

Part 1. The Sword Swallower's Journey

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The lights were dim, and the air was thick from smoke. He stared at the swords in his hands for a long moment. Duke was nervous. He was performing for the notorious Outlaws, a biker gang that ruled the underground of the streets of San Francisco. He licked his dry lips, lifted his head, and gazed over the heavily tattooed and leather-clad audience.

The skinny young shirtless performer gathered a smile and said in his scratchy, smoke-laden voice, “Tonight I am going to do something very stupid for you.”

He shook his head and then rolled his eyes.

“I will attempt,” he shouted, pausing to raise his hands, “to swallow these five thirty-inch swords.”

He waited for the shouts of approval from the audience to settle.

“This is not a bullshit trick! I will swallow these swords!” he bellowed.

Duke set all but one of the blades onto a cocktail table that was placed next to him on the small stage made of old wooden planks stained with beer and grease. He extended a saber out in front of him and twisted his wrist back and forth.

The sword-swallower continued, “What I am going to do is take this sword and the other swords lying on this table next to me and drop all of them into my mouth and down my throat at once! They will pass through my larynx and down the esophagus.”

He opened his mouth wide and made an exaggerated swallow.

Duke interrupted himself. He left his mouth open for a long moment, and then the exaggerative swallow changed to a smirk.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said while nodding his head.

He leaned toward the crowd and raised his right hand next to his mouth and whispered through the microphone, “Maybe he could teach my girl how to swallow swords.”

Duke closed his eyes and let out a laugh and the Outlaws responded loudly with cheers, laughter, and whistles.

He was still holding the blade in front of him when he lifted his free hand above his head to silence the raucous crowd. He could feel his heart race. Duke took a deep breath and gathered himself.

When the shouting stopped, the sword-swallower continued with his rehearsed monologue that he had repeated to thousands, “After passing the esophagus, these blades will push my heart forward as they make their way down into my stomach.”

A loud collective “Ohhhhhhhhhhh” resonated in the room. Mentioning that the heart would move forward always elicited a response from his audience.

Duke reached over the cocktail table, grabbed all five sabers with both hands, and laid each one on top of the other. He looked over the crowd again and slowly raised the swords above his head.

He shouted, “Down the hatch without a scratch, I hope!”

The crowd chanted, “Duke! Duke! Duke!” as bikers pounded their fists on the tables and slammed their boots against the wooden floor.

The sword-swallower widened his stance, leaned forward slightly, tilted his head back, and opened his mouth. He slowly and deliberately pushed the blades down his throat. His neck and face swelled, and his eyes bulged. He was leaning forward. He turned quickly to the left and then to the right to make sure that everyone could see. A brief silence consumed the room. He could only hold the swords inside the esophagus for seconds or risk rupturing his organs. There was always that moment when the audience had seemingly had their breath taken away and that was Duke’s cue to finish. He reached for the hilts and pulled them slowly out of his mouth.

The crowd roared again its approval. They returned to stomping their boots against the wooden floor shouting, “Duke! Duke! Duke!”

He was breathing heavily as he placed his swords on the small cocktail table next to him. He dropped his arms, faced the audience, and bowed.

“Once again, I cheated death,” he thought.

Beads of sweat fell from his temples. He waved his hand above his head as he walked off the old wooden stage and down the hall to the back exit door. Duke tried to mask his shaking hands as he quickly reached into his back pocket for his lighter and cigarettes.

The manager of the bar announced from the stage, “Give it up for Duke Reynolds, my brothers!”

The cold winter night of San Francisco embraced him the moment he exited the bar. He quickly lit a cigarette and leaned up against the brick wall. His thoughts returned to his performance. This was an unusual crowd. The Outlaws were much more intimidating than the normal sideshow crowd he performed in front of for the traveling circus. The Big Top was closed for the winter.

“Tonight’s was a good gig,” he thought. “Nice repeat business.”

Duke made a very good living performing for the sideshow. At the end of each season, every performer received a large portion of their earnings. It was plenty of money for most to not only live off the monies during the off season but to maintain a high standard of living, too. The sword-swallower was not interested in saving money. He lived his life in the moment. After spending the first few months in lavish hotels, entertaining old girlfriends, and drinking excessively, he was out of money and needed the work. The circus season was still another month from starting.

He took a long drag from his cigarette. Car horns, brakes, and the constant roar of urban life filled his senses. He was starting to relax. The back door opened, and a very tall, muscular, bearded man approached him. He stood a foot taller than Duke.

In a deep, quiet voice, the man said, "Duke, Big Jim would like to see you."

The sword-swallower nodded and followed him back into the bar and into the office of the most dangerous criminal in San Francisco in 1967.

Big Jim had stacks of money and an opened plastic bag of cocaine on what appeared to be a homemade, industrial-looking desk made of fabricated metal. The white tile floor was smeared with boot stains of grease, oil, and blood. A leather banner with the gang's emblem was bolted to the wall directly behind Jim. There was no other décor or furniture in the room. He was counting money and pausing to argue with one of his members when Duke entered.

"If I see you wearing a helmet again, I'm going to sew a vagina in your jeans! Don't ever fucken do that. You make us look like pussies," Big Jim screamed.

He stood six feet, five inches tall and was covered in muscle. He always wore his weathered leather jacket and faded blue jeans. The Outlaws, and frankly most of the city, never questioned his authority. He turned his head to greet Duke, and his scowl turned to an expressionless look. He tried to rest his elbows on the desk but realized he risked spilling money or cocaine.

"Great act, Duke! My brothers really loved the show. How much do we owe you? Two hundred?" he asked.

Duke nodded silently.

He peeled off two one hundred-dollar bills from one of his large stacks of cash and handed them to him and said, "I know you will be leaving for the circus soon. Look us up when you return."

"I will, Big Jim. Thank you," Duke replied.

Jim smiled at him briefly and looked him over.

He then returned to his conversation, "A fucken helmet? Are you fucking kidding me? Come here! I'm going to punch your face!"

One of Jim's lieutenants opened the office door and escorted Duke to the back of the bar. He grabbed his shirt, jacket, and swords that were already placed in their sheaths. He turned and nodded quietly to the tall biker, as if to say thank you, and walked out the back door again into the San Francisco night.

He lit another cigarette and muttered to himself, "I should have asked for more money."

He hailed a cab, stopped at a liquor store for some vodka and smokes, and headed for "home," which was a tiny room above Ink Johnson's tattoo parlor.