung up.

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When he was twelve, he ran away from the circus. Dr. Bob Oulijian, I mean. His father had managed two of them while Bob was trying to grow up. One day he showed up on the doorstep of his favorite aunt and said, "If I ever have to see another trapeze act or smell another zebra's butt in my life, Aunt Gracie, I'll throw up." Things were worked out; Aunt Gracie raised him, and he went on to become the fairly respected head of the paleontology department in the semi-podunk portion of the state university system where we both teach. What was, to others, a dim, misty vista of life in past geologic ages, to him was, as he once said, "a better circus than anyone could have thought up."

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We whined down the highway in his Toyota Heaviside, passing the occasional Daimler-Chrysler Faraday. A noise dopplered up behind us, and a 1932 bucket-T roadster came by, piloted by a geezer in motorcycle goggles.
"Soon you'll be studying *them*," I said to Dr. Bob, pointing.

"Oh," he said. "Dinosaurs. *Très amusant.*"

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Did I remember Arnaud?

It was while we were all -- me, Dr. Bob, our colleague Dr. Fred Luntz the archaeologist, Susie Neruda (*née* Baxter) -- undergraduates *here*, at this podunk branch of the North Carolina state university, just after the turn of the millennium, that Arnaud showed up. We assumed he was French, maybe Belgian or Swiss, we didn't know, because he didn't talk. Much, anyway. He had that Jacques Tati-Marcel Marceau-Fernandel body type, tall and thin, like he'd been raised in a drainpipe. He was in the drama department; before we knew him, we knew *of* him.

About half the time we saw him, he was in some form of clown *déshabille* or mime getup. We assumed it was for the acting classes, but a grad student over there said no, he just showed up like that, some days.

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"Does he do anything special?" I asked Dr. Bob. "Did Susan say?"

"I don't think so, or she would have. I'm assuming he mostly puts out fires inefficiently and throws pies with accuracy, unless circuses have changed a great deal since my time."

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For what do we remember Arnaud?

It was in November, his first semester, and he was out on the east mall passing out flyers, in full regalia: a polka-dot clown suit, clownwhite, bald headpiece, a hat the size of a fifty-cent flowerpot. He had a Harpo bulbhorn he honked as people came by.

The flyer said:

HITLER THE MAGNIFICENT!
An Evening of Transformational Sorcery
JONES HALL 112
7 P.M. NOVEMBER 8th

Well, uh-oh.

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It wasn't an evening, it was more like fourteen or fifteen minutes.

It wasn't sorcery, but it was transformative: it transformed him right out of college. To say that it wasn't well received is bending the language.

Jones 112 was the big lecture hall with multimedia capabilities, and when we got there, props and stuff littered the raised lecture platform. Some pipes, a fire extinguisher, a low platform raised about a meter off the ground on two-by-four legs; some big pieces of window glass. In true Brechtian fashion prop men sat on the stage playing cards.

By seven the place was packed, SRO.

The lights went down; there were three thumps on the floor, and lights came back up.

Out came a Chaplin-mustached Arnaud in a modified SA uniform. He wore a silk top-hat with a big silver swastika on the front. He wore a cloak fashioned after one of the ones the Nazis were going to make all truck drivers wear, back when they were designing uniforms for each profession.

His assistants were a padded-up fat guy with medals all over his chest, and a little thin guy with a rat-nose mask.

First, Hitler hypnotized twenty-two million Germans: he gestured magically at a *découpage* of a large crowd held up by the two guys.

Then they painted Stars of David on the plate glass, and Hitler threw a brick through it.

His assistants came back with a big map of Poland, and he sawed it in half with a rip saw.

After each trick, he said: "Abracadabra, please and *gesundheit!*"

Then they brought out three chairs, and three people came out on stage and sat down in them.

In the first, a young woman in her twenties. In the second sat a man in his forties, playing on a violin. At the end chair, an old man in his eighties.

Hitler the Magnificent took off his cloak and covered the young woman. "Abracadabra, please and *gesundheit!*" he said, and pulled away the cloak. The chair was empty except for a wisp of smoke drifting toward the ceiling. He put the cape over the violinist, repeated the incantation, and snapped it away. In the chair was the violin and a lampshade with a number on it. He covered the old man, spoke, and raised the cloth. In the chair seat there was now a bar of soap. The thin assistant picked it up and threw it into a nearby goldfish bowl of water. "So light it floats!" he said.

Prop men lit fires along the pipes and pushed them toward Hitler the Magnificent and the two assistants. Surrounded by the closing ring of fire, with a mannequin wearing a brown-blond wig and a wedding dress in his arms, he climbed onto the two-by-four platform, miming great heights, and jumped down next to a wet Luger water pistol, while the fat and thin assistants drank green Kool-Aid from a washtub and fell to the floor.

The stagelights lowered, and the only sound was the *whoosh* of the fire extinguisher putting out the flames on the pipes.

Then the lights came back up.

You could have heard a pin drop. Then--

It wasn't quite the Paris premiere of *Le Sacre du printemps* in 1913, but it might as well have been.

You'd think with the whole twentieth century behind us, and a few years of this one, and Mel Brooks' *The Producers*, most of the *oomph* would have gone out of things like this. But you'd be wrong.

I got out the fire exit about the time the firemen and the riot squad came in through it.

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He was thrown out, of course, for violations of the University fire codes and firearms policy, for causing a riot, and for unauthorized use of Jones Hall. Plus he spent a couple of days in the city jug before he was expelled.

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About a week before that performance, Arnaud had spoken to me for the first and only time. I was in the cafeteria (where we all usually were), alone, between classes, drinking the brown stuff they sell instead of coffee, actually doing some reading in Roman history.

I looked up. Arnaud was standing there, looking like a French foreign-exchange student.

"Ever read any Nigidius Figulus?" he asked.

Taken aback by his speaking, I still wanted to appear cool. "Not lately," I said.

"Should," he said, and walked away.

That night I got out my handbook of Latin literature. Nigidius Figulus was a neo-Pythagorean of Cicero's time, an astrologer, a grammarian; much concerned with Fate and the will of the gods. In other words, the usual minor Roman literary jack-of-all-trades the late Republic coughed up as regular as clepsydra-work.

The next day I spent in the Classics library, reading epitomes of his writings.

Not much there for me.

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We pulled into the parking lot of the exhibition hall where the circus was, and who do we see but Dr. Fred Luntz getting out of his car with his stepson. Bob called to him. He came over. "Susan call you, too?" asked Dr. Bob.

"No. Why?" asked Fred.

"Arnaud's in this circus."

"Arnaud? Arnaud. I'll be damned." We went in and sat down on the bleachers.

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As circuses got, it was a small one. It only had two mammoths.

Mammontelephants, actually, but you know what I mean.

They were second-billed in the show, too -- and they didn't come in with the Grand Entry Parade. (Dr. Bob noticed immediately. "They usually don't get along with other elephants," he said.) Fred's stepson, about eight, and the product of the previous marriage of his trophy wife, was looking everywhere at once. His name was of course Jason. (In ten years you'll be able to walk into any crowded bar in America and say "Jason! Brittany!" and fifty people will turn toward you....)

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We saw Arnaud in the Grand Entry, then in the first walkaround while riggers changed from the

high-wire to the trapeze acts; we watched the tumblers, and the monkeys in the cowboy outfits riding the pigs with the strapped-on Brahma bull horns; we ate peanuts and popcorn and Cracker-Jacks and cotton candy. Halfway through, the ringmaster with his wireless microphone said: "Ladeez an Genuhmen, in the center ring," (there was only one), "presenting Sir Harry Tusker and His Performing Pachyderms, Tantor and Behemoth!"

There were two long low blasts from the entrance doorway, sounds lower than an elephant's, twice as loud. I felt the hair on my neck stand up.

Walking backwards came Sir Harry Tusker, dressed in pith helmet, safari jacket, jodhpurs, and shiny boots, like old pictures of Frank Buck. In came Tantor and Behemoth -- big hairy mounds with tusks and trunks, and tails like hairy afterthoughts. Their trunks were up and curved back double, and each let out a blast again, lower than the first. The band was playing, of course, Lawrence Welk's "Baby Elephant Walk."

The crowd applauded them for being *them*; Jason's eyes were big as saucers.

They went to the center of the ring and you realized just how big they really were, probably not as big as mammoths got (they were both females, of course) but big, bigger than all but the largest bull African elephants. And you're not used to seeing females with tusks two meters long, either.

They did elephant stuff -- standing on their hind legs, their hairy coats swaying like old bathrobes, dancing a little. In the middle of the act a clown came out -- it was Arnaud -- pushing a ball painted to look like a rock, acting like it weighed a ton, and Behemoth picked it up, and she and Tantor played volleyball while Sir Harry and Arnaud held the net.

It was pretty surreal, seeing hairy elephants do that. It was pretty surreal seeing big shaggy elephants the size of Cleveland in the first place.

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The show was over too soon for Jason.

At the souvenir booth, Dr. Fred bought him a copy of *The Shaggy Baggy Saggy Mammontelephant*, a Little Golden Book done by a grand-descendant of the author of the original elephant one. It was way below his reading level, but he didn't mind. He was in heaven while we left word and waited out back for Arnaud.

He showed up, out of makeup, looking about forty, still tall and thin. He shook hands with us like we'd seen each other yesterday.

Jason asked, "Are you really a clown?"

Arnaud looked around, pointed to himself, shook his head no.

"Let's go get something to eat besides popcorn," said Dr. Bob. "When do you have to be back?"

Arnaud indicated eighteen, a couple of hours.

"Come on," said Dr. Fred Luntz. "We're buying."

Arnaud smiled a big smile.

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"It's all wrong," said Dr. Fred. "They're treating them like circus elephants, only shaggy, instead of what they are. The thing with the rock is more like it, if they're going to have to perform."

Arnaud was eating from nine or ten plates -- two trays -- at the cafeteria a kilometer or so from the

exhibition hall. The four of us had only eaten a couple of pieces of pie, Jell-o salads, and some watermelon because we were so full of circus junk food. Arnaud's metabolism must have been like a furnace. Occasionally he would look up from eating.

"Better that, than them not being around at all," said Dr. Bob.

"Well, yes, of course. But, Sir Harry Tusker. African white-hunter archetype. All wrong for mammoths."

"Yeah, well, what do you want? Siberians? Proto-Native Americans?" asked Bob.

"I mean, there was enough grief twenty or so years ago, when they were first brought back -- the Russians tried taking frozen mammoth genes from carcasses in the permafrost late last century, putting them in Indian elephants, their nearest living relatives--"

"This is your friend, Dr. Bob, the paleontologist, Fred...." said Dr. Bob.

"Okay. Okay. But didn't work last century. Suddenly, it works. Exact same procedure. Suddenly, we have mammontelephants, all female of course. Big outrage; you can't bring back extinct animals to a time they're not suited for; it's cruel, etc. Like the A-Bomb and physicists; geneticists *could* bring back the dead, so they *did*. Or purt-near, anyway. So we give in. They're in zoos at first, then circuses. Ten, twenty, thirty at first, now maybe one hundred, two hundred -- only a few are in the game preserves in Siberia run by the World Wildlife Fund and the Jersey Zoo (and there was a big fight about *that*). Then, five years ago, hey presto! There's males. Someone went into a male completely buried in the frozen ground and retrieved the whole system (and how's you like *that* for a job, huh Bob?) and then we have viable sperm, and now there are five or six males, including the one up in Baltimore, and more on the way. What I'm saying is, turn 'em loose somewhere, don't just look at them, or make 'em act."

"Like loose where? Like do what?" asked Bob.

"Like, I don't know," said Dr. Fred.

Arnaud continued shoveling food into his face.

"What did you think about the mammoths, Jason?" I asked him.

"Neat!" he said.

"Me, too," I said.

"Look, you know as well as I do what the real reason people want to shut all this down is," said Dr. Bob. "It's not that they don't want extinct animals brought back into a changed climate, that they have an inability to adapt from an Ice Age climate -- you go up or down in altitude and get the climate you want. Mammoths in the high Rockies, in Alaska, in Siberia. Sure, no problem. And it ain't, like they *say*, that we should be saving things that are going extinct now first: they're still here, they'll have to be taken somewhere to live, and people will have to leave them alone -- island birds, rare predators, all that. That's their big *other* argument: Fix *now* now, then fix *then*. The real reason is the same since the beginning: we're playing God, and they don't like it."

"Sure it has a religious element," said Fred. "But that doesn't mean you have to put the mammontelephants in some sort of zoo and circus limbo while you decide if there's to be more of them or not. Nobody's advocating bringing back *smilodons* (even if you could find the genetic material), or dinosaurs if you want to go the mosquito-in-amber wild goose chase. This comes down to questions of pure science--"

"If we can, we have to?"

"You're talking like the people who don't want them -- or the two woolly rhinos -- back," said Fred.

"No, I'm giving you their argument, like people give me. They're here because we couldn't stop ourselves from bringing them *back*, any more than we could stop ourselves from killing them *off* in the first place. Where was the religion in that?"

I was looking back and forth. I was sure they'd had this discussion before, but never in front of me. Arnaud was eating. Jason was reading his book for the tenth time.

Arnaud looked at the two docs as he finished the last of everything, including a pie crust off Fred's plate.

"Plenty religion involved," said Arnaud. "People just don't understand the *mammoths*."

Fred and Bob looked at him.

"Yeah?" asked Bob.

"They let me know," said Arnaud. He patted his stomach and nodded toward the door.

As we let him off at the circus, he reached in his shirt pocket and handed Jason six long black hairs, making a motion with his left arm hanging off his nose and his right forming a curve in front of him.

"Mammoth hair! Oh boy oh boy!" said Jason.

Then Arnaud pointed to Dr. Bob and made the signal from the sixty-year-old TV show *The Prisoner* -- Be Seeing You.

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That night I read about mammontelephants. The first were cloned less than thirty years ago, and there were some surprises. The normal gestation period for the Indian elephant is twenty-two months; for the mammontelephants it was closer to eighteen. The tusks of Indian elephant cows normally stick out less than twenty centimeters from their mouths; that of the mammontelephants two, two and a half meters and still growing. (What the tusks of the males, all six or seven of them in the world, will be, no one knows yet, as the first is only six years old now -- it's guessed they could grow as long as those of fossil true bull mammoths.) Their trumpeting, as I said, is lower, deeper, and creepier than either Indian or African elephants (a separate species). It's assumed they communicate over long distances with subsonic rumbles like their relatives. They have developed the fatty humps on their heads and above their shoulders, even though most aren't in really cold climates. Yes, they have the butt-flap that keeps the wind out in cold weather. The big black long guard hairs (like the ones Arnaud gave Jason) are scattered over the thick underfur, itself forty centimeters thick. Further clonings -- with twelve- and thirteen-year-old mammontelephants carrying baby mammontelephants to term -- has speeded up the process -- most elephants don't reproduce until they're fifteen or so. And you get a more mammoth mammontelephant. What will happen when Mr. and Ms. Mammontelephant get together in another six or seven years? They might not like each other. That's where Science will come in again....

Pretty good for an old lady English prof, huh?

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Everybody knew the IQRA meeting in October (hosted by the podunk portion of the University we work for) was going to have Big Trouble. The IQRA is the International Quaternary Research Association -- everything prehistoric *since* the dinosaurs -- and it contained multitudes, among which are people in the profession against the retrieval and propagation of extinct species. They were vocal, and because the meeting was also going to have a large bunch of paleo- and archaeogeneticists there too, the media had already started pre-coverage on it -- sound bites, flashes of personalities, a fleeting glimpse of the male mammontelephant in the Baltimore Zoo.

You know. Big Trouble.

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I know all this because Dr. Bob is the University's host for this Cenozoic shindig, and is calling me every day or so. Out of nowhere he says, "I got a *fax* from Arnaud. Can you imagine? His circus plays up in Raleigh the day before the conference opens, last show of the year before winter quarters." It had been two months since he'd eaten the cafeteria out of house and home.

"What did he say?"

"That's all. I guess he just wanted us to know. I sure as hell won't have time to see him. I'll be dodging brickbats, no doubt."

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A week later, Dr. Bob showed up in my office.

"Uh, Marie," he said, "there've been more faxes. Lots more. Something's up. Want to be an unindicted co-conspirator?"

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The news was full of the IQRA; you couldn't turn on your monitor or TV without seeing people with placards and signs, or Professor Somebody from Somewhere making speeches. I watched some of it, switched over to the Weather Shop. There was a guy yammering on about long-term climatic change, Big and Little Ice Ages; global warming, myth or legend; etc. I ran up their feed and got the forecast: overcast, maybe some mist, fifteen degrees, just cool enough for a sweater.

There was a cardboard box on the front porch with a note on it -- MARIE: BRING THIS TO MY LECTURE. SIT ON 3D ROW AISLE. -- and a wristbadge with STAFF stamped on it in deep holograms.

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The place was mobbed. I mean outside. The campus cops had a metal detector outside the front door. City cops were parked a block away, just off campus.

I looked in the box. There was a double-bladed Mixmaster and a big glass bowl.

I threaded my way through the crowd and walked up to the campus cops, bold as brass.

"What's in the box, doc?" he said, recognizing me and looking at my wristbadge.

I opened it and showed him. "For the mai-tais at the social hour," I said. He looked at it, handed it around the detector, passed it in front of the sniffer dog. The dog looked at it like it was the least interesting thing on the earth. Then the dog looked east, whined and barked.

"That ain't his bomb bark," said the K-9 cop. "He's been acting funny all morning."

"Can I go in now?" I asked.

"Oh, sure. Sorry," said the main cop, handing me the box once I went through the metal detector with the usual nonsense.

The crowd, barred from coming in without badges, swayed back and forth and shined preprinted laser messages into any camera pointed toward them, or waved old-fashioned signs. A couple of people from

my department were in there with them.

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Dr. Bob's speech, "Long-Term Implications of Pleistocene Faunal Retrieval on Resuscitated Species: An Overview," was supposed to start at 1300, and by 1215 the place was full, including plenty of people with signs and, I saw, Professor Somebody from Somewhere I'd seen on the news. The most ominous thing: in the program, the last fifteen minutes was to be Q and A discussion.

It was a big lecture hall, with a wall to the right of the platform leading out to where I knew the building's loading dock was. The wall blocked an ugly ramp from view and destroyed most of the acoustics -- it had been a local pork-barrel retrofit ten years ago. Bureaucratic history is swell, isn't it?

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At 1255 Dr. Bob came in. He went up to the podium. There was mild applause and some sibilant hissing. Really.

"Thank you, thank you very much. Normally I would introduce the speaker, but hey! That's me!" There was some disturbance out at the hall doors. "I know you're all as anxious as I am for me to start. But first -- a small presentation that may -- or may not -- shed some light on my talk. I honestly don't know what to expect any more than you do." A *boo* came from the back of the hall, loud and clear.

The lights went down, and I heard the big loading dock doors rattle up. Grey daylight came up from the ramp and--

--in came something:

It was a tall thin man, bent forward at the waist, covered in a skin garment from head to foot. He had a tail like a horse, and what I hoped were fake genitals high up on the buttocks. His head was a fur mask and above it were two reindeer antlers. The face ended in a long shaggy beard from the eyes down and he had two tufted ears like an antelope's.

In the middle of the face was a red rubber nose. The feet were two enormous clown shoes, about a meter in length, the kind that let whoever's wearing them lean almost to the ground without falling over.

The hairy figure walked around, looked at the audience, and went to the blackboard and, placing its right hand on it, blew red paint through a reed, and left the outline of its hand on the green panel.

Someone booed just as I remembered where I'd seen pictures of this thing before. Some cave painting. Dordogne? Lascaux? Trois Frères, that's it. The thing was usually called the Sorcerer of Trois Frères, thought to be some shaman of the hunt, among the bison and horses and rhinos drawn and scratched on the walls of the cave 25,000, 40,000 years ago....

Tantor and Behemoth walked in through the loading-ramp door.

It got *real* quiet, then.

The Sorcerer picked up a child's toy bow and arrow and fired a rubber-tipped arrow into Tantor, who backed down the ramp, out of sight of the audience. I could see the shadow of another man there, from where I sat. He was pulling something up over one of his arms.

The Sorcerer mimed being hot, and Behemoth swayed like she was about to faint. The man pulled down his animal skin to the waist, and fired another suction-cup arrow into Behemoth's hairy side; she backed out of the room.

The Sorcerer took off his costume (except the rubber nose and clown shoes), which left him in a

diaper. He played with a small ziggurat, then took the model of a trireme from someone on the left side of the room, then a bishop's crozier from another (how had I not seen all these props and people when I came in?). Then he put on a lab coat and glasses, came down to where I sat, and took the mixer from me ("*Bonjour*," he whispered), and went back to the stage, where someone -- Dr. Bob? -- threw him a pair of Faded Glory blue jeans with double helixes painted on them (*one* person in the audience actually laughed). He plugged in the mixer, threw the jeans into the glass bowl and watched them swirl around and around, took them out, went to the right stage wall and -- an elephant's trunk, a cloth puppet on the arm of the man whose shadow I watched on the loading-ramp wall, along with those of the mammontelephants -- snaked around the corner and grabbed the jeans and disappeared.

The lab-coated figure waited, then Tantor and Behemoth walked back onstage again, their eyes dark as dots of tar, their small double-hand-sized ears twitching.

The man went to the blackboard, picked up the hollow reed, and blew red ocher pigment onto his right hand.

Slowly he held it up, palm toward the mammontelephants.

Tantor and Behemoth bowed down onto their front knees. They curled their trunks up in the same double-curve as those on the elephant statues in the Babylon sequence of D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*. And then they gave the long slow loud trumpets of their kind, a sound cutting across a hundred centuries.

Every hair on my body shot straight up.

The lights went off. I saw shadows of shapes leaving, heard a truck start up. The loading door clanged down with a crash, and a spotlight slowly came up, centered on the red outline of the hand on the blackboard.

Then the houselights came back up and Dr. Bob Oulijian was alone at the lectern.

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We were at the freight depot with Sir Harry Tusker and Arnaud.

They made ready to load Behemoth and Tantor onto their personal freight car. "*Everybody else*," said Sir Harry, "goes by truck to winter quarters in Florida. *We* go by train to Wisconsin, the shores of Lake Geneva. We join up with the circus again in March. The girls here get to play in the winter. Me and Arnaud get to freeze our balls off out *there*." He pointed northwest.

Arnaud stood with Tantor's trunk wreathed around his right arm. He scratched her under the big hairy chin.

"Better load up," said the freightman.

"West at three hundred kilometers per hour," said Sir Harry. Then: "Girls! Hey!" he yelled. "*Umgawa!*"

"

They started up the concrete ramp. Then something -- a change in the wind? a low rumble from far away, from the direction of Baltimore? indigestion? -- caused both mammontelephants to stop. They lifted their trunks, searching the wind, and let out their long low rumbling squeals.

"*Umgawa!*" said Sir Harry Tusker, again.

Behemoth took Tantor's tail, and followed her up the ramp and onto their private car.

Sir Harry and Arnaud followed, turned, waved, closed the doors of the car, and waved again through the small windows.

In a few minutes the train was gone, and in a few more, beyond the city limits, would be a westbound blur.

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Though it was October, and though this was North Carolina, that night it snowed.

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Anything with mammoths in it is for Neal Barrett, Jr.

The End