

The Unsettling Circus

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Come one, come all, to the circus! Eat the food! See the marvels! Mind your step. And, for your own safety, please... don't look too closely at anyone.

Contains minor supernatural themes.

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You came out of your house one day to collect your mail and found a flyer caught in a bush by your letterbox. It was tattered and torn and you figured it was probably garbage. But you had a quick read and saw it was for an event nearby; a circus. You've never been one to pass up anything with free admission and, frankly, you've been feeling rather bored. So you decided to go. Now however, as you stand in the middle of this eerie celebration surrounded by strange people, you wonder if it was a good idea.

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You stand at the entrance to the circus— Though it's not what you were expecting. It's eerily dark for the middle of the day. Clouds hang overhead that you swear were not there only minutes before.

The attractions and stands all look... washed out. Like they were abandoned for years in the woods and only recently salvaged. You think you can see spider webs on one— Though as quickly as you look the attendant wipes them away.

Though there's a crowd, you wouldn't describe it as alive. And you don't recognise anyone from town; which is strange. Not a single familiar face passes you.

'Hello, hello!' the booming voice makes you jump, and you turn to the well-dressed ringmaster and his sneering companion. 'Step right up! Step right up! Welcome, my dear friend! Welcome!'

The ringmaster makes to step towards you and the other man puts up a hand to hold him back. He says nothing as he does, but narrows his eyes at you.

You feel his bright eyes dig into you as he glares. Then, he leans over to the ringmaster and whispers something you don't catch.

'Oh, don't be like that,' the ringmaster waves a dismissive hand. 'A guest is a guest! No matter where they're from.'

The man responds to his companion with a snort, then looks back to you. 'They don't belong here.'

You don't dare reply.

'Well...' the ringmaster drawls slowly, and his smile falls. 'Regardless, they're here now.... Let them enjoy their stay.'

The man's glare doesn't move from you as he's taken by the arm and dragged towards the main tent. His eyes only finally break from yours when the ringmaster pulls him around a corner and the pair vanish into the crowd.

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A performer in the circus approaches you just outside the big top, asking if you enjoyed the show.

You tell her you didn't see it —you've only just arrived— and she laughs loudly and offers you tickets.

You're not sure you want to accept them; but she holds them out to you and you realise there's more than one. There's— Exactly enough for you and all your friends. The one's you'd considered inviting.

A coincidence? It has to be.

'Don't look so surprised that I knew how many you needed,' she says with a giggle. 'I thought it was rather obvious that we're....'

She trails off as she eyes another performer. You glance to him as he shakes his head warningly at the younger girl.

'Oh. Well,' she straightens up, adjusting one of the straps on her complicated outfit. 'That's my father. I should probably— Sorry. Enjoy the show!'

She hurries to the older man, who takes her under his arm and whisks her away back into the tent.

You look down at the tickets in your hand.

They're for tonight's show.

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A man dressed in strange black robes is leaning on a crate behind a cart, eating a pear with a knife.

You're not sure what, exactly, it is about him that catches your eye. But you approach him and ask what his role in the circus is.

He doesn't reply. Not even turn to look at you. He just continues leaning on the crate and cuts himself another piece of his pear.

A creeping feeling tickles its way along your arms as you swear you see the skin on his neck... *move*.

You think you can see marks in his skin. Like a thousand closed eyes waiting to open.

Your staring gets his attention and he finally looks up at you. Then he swallows his mouthful and dismissively waves his knife.

'Just a trick of the light,' he reassures. 'Don't you worry yourself, none.'

You're not sure you believe him. But he offers you a slice of pear and gives a smile that seems genuine.

You take the fruit, holding it dumbly as he pushes himself up and trods away into the shadows.

Perhaps he was right. And it *was* just a trick of the light.

You go to eat the pear and realise with a start:

It's rotten.

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You're milling around the circus grounds when you see a group of performers practising by the tent. Blue haired, all of them. Most look very similar with washed-out, sickly-looking skin.

Then one, the oldest of them all, sees you and breaks away. He is tall. Strong looking. And his eyes are a murky green. You recognise him; this is the father of the girl who gave you tickets to the show.

His eyes cut into you like blades as he stares down at you and, for a moment, you feel like something is poking into the back of your head.

You turn to glance behind you but find nothing.

The ache is still in the back of your mind as the man takes a deep breath.

'You were not invited here,' he says.

You're not sure why a circus would need an invitation. Surely he's not serious?

He scoffs, then, still glaring down at you. 'I mean,' he says slowly. 'You were not invited to watch my children practice.'

His children?

'Yes,' he says, as if he heard what you'd just thought. 'My children. You have your tickets for tonight's show. You can wait until then to watch us.'

Your skin crawls. But you try to be polite.

You ask about their mother.

'Their what?'

You repeat yourself; perhaps a little louder, this time. To make sure he heard you.

'Their *mother*?' he looks at you, quizzically, before slowly looking back to the group of young adults by the tent. 'I don't know what you mean. They are *my* children. Nobody else's.'

He casts you one more glance, this one seeming perplexed, before giving a disgruntled snort and returning to practice.

The ache in your head vanishes as he does.

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You're wandering the circus stalls looking for something to do when you notice a man leaning against the side of a food stall, smoking.

His eyes are locked on you. Trailing your every move as you wander aimlessly and take in the sights.

You try to be a little less obvious about staring at him than he is about staring at you. But you're not sure if it's working. He definitely knows you see him.

As you pass, you feel his hand brush your pocket. Not that it matters. You left your wallet at home.

You glance to him and he grins.

'Tough luck,' he comments.

You pat your empty pocket and shrug.

Too bad for you both. Some of the food here actually looks good.

He laughs and takes another drag of his cigar.

'What's your favourite colour?' he asks, dull grey smoke billowing from his lips.

You're not sure you should tell him. This place is so strange that it makes you a little nervous about sharing that sort of thing....

'Come on, kid. Humour me.'

It couldn't hurt, could it?

You tell him. Though it's against your better judgement.

He takes another long drag of his smoke.

This time, the smoke comes out bright and lively; and you give a surprised chuckle as you realise why he asked your favourite colour.

You wonder how he did that.

He laughs again. Then flicks his cigar to the ground and stamps it out.

'Alright,' he says. 'If I can't steal from you, I'll buy you something to eat, shall I?'

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You see a young woman sitting on a bench by a vendor. As you make to walk past you notice she's crying; and you can't help but pause.

She looks to you and you ask if she is alright.

She wipes her eyes and nods, inviting you to sit beside her.

You join her, holding out your popcorn to share.

You ask why she is crying.

She replies that she misses her brothers. They used to come to the circus as children. But now they're gone. They were both in an accident, earlier in the year, that took their lives.

You talk to her about them. You're not sure how long. But by the time you're finished, she seems to feel better.

You look up to her. Then you pause.

Over her shoulder you see two men watching you from a distance. There is something... off about them. Something strange.

Like you can see through them.

The woman watches your eye, turning around and blocking your view of the men.

When she turns back they've vanished.

'What are you looking at?' she asks.

You tell her.

And she smiles.

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You're skirting the edge of the circus when you notice a small crowd gathering around someone.

They're chattering amongst themselves. Laughing and clapping politely as the performer in the centre of them holds their attention.

You can see another visitor that you've bumped into several times already beckon you over to a space in the crowd, and you join them in watching the act.

It's a woman in a skull mask and tattered clothes. You're not sure what kind of performer she's supposed to be.

At first she leaps around the crowd and you think: an acrobat! But then she flexes and retrieves a dumbbell from nearby, and you wonder if she's actually some sort of strongman.

Whatever she is? She is interesting. And you can't seem to look away.

Then she notices you and pauses, cocking her head to one side and staring for a moment before leaning in closely.

You flinch.

The mask is very realistic. Too realistic.

So realistic that, for a moment, you almost doubt that it's a mask at all.

As your eyes lock into the empty black sockets of her skull, your heart leaps to your throat and your stomach sinks to your knees.

The sound of the cheering crowd fades as time seems to slow to a stop.

She lifts a finger to your lips. And with her other hand, reaches over her back for her hood.

She pulls the hood over her face and sets it into place. Snapping it tightly over her skull like a silicone mask.

'I'm so sorry, love,' she says, smiling playfully. 'I didn't mean to frighten you.'

You don't know what else to do but shrug and nod.

'I'll just keep this on while you're here, shall I?'

Then she steps back and the rush of the crowd hits you like a strong wind as the woman leaps back into her performance.

You're still half-stunned when the person next to you nudges you excitedly and calls you lucky; barely anyone ever gets to speak with the dancer!

'She must have seen something in you.'

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You've been wandering the circus for a while, meeting many of the strange....

Would 'inhabitants' be the right word?

They don't live in the circus. At least not that you're aware— But it *feels* like the right word.

You look down at the fairy floss in your hand, wondering when you picked it up.

You're not sure if you would have brought it, even if you'd had money to do so.

It's such a sickly purple-black colour. Washed out like the rest of your surroundings. Looking at it makes you uneasy.

But... it's free food. And it tastes alright, you suppose.

A honk sounds behind you and you turn to find a startlingly colourful clown. They're an eyesore in the faded surroundings. Bright clothes and makeup cover the clown from head to toe, each item clashing with the last in a way that threatens to give you a headache.

You stare at them for a moment to let your eyes adjust.

They slowly open their mouth... And let out a comical bike horn honk that catches you off-guard.

You laugh.

The clown's long, snake-like tongue flicks out as if to catch it.

You stop, staring again.

The clown grins. Then pulls a balloon out of their pocket. They blow it up and start to fold it into shape— And it pops.

The clown leaps back in an exaggerated manner, falling over backwards into the grass with a loud crash, wet splat, and several honking noises.

You can't help but laugh as a dove escapes from their sleeve, a trail of handkerchiefs and confetti following it, and the clown leaps to their feet; their tongue flicking out again and brushing by your mouth like a frog catching flies.

You pause at the strange behaviour. But can't hold it in for long and give another chuckle.

The clown laps it up before stepping back and smiling wide. 'Thank you, I was starving!'

You stop.

*What?*

What... did they just say?

Surely you heard them wrong....

A child crying breaks the awkward silence and the clown's head snaps to look to the sound.

Before you can say anything, they've sprinted away and vanished behind a tent.

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You hear a cheerful whistle echoing through the night, and against your better judgement decide to follow it. It leads you out of the circus, deep into the darkening forest.

The tune is familiar, though you can't seem to place it. It calls for you even when you know you shouldn't go alone into the dark. But you can't help it, and find yourself heading deeper and deeper into the trees.

You walk for what feels like hours; the tune never getting louder or quieter. And then, just as you wonder if you've made a mistake, you see him.

An older man dressed in a well-kept black suit, standing by a lone caravan. He's juggling faded balls that look like they were colourful, once. A long time ago.

They're all different balls, you realise as you approach. Of all different patterns and sizes. A basketball. A soccer ball. A tennis ball—

You catch a glimpse of one that reminds you of a ball you used to play with as a child, but you shake the thought away as the man sees you and gives a friendly nod of his head.

You greet him in turn and watch as he continues to juggle and whistle.

You're not sure how long you stand with him. You feel like you should be bored—he's repeated the tune at least twice— but you can't help but feel... peaceful. Like all the worries in the world no longer matter.

Then a wolf howls and the man's hands drop casually to his sides; his balls falling to the ground around him and disappearing into the long grass.

A second howl and he looks in its direction, a concerned furrow in his brow.

'Woods aren't safe this time of year,' he says without looking to you. 'I'll head back with you.'

You thank him and, as he goes to kick away the breaks on his caravan, you bend down to help pick up his juggling balls.

You can only find one: the one that resembles your childhood toy. Picking it up sends a tingle up your spine. And when you stand you find yourself in the middle of the circus again.

The man is gone.

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You are wandering around several of the circus caravans, not quite sure where to go from here. You've had an alright time, you think. Things have been a little bit unusual throughout the day. But nothing's been too much for you to handle.

You turn a corner and freeze.

Right in front of you there is a lithe, muscular shape. Shadows cut across its orange fur sharper than its blackened stripes.

It stares at you, its bright eyes glinting as it takes a step towards you.

Instinctively you squeeze your own eyes shut and hold your breath.

You wait for it to pounce.

*Nothing....*

'Well? What did you think?'

Slowly, you open your eyes.

In front of you stands a young girl covered in tiger-striped body paint. Her bright young eyes sparkle curiously and she innocently pivots from side to side as she stares up at you.

You let out your breath as a confused-but-relieved sigh. Your entire body relaxes and your shoulders sag as you take in the teenager before you.

You must have been mistaken.

You look around; there's no actual big cat anywhere in view. Just the girl.

You're not sure how, exactly, you could have mistaken this girl for the beast you thought you saw... but you must have.

A giggle brings your focus back to the teen and she cocks her head at your patiently.

'What did you think?' she asks again.

What did you... think?

You ask it aloud.

'Of my tiger impression, silly!' she chirps. Then she spins on her heels; her colourful sash trailing her like a tail. 'Pretty good, wasn't it? Wasn't it! I'm real good at it! The ringmaster said if I keep practising he'll let me in the show just like my ma! She does the lion, you know! But, uh... she's a method actor, so you might want to be careful if you talk to her.'

You're not sure how to reply to that— Not that you've given the chance as the girl prances away into the shadows.

The last you see of her is her white-tipped tail vanishing behind an empty cage.

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You're waiting by the circus' entrance, staring down the road that leads to town.

You messaged your friends to meet you at the entrance about an hour ago, sending a photo of the tickets you were given to entice them to join you.

They were interested, and said they would be here soon.... You're not sure what's taking them so long.

'Ah, my dear, are you leaving already? The show's due to start soon, you know!'

You whirl around and see an old woman sitting on a stone bench. You don't recall the bench being there —if you saw it, you thought you might have sat there yourself— but with all the strange things you've seen tonight, you don't think twice about it.

So instead of letting yourself feel confused you simply smile and shake your head, telling the woman that you're waiting for your friends.

'Ah, well. I hope they fit in here as well as you have,' she says, her smile creasing deep wrinkles into her ivory-white skin. 'It's not too often folk like you feel at home with us.'

You're not sure you felt at *home*, here.

Though... you're also not entirely sure that you *didn't* feel at home....

'Will you come back next year?'

You answer:

Yes.

And, to your surprise, you find yourself meaning it.

'Wonderful,' the woman's smile grows, and she reaches into her pocket. 'Then you'll need this. For re-admission.'

Gently, she takes your hand and wraps a colourful paper band around your wrist.

And then you hear the voices of your friends calling to you and turn to see them waving to you.

You hold up a hand to beckon them over, and when you meet them halfway they laugh and ask; what's up with the statue?

Statue?

You turn, and realise that the woman you'd been speaking to is made of stone.

Still, as you pass her to head back into the circus grounds, you place your hand on hers and tell her thank you.

Even if it makes your friends laugh at you.

—END—

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