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The Shining Girls

Written by Lauren Beukes

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LAUREN BEUKES

The Shining Girls



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For Matthew

Harper

17 July 1974

He clenches the orange plastic pony in the pocket of his sports coat. It is sweaty in his hand. Mid-summer here, too hot for what he's wearing. But he has learned to put on a uniform for this purpose; jeans in particular. He takes long strides – a man who walks because he's got somewhere to be, despite his gimpy foot. Harper Curtis is not a moocher. And time waits for no one. Except when it does.

The girl is sitting cross-legged on the ground, her bare knees white and bony as birds' skulls and grass-stained. She looks up at the sound of his boots scrunching on the gravel, but only long enough for him to see that her eyes are brown under that tangle of grubby curls, before she dismisses him and goes back to her business.

Harper is disappointed. He had imagined, as he approached, that they might be blue; the color of the lake, deep out, where the shoreline disappears and it feels like you're in the middle of the ocean. Brown is the color of shrimping, when the mud is all churned up in the shallows and you can't see shit for shit.

‘What are you doing?’ he says, putting brightness in his voice. He crouches down beside her in the threadbare grass. Really, he’s never seen a child with such crazy hair. Like she got spun round in her own personal dust devil, one that tossed up the assortment of random junk splayed around her. A cluster of rusty tin cans, a broken bicycle wheel tipped on its side, spokes jabbing outwards. Her attention is focused on a chipped teacup, turned upside down, so that the silvered flowers on the lip disappear into the grass. The handle has broken off, leaving two blunt stumps. ‘You having a tea party, sweetheart?’ he tries again.

‘It’s not a tea party,’ she mutters into the petal-shaped collar of her checked shirt. Kids with freckles shouldn’t be so earnest, he thinks. It doesn’t suit them.

‘Well, that’s fine,’ he says, ‘I prefer coffee anyways. May I have a cup, please, ma’am? Black with three sugars, okay?’ He reaches for the chipped porcelain, and the girl yelps and bats his hand away. A deep, angry buzzing comes from underneath the inverted cup.

‘Jesus. What you got in there?’

‘It’s *not* a tea party! It’s a circus!’

‘That so?’ He turns on his smile, the goofy one that says he doesn’t take himself too seriously, and neither should you. But the back of his hand stings where she smacked him.

She glares at him suspiciously. Not for who he might be, what he might do to her. But because she is irritated that he doesn’t understand. He looks around, more carefully, and recognizes it now: her ramshackle circus. The big top ring marked out with a finger traced in the dirt, a tightrope made from a flattened drinking-straw rigged between two soda cans, the Ferris wheel of the dented bicycle wheel,

half propped up against a bush, with a rock to hold it in place and paper people torn out of magazines jammed between the spokes.

It doesn't escape him that the rock holding it up is the perfect fit for his fist. Or how easily one of those needle spokes would slide right through the girl's eye like Jell-O. He squeezes hard on the plastic pony in his pocket. The furious buzzing coming from underneath the cup is a vibration he can feel all the way down his vertebrae, tugging at his groin.

The cup jolts and the girl clamps her hands over it.

'Whoa!' she laughs, breaking the spell.

'Whoa, indeed! You got a lion in there?' He nudges her with his shoulder, and a smile breaks through her scowl, but only a little one. 'You an animal tamer? You gonna make it jump through flaming hoops?'

She grins, the polka dots of her freckles drawing up into Dutch apple cheeks, revealing bright white teeth. 'Nah, Rachel says I'm not allowed to play with matches. Not after last time.' She has one skewed canine, slightly overlapping her incisors. And the smile more than makes up for the brackwater brown eyes, because now he can see the spark behind them. It gives him that falling-away feeling in his chest. And he's sorry he ever doubted the House. She's the one. One of the ones. His shining girls.

'I'm Harper,' he says, breathless, holding out his hand to shake. She has to switch her grip on the cup to do it.

'Are you a stranger?' she says.

'Not any more, right?'

'I'm Kirby. Kirby Mazrachi. But I'm gonna change it to Lori Star as soon as I'm old enough.'

'When you go to Hollywood?'

She draws the cup across the ground towards her, stirring the bug under it to new heights of outrage, and he can see he's made a mistake.

'Are you sure you're not a stranger?'

'I mean, the circus, right? What is Lori Star going to do? Flying trapeze? Elephant rider? Clown?' He wiggles his index finger over his top lip. 'The mustachioed lady?'

To his relief, she giggles. 'Noooo.'

'Lion tamer! Knife thrower! Fire-eater!'

'I'm going to be a tightrope walker. I've been practicing. Wanna see?' She moves to get up.

'No, wait,' he says, suddenly desperate. 'Can I see your lion?'

'It's not really a lion.'

'That's what you say,' he prods.

'Okay, but you gotta be real careful. I don't want him to fly away.' She tilts the cup the tiniest fraction. He lays his head down on the ground, squinting to see. The smell of crushed grass and black earth is comforting. Something is moving under the cup. Furry legs, a hint of yellow and black. Antennae probe towards the gap. Kirby gasps and slams the cup down again.

'That's one big old bumblebee,' he says, sitting back on his haunches.

'I know,' she says, proud of herself.

'You got him pretty riled.'

'I don't think he wants to be in the circus.'

'Can I show you something? You'll have to trust me.'

'What is it?'

'You want a tightrope walker?'

'No, I—'

But he's already lifted up the cup and scooped the

agitated bee into his hands. Pulling off the wings makes the same dull pop sound as plucking the stem off a sour cherry, like the ones he spent a season picking in Rapid City. He'd been up and down the whole goddamn country, chasing after the work like a bitch in heat. Until he found the House.

'What are you doing?' she shouts.

'Now we just need some flypaper to string across the top of two cans. Big old bug like this should be able to pull his feet free, but it'll be sticky enough to stop him falling. You got some flypaper?'

He sets the bumblebee down on the rim of the cup. It clings to the edge.

'Why did you *do* that?' She hits his arm, a fluster of blows, palms open.

He's baffled by her reaction. 'Aren't we playing circus?'

'You ruined it! Go away! Go away, go away, go away, go away.' It becomes a chant, timed with each slap.

'Hold on. Hold on there,' he laughs, but she keeps on whacking him. He grabs her hand in his. 'I mean it. Cut it the fuck out, little lady.'

'You don't swear!' she yells and bursts into tears. This is not going like he planned – as much as he can plan any of these first encounters. He feels tired at the unpredictability of children. This is why he doesn't like little girls, why he waits for them to grow up. Later, it will be a different story.

'All right, I'm sorry. Don't cry, okay? I've got something for you. Please don't cry. Look.' In desperation, he takes out the orange pony, or tries to. Its head snags on his pocket and he has to yank it free. 'Here,' he jabs it at her, willing her to take it. One of the objects that connects everything

together. Surely this is why he brought it? He feels only a moment of uncertainty.

‘What is it?’

‘A pony. Can’t you see? Isn’t a pony better than some dumb bumblebee?’

‘It’s not alive.’

‘I know that. Goddammit. Just take it, okay? It’s a present.’

‘I don’t want it,’ she sniffs.

‘Okay, it’s not a present, it’s a deposit. You’re keeping it safe for me. Like at the bank when you give them your money.’ The sun is beating down. It is too hot to be wearing a coat. He is barely able to concentrate. He just wants it to be done. The bumblebee falls off the cup and lies upside down in the grass, its legs cycling in the air.

‘I guess.’

He is feeling calmer already. Everything is as it has to be. ‘Now keep this safe, all right? It’s real important. I’ll come to get it. You understand?’

‘Why?’

‘Because I need it. How old are you?’

‘Six and three-quarters. Almost seven.’

‘That’s great. Really great. Here we go. Round and round, like your Ferris wheel. I’ll see you when you’re all grown-up. Look out for me, okay, sweetheart? I’ll come back for you.’

He stands up, dusting his hands against his leg. He turns and walks briskly across the lot, not looking back, limping only slightly. She watches him cross the road and walk up towards the railroad until he disappears into the tree-line. She looks at the plastic toy, clammy from his hand, and yells after him. ‘Yeah? Well I don’t want your dumb horse!’

She chucks it onto the ground and it bounces once before coming to land beside her bicycle Ferris wheel. Its painted eye stares blankly at the bumblebee, which has righted itself and is dragging itself away over the dirt.

But she goes back for it later. Of course she does.

Harper

20 November 1931

The sand gives way beneath him, not sand at all, but stinking icy mud that squelches into his shoes and soaks through his socks. Harper curses under his breath, not wanting the men to hear. They're shouting to each other in the darkness: 'You see him? You got him?' If the water wasn't so goddamn cold, he'd risk swimming out to make his escape. But he is already shivering violently from the wind off the lake that nips and worries at him right through his shirt, his coat abandoned behind the speakeasy, covered in that shit-heel's blood.

He wades his way across the beach, picking a path between the garbage and the rotting lumber, mud sucking at his every step. He hunkers down behind a shack on the water's edge, assembled out of packing boxes and held together with tar-paper. Lamplight seeps through the cracks and the cardboard patching, making the whole thing glow. He doesn't know why people build so close to the lake anyways – like they think the worst has already happened and there's no downhill from here. Not like people shit in

the shallows. Not like the water might swell with the rains and wash the whole goddamn stinking Hooverville away. The abode of forgotten men, misfortune saturated deep down into their bones. No one would miss them. Like no one's going to miss Jimmy fucking Grebe.

He wasn't expecting Grebe to gush like that. Wouldn't have come to it if the bastard had fought fair. But he was fat and drunk and desperate. Couldn't land a punch, so he went for Harper's balls. Harper had felt the sonofabitch's thick fingers grabbing at his trousers. Man fights ugly, you fight uglier back. It's not Harper's fault the jagged edge of the glass caught an artery. He was aiming for Grebe's face.

None of it would have happened if that dirty lunger hadn't coughed up on the cards. Grebe had wiped the bloody gob off with his sleeve, sure, but everyone knew he had consumption, hacking his contagion into his bloody kerchief. Disease and ruin and the cracking nerves of men. It's the end of America.

Try telling that to 'Mayor' Klayton and his bunch of vigilante cocksuckers, all puffed up like they own the place. But there's no law here. Like there's no money. No self-respect. He's seen the signs – and not just the ones that read 'foreclosed'. Let's face it, he thinks, America had it coming.

A pale streamer of light sweeps over the beach, lingering on the scars he trailed across the mud. But then the flashlight swings to hunt in another direction, and the door of the shack opens, spilling light out all over the place. A skinny rat of a woman steps out. Her face is drawn and gray in the kerosene glow – like everyone else's around here – as if the dust storms out there in the country blew away all traces of people's character along with their crops.

There's a dark sports coat three sizes too big for her draped over her scrawny shoulders, like a shawl. Heavy wool. It looks warm. He knows that he is going to take it from her even before he realizes that she is blind. Her eyes are vacant. Her breath smells like cabbage and the teeth rotting in her head. She reaches out to touch him. 'What is it?' she says. 'Why are they shouting?'

'Rabid dog,' Harper says. 'They're chasing it down. You should go back inside, ma'am.' He could lift the jacket right off her and be gone. But she might scream. She might fight him.

She clutches at his shirt. 'Wait,' she says. 'Is it you? Are you Bartek?'

'No, ma'am. Not me.' He tries to pry her fingers off of him. Her voice is rising in an urgent way. The kind to draw attention.

'You are. You must be. He said you would come.' She is verging on hysterical. 'He said he would—'

'Shhhh, it's all right,' Harper says. It is no effort at all to raise his forearm to her throat and push her back against the lean-to with his full weight. Only to quiet her, he tells himself. Hard to scream around a crushed windpipe. Her lips pout and pop. Her eyes bulge. Her gullet heaves in protest. She twists her hands in his shirt as if she's wringing out laundry, and then her chicken-bone fingers fall away and she sags against the wall. He bends with her, setting her down gently, even as he lifts the coat off her shoulders.

A little boy is staring at him from inside the hovel, his eyes big enough to swallow you whole.

'What you looking at?' Harper hisses at the boy, hooking his arms through the sleeves. It's too big for him, but no

matter. Something jangles in the pocket of the coat. Loose change, if he's lucky. But it will turn out to be much more than that.

'Get inside. Get your mother some water. She's poorly.'

The boy stares and then, without changing his expression, opens his mouth and lets out a screeching wail, drawing the goddamn flashlights. Beams lance across the doorway and the fallen woman, but Harper is already running. One of Klayton's cronies – or maybe it's the self-appointed mayor himself – shouts, 'There!' and the men stampede down towards the beach after him.

He darts through the maze of shacks and tents put up without rhyme or purpose all tumbled on top of each other, with barely space for a pushcart to move between them. Insects have better judgment, he thinks as he veers in the general direction of Randolph Street.

He is not counting on people acting like termites.

He steps on a tarpaulin and falls straight through it into a pit the size of a piano box, but considerably deeper, hacked out of the earth where someone has set up a semblance of a home and simply nailed a cover into the ground across the top of it.

He lands hard, his left heel smacking the side of a wooden pallet bed with a sharp twang like a guitar string snapping. The impact slams him sideways into the edge of a home-made stove that catches him under his ribcage and knocks the breath out of him. It feels like a bullet has torn clean through his ankle, but he didn't hear a gunshot. He can't breathe to scream and he's drowning in the tarp, falling in on top of him.

They find him there, flailing against the canvas and cursing the sonofabitch human driftwood who didn't have

the materials or the skills to build a proper shack. The men assemble at the top of the hidey-hole, malevolent silhouettes behind the glare of their flashlights.

‘You can’t come here and just do what you want,’ Klayton says in his best Sunday preacher voice. Harper can finally breathe again. Every inhalation burns like a stitch in his side. He’s cracked a rib for sure, and he’s done something worse to his foot.

‘You have to respect your neighbor and your neighbor must respect you,’ Klayton continues. Harper’s heard him using this line at the community meetings, talking about how they needed to try and get along with the local businesses across the way – the same ones that sent in the authorities to tack up warning notices on every tent and hovel, advising them that they had seven days to vacate the land.

‘Hard to do respecting when you’re dead,’ Harper laughs, although it’s more of a wheeze and it makes his stomach tighten with pain. He thinks they might be holding shotguns, but that seems unlikely, and it is only when one of the flashlights shifts away from his face that he sees they are armed with pipes and hammers. His gut clenches again.

‘You should turn me over to the law,’ he says, hopefully.

‘Nah,’ Klayton replies. ‘They got no business here.’ He waves his flashlight. ‘Haul him out, boys. Before Chinaman Eng comes back to his hole and finds this d-horner garbage squatting in here.’

And here is another sign, clear as dawn, which is starting to creep over the horizon past the bridge. Before Klayton’s goons can climb down the ten feet to get to him, it starts to rain, slicing drops, cold and bitter. And there is shouting from the other side of the camp. ‘Police! It’s a raid!’

Klayton turns to confer with his men. They sound like monkeys with their jibber-jabber and arm-waving, and then a jet of flame sears through the rain, lighting up the sky and putting paid to their conversation.

‘Hey, you leave that—’ A yell drifts across from Randolph Street. Followed by another. ‘They got kerosene!’ someone yells.

‘What you waiting for?’ Harper says quietly, under the drumming rain and the uproar.

‘You stay right there,’ Klayton jabs his pipe at him as the silhouettes disperse. ‘We’re not done with you.’

Ignoring the rasping sound his ribs make, Harper scoots up on his elbows. He leans forward, grabs hold of the tarp that is still clinging to its nails on one side, and tugs on it, dreading the inevitable. But it holds.

Above, he can distinguish the dictatorial tone of the good mayor’s voice, cutting through the melee, shouting at persons unseen. ‘You got a court order for this? You think you can just come here and burn up people’s homes after we’ve lost everything once already?’

Harper gets a thick fold of the material in his grip and, using the over-turned stove for leverage with his good foot, heaves himself up. His ankle bangs against the dirt wall and a bright flash of pain, clear as God, blinds him. He retches, coughing up only a long stringy amalgam of spit and phlegm tinged with red. He clings to the tarp, blinking hard against the black holes blossoming across his vision, until he can see again.

The shouts are dissipating under the drum of the rain. He is running out of time. He hauls himself up the greasy, wet tarp, hand over fist. He couldn’t have done this even a year ago. But after twelve weeks of driving rivets into

the Triboro in New York, he's strong as the mangy orangutan he witnessed at a county fair, ripping a watermelon in half with its bare hands.

The canvas makes ominous brittle sounds of protest, threatening to tumble him back into this goddamn hole. But it holds and he pulls himself gratefully over the edge, not even caring as he scrapes open his chest on the nails fastening the tarp. Later, examining his wounds in safety, he will note that the gouges make it look like an enthusiastic whore has laid her mark on him.

He lies there, face in the mud, the rain pelting down on him. The shouts have moved away, although the air reeks of smoke, and the light from a half-dozen fires mixes with the gray of the dawn. A fragment of music drifts through the night, carrying from an apartment window, perhaps, with the tenants leaning out to enjoy the spectacle.

Harper crawls on his belly through the mud, lights flaring in his skull from the pain – or maybe they're real. It is a kind of a rebirth. He graduates from crawling to hobbling when he finds a heavy piece of timber the right height to lean on.

His left foot is useless, dragging behind him. But he keeps going, through the rain and the darkness, away from the burning shantytown.

Everything happens for a reason. It's because he is forced to leave that he finds the House. It is because he took the coat that he has the key.