

SHORT STORY

# Cannon

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“I heard it's a good show,” a woman said. She was standing right behind me; I think she was talking to me but I didn't turn my head. I just felt the humidity of her breath on my neck. She must've been slightly shorter than me.

One of the suitcases was so overpacked it had puked its contents out. The lion tamer, with his whip rolled around his neck, stepped onto a red dress before moving back to the tent. The dress was long-sleeved and one of the sleeves sprung upwards as it sank into the mud.

“Blood stain,” someone whispered. I laughed. I had no idea why I was laughing, I just wished there was no animal abuse in the show. They piled up our suitcases in warehouses, dividing them based on colour and size, shoving them in metallic shelves and handing us something like a cloakroom number. We waited in line for hours, even when it started to rain. There weren't umbrellas enough for all of us so we had to share. Some of us chose to remain exposed: I never had adequate social skills. I could hear everyone's simultaneous talking, the whole place buzzed like a huge beehive, a yellow section, then a blue one, a green one right next to it:

“Where are they taking us?” / “I'm so excited, I always liked surprises!” / “Where the fuck are they taking us?” / “Don't you like surprises?” / “I really need the prize money!” / “They should've checked us in at the hotel first, to have a shower.” / “You're having one right now.”

I never understood people's sense of humour while waiting in line. I heard the worst jokes in my life while waiting in line. I also told some myself.

“Can I keep one?” a little girl asked. “After all this is over, can I keep one of the coloured umbrellas? The red one?”

“Poor immigrants...” a man with a moustache whispered. He had a polo sweater tossed over his shoulders; its empty sleeves snatched onto his chest like the arms of a famine-struck child.

“Why is it taking so long?” an old lady asked. She had refused to leave her suitcase in the warehouse, carrying it with her. Sweat nested in the cracks of her forehead and refused to drip. I found that very depressing but was mostly curious to know what she was carrying.

The rain stopped so we could no longer see colour in the landscape. All umbrellas were collected to the side; the tent in the distance now looked bigger. A man with a clown costume lit a match and threw it onto the pile of umbrellas, his wig was dusty as if sprinkled with flour. The flames turned the colour of the umbrellas into ash.

“Mum, why aren't the flames in colour too? How can colour burn so easily?” the little girl asked. But most of us, all of us I suppose, wondered why the man with the clown costume would set the umbrellas on fire:

“What if it rains again?” / “How much longer are we gonna wait?” / “I want my registration money back!” / “I heard those acrobats are hunks!” / “I'm allergic to ash.” / “I once used an umbrella as a dildo. It was challenging.”

“To keep you warm. You'll need to wait longer...” the man with the clown costume said.

Breasts bounced, people threw their hats on the ground, while others stamped their feet. Mouths opened and closed, we swore in several languages but mostly sounded the same. Some of us tried to bribe the man with the clown costume and jump the queue. A teenage boy repeatedly rubbed the silver cross on his neck.

That was the moment the ground shook for the first time, as if something tiny exploded underground.

Bang

“They're trying out the cannon; ever seen one in the circus, love? It used to be one of my favourites,” a man said to the woman next to him, who wasn't really a woman. It was a plastic doll and the man's name was Casper, like the Hollywood ghost. I had met Casper as soon as we arrived:

“It all feels very weird,” he said to me. “Of course you feel weird, you're a ghost,” I replied, and we quickly became friends; not all people had my sense of humour. But Casper was right. The more we approached the stranger everything felt.

When Casper disappeared from the line nobody asked for him, he just vanished, as if he never existed. I spotted his doll kicked to the side, deflated. More cannon noises followed.

Bang

Bang

Bang

Bang

“It must be a hell of a cannon!” / “Soooo looking forward to it.” / “I lost most of my hearing back in Iraq.” / “Sounds like bird chirping to me.” / “Ever made love with a cannon or another phallic object?”

We could finally see the Tent's red and white stripes, its colourful little flags and flashy pollen-like signs luring us into the main entrance. As we approached, it looked like a black hole. The outdoor speakers were impressive in size: they spat out playful music and cheering sounds, with awkward pauses in between. The closer we got, the louder the cheering grew. It made us want to cheer as well, some of us even started to dance but our feet ached from all that waiting and we must've looked like spineless puppets. Hunger also kicked in but we could smell the hot-dogs, they smelt funny but we didn't mind. I praised Allah when we finally got there.

The lady at the entrance was wearing a hat with a plastic flower, a disoriented piece of tape that flickered as she forced herself to smile:

“Enjoy the show! Enjoy the show! Enjoy the show!”

A couple of acrobats were stretching at the back of the arena; one of them was mopping the floor. The trunk of an elephant sprang out and then vacuumed itself back into the curtains.

“Leave all of your clothes in the basket on the right, you can keep your underwear on,” the lady at the entrance said. We complained but, what the hell, it was *the greatest show of all time* and we knew in advance that we would be asked to be part of it, *in unusual ways*. Some of us really needed the prize money. The man with the moustache was wearing no underwear so he covered his penis with his palms. I found it difficult not to stare at him from time to time. The performer on stilts closed and sealed the door. At that moment, the little girl grabbed my hand, something fearful crawled in our palms. I also wondered why she was holding the hand of a stranger rather than her mother's.

Two dancers wearing torn tutus asked us to gather in the middle of the arena and handed us each a bag. Random objects were inside.

“Improvise,” they shouted, “and may the odds be ever in your favour.” That last statement reminded me of that popular series. Couldn't they be more original? I laughed. I didn't know why I was laughing. A man next to me had a tomato and a knife in his bag, he sliced open a crack and stuck the tomato on his nose, like a clown. I found that very clever; people next to him clapped. I had lemons but didn't know what to do with them: juggling them felt like the easiest thing to do. I needed something better than that. The majority of people chose the costume baskets close to the empty seats, maybe to disguise their half-naked bodies. I was tempted to do the same but, as I said, I desperately needed the prize money.

A dwarf appeared; he slowly peeled the curtains on the left. It was Casper! He didn't disappear after all. Casper was locked in a cage and a fire eater was dragging him to the middle of the arena. We cheered and Casper pretended to be a lion, roaring like crazy as the fire eater spat out flames around the cage.

The old woman with the suitcase was given a long piece of white fabric and covered herself in it, as if waiting for a magician. She just stood there, on the suitcase, whispering something like a song, but the speakers were really loud and festive music flooded the tent. The little girl's mother covered her with a ballerina costume from the basket. The girl floated in it. I felt awe looking at her: if I ever raised children, I would want them to be like her. The girl's mother tried her best to impress with the sword she found in her bag, first by attempting to swallow it, then to use it as a tap-dancing cane. In the end she injected the sword into her right thigh.

“Call an ambulance,” the man with the moustache shouted, still covering his penis with his palms. The dwarf offered him a nurse costume from the basket. Those acrobats stretching at the back swiftly retreated behind the curtains, one of them stuck his face out as if trying to spot someone in the crowd. The girl's mother continued to bleed; someone rubbed the wound with tape from one of the bags, that beige tape turned dark blue: the colour of the universe.

There wasn't a magician but we could spot some equipment next to Casper's cage which had paused in the middle of the arena. We were all now being tied together with a rope. One of us tried to do some tightrope walking but failed; his belly repeatedly slapped us in the face as he moved. A group of people on the other side of the circle struggled to create a human column. Flying balls, rings, clubs, plates spinning, lemon eating: we were all doing our best, while being squeezed and crashed into each other.

“Is this really that necessary?” I asked. The bitterness coming from the lemons had also upset my stomach.

“Mum, look, a cannon,” the little girl shouted. We all turned our heads towards it. The music stopped. “Where are the hot-dogs?” one of us asked, and the human column, after shaking for a few seconds, collapsed in noise.

It didn't really look like a cannon, but more like a long wide pipe, expressionless and silent. We all instinctively started whispering in the language we knew well. I thought of the Tower of Babel, not because of the many different languages heard at the time but because of that incomprehensible hole-like feeling that had just leeches itself into my chest. In the meantime, one of us, the one with a red napkin in his bag, pretended to have just been shot. He pressed the red napkin on the left side of his chest and screamed, dramatically falling to



the floor, eyes closed. I found that pretentious, considering the fact that the little girl's mother had literally stabbed herself. The man with the red napkin must've waited for a cheer, his eyes remained closed for quite some time, but we all stared at that cannon-looking pipe now being activated by the man with the clown costume.

BANG

The noise coming out of it stuffed our ears, fireworks and thick smoke followed and we coughed. The man with the clown costume then pressed another switch. 'Fshhhhhhhhhhh,' compressed air exploded out of the pipe's opening, something colourless sliced the thick smoke, we felt its force slap our hair and skin.

“Where's the cannon man?” someone asked.

The ones closer to the pipe started to smash their heads and arms on the metal. They fell first, slipping out of themselves. The tomato on the man's nose spurted its insides on the floor and the old lady's white fabric melted like cream, her still in it. The tent made a huge buzzing scream, no door, no windows, I turned my head to the little girl, searching for air.