

short story

The Greatest Show
by E. Harikumar
translated from
Malayalam by



E. Satish Narayanan

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The Greatest Show

E. Harikumar

He was watching them for the last one week, on the pavement across the bus stand, performing acrobatics. They would be there, when he boarded the bus in the morning or got down from it in the afternoon way back from office, a boy and a girl. Brother and sister, probably. His face was dark with dirt and so was his sister's. She would wipe her running nose with the back of her cute little hands. She must be five or six years old and wore a short skirt only, torn and dirty. With a torn shirt and shorts her brother's dress was a little better.

It was six in the evening and they were still showing acrobatics. Probably the whole daylong they were there facing a crowd that changed like a kaleidoscope and showing the tricks that an eight-year old is capable of doing; his expectations of a kind soul amongst them fading into thinness. He used to watch the children from the waiting bus, showing tricks like somersaulting, passing through a small iron ring and so on. The scantiness of the mob did not discourage him, and hardly anybody paid anything to them. The people would be waiting there with an obscene curiosity to see what happens next, and when expectation of witnessing a big circus falls into boredom they would walk away pretending not to see the extending frail hand of an emaciated girl with a bowl. The show would go on.

I was in a hurry to reach home. It was a hectic day. In fact each day is a hectic day. In the struggle for holding your position you lose days, then months and even years, and finally your self itself.

The boy has stopped the performance and now is sitting in a corner and inspecting his toe. A wound, and blood was oozing out of it. He must have got it while doing some acrobatics.

"What happened?" He asked.

The boy looked up at him and turned his face down. He was obviously averting him. He did not want anybody's sympathy. He moved on only to be confronted by the girl with a bowl. "Sir, please, ten paise."

He fumbled his pocket and took out a 25 paise coin and put it in the crumbled dented bowl. The girl's eye gleamed.

25 paise! He thought while walking home. She asked for ten paise and I have given two and a half times as much. What a magnanimity!

The elevator was on the ground floor, and he could walk in and press the 8th button that will take him to his flat on the eighth floor. He could sit in the sofa and remove his shoes and relax by selecting any of the 30 odd channels in the TV and sipping the cup of tea that Sarada has brought with Dosa or Banana fruit fry.

But he did not enter the elevator. He retraced his steps and went out of the gates. He fished out his purse from the pocket. Yes, there is a lot of money in it. He could give one Rupee, or why not two Rupees?

'What a chicken-heart you have', he asks himself. 'What is two Rupees worth these days. Is it worth a morsel of food?'

He took out a ten-Rupee note and kept aside.

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The pavement was desolate. The children were not there. Today's show must have ended. Or may be the boy could not continue because of the wound on his toe. He must have bandaged the wound and tried to resume, but being unable to bear the pain.....

He walked back.

His daughter was eating ice cream. In fact it has become a regular scene. When he goes to the office, or when he returns, all the time she must be sitting there with an ice cream cup. And whenever they go out, she will be demanding ice cream.

"Chubby girls should not eat ice cream." He would say, but she wouldn't care and go at it with renewed ecstasy.

He recalled a girl, frail and shrivelled, with dirt sticking around her nose and dry unkempt hair. A girl who has still not lost the flicker in her eyes.

"The Secretary rang up." Sarada said, "He wanted to see you."

It is the Secretary of the Association of residents in the building.

"Why?"

"It's about the terrace party in the evening."

"Oh, yes." The get-together in the evening. He had forgotten all about it.

The Secretary had asked him to arrange for a sound system. The orchestra has been arranged already, and there are singers among the residents. He picked up the phone and started dialing.

"7 O'clock, sharp 7 O'clock." He said it rather rigidly. "The party should not get spoiled for want of a sound system."

At 1 O'clock midnight when they returned to their flat Sarada said. "The party was grand."

Ragini endorsed her mother's views. God knows how many cups of icecream that girl had gobbled.

"The chicken biryani and fried fish were excellent." Sarada said. "How was the vegetable fried rice? I wanted to taste the Gobi Manjura a little bit, but no room in the tummy. I had to spare some space for Pista Ice Cream; that's my weakness.

"The food was good" He also agreed. Since it was a buffet party you could take as much as you want. On the long table covered with white linen, steaming items were laid in steel vessels put on simmering gas stoves, and the bar with an array of bottles was on the other side.

"The orchestra was also good."

"Paying 6000 bucks they will beat you up if it is not worth it."

"Six thousand?"

"Yes."

"It's not worth that much."

"You don't blame the orchestra for the songs that slithers out of tune."

"And then I didn't like Rohini's dance at all. That dance you remember; whenever it's on, I used to switch off the TV itself, because I don't want our daughter to see it. It is not a dance fit for a sixteen year old to perform on the stage, you know, shaking it up here and shaking it up there."

He laughed. Probably this is the first time since he woke up in the morning he had a hearty laughter.

"Why laugh?"

"Do you know? Rohini's Mom has been teaching her daughter this very dance for the last one week. She in fact bought a videocassette of

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the movie in which this dance appears. Didn't you watch them videotaping her whole dance? For preserving it, for showing to their friends and relatives."

"This dance, shaking her hips and all?"

"Yes Ma'am. That very dance. That takes them to the upper strata of the society in a jiffy. What do you know of problems that the neo-rich face? If you don't want to be left out, teach your daughter the dance of Silk Smitha or Nagma."

"Huh!"

Before going to bed he told Sarada.

"Now do you want to hear a kitchen secret?"

"What's that?"

They had ordered 150 Chicken Biryani, and only about 90 guests turned out. Out of that some are vegetarians. They expected people from outside. Not all came. About 60 to 70 plates were left out."

"Then?"

"They have packed the whole thing in a plastic bag and dumped it in the corporation bin. A perfect murder."

"In the waste bin?"

"What else to do? They had prepared it at 4 O'clock. After 1 O'clock, what will be its shape?"

"How sad?"

"At twenty-five rupees per plate, imagine the money spent on it. Fish fry and vegetable fry rice, also were left over."

He paused for a while and told himself.

"...that too in a country where poverty and misery reigns...."

Sarada was asleep. For a while he could not sleep. The defiant face of an eight-year old boy, bent with his finger pressed on the bleeding wound on his toe and suppressing pain with clinched teeth has started to make him feel ashamed of himself.

He went to the Society office in the morning to write accounts. Twenty-five thousand Rupees spent. The money spent by twenty-five families for a night's mirth! He remembered the 25 paise coin he had given to the circus girl yesterday evening.

The children were not there next day morning. Must have gone looking for new pastures. That's the way it is. They will camp in a place for a week. When they see the same acrobatics being repeated, the public turns away. This is the case even with a big circus, let alone a tiny two-member circus.

During one of his evening walks, he saw them again in front of a shop with its shutter down, in one of the many by-lanes of Mahatma Gandhi Road. They wore the same attire, filthy face, their dirty ransack lying nearby. The boy was sitting there, opening a small packet that lay in front of him. His sister was watching him open the packet, impatiently. The packet contained four iddalis.

When he went near, the boy raised his head to look at the intruder, as if to say 'now what, when everything is over and I am having my food.'

He asked him.

'Don't you have father and mother?' He somehow asked a question that came to his mind.

'Don't have mother, she died.'

'Father?'

'Yes.'

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'Where's he?'

'He's in the jail.'

'How come?'

'He stole.'

He said it without any emotion. His sister started to eat the iddalis. He too was having his hand on the iddali, waiting for the stranger who is rudely intruding, to go.

'What'll you do if I give you ten Rupees?'

His face brightened. He smiled coyly. The grown up look on his face vanished, and he, once again became an eight-year old.

'What'll you do?'

'We will go for a movie.'

He didn't have to look around for an answer.

He placed a ten Rupee note on his hand. The boy unfolded the note and looked at his sister unable to believe. Her face also brightened. She stopped eating and took the note from her brother's hand.

'What are your names?' He asked.

'Raju.' He said, 'and she is Sheela.'

'Okay Raju, I must be going.'

He turned to go.

'Sir...'. The boy got up and called him.

He turned around. The boy told something to his sister and swiftly opened his ransack and took out two iron rings. Then like any other acrobat in the world he walked backwards four steps and clapped his hands and somersaulted four times. He somersaulted backwards and again forwards. He let his body through the iron ring with difficulty. Then he let the bodies of himself and his sister through the same ring. He let his sister stand on his shoulder and walked forwards and backwards balancing her on his shoulder. He kept a rod on his forehead and walked balancing a cup on top of it.

Leaving aside his food, he was showing the tricks only for the sake of the stranger.

With wide eyes and dismay on his face, he was watching it. It was the greatest show he had ever seen.

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