



FREAK SHOW Crista Ermiya

Every summer, when the Hoppings comes to the moor, I say, ‘let’s go look at the freak show.’ Every summer Tommy refuses.

‘You must be joking,’ he says, ‘it’s so 19th century.’

Which of course it is, in an Elephant Man kind of way. I like that, but Tommy thinks it’s morbid. Tommy goes strictly for the white-knuckle rides. Magic Mouse: the biggest mobile roller coaster in Europe. (‘Tame, very tame,’ Tommy says.) The rush of the Big Ben tower. The reverse bungee-jump, that swings you upward using what looks like an oversized catapult (£10 a go).

Whereas I get sick on fairground rides. Of course. I’d like to go on the children’s rides: gently spinning teacups or the carousel. But I’m way *way* beyond the permitted weight. I don’t mind the big wheel, except I always forget how high the Hoppings’ Big Wheel actually is, until I’m already going up and it’s too late to change my mind.

We went on it last year. Tommy kept shifting his weight to force our

capsule into a spin, and laughed as I gripped the bars around our seats, practically throwing myself to the floor. He stood up and leant over the side, dangerously.

‘Look at me,’ he laughed. ‘Look at me.’ That’s Tommy. Beautiful, brainy, bastard Tommy. He stopped laughing, though, when I vomited over his vintage *Screeching Weasel* t-shirt.

‘Fairgrounds aren’t about the rides,’ I tell him. ‘They’re about the suspension of reality in a looking-glass world of play and threat.’

Tommy groans and accuses me of reading Bakhtin again. He took a 12-week module on literary theory at my instigation, and has still not forgiven me.

‘Look at the evidence,’ I say. ‘Look around you.’ We walk past a woman clutching a furry toy dog to her shoulder. It’s only when we get close that we see it’s a real dog, all bad-temper and vicious high-pitched bark, not some cuddly cloth thing she’s won as a prize. This is what the Hoppings is about. Details that loiter at the corner of your eye, waiting to lunge at you, that have no meaning you can discern.

There are a score of women in caravans, each claiming to be genuine Romany Gypsies with the gift of foresight. Some claim to have told the fortunes of Bet Lynch, Ken Barlow, Pauline Fowler. No one thinks to say, but those people are fictions, they don’t exist in real life. Tired blonde women with lined faces queue like Soviet-bloc housewives for a better future (£5 for palms, £15 for tarot), carrying plastic bags, twisting wedding rings or fiddling with gold rope chains, or huge hoop earrings; their blistered, sockless feet in trainers, or kitten heels sinking into the grass of the moor.

Tommy pulls me away.

‘You’re not going to give money to one of those frauds,’ he says. ‘Or

maybe,' he looks sideways at me, 'you think it's you who should be in one of those caravans?'

'I'm genuine,' I say. 'I wouldn't prostitute my gift like that.'

My pockets are full of petals, leaves, stems; dried, freshly-picked, multi-coloured. My wrists and neck and ankles are weighted down by jewel-hued stones, delicate crystals hanging on threads, to protect, to ease pain of heart, to open up other hearts to myself. I wear the markings of my ancestors on my sleeves.

Tommy has just completed his finals for his Psychology with English Studies degree, is planning to stay on another year to do a masters in Psychology. He reckons I have 'extreme identity' issues. That I 'over-compensate' through over-identification with a fraction of my gene pool, based on a tenuous link by family name, the colour and texture of my hair, the dark rim of my eyes.

'It's my heritage,' I say, trailing heather stuck to the bottom of my plimsolls.

He points out, 'but you're from Bermondsey.' Clever, rational Tommy. So sure of himself, of his future, of his place under heaven.

A gaggle of men in short-sleeved shirts walk past, singing 'Who Ate All The Pies?' I throw out a curse, silently, in their direction. One slips up and stumbles, pulls a mate down with him into the dried up mud and grass.

There's something sinister about fairgrounds. Everyone knows this, except Tommy, who really does believe it's all about the rides and the rush. I tell him the heart of the fair is the freak show.

It's not actually called The Freak Show; of course not. Its official title is *Marvels from the Seven Continents*.

Tommy says, 'but there're only five.'

'Not if you count Antarctica, and the Indian sub-continent.'

‘Five,’ Tommy insists. ‘Like the Olympic rings.’

The sign is scrawled in marker-pen on cardboard. A wobbly arrow points the way to a weathered portakabin, patched up with decaying planks of wood. It’s at the very back of the fair. It looks like a cowshed, and there are a series of dried cowpats, like stepping stones, leading all the way to the Portakabin door.

‘I’ve never seen anyone go in,’ I say to Tommy.

He gives me a look. ‘Doesn’t that tell you something?’

‘Yes. It tells me that people here aren’t very curious.

‘Or at least,’ I add, ‘not about anything that takes place outside themselves.’

I’m remembering the queues of desperate, yearning women, lined up in front of a sign that proclaims *Uncannily accurate says Deirdre Barlow, Coronation Street*.

Tommy sighs. He thinks I’m hopeless.

In Spring, before the Hoppings, a woman in a confidence-building workshop upstairs at the Bridge Hotel says, ‘Complete this sentence: I am like (a fairground ride).’ I try hard to visualize myself as the upwardly mobile gravity-defying Big Ben ride, but instead, can’t help myself, so mundane, so clichéd, I imagine a hall of mirrors. I read out loud my sentence: I am like a hall of mirrors where every image is distorted. The confidence-building woman nods in a sage manner. She thinks I’m an idiot. But this is how I imagine the freak show, as a hall of mirrors.

Except it’s not a hall, it’s a bare room in a portakabin, with one plain mirror, full-length, that doesn’t distort at all.

Tommy always says my thoughts are too random. Modular, like the Hoppings, where different rides come together only to disperse ten days later. Tommy’s mind is more orderly, his thinking-processes are shapely

and well-connected, like fan vaulting in a cathedral. That's why he'll get a first and I'll only get a measly 2:1.

We arrive at The Bomber. It has two long arms, like a deformed windmill with a paucity of limbs, weighted at each end with people locked into seats, screaming. They travel forwards and backwards, and the arms spin on their horizontal axis as well as round the central point, so that people are held upside down, hair flowing towards the ground.

'Don't go on there,' I tell Tommy, gripping his arm.

'Why not?' Tommy extricates himself from my grip.

'Because.' I can't tell him I've got a funny feeling.

Tommy snorts. 'Don't tell me. You've got one of your funny feelings.'

'Even if I don't have endorsements from soap stars, I have to be right at some point. To be wrong all the time is against all the laws of averages.'

He concedes the point.

I say, 'I am Romany.'

'It doesn't count if you live in a student-share Tyneside flat in Jesmond.'

He doesn't believe me. I admit I've been wrong in the past.

I don't say, like when I believed we were — would become — more than friends? But I came home and you were on the sofa with that skinny bint from my Scottish poetry seminar, the one I'd already told you had been behaving like a complete bitch to me all term. And I knew that you'd meant for me to see. Or that time we were both drunk on cooking lager and we climbed into the bath and you said I had more flesh than all the girls you had ever met put together and I sobered up straight away after that but you just laughed and in the morning you had forgotten. I don't say that to him.

Instead I say, 'Tommy, I'm telling you, please don't go on this ride.'

‘You’re being silly. Of course I’m having a go.’

After a pause I relent. I say, ‘OK. But I’m thirsty. Let’s have a drink first. Do you want one?’

‘Not really.’ He looks longingly at The Bomber.

‘It won’t upset your stomach. Stay here, I’ll be back in a minute.’

I buy one can of Dr Pepper from a chip and burger stall. I open it but don’t drink. Instead, on the walk back to Tommy I reach inside one of my gypsy-skirt pockets, pull out a miscellany of red flowers, purple stems, dried brown leaves; crush them between my fingers, slip them into his fizzy drink.

‘Where’s yours?’ he asks, when I get back and offer him the can.

‘I only bought one. I took a few sips but then I wasn’t thirsty anymore.’

Tommy shrugs and takes the Dr Pepper. He never refuses food or drink once it’s shoved under his nose. He never gets fat either, no matter what he eats, or how much. Slim as a foxglove stem, my Tommy. Pretty as belladonna.

Tommy drinks it all in one long slurp, then burps so he won’t get sick on the ride. Two girls walking past giggle at the sound of him, but the smirks on their faces are good-natured rather than scornful. It helps that Tommy is good looking, shiny dark hair flopping into his eyes like that singer from Blink 182, the one Tommy sometimes gets told he looks like; usually by naive first years fresh from home and eager for love’s brutish rutting. He can do quite a lot of disgusting things, burp, belch, fart in public, and still get looked on with an affectionate, forgiving eye. Whereas I have only to bump into a stranger in the Tesco Metro on Acorn Road to get called a bitch.

Tommy pays for his ticket (£5) and gets strapped into The Bomber. I watch him go up and down, hands free as he goes past me waving, hair

pulled down by gravity, screaming, pretending to be more frightened than he really is. He knows I find it scarier to watch him than to be on the ride. The people on The Bomber go backwards and forwards, round and round, get held upside down by mechanical arms held at noon's position, poised, waiting in freefall before that stomach lurch and then back down again.

I think, but am not sure, that Tommy is starting to go green. He does not wave as he goes past now, instead, uncharacteristically, he clutches at the safety bar that keeps him strapped into his seat. He's not screaming now. As I watch his face flash past, his lips are thin and pinched tight.

When he comes off, finally, he doesn't run and jump and gurn in my face the way he usually does after these rides, body pumped with adrenalin. Instead he zigzags, staggers, slides on the grass towards me, hands reach out, then he stumbles at my feet. He kneels and I wonder if he is going to be sick over my plimsolls.

'Are you going to be sick Tommy?' He doesn't answer. I look down at him. He's turned puce. I observe him with some interest. Tommy lies in the dirt, twitching. He is at the centre of a widening circle of people. White drool is spitting from his lips and his limbs are flailing out of time to the tinned music emanating from The Bomber. The two men selling tickets for the ride are looking distinctly uncomfortable. Someone asks, 'Is he alright?' Imbecile. But I suppose it must be difficult to process what we are not expecting to see.

Later, the ambulance crew ask me if he has epilepsy.

'No,' I say.

In fact, he's never had so much as a cold the whole time I've known him. He's always been super-fit, ultra-healthy.

Later still, when it's all over, a policeman asks me if Tommy used drugs.

‘You don’t need to hide anything now,’ he says, while tears fall down my cheeks.

‘I don’t know. Why, do you think it was something he took?’

‘Could be, could be,’ he murmurs.

The senior detective looks at me sideways, asks too casually, ‘Why did it take you so long before you called the ambulance? You had a mobile phone.’

‘I thought he was just mucking about,’ I say between tears and intakes of breath. ‘Trying to spook me. He often played practical jokes. He liked being the centre of attention. You know what good-looking boys are like.’

The detective nods. He is overweight, tired-looking, trapped in ill-fitting clothes that I know leave marks on his skin when he takes them off at night.

‘That was Tommy all over,’ I say, a well timed teardrop overflowing the rim of my glistening left eye. ‘He was always making a spectacle of himself.’

‘Look at me,’ he’d say.

Look at me.

Look at me.

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