

## Double Feature

### Double Feature

The second week on the job with the *Des Moines Register* my editor held back a grin as he gave me the day's assignments. After detailing a visit to the police chief and the kindergarten Teacher of the Year, he covered his mouth and said, too casually, "Go out to the fairgrounds and get an interview with Albert Crosius. He's one of our undecided voters and I gather he's of two minds about a number of issues." He handed me a tent address and turned away before I could catch the look on his face. I had been warned to be wary of the prank goose chases freshman reporters got sent on, like apprentice mechanics being sent to fetch left-handed screwdrivers. But the State Fair was a plum assignment - three months before the election, and the biggest show in the state was a magnet not only for fans of canned goods and giant pumpkins but also for national politicians and the national press that followed them. This assignment might present three opportunities all at once.

Late in the afternoon my press pass and twelve dollars got me through the main gate, and my heart began to sink as the fair map led me not to the speakers' center but towards the Midway section, where the shouts of barkers for side shows and ball-toss games competed with the overhead din of the whirligig rides. My destination led down a sawdust covered path behind a row of tents, until I arrived at a hand-lettered card that read Crosius Brothers taped to a tent flap.

I had been had, but good. I imagined that by now everyone in the office was howling about the naïve girl just out of journalism school trudging around the carnival freaks trying to take the pulse of the electorate. Well, no matter. I was here

## Double Feature

now and pushed my way through the canvas flap to see what sort of backstage trick was behind this show.

What I did not expect was to walk into the middle of a heated argument between two identical voices.

“I keep telling you that your guzzling Cokes makes me burp.”

“Better than your Mexican beers that get us both drunk.”

“Getting a buzz on is the only way to get to sleep with your snoring.”

“You should talk. You’re the one with your mouth in my ear all the time.”

The room was still dark compared with the bright sunshine outside and my eyes hadn’t adjusted yet. Across the tent I saw the backs of two heads seated side by side in what looked like a wheelchair. I cleared my throat. “Excuse me,” I said. “I’m looking for Mr. Albert Crosius. Is he around?”

The wheelchair pivoted, and as my vision cleared I saw two pair of eyes looking at me appraisingly, two mouths fixed with half-grins, but only one single and remarkably wide torso seated in the chair.

“That would be us,” said the head to my left. “I’m Al, and this is Bert. Our dad had planned to name his son Albert, but he had to adjust a little when we were born.”

“Dad had a sense of humor all right, but he needed one,” said the other head.

By now my eyes had adjusted to the dull green shade inside the tent, and I could see the poster “The Crosius Brothers– The World’s Only Two-Headed Man!” I looked more closely and saw the two faces were not identical at all. Al, on my left, had a long and angular face, with thinning brown hair and an inquisitive, skeptical

## Double Feature

expression. Bert on my right had a rounder face with thicker hair and prominent black eyebrows. Al's neck appeared longer and indeed his mouth was at the same level as Bert's ear.

"Now don't tell us, let us guess," said Al. "You're the reporter from the *Register*, right?"

"Yes," I was stammering. "How did you . . . did they tell you they were sending me out here?"

They both laughed, and Bert said, "No, of course not. They send a new reporter out to see us every year we pass through. And who else would be wearing a pants suit to the fair?"

"But you're sure better looking than those boys they sent out before, honey," said Al, cocking one eyebrow. "What did they tell you to look for – the champion cabbage grower, or a social worker from Head Start?"

"Or maybe they just told you to get a good headline. Get it?" said Bert. I was beginning to notice how they tended to complete each other's sentences.

"No," I said, looking at my shoes, "they told me it was some political angle, but it looks like they were just pulling some joke on me. I'm sorry to bother you."

They chuckled in unison, then together said, "Don't leave, honey."

Bert continued, "We're always good for a story, and we'll tell you more than we gave those dopes they sent out in previous years."

"As long as you don't use the headline "Two Heads Are Better than One," said Al. "We've seen that too many times."

## Double Feature

We had half an hour until their next performance, and I learned more than enough about dicephaly and conjoined twins. Al and Bert were lucky to be alive, mainly because their massive torso contained two hearts and each head had a complete spine, but farther down they shared a digestive system. Each had control of one arm on their side. "Took us a long time to learn to walk," said Al. "We each control one leg, and getting that motion coordinated was a job.

"Especially with someone as clumsy as him," said Bert. For emphasis the left hand reached over and gave a tug on the ear of the right head, and in response the right leg gave the left one a little kick.

"We used to have a little vestigial arm up here," said Al, "but it didn't do anything and was removed when we were three."

"Wish it were still there. Might slap some sense in you," said Bert.

"Some things we share," added Al. "One stomach, which this dope keeps filling with junk, and I need to drop in the antacids."

"One liver, one digestive tract, one butt."

"Which only I can reach. And one dick."

"And a very nice one for sure. Would you like to see it?" At that they both looked up and nodded encouragingly.

I couldn't tell if I was blushing or it was just the August heat percolating through the tent. "Are you guys trying to hit on me now?"

"Just him," said Bert. "I'm the gentleman of the pair, and I'll defend you."

Al winked and said, "Right, he can be our chaperone."

## Double Feature

A raspy voice from the front of the tent called out “Two minutes to show time, boys.”

Both faces fell for a second. “Wait around for an hour, honey,” said Al. “Afterward the show maybe we can get together, have a bite. . .”

“Or a drink,” said Bert.

“Or a drink,” continued Al. “Just hang out a little. A normal date.”

“If you like we can go to the ball park. Maybe take in a doubleheader.” Bert earned another kick from Al. “Ow! Sorry honey, that’s a line from our show. I couldn’t resist.”

Beyond some biographical and anatomical detail, I still didn’t have enough material for a story here, but more than that, I was intrigued by these fellows. Except for their unusual conjunction, each of them individually would have been rather presentable, self-assured and witty. And for sure I was in no rush to get back to the office. “Okay,” I said, “I’ll be back. Don’t either of you stand me up.”

The two faces turned and grinned at each other. The raspy voice from the front called again. Bert said, “On two,” and simultaneously they pushed themselves up from the chair, and alternately took steps towards the stage in the front of the tent. Al glanced back over his shoulder at me, and they nearly stumbled as they passed through the canvas flap.

I had an hour to kill and I wandered around the Midway section taking in the sights. What would a normal date be like with this pair? Indeed, what about their lives could be normal? As I wandered past the weight and age guessers and the piglet races, it occurred to me that for them ‘normal’ was the life they had always

## Double Feature

known, that any interaction without the presence of the other would be not only impossible, but literally unimaginable.

As I was lost in thoughts of the dicephalic lifestyle, my feet led me back up the noisy Midway until I was jarred by a familiar raspy shout, "Alive! Alive! Prepare to be astonished! Step right in and see the eighth wonder of the world! Not for the squeamish! Right here, the Crosius monster, the world's only two-headed man!"

Beside the barker were huge posters of Al and Bert's faces, not grinning slyly or looking thoughtful, but with bared teeth and the eyes colored a menacing red. Plastered around the poster were the words "Grotesque!" "Terrifying!" and "Unbelievable!" I started blinking tears.

Behind me a fat man wearing a straw boater and trailed by an equally pudgy wife and three overfed children paused before the Crosius tent. "For sure this one's fake," said the man. "Probably some ventriloquist with a dummy head taped on his shoulder. That's what they always do."

I wanted to shout and argue, then caught myself. No, let them go. The boys didn't deserve to be demeaned by having these people gawk at them. Suddenly I was angry and defensive, and realized I was feeling something more than pity or an offended sense of justice.

I still had a half hour to kill and found a booth next to a cotton candy stand to file my earlier interviews of the day. The police chief had boasted of his need to make quick decisions, how he could never second-guess himself. The kindergarten teacher spoke of needing to have eyes in the back of her head to keep track of 20 squirming five-year-olds all at once. My mind kept going back to the Crosius

## Double Feature

brothers – they could look in two directions at once, and they always had a second opinion available in any situation. Who could feel sorry for them?

It was close to sunset when the final show wrapped up, and I was bracing my stomach for a dinner of carnival corn dogs, but Al and Bert had other plans. They emerged from the back of their Midway tent in their syncopated lurch, trailed by a rat-faced little man of indeterminate late middle age. Besides being the barker, Eddie was their personal attendant, business manager, and, it turned out, chauffeur. He went ahead, and a moment later pulled up in a late-model Lincoln at the head of the Midway strip. I was given the front passenger seat while Al and Bert situated themselves in the middle of the back seat. “We would have invited you to sit with us,” said Al, “but we would have spent too much time fighting about which one of us got to sit next to you.” I could see that with them positioned in the middle, there wasn’t room for another person on either side.

The Lincoln swept into the carport of the Des Lux, the fanciest hotel in Des Moines, where a uniformed attendant was waiting with a wide wheelchair. Al and Bert worked themselves crab style out of the car and gestured me to follow, with Eddie holding the car door for me. Snugly settled in their custom chair, the brothers chatted familiarly with the bellman, who was laboring to steer the chair through the plush carpeting en route to the Flamingo Room. In my four years at Drake no date had hinted at going to the Des Lux, nor could they have afforded to. I knew reservations needed to be booked two weeks in advance, but when we whisked up to the maître d’, Al said, “Good evening Maurice. The usual table, and tonight we have a guest.”

## Double Feature

All the while I kept looking around at the crystal and velvet and gold leaf covering every surface, and over my shoulder at the patrons coming and going. Bert noticed my nervousness and chuckled, "Now don't be self-conscious, honey. With us here, for sure nobody's going to be staring at you."

In the back corner of the restaurant a table was set with a small sofa as one chair, which the brothers slid into, and a chair was brought in for me. "I wish you'd call me by my name," I said, pointing at the press pass still pinned on my jacket. "It's Elizabeth, you know."

Al and Bert glanced at each other. "Okay," said Al, "I'll call you Liz."

"And I'll call you Beth," said Bert. "That way we can tell you apart." He paused to give me time to catch the joke. "C'mon, it's only fair. It's not your fault there's only one of you, so humor us a little."

"Sure, this is probably the only time you've ever been on a double date by yourself. If we're lucky you might be schizophrenic."

I couldn't help but laugh. I was with doubtless the most freakish pair of people on the planet, who by any measure would be considered abnormal, hideous, or repellant, and here they were, trying to put me at ease and teasing me. I was full of questions, not just for the paper, but for myself as well.

Just then the menus arrived, with a half glass of wine each for the boys, and they entered serious negotiations. "We have this one stomach between us," explained Bert, "but we each have our own set of taste buds. Mine refined, his primitive, so we need to bargain."



## Double Feature

“Four items total, we each get to choose two,” said Al. “Today is my turn for entrée and dessert.”

“Well cut up,” explained Bert. “We each get a fork, but we wouldn’t trust each other with a knife.”

“We’re pretty good with chopsticks though.”

I marveled. How they managed daily living was a whole new version of normal. “Doesn’t it bother you though, being stared at all the time,” I asked.

Bert chuckled, “Of course not. That is our profession. If people didn’t look, and look again, we might have to do real work for a living.”

“And we do quite well, thank you,” said Al, gesturing at the room. “This is where we stay every year we pass through, and even better in the big cities. Some carnival people may still sleep in the straw in their tents, but this is how we roll.”

“Not a lot of competition, you know. A pair like us comes along every two generations or so.”

“We’re working on a nice deal with Doublemint gum. Our previous manager didn’t want to go there, and that’s why he’s previous.”

“We have business degrees, took them online.”

“And he kept peeking at my answers on the test.”

“It’s tough to beat us in negotiations. While one of us is watching the words, the other is following the body language.”

“And if you think about it, together we have an IQ of over 200.”

## Double Feature

“I don’t think it works that way,” I said, but couldn’t keep from laughing. I had to admit that their perfectly timed alternate delivery would be powerful to interrupt. There was no pause to catch a breath before the other followed in.

“Still,” I said, “ aren’t there times when always being the object of curiosity, and, and, fright or pity, bother you?”

“Or repulsion?” said Bert, looking thoughtful. “We know how to deflect that.”

“But even your advertising. I saw the poster outside your show. How can you let them portray you that way? You aren’t grotesque, you aren’t monsters.”

“Oh, aren’t we?” said Al, in a Boris Karloff voice, then both of the laughed. “No, no, the ads came from our marketing consultant. We did focus groups, test market comparisons. Our gate increases by 20% if the audience is primed to be scared rather than if we were billed as a comedy routine.”

“But when we get them inside, we engage them, make them giggle, which surprises them either more.”

“If they thought they were coming for a comedy show, then the, ah, novelty of our appearance might be startling. But if they are coming braced to be horrified, then having us tease them for being half-wits sets them at ease.”

As dinner progressed I found myself entranced. Never had a date been so attentive, or for that matter even half as attentive, as this pair. As I alternated between being Liz and Beth, my speech patterns began to alternate in tandem with the dual conversations. As Liz I mirrored Al’s mildly ironic and flippant tone, while as Beth I adopted Bert’s blend of seriousness and whimsy. By now my questions

## Double Feature

were not for the newspaper, and I felt accepted enough to not worry about giving offense.

“Don’t you ever wish that you were, well, like other people? Separate individuals, not tied together?”

“Not at all!” said Bert, and Al nodded. “We wish that the rest of the world was like us. Think how much better things would be then. Less impulsive and hasty decisions, always someone there to watch out for you and keep you from doing something too stupid.”

“We’ve never been lonely, and how many other people can say that?”

“You don’t need to be taught about caring and sharing. Our lives depend on taking care of each other. When one of us dies, the other one will too, within the hour.”

I was reminded of the story of the Chinese host who settled a family dispute by placing two-foot long chopsticks by his guests’ plates. Nobody could feed himself, but when they discovered they could feed each other, they learned the value of cooperation.

“And when one of us decides to get drunk, the other one does too,” said Al, as the third pair of half glasses of wine appeared. I had been keeping pace with them, and had a drowsy feeling that I had forgotten something in the course of the evening.

Al and Bert glanced at each other, and whispered something I couldn’t hear. They leaned forward, and Al took my left hand and Bert laid his palm over my right.

“Liz, we think Mom would like you,” said Al.

## Double Feature

“We haven’t met many girls like you, Beth,” said Bert. “Most just want to go straight upstairs, to have something to tell their friends about. But you are someone we can talk to.”

“Even if there’s only one of you. But it’s a very nice one.”

Suddenly I realized what I had forgotten. My car, still parked at the fairgrounds. I couldn’t just jump up and leave, nor did I want to. By most measures, these were two of the nicest guys I had ever met. But still, this was a first date, and I had to be at work in the morning.

“C’mon up and let us show you the bright lights of the big city,” said Al, whose speech was starting to slur a little.”

“Just the three of us,” said Bert, giving my hand an added squeeze.

I had little choice. Eddie and the Lincoln didn’t get the same accommodations as the stars of the show and were settled in at a Motel 6 two miles away. We rose from the table and tottered to the service elevator at the back of the restaurant, with me still holding Bert’s surprisingly strong arm. All the while Liz and Beth were being showered with outrageous flattery

The skyline of Des Moines might be drab by daylight, but from the Presidential Suite on the fourth floor the lights from the buildings reflecting off the river at night yielded a stunning panoramic view. The room itself was elegantly, if sparsely, furnished. In particular I noticed there was only one oversized bed, and no sofa that I hoped might be my refuge for the night. And I had little time for inspection of the décor as I found myself, not just embraced, but enveloped, by a hug that halfway surrounded me. I gasped when simultaneously Liz’s earlobe on the left

## Double Feature

and Beth's earlobe on the right were being nibbled, and for a moment I was disturbed at how expertly – too expertly – Al's longer hand was unfastening my buttons. That was quickly forgotten when I jolted to the thrill of having both nipples kissed at the same time, and at one point I thought I heard a voice beneath say, "Mommy."

Later, much later, as I lay awake with my chin resting on the mutual shoulder between their two sleeping heads, feeling the unsynchronized thumps of two different heartbeats against my chest, I wondered how I could make this relationship work. Most of my friends would recoil in disgust and disappear. Mom would be horrified at first but eventually come around, and Dad, who always advised me to marry rich, would have no problem. But what would I really be to these two? Could I ever be a full partner, or would I always be a third wheel appended to their bicycle?

In the morning, true to their word, the brothers had room service send up a lavish breakfast, and they telephoned Eddie to pick me up before the fair opened. Their shows didn't start until afternoon. "Can we see you again this evening, Liz?" said Al.

"We really like you a lot Beth," said Bert. "You're most unusual."

"That's quite something, coming from you," I said. "You're really sweet, both of you, but I don't know if this would work out. I couldn't marry you, that would be bigamy."

"We could do it in Utah," said Bert. "We have a show in Salt Lake every fall. That way you could get two rings."

## Double Feature

“Or you could just marry me,” said Al. “Let Bert be the best man.”

“Which I am, by the way.”

“That wouldn’t work either,” I said. “Then you’d accuse me of having an affair with your brother, and not even behind your back.”

“Heck, just come along with us anyhow. Any chance you have a sister?”

“Fortunately not, but that would make things even worse.” Eddie’s knock and raspy cough sounded from the other side of the door. I stood up, reached out, and took each of their hands. “Fellows, you are wonderful, you really are. But you couldn’t commit to me the way I could to you – you’ll always have someone else to care for, to confide in, before me.”

Al looked down, and Bert nodded almost imperceptibly, which showed me I was right. He said, “Well, that’s the kindest put-down we’ve ever had. Usually it’s just because my brother is a jerk.”

The ride back to the fairgrounds was mercifully quiet. Eddie asked no questions and his face betrayed no sign of a smile or smirk. I sat in the back, settling into the depression the brother’s body had molded into the seat cushion, and wondered if I had missed my best chance for a remarkable life. When I arrived at the office in mid-morning I avoided my editor’s eye and filed a one-paragraph clip for the political section, noting that the visiting Crosius brothers, age 29, of Missoula Montana were independents who strongly favored family unity.

In the four years since then I haven’t been back to the fair. My mother, always pushing to get into the grandmother business, invariably quizzes me why I’m

## Double Feature

not dating, and all I allow is that I'm getting over a previous disappointment. When pressed for details, all I offer is, "It's complicated."

The single girls who come and go at the paper seek me out to unload their romantic woes, knowing they will only have a smug and condescending audience with their married colleagues. With them I allow that I once had two suitors, but had to dump them both because they sort of knew each other, which made things awkward. Last week Darlene, the new headline proofreader, was fuming about her boyfriend of six months. "I could just spit in his eye," she said. "He's so two-faced."

I patted her hand. "I know just what you mean, dear."