

The Circus, Ray Bradbury

The Circus

THE EMPTY MEADOW lay beyond the town.

At eight o'clock, Tom Spaulding came walking through the dusk to the edge of the meadow and stood breathing in the scents that blew from the summer grass in whispers.

"This is where it was," he thought. "If only I could have come. If only I hadn't had a cold and stayed in bed."

He walked slowly to the center of the meadow. He stood sniffing, under the great chandelier of stars as all the blazing constellations caught fire and burned above him.

"Here's where the lions were..."

The yellow smell, the smell of carpeting in sunlight, the smell of African dust, the smell of violent acid. A few quartz pebbles glittered in the dry grass like yellow animal eyes, and turned to stone once more as he bent down.

"Here's where the elephants stood."

The wind was large, towering above him, touching him with a cold, wrapping-around touch. The wind swayed back and forth, invisible. And the smell of the elephant was like a huge barn.

"Here's where I'd have fed them."

He picked up a few scattered peanut-shells, shoved them in his pocket after looking them over and over.

"And here's where the monkeys were and the zebras and camels." The dry bushes chattered in the wind. Summer lightning painted great luminous stripes upon the hills, soft, pale, and gone.

There hadn't even been a circus parade.

The lions had been silenced outside of town by the Lions inside of town. The elephants had been vanquished by the Elks. The calliope had been throttled and choked with red-tape and the entire circus assemblage, band, wagons, and clowns had fled before an Ark of Moose, Eagles and Oddfellows.

The Kiwanis, reaching out its arm for its proverbial handshake, had had its knuckles slapped by Colonel Quartermain. Quartermain, Quartermain, the name was an unending repetition in the crowd of days, his face appeared in every window, on every street, he spoke from every monument on Memorial morning, he stood silent on Armistice Day facing East, he cried out from between the tar-black Civil War cannons on the Fourth of July. His eye was glittered at you from the clawing eagle's head on the back of every dollar bill.

His teeth smiled at you evilly in the store front cases of town dentists. His domed head glinted suggestively each time you opened the ice box and reached in for a fresh farm egg. He had fired off his mouth and sent the circus in panic to a forest beyond town.

And passed a law preventing the employment of children therein when the poles were going up in the cold dawn light. Quartermain, Quartermain. Tom thought of him and knew the hatred that Douglas must know for the buzzard and the vulture and the snake.

“And here's where the ring was and the man in the black silk hat saying, 'Ladies 'n Gentlemen!'”

He stood at the exact center of the quiet meadow.

“And up there was where the men and ladies in pink cotton candy clothes swung on trapezes.”

Now the night wind whirled in a great merry-go-round about, stirring the odors, colors, sounds, tossing tin-cans fitfully in gusts through the grasses that swished like lions walking, and Tom staring at the sky through which papers flew and soared, dipping, to fly again. The whole

meadow shook and quivered with the calliope wind and leaves spun in circles, the boy turning his hand out to them with an invisible whip. His eyes fixed the sky. Birds, crying, flew away.

The wind died.

Tom stood for only a minute longer, then his gaze dropped, his hands dropped. He walked across the meadow. He stood at its rim, and the numerous odors were richly ripened and might last, if savored carefully, if he didn't come too often, until next year, until another late spring and summer. Even on winter nights, if you came here, if the wind was right, and the night not too full of moon, anything might happen.

"This is where it was, all right," he said to himself.

And he walked away from the rich meadow, back into the summer night town.

The end