

Excerpt from HELL GATE, a new novel by Elizabeth Massie (DarkFuse, 2013)

The wooden chair was built to spin round and round, worked by a foot pedal in the closet and a hydraulic hose that ran through a hole in the wall and across the floor. There were four leather straps on the chair – one to secure each arm, one across the chest, and one down tight over the thighs – so that the man or woman on the ride would stay in place and could watch the scenes that would soon flash on the wall.

So the rider couldn't escape when he or she began to feel sick. Or justifiably terrified.

At this particular moment, there was a dapper, pudgy gentleman in the spinning chair, though his dapperness was long gone. His eyes rolled and his mouth hung slack from the spinning. He tried to speak but the motion of the chair drove the words back into his throat, and only a pathetic whine escaped his lips. His skin was damp and pale, as if the color had been spun away against the walls. He smelled of sour sweat.

The proprietor pumped the pedal in the closet and watched the spinning chair through a tiny window in the door. The proprietor's grin was wide and quite pleased.

The chair ride was located in the backroom of a tar-black, two-room shack. The shack was situated among countless other independent exhibits, trinket shops, shows, and snack booths within an area called the Bowery, a maze of stuffy, smoke-scented, alleyways between Coney Island's Surf Avenue to the north, the ocean shoreline to the south, Steeplechase Park to the west and Dreamland park to the east. Located at the end of a very narrow dead-end corridor off one of the main walkways, the tar-black shack was not the most popular amusement in the Bowery by any means. Most folks never saw

it back in the shadows and passed on by, opting for the dance halls, snack shops, and stereograph booths where, for a penny or two, they could gaze into a wooden viewer at three-dimensional photographs of wild elephants or naked women. However, as long as enough holidayers found the shack with its intriguing red lettering – “Snow’s Symposium of Secrets and Surprises!” – and their curiosity was enough to cause them to part with their nickel to see the magic within, the goal was accomplished. All were welcomed to sit on a bench in the front room to view the sleight of hand and parlor tricks performed by Rex, the proprietor’s bald and towering assistant. Children and old folks alike were enthralled when cards disappeared and re-appeared, torn paper was made whole again, and coins were pulled from behind a customer’s ear.

However, the backroom was reserved for those few special thrill-seekers. Adults only, lone souls. Those who inquired, asking, “What, may I ask, is in the room behind those curious velvet curtains?”

Only those who would not be missed were invited to see.

The proprietor pushed the pedal harder and the chair went round-round-round-round. The man’s arms spasmed on the rests. His chest heaved against the straps. His face contorted, his lips drawn back. Then the light went out and the projectors clicked on. Sharp-toothed rabbits and horned devils appeared instantly on the walls, dancing, dancing, up and down amid flashing reds and oranges.

The man cried as round and round he went. Round and round as the devils and rabbits danced. Round and round, until the light in his eyes winked out.