

Raw Meat

The park was not feeling itself. A high fever ravaged its grassy body, and the trees standing in silent groups, whispered notes of sympathy in the gentle breeze. An army of marching feet had invaded, and for two days now the occupation had wrought its toll.

From a distance it looked like fun: a mirage of colour and movement, but the park knew better. A Ferris wheel turned in an unending journey, taking people nowhere and back again, nowhere and back again, and they all laughed. Strange, multi-limbed metal monsters moved their arms in absurd frenzy, clutching tiny people in their grip, flinging them first this way then that. Half-crazed tracks, twisting themselves into knots, cajoled midget trains filled with midget people to go follow their way, round and round and upside down even. Further on, Ping pong balls bounced through rows of empty goldfish bowls, whose oval mouths yawned at the clouds, while children looked at the prizes they could win if only one would fall in. Machine guns, in the hands of boy soldiers, fired a constant spray of pellets with a rat a tat a tat, and battle-weary eyes watched red stars on white paper shred and mutilate. And they all laughed.

In the middle of all this stood a nice young man: Everard Swain. A nice young man who has left boyhood behind in the rubbish bin, with the rest of his toys. For the moment, however, he is intent on avoiding our scrutiny, and so we must concentrate on other matters.

The afternoon was drawing to a close. It was five thirty, and the first wave of people were beginning to straggle back through the gates and home for tea. Going against the flow, though, were two and a half people. There was a father, a mother, and a son.

"What do you want to go on first?"

"That one over there," the boy said in a voice that sounded like a small bird pecking on a window pane, pointing at the wildest and most deranged looking ride in sight.

"I don't know," father said doubtfully. "It looks rather big, eh?"

"I want to."

"Let's go over and take a look," mother decided.

The ride consisted of a bendy looking thing, attached to which were some swivel type devices just big enough to seat two people. The fun was to be swivelled like you had never been swivelled before.

"I don't know..." father said.

"Please."

"It looks like it's just for big kids."

"I am a big kid."

"Yes but...."

"Go on, take him on it. He'll be fine," mother ordered, in an un-orderly way.

"Yes, but what about me?" he pleaded, and the two, the small and the big, giggled. Father liked it when they giggled together. They joined the queue and soon were busy strapping themselves into the unlikely looking capsule.

"I don't like the look of this."

"It's all right, you're with me," the boy teased, and giggled some more. All of a sudden things began to happen, and they were things father could well do without.

"It's starting!" excitement spoke up loud and clear. They were then rolled up, chewed on, and spit out by a machine that seemed to have no taste for people.

"Oh God."

"Weeeeeeeee," the son told him. Father saw mother's face appear before them for the briefest of moments, and then they were taken else where. It was at that moment he realised to be swivelled was to be made a fool of; and then he was swivelled some more.

"Oh no."

"Weeeeeeeeeeeeeee. Weeeeeeeee weeeeeeeeeee." Father knew that by "we", the boy meant the two of them, and the game went on.

It did not last forever. With feet planted once more on terra firma, he glanced down and felt a fleeting hint of sorrow for the crumpled grass. It did not last forever.

Meanwhile Everard Swain was still some distance away, still hiding from the story, still hoping to be overlooked, though in time we must seek him out proper, gaze into his dark eyes and say, "Hello."

They had been tossed about, span, twisted, bumped and fondled by a vast array of freakish machines. By seven p.m. father had perfected the art of grumbling and mastered the subtleties of pretended fear. He had been told not to act like a baby nineteen times, and the boy had smacked his bum more than once. The family made over to the food section of the fair, sat themselves down for some moments, and wondered what they should eat. They settled upon several sticky things of questionable origin.

The two big ones sat smoking whilst the boy ran hither and dither, chasing shadows like a dog chases his tail. Soon, the sun sank from view, and an unnecessary chill descended on the park. In the half light more people arrived: The other ones.

"Come, put your coat on." The boy scampered back almost at once. With time the darkness became more severe, the noise from the machines and generators and people became at once tangible, forcing the boy to hang close to his parents. He was not yet played out though, and begged more fun and more rides. Father tossed the beggar boy a few favours. They were small rides, and he rode them alone.

"Can we go on just one more big one?"

"I don't know. We've all just had supper," mother said.

"So?"

"So it can make you sick."

"But it won't. Honest. Please, just one big one."

"It's no good asking me anyway. Ask your dad, he's the one that takes you on the big ones."

"Dad?"

"Okay, but then it's time to go home."

"Yeaah," cheered the boy. And so they stumbled about the place, finding way through the crowds of dark people who blocked their passage at every turn.

"That one looks fun," father lied.

"It's not so big though."

"It's big enough." And it was. They joined the queue. It was something like a Ferris wheel only it took you faster and appeared less likely to be your friend. The seats were two by two, and above each was a plastic parasol with flowers painted about its edge. The course it took was slightly off the perpendicular, and reached a height beyond which most people would wish to go.

One by one, the seats were emptied, and the line of people shortened correspondingly.

"We should get on this time," father said, estimating the number of places remaining. And soon they were the next to be boarded. And soon they were face to face with Everard Swain, for this ride was in his charge—which is all very nice for us.

"That's all," said Everard, and placed a chain across the gateway.

"Why do these things always happen to me?" father said, some what disgruntled.

"They don't," Everard replied, pushing a button which sent the ride in motion. "They always happen to me." And the two of them laughed.

"It's cold, eh?"

"If you're cold now wait 'till you get on the ride," Everard warned, grinning.

"I can imagine. The things we do for kids."

"Yeah, but I was a kid once myself, you know."

"Really? When was that?"

"When I was younger." They both laughed, and father could not help but think how pleasant this fellow seemed to be. Such a nice young man.

Everard wondered off to check the ride's control board.

"He seems nice, eh?" he remarked, and the mother murmured something which lost itself in the noise of the electric generator, supplying power to the smiles of two dozen people who were lifted high and low in the circular motion of the machine.

"Yes, very nice," she said a moment later, her stare fixed on Everard as he came back towards them. Her eyes trawled down his body. He wore a pair of thread bare jeans, off-white pumps, a thick sweater and a blue anorak.

"Do you like going on the rides?" Everard asked the boy, bending down first to his level. He nodded shyly.

"Are you having fun?" He bobbed his head once again, like a plastic float adrift on an unknown sea, and then looked down at his feet to see if they were still there. "He's a shy one," Everard said, drawing himself upright.

"He is rather. I suppose he'll grow out of it though."

"Or into it," smiled the fair-ground worker.

"Such a nice young man," father thought. "And clever too."

The ride came to a halt and the first two took exit. Mother stood to one side.

"Are you not going on," Everard asked her. "There's room."

"I don't know." She had assumed only two were allowed.

"It's safe as houses, you know."

"All right then." The two big ones and the little one went over to take their place. Everard made sure they were secured in the seat.

"You can borrow my coat if you want. It gets pretty chilly up there."

"No, no, I'll be fine," mother said half shyly, but he was already removing it.

"Here, take it. I tell you, its cold up there."

"Thanks," she took it from him.

"Now then, are you okay?" Everard looked to the boy, who once again offered a brief nod.

"Good."

The machine made a slight rotation and the next people, now below them, were helped out, and another couple locked in. Mother and father listened to the nice young man's friendly banter with everyone.

"He's nice, eh?"

"Yes, he is."

"So friendly and helpful, eh?"

"Yes."

"We're going upper and upper." the boy breathed, though now there was a note of distress in his voice. A note that went unheard.

"Mmm." Upper and upper until they reached the crest and began to descend the other side. The boy fell silent. The darkness had whispered something in his ear, and the unperturbed manner in which he had ridden a host of bedraggled machine monsters during the day, beasties lost in frenzied fits of epilepsy and lust, was now less than a boyish memory of imagined heroism. Darkness made machine growls louder.

The seats had been filled with fresh victims and the ride began its slanted circular course.

"Look how far you can see," mother said pointing, but by the time the words had been spoken they were back at ground level. "Watch when we get back up."

They had gone around and back up perhaps a dozen times when the boy began to whimper.

"What's wrong?" mother asked, leaning around to see tears fill his eyes.

"I don't like it."

"Why not?"

"I just don't."

"Stop acting like a little kid. You've been on bigger rides than this today."

"Yes, but now its dark."

"So?"

"Everyone's a monster in the dark."

"Don't be stupid. Anyway, the ride will be over in a few more minutes. You'll be fine. It's safe." In the meantime, Everard had noticed something was amiss, and as they reached ground level he brought the machine to a halt. He came running over.

"Is something wrong?"

"Yes, he's scared." Everard opened the lock and helped the boy out.

"There we are," he said, planting him on the ground.

"It's funny, he's been on big rides all day long."

"Nothing to worry about now," Everard ruffled up the boy's hair and presented him with a cheery smile. He did not smile back. Everard moved over to the control board, restarted the ride, and joined them at the exit gate. The mother took off the anorak and handed it back.

"Thank you."

"No problem. Here," he fished in his pocket, took out a tube of Smarties and offered it to the boy, who looked down to his feet.

"Don't you like Smarties?" The boy rocked back and forth, from heel to toe, with out saying a word.

"Don't be rude," mother told him, but he continued the careful study of his shoe laces.

"He's like that some times. Shy. Takes after his mother."

"Really!"

Everard looked to the mother who blushed, her head inclined slightly downwards, snatching the occasional furtive look at his strong young face.

"Ah well, thanks for stopping the ride."

"That's all right. Have a nice evening now."

"You too," father said.

"Bye," mother added, taking the boy by the hand and leading him away. Once they were back in the crowds, father said, "He was nice, eh?"

"Yes. It's a pity every one's not like that."

"He was nice, eh?" he said to the boy, who replied:

"Are we going home now, are we?"

As they drove back, father mentioned what a nice fellow he had been, and how good he was to stop the ride for them. The mother said yes, he was very friendly. He was very nice.

One by one, or in long rows, the lights were closing their eyes. The machines were at rest and their attendants straggling off towards home. Many travelled with the fair all year round, and had only a short walk to the pack of grimy caravans huddled beneath a circle of elm. Others were locals living in the town, out to make some extra pocket money.

There was a deadly silence about the place now, and the chill hung bodily in the air, thick in the air. It was twelve thirty, the pubs had been closed a good two hours, and the streets down which the shadowy figure of Everard wandered were lost to themselves. Nothing moved. There was not a breath of wind.

The noise of the day made the silence hurt. He walked in agony.

There was no need to smile any longer. There was no need to speak. There was no need to listen. He was almost home. The nice young man who helped children from scary rides was almost home.

The bed-sit was more silent than the street in which it lived.

Everard closed the door behind him. His face was long. There was no inclination towards expression. There was no one around for miles. For thousands and thousands of miles.

He glanced about the dead room and sighed. He walked over to a rejected looking refrigerator. There was no magic light inside, and when he opened the door the room itself grew darker.

Everard took out a limp parcel and placed it on the table beside an unopened envelope. The letter was from his father and would never be read. He searched out a knife and fork from a dirty pile in the dirty sink and sat himself down, opening up the damp paper parcel and spreading it out. Cradled in the folds lay a large piece of raw of meat. Cutting into that large piece of raw meat, blood ran out onto the table, onto the letter. He cut again, stabbing and hacking, stabbing and hacking, spearing a piece with the fork and pushing it greedily into his mouth. He chewed.

The nice young man ate raw meat.

It was very good.

