

CONTINUUM X

AMATEUR

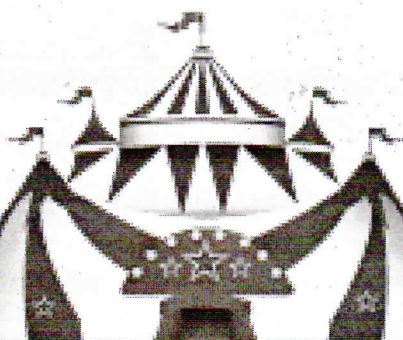
SHORT STORY
COMPETITION

Proudly sponsored by the Australian Science Fiction Foundation.
Since 1992 the Australian Science Fiction Foundation has provided sponsorship funds to the Australian National Science Fiction Convention to run an Amateur SF competition. They are pleased to once more be supporting this competition.
www.asff.org.au

An empty field one day, the next filled with a riot of colour and noise, the smell of sawdust and fairyfloss, a feeling of excitement and anticipation! The circus, no matter what world you're from draws everyone in with the promise of incredible acts and the allure of running away to a more interesting life. Full of the weird and fantastic in its truest sense, you never know what you'll find or discover about yourself. Things aren't always what they appear to be at the carnival, dark things hide in the shadows.



Please be advised the following stories contain strong language, violence, sexual references and scenes that some readers may find disturbing.



LATENCY

Lauren Mitchell

The midway's bustle is subdued for once, the rainbow bunting that usually has at least a little flutter to it hanging limp. Jerika makes her way to the nearest taco stand, relieved that she doesn't have to dodge quite so many marks today. With her hair in its myriad tight braids swinging free and her tight t-shirt and shorts, she isn't recognisable as the mysterious Madame Sosostriis.

'Ma'am,' Devin greets her at the taco stand, pre-empting her order by handing her a paper tray brimming over with meat and beans and cheese. Presumably there is at least one taco shell under there, somewhere.

'Dev. How'd you know I was coming here, not the cookhouse?'

He gives her a sly look. 'Maybe I've got a lil' psychic in me myself.'

Jerika snorts. 'I wouldn't believe that in a hundred years.'

'Hey, exotic mistress of the spirit world, it's not like you have an exclusive claim on special talents around here.' Before she can smack him for calling her "exotic" *again*, Devin gestures around the midway. 'What do your psychic powers tell you about today's lacklustre turnout?'

'It's cold. It's been on the verge of raining for the last two hours. Plus people probably don't want to walk through a freakshow where they're likely to wind up covered in freaksnot.'

'Succinct and disgusting. Thank you, Jerry.'

Jerika easily finds a place at a nearby table to sit and eat. The food is great. When she first joined up with the Carnevale Arcobaleno, Devin was one of the people doing the interviewing. She'd wowed him with the Zener cards, cast the runes for him, and only then found out that his speciality was cooking and not the business side of the carnival at all.

'How come you're running job interviews?' she'd asked.

He'd raised an eyebrow. 'Shouldn't you be telling me?'

'Oh, that old *gotcha*. You're running job interviews because you're the resident sceptic and they pit you against all the psychics. Also because you're the boss's son and he says he trusts your judgement, but he's really just too lazy to do interviews.'

The eyebrow had gone down. So had Devin's jaw.

Since then they've had a friendship based on banter, Devin cooking for Jerika, and Jerika helping him out by telling him snippets of his future, like which of the guys hovering around his stall is considering sneaking a hand into his poke and snatching his take.

She finishes eating and tosses her rubbish in the bin, and slips down the narrow passage between her tent and the Laughing Clowns game booth, which she's never pitching next to again because the girl running it, a casual ring-in from somewhere, has set up an eerie laughing soundtrack more suited to the Haunted House down the way.

Jerika ducks through the back of her tent and takes three deep breaths to acquaint herself to the stuffy atmosphere. The incense is an expectation, an affectation she wishes she didn't have to take on. It makes the air feel heavy, solid, clinging.

Then she pulls her hooded robes on, relights the candles, and becomes Madame Sosostriis again.

Dark.

Mysterious.

Exotic.

Fuck Devin, really.

She has this thing where if nobody comes over for a while she'll stand at the front of the tent, the swags of material gathered close around her face, and look out at the people streaming past until she sees someone make eye contact. Then she'll beckon to them like she's got just the juiciest secret to tell them. Nine times out of ten it works, and even the tenth time they'll maybe take a step her way before they get distracted by something shiny.

Today seems to be a lot of tenth times, though. Finally Jerika gets sick of fishing and flops down into her chair, which is plush and comfortable and the world's biggest pain to relocate into her caravan at tear-down time.

She shuffles and cuts her second-favourite Tarot deck, the Goddesses, and flips a card up. It's the Wawalak, this deck's variation on the ominous Tower.

'Chaos and crisis,' she mutters. 'Fabulous.'

The Three of Swords comes out next, and then Ukemochi - Transformation, which is the less scary and also more accurate way of saying Death that's less likely to freak out the marks - and then Jerika sweeps the cards off the table and into their bag because someone's fumbling at the tent flap.

'Enter, seeker after knowledge,' she calls out, hoping she doesn't sound miffed at being interrupted, and also that she doesn't have any food between her teeth.

The young woman who enters has collarbones that stand out at the neck of her white t-shirt and an actual thigh gap. Jerika's tempted to tell her to save her ten bucks for food, maybe send her Devin's way.

'Hello,' she says shyly, slipping into the querent's seat. She's barely even a young woman; up close she looks maybe seventeen. She doesn't look so sickly up close; her cheeks are tinged with pink, and her soft grey eyes are bright.

'Hello.' Jerika lets her dark-mysterious-exotic façade slip a little. 'Are you enjoying the carnival?'

'Oh, yes.' She clasps her slender fingers on the velvet-covered table. 'I especially like the carousel. There's so much to see. You must enjoy travelling very much.' She sneezes lightly.

'Bless you,' Jerika says automatically. What if this little waif wants to steal away with her, away from whatever small-town woes are plaguing her? 'It's not for everyone, though, especially in winter.'

'I can imagine.' She blows a strand of hair away from her face. It's so blonde it's almost white. 'But I'm taking up your time chatting, I'm sorry. We should do the reading so you can help someone else.'

For that alone Jerika mentally adds an extra couple of free minutes to the girl's time. 'Did you want the cards, or the runes, or the crystal ball?'

'The ball, please.'

Jerika twists around to retrieve the ball on its hand-carved wooden stand from the side table, and places it between them. The cover slips off of its own accord, but she pays it no heed; it's prone to doing that.

'I didn't ask you your name.'

'It's Mara.' No *don't you know already?*, which is a nice change.

'Can you put your hands on the ball to let it know you're here, and focus on whatever it is you want enlightenment about?' Jerika ruins the effect of the request a little by punctuating it with a sneeze.

Mara obediently puts her hands on the ball, cupped around the base where they'll be out of Jerika's way, as if she's done this before. Jerika puts her palms on the ball, her fingers over Mara's, and tries not to flinch at how cold Mara's fingers are.

Jerika's prepared to go into her usual spiel if this doesn't work - she sometimes has trouble getting anything clear out of the crystal, she likes the cards better - but the images come to the surface almost immediately, so fast that she has to blink and stare a little to make sense of them.

'I see horses, and they're running really fast... maybe there's a race coming up. Do you ride races, or go to them?' She probably does. She looks like she might have not long left Pony Club behind her.

Mara shrugs. 'I do ride... it's not usually a race though. More just... travelling with friends.'

'Perhaps it's because you mentioned the carousel.' Jerika surreptitiously touches Mara's fingers again. They're still icy cold.

'Maybe. Can you see anything else?'

Jerika looks again. This time it's fields of corn baking under the summer sun and she's about to say something about fertility (which, frankly, the girl's too young to worry about), when a breeze ripples through the field and in an instant the gold turns to rotting black. She almost flinches away but something compels her to keep watching. Next there's an army trampling the dead stalks down, turning them from black to red.

She cannot tell this to Mara. She's going to have to make something up.

But as she opens her mouth to make something up about good fortune for high school exams and to beware of drink driving or something, Mara takes her hands off the ball and it goes dark.

'Thank you. That was very informative,' she says, all at once sounding like a jaded high school teacher instead of a student.

'But I didn't tell you much - you still have six minutes!' Jerika feels another sneeze coming and scrabbles for the tissue in her sleeve.

'You showed me what I needed to know,' Mara says. She stands up, pressing the ten dollars into Jerika's hands, and unexpectedly kisses her on the cheek. Her lips graze the corner of Jerika's mouth and they are as icy as her hands.

'I...'

'Thank you, Madame Sosostris.' A smile tugs at Mara's lips. 'Get well soon.' And before Jerika can say *thank you*, or more likely *huh?*, the girl is gone.

'She sounds like your average woo case,' Rhiannon says, digging into her pasta. In the bustle and light of the cookhouse it's easy to forget the cold. 'I don't know why you get surprised when the nutjobs come to you.'

'Come on, Rhi, you know I have power. That little girl could be in big trouble.'

'"Little girl". You're only twenty-three yourself.'

'I feel older.'

Rhiannon puts her hand over Jerika's and it's wonderfully warm where Mara's was cold. 'Come to my caravan tonight and I'll show you just how old you aren't.'

Jerika can feel the smile stretching her lips. 'Challenge accepted.'

Beside her, Devin lets out a disappointed groan. 'And here I was going to ask her back to my caravan. Any chance of a threesome?'

'You know,' Rhiannon says, propping her chin on her hand, 'a threesome's when three people get it on. And a twosome's when two people get it on. So I guess that makes you handsome, Dev.'

Jerika gets it first and starts giggling. Devin takes a minute longer, by which time everyone within ear-shot's laughing.

'You're hilarious, Rhi,' Devin says, sneezing. He grabs his paper napkin and blows his nose. 'Kick a man when he's down.'

'Dude, you sound awful. Lucky we're going north soon. Won't be long before you can relax on the Sunshine Coast. One towel for you and one for your hand.'

'Rhiannon.'

'Don't forget the lotion,' Jerika puts in, and that sets everyone off.

Rhiannon's sound asleep and Jerika's drowsing when someone knocks on the caravan door. Jerika slips out from underneath Rhiannon's arm with ease borne of practice and pulls Rhi's dressing gown on.

Devin's on the doorstep, pressing a wad of tissues against his nose.

'Hey, man, we were only joking before.'

'It's not that.' He holds the tissues out to her. They're soaked dark with blood. 'Something's wrong.'

'Holy shit, Dev.' Jerika descends the steps. 'We gotta get you to the hospital.'

'Can you - I can't drive like this—'

They have an on-site medic, of course, but his nose is *gushing* and Jerika's pretty sure this isn't a cotton wool up the nostrils job. Plus now that she's up she can hear a couple of the horses going crazy, and their grazing area is by the car park, so she can wake up a stablehand and tell him to find the equine Prozac on the way.

'Cover your damn nose. Let's go.'

She has to detour via her own caravan for her phone, wallet, and car keys - and some damn shoes, she's not driving barefoot, much less taking Devin into Emergency barefoot - and leaves him on the step outside. When she comes back out he's lying on the grass.

'Devin, what the fuck—'

'Jerry. I can't.'

'No, Dev, you gotta get up.'

He struggles and gets halfway up. Half his face is covered in blood. It looks like a tragedy mask.

'What the hell happened to you?'

'I was feeling fine all day, but then this one girl came to the stand and she sneezed a couple times and I think maybe she gave me something.' Devin's eyes are unfocused. 'Weird, actually...'

'What, why?'

'She said you told her to see me, that you thought my food was the best.' A smile's shadow flits across his face. 'At least that's okay.'

'But I didn't—' Jerika thinks about it. 'Wait. Blonde girl? Thin? Young?'

'Yeah.'

'What the hell,' Jerika asks rhetorically. A little tickle in the nose, a bit of a cold, that she could understand, but this is more like haemorrhagic fucking fever or something, and *that* she can't imagine being passed on by someone who looked so healthy. And anyway, doesn't that shit take time to incubate? This is more like someone's set off a bomb in Devin's sinuses.

'Jerry...' Devin starts coughing, and spits onto the grass, and even in the dark she can see that it isn't clear.

'Hang in there.' She pulls her phone out and calls triple zero, wondering why the hell she didn't do that in the first place. The voice tells her the ambulance will be there in ten minutes.

Ten minutes is maybe three minutes too long. The red and blue lights paint coloured shadows across the ground and people swarm out to see what's going on. More than a few of them are holding tissues to their noses, Jerika notes almost clinically. She can't do more than that. Devin's head is heavy in her lap and Rhiannon's dressing gown is ruined.

The paramedics load Devin into the ambulance and get a statement from Jerika, although all she can really say is that he bled too much too fast, and that's self-evident from the puddle on the ground. They tell her maybe it was a brain aneurysm. They tell her no, he didn't die from catching a cold. Catching a cold never hurt anyone.

At last she's released and everyone crowds around to see if she's all right, but all she wants to do is go back to Rhiannon's bed and try to sleep in Rhiannon's comforting warmth. Rhi's one of the few people who didn't come running at the sound of sirens, but she can and has slept through anything from a tropical cyclone to a police raid, so Jerika's not worried. She wonders whether this is going to keep them from tearing down tomorrow, but dismisses the thought. Tomorrow can look after itself.

She's almost at Rhiannon's caravan when she realises that the horses are still going ballistic, maybe more so than usual. Evidently the stablehands didn't bother to check on them before running off to see the spectacle of Devin being taken away. So she turns round and grumbles her way back.

She's close enough to smell unshovelled manure when the white horse jumps the temporary fence and lands in front of her, which is interesting because they're meant to be on picket lines, and also because Carnevale Arcobaleno doesn't have any white horses.

She recognises the rider, though.

'Mara?'

A second horse joins her, a strawberry roan. The girl straddling this one is naked, skin painted with swirls and sigils in crimson, her red hair cut short and spiked with what Jerika is certain is not gel.

The third horse is black. So is its rider. Jerika can only assume she's female as well.

The last horse is a pretty cream palomino and actually could be one of the carnival's horses. It's riderless, but joins the other three in a neat line as if choreographed.

'We can carry you, if you'll come,' Mara says. 'But if you won't come, we can't carry you. You'll be the one who carries.' The red girl snickers as if this is a hilarious joke.

'I don't understand.'

'Death, girleen,' the red girl says. 'Ride with us. We need a fourth, and you've got the Sight. You're the wisest woman.'

Jerika knows that she's got the Sight, whether she usually calls it that or not, but isn't sure what it has to do with three strangers on horses in the middle of the night, and says so.

'Your abilities would be useful to us,' Mara says.

'You can show us the way,' the dark girl says, and her voice is soft and low and Jerika almost believes her, it's so compelling. 'Without your vision, we're left with trial and error.'

'Mostly error,' says the red girl, snickering again.

'We cannot wait all night,' Mara says. 'Will you join us?'

Jerika thinks she knows this story. She thinks she knows these signs. And she wants no part of it.

'I can't,' she says.

'Then forget,' Mara says and, although she's still up on her horse Jerika feels her icy hand touching her forehead.

'The horses are fine,' the stablehand says, looking at her curiously. 'All present and accounted for. Are you all right, Jerry? You look really out of it.'

'Yeah, no, I guess I'm just tired.' Jerika flaps a hand at him. 'Go on back to sleep.'

She heads back towards Rhiannon's caravan, barely avoiding a darkly muddy puddle on the way, rubbing her temples. She has a hell of a headache, and her sinuses are threatening to dribble clean out of her nose, and she really needs to sleep.

Rhiannon is predictably fast asleep. Jerika blows her nose three times, drops a couple of Panadol with a glass of water, and crawls into bed.

The last thing she hears before she falls asleep is Rhiannon sneezing softly, and she thinks muzzily that there's a reason that's bad, really bad, but it won't come to her. Not when she's got tear-down on the brain; they have to be up at five.

The carnival doesn't move on its own, after all, and they have so many places to go.



STRANGENESS AND CHARM

Vanessa Kuipers

Every year, the carnival comes to town.

Every year, those who have been bored and dispirited and weary of their own lives wait in anticipation. Longing for just a touch of the magic it brings, with glittering confetti and huge stuffed animals and steel carriages whirling through the air.

* * * * *

Dave groaned and ducked his head, walking just a bit faster through the crowd.

Seriously - why did those two dickheads have to decide another round of 'Whack-a-Dave' would be fun **now**?

The circus was one of the most exciting things to happen all year in this place; why did Curtis and Brian have to ruin this for him? Summer was supposed to be when he escaped them, as well as school. Why couldn't they just find some of their mates from the footy team, piss off with some beers, and get drunk in a quiet corner somewhere?

Wait; it was still early - barely dark. Maybe if he could dodge them long enough, they'd lose interest and end up doing exactly that?

"Why won't the stupid little shit just stand still and take what's coming?"

Dave nearly froze at the loud complaint, but long painful experience had taught him to keep going. Brian making comments like that didn't mean they'd spotted him; he just like complaining at the top of his lungs so everybody near him had to listen whether they liked it or not.

But it still triggered an instinctive fight-or-flight rush of adrenaline, and Dave found himself moving faster than he should, as he cursed whatever hormone imbalance made bullies out of the blokes that grew up bigger and stronger than everyone else. Dave was actually four months older than Curtis, and just a couple of weeks younger than Brian, but he was only medium height to their six foot each. He wasn't a wimp, but he was skinny, where they were built like tanks.

Dave's eyes flickered over the layout of the paddock-turned-fairground as he rapidly considered his options. If he stayed in the thick of the crowd, the many witnesses could put Curtis and Brian off; but that didn't always stop them, and Dave had learned the hard way not to depend on the kindness of strangers. As the crowd shifted, he saw an opening, and Dave impulsively decided to take it, slipping through a narrow gap between the Lions sausage sizzle and a van selling ice creams. There weren't any lights shining except on the other side of a row of tents, and he realised he must be behind the sideshows.

"Over here, Bri!"

Still unable to see clearly because of the sudden dark, he dodged into a fold of tent-canvas just deep enough to hide him, every muscle tense. Dave sucked in a shaky breath, and nearly cried out when he felt a sudden pressure winding around his ankle.

Looking down, he bit back a yelp at the sight of two glowing green gems, hovering just below his knee... then let out a sigh of relief when a wandering shaft of light skated over glossy black fur and a sinuous tail.

The cat strolled into the narrow gap between the tents and food stalls, and looked back at him.

Dave could almost hear the cat say "Well? Are you coming or not?"

Well, he'd done stranger things to get away from those two than follow a black cat. Dave shrugged to himself and stepped out of his hiding place.

The cat turned out to be a good guide; Dave stumbled a few times, but discovered that if he simply followed in the cat's footsteps exactly, he avoided every guy-rope or deep tire track that would otherwise trip over. Dave had lost track of how much ground they'd covered when the cat strolled into a tent that had silver dots sparkling from the outside walls - paint, maybe? Dave was about to stop and get his bearings, when his feet took over and carried him inside.

Dave stumbled into the tent, dazzled by the sudden wash of light, and blinked rapidly to let his vision adjust. The light was soft and golden, not quite reaching where he stood, the edges lapping at the dark like a glowing,

sun-lit pond.

The black cat strolled ahead and jumped onto the small table in the centre, weaving a path through the objects littered over the table without hesitation. Not a single card was brushed from the tarot deck, nor were any of the smooth pebbles carved with runes knocked askew - he didn't even prick holes into the velvet tablecloth with his claws. He stopped only for a moment to curl his tail around the crystal ball, as if to stroke it, before he made another jump onto the high chair back, arranging his body into a furry neck-rest for the young woman that occupied the chair.

Dave looked at the two identical pairs of emerald-green eyes, which gazed at him with equal intensity, and gulped.

"Um, look, I'm sorry to barge in like this."

"You're not intruding," the fortune-teller replied smoothly. Despite the stereotypical dark curls that streamed from her vivid red headscarf to tumble over her shoulders, her voice held no trace of Spain or Eastern Europe. She sounded like any Australian woman, just one who'd had lessons from a drama teacher on how to speak properly.

"I generally allow my customers to come to me in their own time as necessary. It's been a very long time since Socrates led one to my door."

"I think I need sanctuary more than anything else," Dave admitted. "Couple of dickheads from school."

"Take a seat anyway," she invited. "Business has been slow tonight."

Dave sat in the folding chair, and leaned against the back rest with a small sigh, as the last of the adrenaline rush faded away. He let his gaze run idly over the table, and asked, "You've got Tarot cards, rune stones, and a crystal ball here - do several of you share the tent or something?"

"I'm trained in several methods," the fortune-teller replied. "I try to use whichever form the customer is most comfortable with."

"The rune stones - they're Nordic, right?" Dave asked idly.

She gave a lovely smile and nodded. "Is that what you'd like me to use?"

Dave blinked, and asked awkwardly, "Um, I don't have a lot of money on me - how much do you charge?"

"Depends on how polite the customer is, and how difficult their reading. Let's try the rune stones, first."

She quickly gathered up the rune stones, putting them into the small blue drawstring bag lying next to them on the table. As she picked up the rune that looked like a capital P, the ring on her right thumb caught the light; for a moment, Dave saw the golden light of the tent reflected from the smooth half-globe of amethyst, highlighting some kind of flaw in the crystal that looked like an identical rune hidden in its depths.

Dave looked up, and a sudden twitch of perspective made him realise that though the fortune-teller was a woman, she was actually a very young woman - probably no older than he was. At least chronologically.

"What about palm-reading?" he asked impulsively.

The fortune-teller shook her head. "I'm not very good at that; my talents lie in aiding those who seek answers about their path through life. Palm-reading is focused more on introspection, detecting truths about the person being read."

"What about you?" Dave asked quietly. "What does your palm say?"

Just like when he'd stumbled into the tent, his body started to move without his deciding to. It was like watching someone else's arms move, as Dave slipped his hand underneath hers, cradling the small white hand in his larger one. Tracing the lines on her palm with his gaze, he brushed his thumb over the inside of her wrist, feather-light. He knew that a person's thumb had its own pulse - the reason why you're taught to use index and middle fingers to find the pulse - but he still felt it when the fortune-teller's heart leaped, the bump of blood in her wrist crashing against his thumb before settling into a harder, insistent thumping under his touch.

But she didn't pull away. Her hand rested in his as if it was the most natural thing in the world, and when he looked at her face from under his eyelashes, Dave saw that she was smiling at him warmly.

How long had it been since someone welcomed his touch like this? His foster parents and the other kids in the house barely looked at him, let alone touched him. He didn't have any real friends, and everyone at school - even teachers - avoided physical contact of any kind as if it was a disease.

"I'm the one supposed to be telling your fortune, remember?" came the quiet reply.

Dave caught a movement from the corner of his eye, and frowned. "What's wrong with the crystal ball? Is it actually like one of those lava lamps or something?"

"Wait - you're seeing something in it?"

The fortune-teller's voice was worried, even alarmed, but Dave was already caught up in the pictures

forming in the mist.

David shivers as the wind howls outside his bedroom window; he's been feeling strange all day, fighting the urge to run down the street screaming but has no clue why. Maybe it's the funny smell lingering in the air, ever since he dragged himself out of bed around ten to wave good-bye to his Dad - David can't figure out what the scent is, sort of like raw meat but not, and it makes him antsy as hell.

When the doorbell rings David almost runs to answer it, relieved by the possibility of a distraction. But when he opens the door, a policeman is standing there with an apologetic expression, and David only needs a single look to know that Dad isn't ever coming home. It's only as the policeman with the stolid, but kind, face begins to speak, that David realises what he'd been smelling all day was blood.

Dave remembered, now - that was when he'd lost his real name. His father had always called him David, and he'd always thought of himself as David, too. But Sergeant Collins had called him Dave when he came to the door, and after that day so did everyone else.

Dave looks down at his bare feet, wriggling his toes in the grass. Taking a deep breath, he tries not to wince at the quick stab of pain from the bruises that run along his rib-cage like a trail of blue and purple and yellow. He still can't figure out Brian and Curtis like tackling him in PE so much - they beat him up all the time anyway. Is it just some sick thrill out of having an excuse to hurt him right in front of the teachers?

What hurts even more than the bruises is the knowledge that if he dropped off the face of the earth tomorrow, there's no one who would care. No one would even notice, as long as his foster parents still got the money from the government for keeping him.

He blinked rapidly, fighting back tears with long practise, and returned to the mist swirling in the crystal ball.

The wide stream is fed from Mount Kosciuszko, and it's nearly freezing - but David still laughs as the water rushes around his naked body. He's so warm in all the places where Abby is wrapped around him, most of all where she's taken him inside her, and Abby laughs with him as they tumble and roll through the water, their grip on each other never faltering. Abby's eyes glow with the same happiness she gives him every single day, and an identical pair of green eyes watches from the riverbank. Socrates, sitting primly on a rock securely above the water-line where no random splashes can reach him, gives a feline sigh at the folly of his humans and curls up for a nap in the sunshine.

David sucked in a deep breath in shock, and the picture - was he seeing it with his eyes, or with his mind? - changed around him.

The bonfire is big enough to warm every single person who travels with the carnival, and roaring so high that it's sparks seem to dance with the stars twinkling over their heads. They didn't bother turning on the lights inside, since their caravan is close enough to the bonfire to provide all the light they need right now. Their small deck extension has steps wide and deep enough to hold all three of them, although Socrates still prefers to curl up in Abby's lap. The firelight gleams on the antique silver hairbrush that Abby's grandmother brought with her from Sweden, and it feels smooth and cool in his hand. Abby's long, fine hair floats and crackles with static as it dries, and the golden-blond locks curl around his hands, clinging to his fingers almost the same way Abby's body wraps around him in their bed. He has to keep stopping to untangle her hair from his hands in order to brush it, but Abby sits through the whole process patiently, humming along with the Jimmy Barnes song a makeshift band is playing underneath the tent on the other side of the fire.

The only ring on Abby's left hand is an amethyst on her fourth finger, and she wears just a moonstone and lapis-lazuli on her right, but the firelight catches and plays on her rings brightly as ever as she strokes Socrates, who looks downright smug as her hands smooth his short black fur that is always immaculate and appropriate for the occasion.

David blinked dazedly, as he tore his eyes from the crystal ball. "You're really blonde?"

He spent years afterwards groaning at the memory - that the first thing he ever truly said to her was so **inane**.

But Abby just laughed, and used her free hand to pull off her Gypsy wig and head-scarf in one move.

When the carnival left the town the next day, David went with it, still wrapped in the midnight blue sheets of the fortune-teller's bed.

One year later

"He came this way!"

David's head snapped around as he heard a still-familiar, hated voice.

A year since he'd left this town, and it seemed like nothing had changed. Brian was still chasing after younger - or at least smaller - guys, with Curtis hot on his heels.

But David had changed; changed so much, learned so much, that standing by and watching as someone else was swallowed by his old torments was unacceptable to him.

"Hey, mate!" he called softly.

The younger boy's head jerked around, and David stepped forward, into the shaft of glittering light thrown off by the Zipper. He nodded towards the gap between Ian's tent and Jessie's van, and told the blonde boy, "Go out that way, and head for the big top. Tell the guy at the door that David left a comp ticket for you, and they'll let you in free. Those two will get bored and wander off before intermission."

The boy - who couldn't have been more than fifteen - eyed him suspiciously, but nodded in thanks and ducked through the gap with the agility of a soldier dodging bullets.

David moved slightly, to cover the boy's retreat, and waited.

Less than a minute later, Curtis stumbled into view a few metres away, and swore as he tripped on a tent-rope and nearly fell on his face.

"You really shouldn't use language like that around here," David spoke calmly. "This is a family event."

His voice, now trained to carry over a crowd or cut through the chaos backstage, carried over the short distance easily, and Curtis looked over at him even as Brian caught up.

"Dude, where'd he go?" Brian asked.

"You lost him," David answered.

"Who the hell are you?"

Brian and Curtis just frowned at him in confusion, and David wondered if it was just that dark, or if he'd changed so much on the outside as well as the inside that they didn't recognise him.

A year helping to constantly assemble and dismantle the heavy equipment of the carnival had honed and strengthened his body; a year sharing his lover's bed had given him confidence in his own manhood. A year with Abby and Socrates had given him the security that comes from being deeply loved, and loving in return.

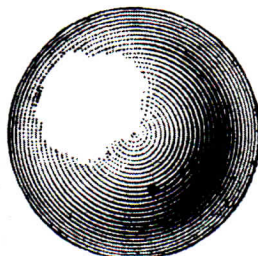
As the house lights on the Zipper came on, spilling over the patch of ground where the three of them stood, David glanced thoughtfully at the ring on his left hand. If his former tormentors had ever been to the fortune-teller's tent, they might have recognized it - a smooth half-globe of amethyst that used to ride on her thumb. But now it's his, and the fortune-teller wears a matching, smaller-sized ring on her wedding finger. As David slid the ring off, a splinter of silver light hit the crystal, and for a moment the Nordic rune wunj - meaning 'joy' - seemed to flash from the purple depths.

As he tucked the ring deep into his jeans pocket for safekeeping, he felt his lips involuntarily stretch into a smile... and he knew it wasn't a nice smile.

Every year, the carnival comes to town.

Every year, those who have been beaten and oppressed and wounded wait in anticipation.

Every year, when the carnival leaves, a human predator of some kind - bullies, wife-beaters, once even a rapist who still had a pocket full of roofies - is found in the ashes and left-behind glitter, the scent of popcorn still lingering in the air. Broken and whimpering, but with never a mark to show why.



A SIMPLE FORM OF MAGIC

Cameron Burnet

He had promised he would tell her if he ever saw it, but he didn't want to miss it either.

The five years she had on him meant Harriet had little trouble keeping up, despite Marko's nine year-old abandon causing branches to violently bounce back at her. They had no concern they were in their night clothes, mostly naked, running in darkness.

They just wanted to see it.

He stopped without warning, causing her to run into his back. He was ready for the impact, and kept his balance as she savagely toppled to the ground.

'See?! See?!'

She looked up, ignoring the pain in the arm she had landed on. A long way away, she saw a tiny green dot make a crude line towards the stars. It appeared to fade, but then multiplied, exploding in countless directions. Then it happened again with a blue dot, and then a red one, and then a bright white one.

She couldn't believe she was seeing the colour-stars.

Coloris Onidas had returned to Mellbin.

This time, she would be there to see it.

Her mother had made the journey as a child, and told her stories from the time she was able to understand them.

They were about magicians who travelled oceans in a fleet of huge boats, dancing around the severe weather conditions before they reached them. They believed in old powers. They did not fear earth shifts, harbour waves, cell storms, or heat-days. They did not fear the sun, which had splintered and isolated what remained of their ancestors.

They called no place home, and lit up entire cities which had long since fallen. The ones that had been extinguished and declared uninhabitable.

They had their own energy devices and exotic food stocks, and set up fantastic machines long since forgotten. Little metal cars, giant wheels which touched the sky, and games of chance lost to time. Some could see the future, had the strength of twenty people, or could breathe underwater.

They turned the broken, abandoned places - the places which the flares had hit the hardest - into sites of wonder. They declared any city they stopped in to be Coloris Onida for any period of time they wished, before deciding it was time to light up another piece of dead landscape. Then they vanishing as quickly as they arrived, always promising to be back one day.

As a free-child, Basin law said Harriet couldn't be stopped. Her father was long dead - fine one day, coughing blood the next. The township med could do nothing but apologise for several days.

Her mother's obsession with Coloris Onida had not been limited to stories. She had left during Mellbin's last Resurgence, promising to be back soon. She had hugged her too tightly, and had water in her eyes. Even as a six-year old, Harriet knew she was going to be a free-child from then onwards. She didn't need to be told.

Two days later, she left at daybreak.

Marni looked her hard in the eye. Marko stood behind her, knowing better than to interrupt his mother when she spoke.

'Remember to keep to the black veins, lass. Follow them west in the straightest line you can, and you should reach Mellbin before sundown.'

She had told her this four time since the previous morning, when Harriet had told her she was leaving. She was insistent on the matter.

'Thank you for seeing me off, Marni. I'm very grateful.'

Marni never hugged others or offered words of comfort. She simply nodded, and held out a cleaver with a large wooden handle.

'Burbayas are not like The Basin. And not all townships are like ours. Don't be afraid to use it if you need to. We didn't teach you how to for nothing.'

It was like she was still exploring The Basin. She was comforted by all the grass and trees. But the black veins made her face reality. They felt a lot harder than grass or dirt, even in places where they were cracked or overgrown, or the white marks had faded.

She knew if she fell, it would hurt.

A burbaya soon became visible in the distance. It was like the olds said. Rows and rows of buildings for as long as her eyes could see.

She was fascinated by this rather than afraid, unsure how such a place could inspire terror, but as she got closer, the level of decay became clear.

Many of the buildings were missing walls. Many had roofs that were either depressed or caved in. There were tress growing in a lot of them, or over them, and it was rare that a window was not shattered. She could see messages painted on walls, some on the outside and some on the inside. They were usually in black or red. Some she understood.

Keep out. Go away. No trespassing.

There were others which were written in words she could read, but hadn't heard before.

Fuck off, or get raped. Piss off, maggots. No darkies or pan heads.

She didn't know what these words meant, but they sounded twisted and aggressive, and she increased her speed.

His rotten breath filled her nostrils. Her eyes stung as she struggled for breath. She had not been fast enough. The man held down her against the black veins with one hand while undoing his pants with the other.

'Should have just given me the bag, bitch. I'm gonna take it anyway.'

Harriet reached for the cleaver strapped to her side and slashed wildly, yelling as aggressively as she could.

She felt the blade hit flesh a number of times, and the arm on her chest released the pressure. She scrambled to her feet, and saw the man holding his mouth with both hands, blood escaping between his fingers. His pants were around his ankles, his penis limp.

She didn't wait. She brought the cleaver down on top of his head as hard as she could, and felt his skull give way before he collapsed on the black veins.

'I'll do the same to any of you!' she yelled to the people in the buildings who had watched on.

They were no longer laughing.

She resisted the urge to run as fast she could, and doubted she had the energy to anyway.

They walked with her. They had appeared from other black veins the further she walked, and like her, looked cautious and afraid. First they said nothing, but after walking for a while they asked her name, told them theirs, and said she was welcome to join them.

Soon more came. Men, women, children. And then more again. They were vast in number. They were all different, but they shared a purpose.

They all felt the pull of Coloris Onida.

It was dark when they saw it in the distance. A giant wheel with pods attached to it, which changed colour as it slowly rotated.

Blue, purple, green, yellow, red.

They could see a harbour, and a number of massive ships docked in it. Gigantic buildings were lit up in the dark. The colours danced on them, as if alive.

Colour-stars randomly exploded in the sky. She imagined the magicians who fired these from their hands.

They were amazed, and Harriet knew there was so much more they couldn't see.

People who did not know each other that morning embraced right there on the black veins. Some cried. Some sang. Some danced.

They were tired, but they were almost there.

She shared a pod with a man and his small daughter, who sat opposite her. She had never been as excited about anything in her life.

They looked down at Mellbin. At Coloris Onida. The buildings and the black-veins were so much bigger - colossal.

Together, they saw it all.

The thousands of people, so tiny from up above, who lined the streets. The massive posts spread out around the city which seemed to cover everything in colour. The free food stalls everywhere. The board walk on the docks, and the magicians who spruiked their attractions.

All the other rides which couldn't be seen from the horizon. The roller coaster that raced around the remains of the old buildings, making made people scream. The dodgem cars by the water that pounded each other. The slide from the top of the tall rises. The ghost train. The metal contraption that swung people the wrong way around - the magician in front of it had told her it was called the high roller. And all the rest. Uncountable in number.

She would ride them all.

There was so much colour. So much sound.

There were voices that all spoke at once. Or laughed at once. Or screamed at once.

Thousands of them that regardless of their action, formed one binding sound which couldn't be interpreted. It just meant they were all there. That they were together.

Tears rolled down her cheek. She understood why her mother had left.

The small girl hopped off her seat and awkwardly made her way towards Harriet. She held her arms open wide.

'Wanna hug?' she asked.

They would talk into the night. People her own age, or close enough to it, telling stories about where they were from and what their lives were like.

On the seventh night, one of the boys, a lanky kid with black hair, returned to their camp, a small space of grass and trees among the monoliths and black veins of King's Path. He laughed, and carried a glass bottle with a clear liquid inside, saying his father had given it to him.

'You guys have to try this.'

They passed it around in a circle.

It looked like water, but it tasted hot, like drinking fire. But also good.

The last thing Harriet remembered was looking at the colours in the sky with a feeling of numb happiness.

She was inside an old building, on a soft mat, covered with a blanket. It was light outside and she saw people's feet pass by the space where the windows had once been.

Their singing and laughter hurt her head.

She had woken up when she heard the man's footsteps on the floorboards.

He didn't look much older than a Basin junior-old, He was maybe twenty-five or thirty, with shortly cropped brown hair and skin that looked like he spent a lot of time outside, but was covered in pictures.

She was perched atop a hard wood table fixed to a brick wall, and surrounded by many like it. She was fully clothed, but covered in dirt.

Her arm was wrapped in a bandage, and her sides hurt a lot.

The man, who said his name was Dunc, explained it to her. He didn't mince words.

He told she was at The Limerick. Her arm was badly sprained, and her ribs were cracked.

He said it with no sympathy. It was clear he was angry.

She didn't remember falling from the tree, or climbing one, either. She didn't remember being carried to this place by her friends, crying, screaming and thrashing. She didn't remember trying to slash Dunc's hand to pieces.

Harriet begged him not banish her.

She tried to explain the man who had forced himself on her, and what she had to do. She struggled to finish her explanation, remembering his rotten breath and the blood that poured from in between his fingers.

Dunc held up a bandaged hand to silence her. He looked her hard in the eye, the way Marni did, before giving her a second option.

'You better be a fast learner.'

It was as he said. She liked to climb, and she agreed it was her fault he couldn't do it himself.

His instructions had been limited.

Climb Mellbin tower. Turn the light generator on. Plant the colour pots. Light them.

She was not afraid of heights, and the scaffolding on the side of the building was easier to climb than the sheers she was used to in the Basin - even with the heavy pack he had strapped to her.

As she climbed, she saw the tower for what it was. Everything above the magnificent ground floor lobby was littered with trash and shattered glass. Broken furniture covered in moss and fungus. She saw there were stairs, scaling hundreds of metres up the inside of the building. It was clear these were unstable - corroded and cracked.

The tower had just been made to look good.

The damage was far too extensive to ever fix.

She sat well away from the pots, like Dunc told her, and watched by herself from the rooftop.

From up close, it was more intense than she could imagine. The whistling and the cracking was almost deafening. The colours almost blinding.

But it wasn't the same as seeing it from below.

She heard their unified voice. It oooohed and ahhhed from those metres below, as the stars exploded in the night sky, light towers splashing colours all over the city, able to be seen from kilometres away.

Her voice was not among them.

She wondered if the people who saw the colour stars thought what she had as recently as an hour ago.

That there was a person in a dark purple cloak firing the colours from their hands, or waving a wand while chanting indecipherable words of magic.

He raised his voice.

'We can't undo solar flares, sea levels, or bombs that exploded hundreds of years ago. We can't un-destroy cities, or rebuild towers which touch they sky. We never tried to.'

'Then why do you claim to?'

'We don't. None of us told you that rubbish, did we? Blame whoever did. We tell them it's not permanent. They know that this can be gone in a few days, and you know it too.'

She had asked for an explanation. He asked if she was sure, and provided it to her when she nodded.

'So it's a lie?'

'That's not even remotely what I said.'

She stared at him.

'You aren't magicians. You don't bring cities back to life.'

'Do you know how to make a colour pot? Or a light generator? Or how to build or operate a Ferris wheel? Do you know how the dodgem cars work? Or how we have enough food to feed all these people?'

'No.'

He threw his hands in the air dramatically and raised his eyebrows.

'Abracadabra.'

He sent her to the docks, where his friend - a one-eyed man named Thad who looked a lot like Santa Claus and limped heavily, operated the bumper cars.

Thad said very little, mainly as there was always a pipe hanging from his mouth which he refused to remove even when he did speak.

Her job wasn't hard. She rode on the back of the brightly coloured bumper cars, helping people, mainly children who got stuck in corners, and couldn't adjust to the sensitivity of the steering wheel.

They collided with each other, squealing with delight and impunity as they bounced around in the cabin. Just like she had on her first day in Mellbin. Thad blasted strange music at them, periodically pressing a button which stopped the cars dead so a new group could have the chance to injure each other.

It seemed like a simple formula, but it worked.

Nobody got off the bumper cars without a smile plastered on their face, and Harriet supposed this was a better form of magic than the one she had imagined.

By the time Dunc's hand healed, he had mellowed to her, and was happy to let her climb and light pots. As well as this, she continued helping Thad, who despite calling her either hairy rat or Girly, had warmed to her.

She learnt to jump from car to car, timing her leaps perfectly to avoid the collisions she saw coming, and absorbing the ones she didn't with a grin.

During breaks, she offered to run errands for the old man, which he gladly accepted. She often ate with the other magicians of Coloris Onida, explored the boardwalk attractions, and learnt a little bit more each day.

It was ending.

Many of the rides had started struggling in the heat.

She pulled the cart behind her, filled with the ancient power tools she had used to help Thad dismantle the bumper cars.

She dragged it into the building he had told her to, which smelt like fertiliser, and was filled with long bright lights, and rows of potted plants.

She was covered in sweat, but she was ready.

'Here are your tools back. Thad says thanks again.'

'Thanks, love. You can just leave them there.'

The woman smiled at her briefly, then continued to water the plants. A small boy, covered in soil, played in the corner.

She had not looked for her, but Harriet knew the woman was her mother as soon as she saw her drop the tools off for Thad a week earlier. She had practically fallen into her lap.

Harriet wondered if the small boy was her brother.

'You owe me answers.'

The woman walked turned to her, recognition slowly appearing on her face, the watering can still in her hand.

The woman nodded, tears streaking her dirty face.

She had not been on a boat before. She suspected she gave this away shortly after the fleet pulled out of Mellbin.

Her family's reactions were varied.

Her brother seemed oblivious, running around the deck, impervious to it all, singing wildly and out of key.

Dunc laughed when she had told him, splitting his sides at the thought of Harriet emptying her stomach into the ocean.

Thad had thrust a garlic bulb into her hand, telling her to eat it, but looking a little disappointed.

Her mother had rubbed her back.

'You'll find your sea legs, love,' she had told her. 'All magicians do eventually.'



