



Booth

---

Volume 6 | Issue 4

Article 2

---

4-11-2014

## The Strong Woman, After Failing Her Massage Therapy Practical Exam

Katie Cortese

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth>

---

### Recommended Citation

Cortese, Katie (2014) "The Strong Woman, After Failing Her Massage Therapy Practical Exam," *Booth*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol6/iss4/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Booth by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@butler.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@butler.edu).

---

## The Strong Woman, After Failing Her Massage Therapy Practical Exam

### Abstract

The circus is no one's first choice. Our lion tamer dreams of Fenway Park; banishing ball after ball into the Citgo sign's white center. Spidergirl, that wispy wonder, tarantellas around her tent like an angel. But here at the Poach Brothers' Three-Ring, no one cares about your dreams.

### Keywords

circus, strong woman, massage therapy

### Cover Page Footnote

"The Strong Woman, After Failing Her Massage Therapy Practical Exam" was originally published at [Booth](#).



# BOOTH

A JOURNAL

April 11, 2014

## The Strong Woman, After Failing Her Massage Therapy Practical Exam

Fiction by Katie Cortese

The circus is no one's first choice. Our lion tamer dreams of Fenway Park; banishing ball after ball into the Citgo sign's white center. Spidergirl, that wispy wonder, tarantellas around her tent like an angel. But here at the Poach Brothers' Three-Ring, no one cares about your dreams.

Harry's out there barking up a crowd. "Torn from her Amazonian home," he says of me, allergies turning his voice high and nasal. "Stronger than ten, red-blooded American men."

Actually, I'm from Delaware, and bench around 550. Daddy got me started on the weights, back before his heart burst during the swimming leg of his 28th Ironman but I'm glad he's not around to see where I landed. I'd hate for him to feel he stuck me here.

Outside, Harry sneezes three times, rapid-fire. I could help his allergies. A few taps to the chest to loosen the phlegm, a little hot stone therapy. He always tells me keep my manhole covers to myself, though, especially since my last client's hovering between worlds in the ICU.

But things are looking up. The contortionists struck me a deal. For half my nightly take, I can practice anything on them. Reiki or Swedish. Thai or Shiatsu. Trigger Point. Acupressure. I'm getting better, gentler. If they let me retake the test in December, I might just have a shot.

As tonight's first batch of suckers push into my tent, five snot-nosed boy scouts with camera phones, I point to the metal chain I've looped over the fence between us. It snakes over the straw-strewn ground and runs through a pair of iron manacles fastened on my wrists.

"Try and break it," I say. Each word stirring a breeze that musses their cornsilk hair. The fat one screams, peeping between his chubby fingers. The tallest grasps one side of the chain and a gum-chewing redhead the other. They strain and sweat until the redhead lisps a curse.

"Shit lady, itsh imposhible."

The others try too, even the one with an arm in a sling. The contortionists are used to torn tendons and dislocated joints. Their tolerance for pain is such that they barely cry out when I bruise them. Maybe Harry's right when he says I'm only of use to other freaks.

"Imposhible?" I say while his friends snicker up their sleeves. I have calluses where the chains caress me nightly. My poor, dead Daddy would hate the marks they leave. "Behold."

I wrap the chain around my wrists like cat's cradle and use half my strength to rend them. While pulverized iron coats the boys with metallic snow, I give Patrick Henry his due. My personal favorite of the founding fathers. "Give me liberty," I say, and hope I'm channeling one of Mama Nadia's prescient visions. With any luck, by Christmas I'll be licensed and legal, then it's goodbye to Harry and Lenny's mangy lions. Adios to Spidergirl's many-jointed legs.

After the scouts leave their sweaty pennies in my tip jar and file back out, I slip out through the flap at the back of the tent where the air is crisp and I can hardly smell the elephants.

Daddy always said he wanted me strong for the day he wasn't there to protect me. He wanted me to be the strongest woman in the world. I'm trying, Daddy, I whisper, I'm trying to get out. Then I bend to the pile of unbroken chains and stoop to grab myself a fresh one.

Katie Cortese holds an MFA from Arizona State University and a PhD from Florida State. She has earned prizes in contests hosted by *Narrative Magazine*, *River Styx*, *Silk Road*, and elsewhere. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Gulf Coast*, *Third Coast*, *Blackbird*, and *Willow Springs*, among other journals. She currently teaches creative writing at Texas Tech University in Lubbock where she serves as the Fiction Editor for *Iron Horse Literary Review*.