

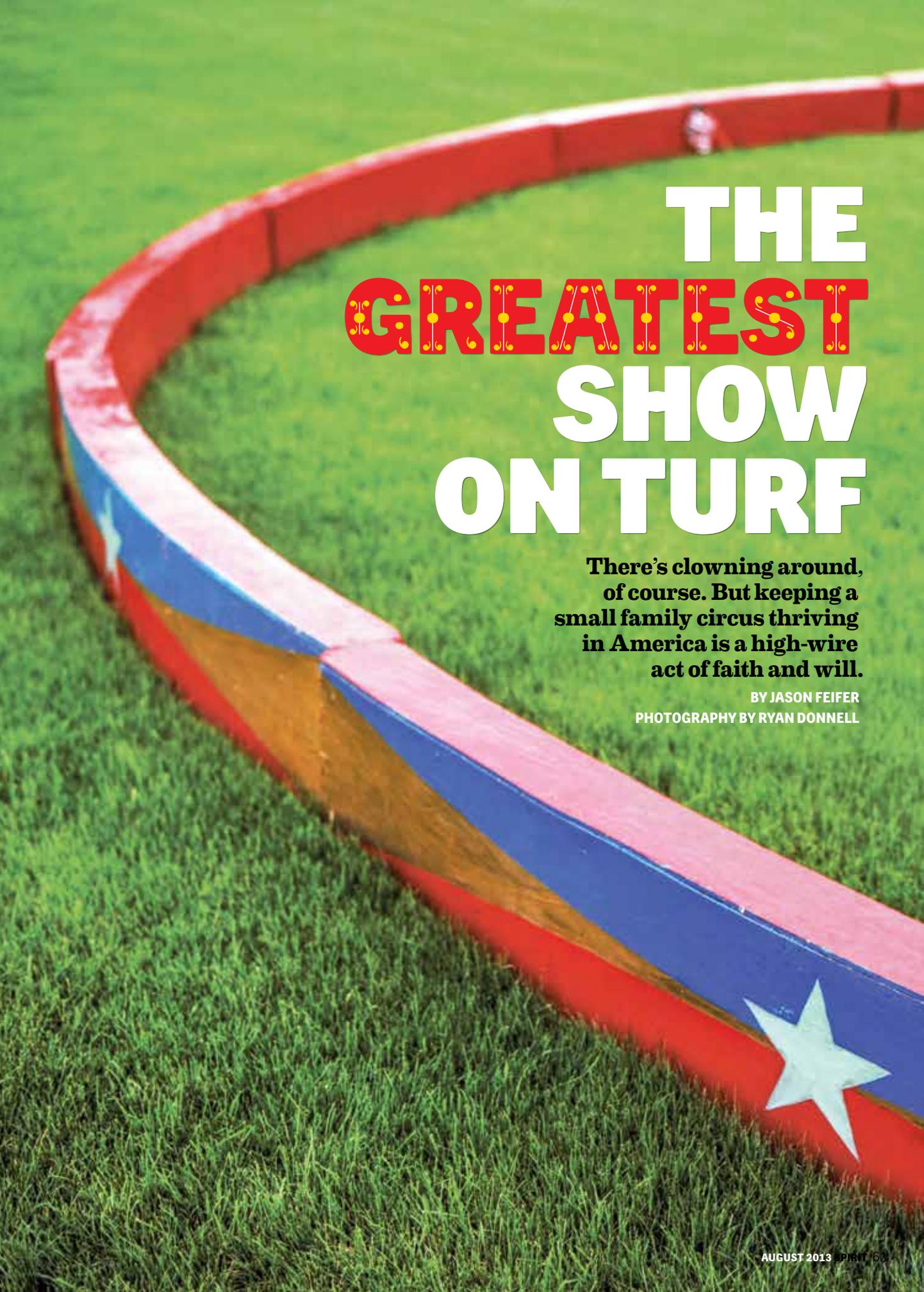


REARING UP
Plunkett family
matriarch,
Cristine, comes
from generations of
circus performers.

THE GREATEST SHOW ON TURF

There's clowning around,
of course. But keeping a
small family circus thriving
in America is a high-wire
act of faith and will.

BY JASON FEIFER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY RYAN DONNELL



A

hundred years ago, the littlest circuses called themselves “mud shows.” Unlike the biggest of the big tops, which toured by railroad, these were the circuses that traveled by wagon into the great recesses of America, driving their stakes into the ground wherever they could. They called themselves mud shows because that’s often

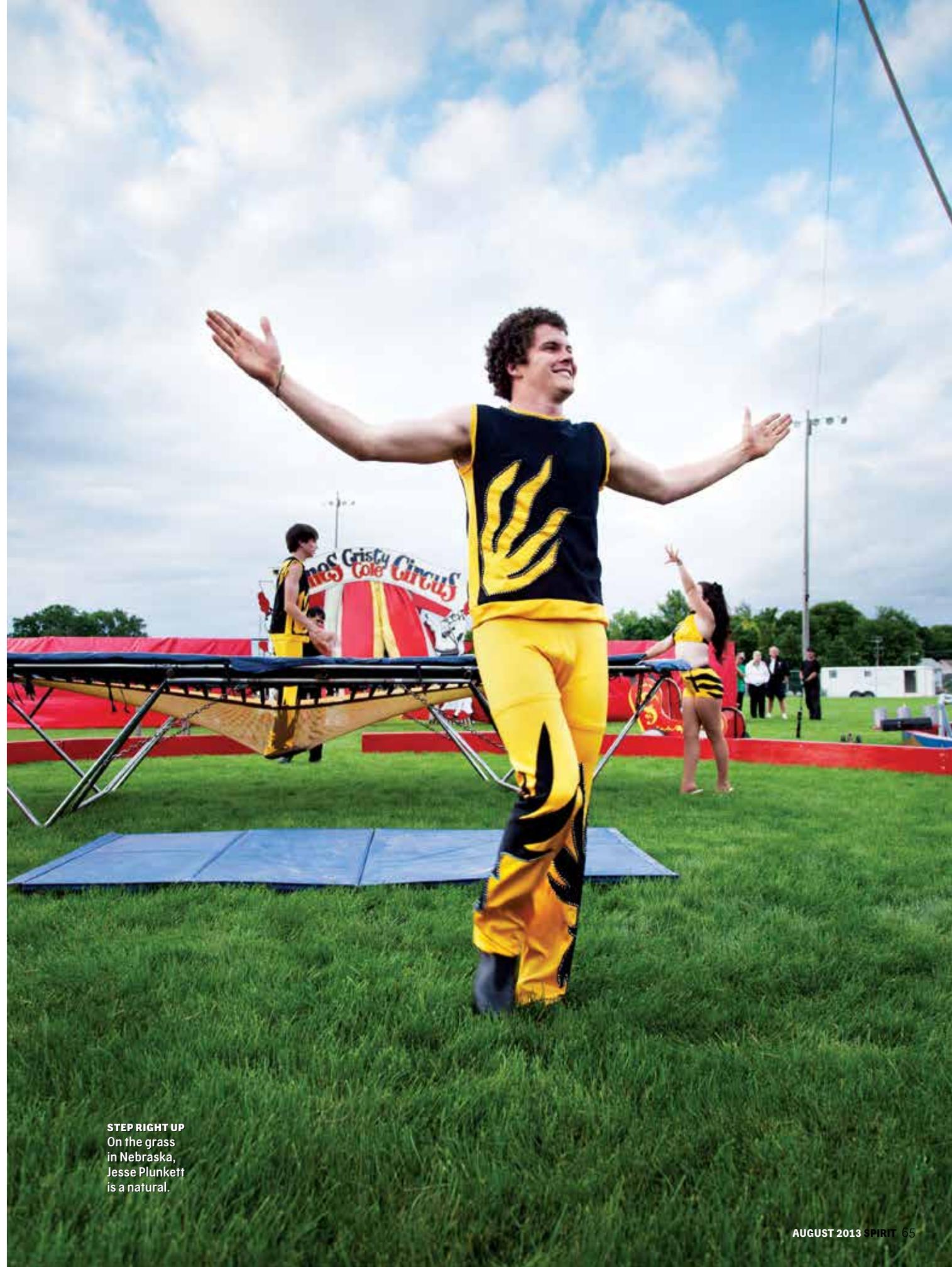
what they were. And on days like today—a wet June Saturday in Gretna, Nebraska—that’s what they still are. Which is why Jesse Plunkett is walking the perimeter of a high school football field without as much as a raincoat, as the open sky treats him like a crop. He’s a 19-year-old, fifth-generation circus performer. They didn’t get this far by hiding under umbrellas.

“It’s a struggle,” he says. “Every day when you wake up, you don’t know what’s going to happen. Rain’s the one problem I can’t really fix.”

Jesse moves with purpose—not the swagger of a teen marking his territory but the confidence of one who *has* territory. He’s the boss’ son, but he’s quickly becoming the boss himself, leading a team of 25 through two daily shows, about 20 weeks out of the year. He starts this Saturday by helping to unload hay from a truck and move it beneath a tarp where eleven ponies await their breakfast. From there, he wends his way through

the circus’s cluster of trailers—there’s one with eight tigers, another with two bears—and out to review the equipment his modest crew has already set up. The James Cristy Cole Circus looks nothing like Ringling Bros.; it shape-shifts, hiring performers and animals to fill whatever-size gigs it can find in heartland America. Today it’s looking rather dinky: just three traditional circus rings sans tent, a tiger cage, an angular rig for the aerialist, and a handful of other props spread out on Gretna High’s characterless practice field. Directly across the street is a row of suburban homes.

Jesse once fostered plans for ambitiously remaking the family business. In a closed universe where most circus kids are home-schooled, it was a rare achievement when, last year, he enrolled at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, and took freshman classes in economics. Among his aspirations were to become a mar-



STEP RIGHT UP
On the grass in Nebraska, Jesse Plunkett is a natural.

keting expert and to use that knowledge to book more shows, eventually earning enough money to buy a tent and put to an end the rain cancellations that cripple his family's bottom line. Even Business 101 principles began to pay dividends. A lesson in supply and demand was quickly relayed to his dad, James, whose stock of cotton candy was running low. James raised the price to \$4 from its usual \$3—and the sweets sold out. "Supply and demand, man," he told his son.

But after a semester and a half on SMU's leafy, urban campus, Jesse felt overwhelmed and out of place, and decided he didn't need a college degree to help his family. So he quit school in April and rejoined his circus. Today, the unrelenting rain will take away what he loves most: the show. With no performance left to prepare for, Jesse trudges through the thick, wet grass, past an attentive camel, and toward the semi that holds props and then some. "This is the man cave," he

"The circus life is a hard life—well, it's a good life," says family patriarch James Plunkett. "Who said a hard life isn't a good life?"

says, swinging open the truck door and revealing a living space of maybe 100 square feet. The walls and floor are faded to a dull gray, and the only food in sight is a value-size box of Apple Jacks. Jesse's 14-year-old brother, Cole, is planted in the middle of the tight space, playing *Mortal Kombat* on a small television that rests next to the kitchen sink. Jesse sleeps on a tattered couch embroidered with cheesy palm trees; Cole's mattress is jammed into a loft above the bathroom. "We don't live glamorously," Jesse says. "I live in the front end of a semi, which for me is perfect."

"Yeah," says Cole, who, in four years, will face the same decision Jesse just had to make about his future. "It's perfect."

THE PLUNKETTS TRACE their performing roots to the late 1800s. At that time there were more than 100 small circuses trawling the country. Now there are maybe 25, the survivors of changing times, mostly serving the parts of America that Cirque du Soleil won't bother with.

James and Cristine, Jesse's parents, met when they were 11 and 4, respectively. They both came from circus families. "It was love at first sight,"

James says with a wheezy laugh, the mark of guy who has spent his life as a garrulous showman. They wed in 1991, after failed first marriages to other people. He was 35, and she was 28—so a union, James jokes, was "more respectable."

"We decided that we had everything in common," Cristine remembers. "We both wanted children very bad, so we didn't waste time."

Three babies later—Jesse's sister, Star, is the firstborn, Jesse is the middle child, and Cole is the youngest—the couple did what came naturally and started a circus of their own. In need of a name, they stitched together the James Cristy Cole Circus and put in place a rule that most of their peers do not: The children would go to school full-time in their rural home of Mabank, Texas, and only join the circus during vacations.

"It's very addicting," James says. "When you go in front of 6,000 people, and they give you a big round of applause, that's instant gratification."



This is James' own adolescence talking: Long before he grew a belly, he toured the world performing a popular tightrope act in which he'd appear to drunkenly stumble from perilous heights. "I knew that once they got a taste of that, it was over."

It's not that James and Cristine wanted their children banished from circus life. They encour-



IT'S SHOWTIME!
The Plunketts (and Rascal) always aim to please. So does Tebor the bear.

aged them to perfect their own acts: acrobatics for Jesse and Cole, dog-training and Hula-Hooping for Star. But they wanted their kids to see the world, too, and to choose a path that could take them beyond the big top.

"The circus is a hard life—well, it's a *good* life," James says. "Who said a hard life isn't a good life?" However, that life now comes with skyrocketing insurance and gasoline costs and an increasingly fierce struggle to find paying gigs. James figured the Plunkett circus legacy would end with him.

Star was the first to prove him wrong. She took little interest in academics but turned out to be a natural with ponies. Jesse was different. He had extracurricular interests and was a born athlete.

At age 7, when he asked his mother if he could take karate lessons, she hadn't any idea that kids could do such a thing. Jesse went on to become the captain of his high school football team, the prom king, and the fifth-ranked academic in his graduating class of 250. Harvard wait-listed him.

When Jesse entered SMU, his entire extended family cheered. He was the Plunkett finally meant to break away.

Until he wasn't. For Jesse, SMU was less about finding a new future and more about comparison shopping. Back in the man cave, he puts it this way: "If you manage to find something you love more, then that thing has gotta be pretty good. Because this life I have is already great." He tried. He pictured himself as a doctor, a lawyer, an architect. He sat imagining new lives because he believed his family expected it of him. But that word *love* was a bar he had already hurdled.

All that was left for him to do was make peace with

the idea that the circus's three rings suit him best. He's still working on it. "By taking the one option I've always had," he says, "I kind of feel like I've let my parents down."

Cole, who's been discreetly listening, puts his game of *Mortal Kombat* on pause. "Mom always talks about you," he says to his older brother. "How she's proud of you—about all the work you're doing."

"She just never tells me to my face," Jesse snaps. It's a rare moment in which he very much seems the 19-year-old he is—one under uncommon pressure. Catching himself, he goes on softly. "She's been the most wonderful mom anyone can ask for. It really makes it where I want to be around my family a lot."

He tells a story of how, just a few days before, in the middle of a 4 p.m. show, he ran into his parents' trailer to make a costume change. "They were in there napping on the couch—in the middle of the pony act!" he says and laughs. Careful not to wake them, he quietly lifted his costume and raced back out to the show. That catnap would have been unimaginable a few years ago, but Jesse's now there to ease his parents' burden. "It's good to be able to give them that," he says, "because they've given me so much."

THE WORD "TRADITION" is spoken regularly by the Plunkett family. It isn't used in a stuffy way, like old-money types gassing on about decorum. It's shorthand for the circus, the itinerant lifestyle, the craft, the heritage—all of which are sources of great pride for them. "I'm thrilled to death that Jesse wants to carry on the tradition," Cristine says, even though she dearly wanted her son to finish his schooling. This is the weight of carrying forward a family legacy, the fine line between inherited responsibility and personal sacrifice.

The Plunketts' ancestors traveled by wagon. They entered the circus by accident—one was a dishwasher working for Buffalo Bill, the other a velvet-voiced panhandler literally kidnapped and forced to sing on the road. Each had children who grew up knowing little else but the circus life. And how carefree that once must have been, back when clowns and jugglers were in demand because mass entertainment was harder to come by. The Plunketts' ancestors lived in a younger country, one with less upward mobility. Their roles were clear; their paths fixed.

Jesse's challenge is more complex: In going to college, he was encouraged to step beyond a community in which he already knew his place. "All of a sudden you've got to rebuild, you know? And find your identity," he says. In high school, he was a big man on campus—the star jock, a promising scholar, the circus kid, a rural success story. At SMU, among the children of Dallas' elite? "It seemed like the kids there were *entitled* to be there. One's mom is the CEO of Victoria's Secret. He lived in my dorm. I was like, 'Your mom owns Victoria's Secret?' It's heavy-duty; heavy-duty people. And I was like, 'My dad owns a circus.'"

Plenty of college kids plow through these crises of self and set a course for their adult lives. If Jesse were just another boy shocked to discover that his strutting high school persona amounted to nothing in college, he might have toughed

it out. But the circus offered an escape from the disorientation SMU stirred in him; it gave him a purpose. In bailing, Jesse wasn't running away to join the circus, he was running *home* to it.

Now he'll have to pull off the same tricks his forebears did. Despite its robust past, the circus has repeatedly had to evolve to avoid extinction. Although today's audiences are harder to come by, the circus arts have become popular among kids. More than 350 instructional youth circuses operate in America, a quarter of them having emerged in the past 10 years. "The challenge for Jesse's generation," says author and circus historian Janet M. Davis, "is to bring all of these young people into the broader circus fold."

That's his task, town by town, wherever roads will reach: to make others feel his passion and



make the same investment in traditions—even the everyday ones.

"What's he doing?" Jesse's father, James, says, sitting up in the RV he and Cristine share on the road. It's late Saturday afternoon, and crowded around him are his wife, the children, and a few extended family members: James' ex-sister-in-law Wendy, who serves as the circus treasurer, and Niche, a lion tamer whom Jesse calls his best friend. Jesse looks out the window, following his dad's gaze. There's a small break in the rain, and the camels have been let loose to graze on the grass next to the football field parking lot. But one of the wranglers isn't paying attention and has wandered too close to the animal's backside. Jesse knows what'll happen next.

"Oh, just kick him!" he yells. The camel half-heartedly obliges, but only after the wrangler jumps out of the way.

STANDING O
When Niche puts his cats through their paces, it's the crowd that goes wild.



How carefree the circus life once must have been, back when clowns and jugglers were in demand because mass entertainment was harder to come by.

"Awwww!" the Plunkett men groan in unison, as if watching a dropped pass in a football game. It would have been the day's high point. The American circus began traveling in the early 1800s, and no doubt this is what it has been like every day since: family and adopted family far away from home, bonded together, spreading and unearthing joy wherever they can find it.

GOOD MORNING, Mr. Steeples!" Jesse yells across the field. "Can you perform in the rain?"

"Yes, indeed. I've done a hundred like this," shouts back Ari Steeples, the bear guy, who doubles as ringmaster. It's 11 a.m. on Sunday, and the skies are still threatening. A 63-degree wind churns as steady as a ceiling fan, and the ground is soft enough to sink into. But the Plunketts will touch down in this town for just two days. Yesterday was a washout, so they perform today at 3 p.m., rain or shine. This mud show will earn its name.

Jesse and Cole roll out a trampoline to warm up. They're wearing their stage getups—shimmering green-and-black zebra-print vests over shirtless arms and torsos; matching fabric cuffs; and black, stretchy pants adorned with green curlicues. Like so much of circus life, the outfits—reminiscent of a bygone era—seem to make more sense in front of an audience.

After a few somersaults and half-twists, the boys work on a new trick in which Cole does a back-handspring while skipping a jump rope. "Ahh! Face!" Cole shouts, as the rope catches him



HUMPDAY
At show's
ends, it's
off to the
next town
for Jesse
and Cleo
the camel.

on the noggin. Jesse can't help laughing, because that's what brothers do. But when Cole bounds to his feet, holding his cheek, Jesse assumes the posture of a concerned coach. "You let it get under you," he says of the rope.

This is how Jesse works—at once total goofball and pro, a balance that suits the circus well. Setup soon begins; eight caged tigers are rolled out onto the field. Everyone who isn't moving equipment is readying his or her act: brothers Matthew and Fenix Dresdner do test runs on their motorcycles; Uncle Willy, the clown, juggles bowling pins. At one point, Jesse play-tackles a crew member, and from the ground they spot someone slacking.

"Get to work, Zack!" Jesse's wrestling partner half-mockingly hollers.

"Dude," Jesse blurts, suddenly serious. "Let me do the yelling. Let them be annoyed at me, not you."

The hours move quickly. At 3 p.m., the skies are still dark, and the wind is still steady, but 75 people have assembled in the bleachers, as the speakers are pumping out a stately oompah-pah called "Shangri-La," from the album *Sounds of the*

ringmaster Ari Steeples glides through it as if he were entering a grand arena. "There's one thing I have to know: Are you ready for the circus to begin?" he rumbles. The crowd responds in kind. "Then it's on with our show!"

Jesse's 21-year-old sister, Star, gets things moving with her hyper-gyrating Hula Hoop act. Next up are the tigers, put through their paces by whip-wielding Niche. James Plunkett stands about 15 feet away, in the shadow of the bleachers. He's watching tricks he's seen all his life and thinking about ones still left to see. "Jesse's good here," he says, out of nowhere. "He's good for morale."

As the minutes pass, he doesn't take his eyes off the majestic, striped wildlife. "This is a good trick here," he says. "Watch this."

One tiger lies on the ground, while another climbs on his back. It's a vintage circus bit called "Over the Garden Wall." The kids in the crowd roar.

And the show goes on.

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