

Ladies and Gentlemen

by Yumna Ahmad

Dapples of sunlight streak the sultry, dusted floors this morning. I am awake with the rush of noise in the house.

If you do not wake early, you will miss the circus. That is what Father says each visiting day. His tie is on backwards, his shirt unbuttoned, his hand a vice grip in mine. "We cannot miss the circus," he says hurriedly, dragging me down the hall.

My gaze shoots to the calendar on the fridge as we pass by it in a blur of white, blue, and red. We visit twice a month, the circus and its dazzling acts. We used to only visit once, but somehow along the years, it became a twice a month sort of thing.

It is always on a Saturday. Except today is Sunday, and also, we've already visited the circus twice this month.

"Get your shoes on, we're going to be late," Father says.

Outside, in almost a reverse sort of twilight, dark and twinkling stars map out across the horizon. A pale and bleeding sun curls over the pavement of our neighbourhood, half-awake itself. "Father," I mutter. "It's barely sunrise."

Every morning that we visit the circus, we leave a little earlier than we did last.

He yanks me out of the door without reply, and the faint smell of butter whizzes past me.

I have forgone my second shoe by the time I've stumbled into the van.

"Circus, oh circus, what would we do without the circus," croons Perdita, my older sister, loud and haunting in the seat beside me. My gaze

shoots to the passenger seat, vacant and almost ominous. Our mother used to come with us to the circus, but one day when we were there, she simply did not come back.

The van starts with a crazed rumble, the engine screeching to life against the melody of Perdita's eager singing. Father's hat twinkles on his head. My eyes slump closed as we pull out of the driveway. Then I jerk myself awake. Better safe than sorry—one should never fall asleep at the circus. It is not right to fall asleep at the circus.

Along the way, I watch the roads. I enjoy the quiet morning, observing the sun as it wakes from slumber and stretches its limbs, thick and waning in its breadth. I used to do this part in my room, from my window, watching sunrays stretch thinly over the neighbourhood. But then we started leaving earlier and earlier and earlier.

Perdita hits a break in her song, and Father starts to chuckle. His laughter has begun to sound more maniacal these days, like the wailing concords of the merry-go-round, like the ditzzy tunes of the festival.

"Don't laugh at me," Perdita pouts. "It's hard to find rhymes."

Perdita used to be a doctor.

Father does not answer her, because the air has grown thick with the scent of latex wigs, saltwater taffy, burning flesh, fresh popcorn. I see a dirty red cloth on the ground, the cotton

stained with something black. "We're here," I mumble aloud, and Perdita begins to bounce in her seat.

Father hums along to the tune of the circus song. "Get out," he says roughly. Then, lightening, "we must get close seats!"

I step out of the van, one socked foot against the hot, dusty pavement. Across the grounds, a leashed monkey locks eyes with me. It is

about my height, coated in hair, and overgrown. Its face is thin. Its eyes, knowing. I turn away, holding Perdita's hand.

We walk towards the large, lively, tent and its dull red stripes. Between the coloured stripes of the tent, some of the white is stained red as well. I wonder if they are in the midst of painting it all one solid colour.

Despite our tearfully early arrival, the circus is packed. We must nudge ourselves between obese carnies and dwarf men who have stolen our seats like little elves. Father does not seem to mind. His lap bustles with popcorn that Perdita snatches up and swallows until her breath stinks of burnt butter. When the contortionist laughs from the centre stage, Father laughs too, barking loud and with his jaw as low as he can get it.

I remember I have not had breakfast.

We wait for what might be hours, really. The circus starts not until a late afternoon. We sit there, sweating under the stage lights, tucked against acrid-smelling men and washed-out

perfume. Sometimes I want to ask my father lots and lots of things. But I'm afraid he'll realize what I know.

Do you want to know what I know?

That there exists a woman in this circus, her face drawn in lines, her elbows always pointed up, in some sort of permanent frozen dance stature. She stands in the back of the tent every time we arrive, and the glowing warmth of her brown hair is exactly like my mother's.

I think my father knows she is there, or at least, that she feels like she is there. I think he knows my mother joined the circus. I think that is why we come so often. If she hadn't, for lack of a better word, joined, the circus, then we would still have a family, and not whatever this is that we've pieced together like shards of glass under our roof.

And we wouldn't come so much.

It is not to say that the circus is a terrible place. It's just that the circus is not everything it seems to be. In fact, if one spends too much time here, they might even, perhaps, actually, get sick of the circus. They might, perhaps, get sick of the blinding colours, the same old red blue white brown. Sometimes yellow. They might get sick of the chimpanzees, or the screeching trumpets when they play their song.

There is filthy, filthy jealousy mingling about the circus. Trapeze artists that break their legs because stunt doubles are wanting to take their places. Dancers that leave their families so they can rehearse for hours.

But everyone has their place in the circus, whether yet or not they know it.

Father's elliptic eyes flash against the contortionist's. Perdita's soulful songs meet the pitch of the bald clowns. My mother stands frozen, waiting for her cue, her arms trembling like mini-hurricanes locked in place. I meet the monkey's eyes again, far across the stage, and look away.

In the circus there are dirty dirty liars.

Ticket stubs that stop working all of a sudden, their competency whisked too by the magic of the carnival, refunds that whimsically disappear. Popcorn vendors whose hands are sticky with fluids I cannot imagine, digging into our food, our mouths. Clowns, with their eyes big and wide, and their mouths big and covered in stitches.

But I don't hate the circus. Cross my heart and hope to die. I just sit here, in my stiff, rigid seat, back aching, butt cold, teeth chattering. I just sit here, eyes sliding every so often to the quiet shadow of a woman by the curtains—then right back! Because she cannot know I know she's here.

I think if she found out one of us would not leave again.

I think if she found out we'd all, finally, go home.

The circus is a place of love and friendship. The circus is a place of

magic and excitement, twirls and sparklers, broken bones and wet eyes, laughter and joy. And when the rumbling gin arrives, the floor shaking with the laughter of the crowds, the entertainers, though those might be the same thing, and everyone has a smile on their face, the circus lights up with orbs of glee, feeding off our frightened, frantic, feeble energies. Perdita jabs a hand into my popcorn, and one of the kernels comes away sticky, and I do not grimace, instead I smile the rule is to smile if you feel volatile and Perdita munches on her kernels, and Father roars with the contortionist's laughter at the bumbling clowns and gaping apes, and maybe I don't truly despise it here after all.

My face pulls into the slightest frown when the ring lord comes out—his teeth bright and sharp—and looks at my mother. My spine arches, fear thumping, as my mother slips away from the curtains with her arms still stiffly raised.

But then the music rushes back in, quick to swallow any sounds of worry, and my face relaxes, brightens in fact, as I swell with the energy of the tents.

The circus is a place of power and sweat. Of lies and joy. You cannot fear what you do not know. The circus tells you to ignore all common thought. Anything that isn't told, isn't true. Think it, feel it. But don't believe it.

The singing clowns, the broken trapeze artists, the flimsy dancers, the sticky vendors.

They are all just a part of the horrible, horrible magic. And do not get me started on the animals.

Their mangy, rabid snouts. The hazardous look in their eyes. The revolting globs of sweat and drool hanging in their wired, shuttered mouths. In some odd angles, in speckles of light, they always look just a little too

human.