

CARNIVAL NIGHT

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

Because it is cold tonight, my mother has made me wear two pairs of socks. The extra material makes my already too-small wellies even tighter and my heels are pinched painfully. I am almost certain that I can feel a blister forming on my right foot, blooming violently under the boot's pink rubber. To relieve the pressure, I am walking on my toes, wobbling awkwardly down the road. In addition to preventing further blisters I am also trying desperately to avoid the cracks between the paving stones. Jessica White told me that stepping on a crack causes you seven years bad luck and Taylor Johnson said that his sister's-friend's-cousin stepped on a crack just before she had her appendix removed. This is a serious concern. I am going to the zoo next weekend and I don't want anything to get in the way of me seeing the giraffes.

My walk causes my mother to sigh loudly. Eventually, she is forced to retrace her steps up the hill and pull me along in frustration. I hold my breath and hope that the near suffocation will protect me against the cracks my wellies are tripping onto. By the time we reach the road Emily and Aunty Lou have already positioned themselves at the edge of the pavement. My mother and I move to stand on either side of them. Best friend matched with best friend.

Before we left her house Emily and I had an argument about who would hold the torch. After a silent foot fight under the table, during which I got kicked in the shin three times, Emily won. She is now directing the torch full beam at the houses opposite, performing acrobatic stunts with the glow. Every so often Emily turns to look at my face, ensuring that I am hating this as much as she hopes. I am of course, but I rearrange my features into what I hope is a look of indifference.

We are waiting for the carnival. The annual parade of bright lights and floats that will travel down the road and blare life into our sleepy seaside town. Its presence has been brewing for weeks. Ever since the tourists left their holiday cottages people have been filling carts with plywood props and washing tractors ready for the big event. Meanwhile, Sarah Cowley has been pirouetting around the school playground at lunch, practising for her role as carnival princess.

“I won’t clap for her” Emily told me fiercely the other day. “When she comes past I will just put my hands by my side and watch. Otherwise, she will get way too big-headed.”

I nodded in agreement but secretly I was disappointed. I liked Sarah Cowley with her long silky blonde hair, so light it was almost white. I even admired her chipped front tooth, a casualty of a bike accident three summers before. To me Sarah Cowley looked exactly as a carnival princess should look and I was impressed by her coronation.

Despite our differing views on Sarah Cowley, Emily and I agree that the majorettes are the best part of the carnival. We like the way they strut confidently between the floats, waving their batons in time to the music and we covet their sequined leotards, the way they glisten in the fluorescent lights. Every year we beg our mothers to let us join their team. But they deem the majorettes too American and think that their tight costumes are inappropriate for the cold autumn air.

As always, the carnival is late getting started and the crowd is beginning to get restless. The man behind us sighs and then swears loudly about how cold his fingers are. Emily and I look at each other delighted. The memories of our torch conflict are long forgotten in the face of this new development and we listen carefully in the hope of more expletives. We are not disappointed. The combination of boredom and several pints of West Country cider have removed any filter this man may have had. A moment later he follows his exclamation with a series of other bad words, which both Emily and I immediately commit to memory.

Years later I will shout similar words down the phone, using them to describe the latest man I have dated. Emily will offer her own profanities in sympathy, before replying with the tried and tested platitude ‘you know... you’re better off without him.’

‘Did you hear Sarah Cowley is pregnant again?’ Emily continues, deftly steering the topic away from my disastrous love life. ‘My mum saw her in Sainsbury's the other day. Said Sarah could hardly control the two children she already has... never mind a third.’

I put my phone on speaker, so that I can search Sarah on Facebook while we continue the conversation. Her page is filled with photographs of her children. A blonde boy and girl who smile angelically for the camera while sitting on benches and sea walls I recognise from my own childhood.

As I am scrolling past an image of Sarah’s children eating ice creams, I make the noise of disdain that Emily and I reserve for when someone from school is pregnant. We have maintained this response well into adulthood, even though we are all long past the age where a pregnancy is shocking. Emily cuts in again,

‘Do you remember when she was carnival princess? She was unbearable for months.’

I do remember. I remember how Sarah sat on a cart in a beautiful pink gown that had been especially made for her. I remember how she waved at the crowd in a dignified manner, as if she really was a member of the royal family. I remember how she smiled even though her eyes were red and her cheeks were stained by unexplained tear marks. And I also remember how Emily, overcome with excitement, had laughed and cheered as the float went past. Shouting Sarah’s name into the night’s sky.

Originally from Devon, Rebecca now lives in Birmingham where she is completing a PhD in art history.