

**THE FUN FAIR**  
**by Elena Alexieva**

translated from the Bulgarian by Elena Alexieva

I observe my sister sweeping in the spotlight of the torch, a bunch of dry twigs in her hand. Then, I move the beam away, and I don't see her anymore, I can only hear the dry, vigorous brushing of the twigs against the asphalt. She says she's sweeping the area around the stand, so it will be clean tomorrow when mom comes to work, but she's actually trying to stick as close as she can to the white circle of light I'm drawing for her. She is afraid of the dark. As for me, I love dragging the circle away right under her nose, luring her on with the spotlight without letting her stay safely in it. Sometimes it makes her furious, so she takes a few menacing steps in my direction, intending to get the torch from me. She knows very well that the light comes from it. Or else, she weeps. She is older than me, and stronger, too, but everyone treats her like she is little. She, too, treats me as if I'm the older one. My sister is not like the other girls, not at all. She is worse than even the ugliest and dumbest in my class. Mom always says that I shouldn't be ashamed of her because she is my sister. And there's no way I can explain to her that if she weren't, I most probably wouldn't be ashamed at all.

She keeps sweeping, trying at the same time to come closer to the torch light. Until recently, she used to think it was enough to step on the white circle so that no one could pull it from underneath her feet. She pants with effort. The hand holding the twigs scoops up from the darkness and then spills is back. Her round head sways in step with the sweeping. She is like a bird pecking at invisible grains. I let her stay inside the spotlight for a while. One of her shoes is unlaced but she doesn't notice. I swiftly move the light away. She straightens up. I bet she is about to cry.

'Come on, kids.'

It's dad. He has hooked the stand to our rusty old VW. I glance at him to see if he is going to make our secret sign. He doesn't. He wouldn't even glance back. The secret sign means that we walk away in silence, just the two of us, pick up a tree and take a leak without a word, standing side by side under the stars, like real men do.

Right now, however, dad doesn't feel like making any secret signs. Perhaps because mom is already seated in the car, waiting for us, somewhat angry at our getting there so late. Although

it's spring, the evening is cold. And there's no one in the park except for the man who sits in the metal booth, watching his tiny tv set, guarding the bumper cars for the night. I have never seen him from close by, only his outline in the bluish aquarium of the booth, always with his back to us, always facing the screen. Mom says he has a gun but I don't think so. He is too old to shoot. Even through the glass, I can see his hair is all white.

Dad also steps into the car. I turn off the torch and take my sister by the hand. Her palm is sweaty, covered with bits of bark and dirt from the twigs. Her name is Elissaveta, but we all call her Ellie. I check one last time if the stand is hooked firmly and its side doors are locked. Then I open the car's backdoor and I let Ellie climb in first. In the rearview mirror, mom's face is vague and somehow sad. Her jacket is zipped up to her chin although the car is much warmer than outside.

We drive off the dark main alley along which we came. In principle, no cars are allowed in the park, but we have a special permit which dad has glued to the windscreen for everyone to see. The guys from the funfair have them, too, but we have nothing to do with them. We are here to stay, whereas they come and go as they wish. We need the permit so that dad can drive mom and the hotdog stand every day to the park, always on the same spot, not too far from the merry-go-rounds and the shooting sidestall and the Ferris wheel, but not too close either. Even when the fun fair is not there, mom is. Dad says our business is better than the attractions because eating always comes first among human necessities. Moreover, we also have another stand, an ice cream one, which mom takes out during the summer. Once the heat is in, people start craving for ice cream and they simply forget about hotdogs. The hotter it is, the more ice cream they eat. In addition to the two stands, we also have a plastic chair and a huge sun umbrella. When there are no customers around, mom sits on the chair under the umbrella. Dad says that besides everything else, our business is also a rather healthy one because one spends the whole day in the open.

He turns on the radio and the car is instantly filled with the voice of a woman. The woman doesn't sing; she only talks. She utters a whole lot of words, and really fast, faster than I have ever heard anyone talking, and she even manages to make short pauses and chuckle from time to time. Her chuckle is clearly heard on the radio. And it's not really chuckle, it's more like an abrupt hiccup as if the woman is trying to take a breath. I can't make out her words very well. They seem rambling and scattered, as though the woman is a sack from which the words are

pouring out in an enormous shapeless heap. I'd rather have her sing or simply shut up. My sister Ellie, however, is listening. Her spit-covered lips are parted more widely than they normally are, so that I can even see her tongue lying heavily inside her mouth, still, bloated like a jellyfish cast away on the beach. She likes the words. And since they mean nothing to her, she is happy when there are so many of them. The more, the better. Perhaps, she even manages to count them. Mom says that sometimes people like my sister possess unsuspected talents.

There are no lamps in the park. That is, there are, of course, but they are all out of order. Not even one of them, not even the tiniest lamp is lit up. Only where the fun fair and the bumper cars are there is light. Dad says that the fun fair people are stealing away power. We don't steal any power for the hotdog stand because it doesn't work at night. Once it gets dark, people stop coming to the park or buying hotdogs. They prefer to have a more delicious meal at home. It's the same with the ice cream, although in summer the days are much longer. Then we don't take the stand back every night. We often leave it with the fun fair people to watch for us as they are always there with nowhere else to go. Dad says they are vagrants because they live in old shaggy trailers, and they can't be trusted. Mom, however, doesn't think so. She says they are good and sensible guys, wherever they're coming from. Dad shuts up disapprovingly and doesn't say a word more. I am not sure exactly what 'vagrants' means but I dare not ask. It might be something like 'criminals' or even worse.

I know one of them. His name is Krassi and he is in charge of the Ferris wheel. We got to know each other because he is something like my sister, although much older than her. We've chatted several times and he promised me a free ride on the wheel when his boss is not there. I guess he is not that dumb if they have entrusted him with the Ferris wheel. May be some day, when she grows up, Ellie too will find a job at the fun fair. On the other hand, I have seen no girls there so far. The fun fair is a men's business. Or else, Ellie could be selling things at the stand, and I'll be going there to collect her. I think mom and dad will be happy.

It feels strange to ride along the broad alley, in full darkness and silence, the inside of the car filling up with the words of the woman on the radio which will any second now spill out and scatter away like bats in the dark. My sister keeps listening with her mouth agape. She's really getting on my nerves, so I pinch her leg as hard as I can. Her thigh under the thick wool pants is

soft and fat. She looks at me in astonishment, then her face becomes pained and offended. She pushes me and tries to pinch back but doesn't close her mouth.

'What's going on there?' dad asks threateningly and frowns at us in the rearview mirror. His voice sinks in the ocean of words that keep pouring on us like a torrent.

'Why don't you turn this stupid radio off?' says mom at last. 'It's giving me a headache, and it's not that they're making any sense.'

Dad reaches out to turn off the radio but instead he all of a sudden jams on the brakes. We don't so much hear the thump as we feel it. In the beam of the headlights something bounces away and lands somewhere in the dark. We all fall forward, then back, stuck in the seats.

'What was that?' mom asks worriedly.

'I don't know' says dad. 'I've no idea. Could be an animal.'

'But there are no such big animals around!'

'A dog' suggests dad. 'I think it was a dog. I'll go and check, you stay here.'

I, however, reach out, lock the door on my sister's side, then slip out on my side and lock that door, too. Ellie stares at me uncomprehendingly. Mom yells behind me but I can't hear her. I don't want to.

Dad is squatting farther on the alley, where the beams of the headlights won't reach. Luckily, the torch is in my pocket. It lights up the whitish outline on the asphalt. It really is a dog. Not a big one, not at all. It's rather a small and old dog. Its hair is short with brown spots. Its years are brown as well. The dog doesn't stir; only its eyes are open, staring at us.

'Is it alive?'

'Don't you see?' dad snaps at me.

'There's no blood' I say and bring the torch closer. The dog blinks.

'This means nothing' says dad, taking the torch from my hand and turning it off.

'What shall we do? Shall we take it home?'

'And have it die there? No way!'

My eyes slowly get used to the darkness and I can make the dog out more clearly. It continues to lie still on the alley.

‘It might not die’ I suggest timidly. ‘It might be just scared, that’s why it won’t rise.’

‘Sure’ replies dad harshly, but nevertheless slightly pokes the dog with his finger, just in case. The dog squeals.

Dad pulls his hand away, terrified.

‘Get back in the car!’ he orders and I know I’d be sorry if I don’t obey.

‘What are you going to do?’ I whisper.

Suddenly, I feel how I roll back inside myself, as if I’ve been hit, sinking deep down to my heels and spilling out through them onto the asphalt. I am scared brainless but not of dad. I am afraid that I’ll never be able to stand up and leave this place. I turn and see mom’s face behind the windscreen. It is distant and round and doesn’t look our way. It could be my sister’s face or the face of that guy from the fun fair, Krassi.

‘I said get into the car! Now!’

Dad rises, grabs me by the jacket and drags me to the car but halfway lets go. I only stop for a second, just enough to see him going back and taking the dog in his arms. It whines terribly but dad won’t let it down. Instead, he crosses the alley and disappears among the trees behind which the river runs. I start walking toward the car again. Mom unlocks the backdoor for me.

‘What happened?’ she wants to know. ‘What’s going on?’

But when dad returns, mom says nothing.

Dad turns the radio on again, this time not so loud and at a different station. Our car advances very slowly, so slowly that if I were walking beside, I would have long ago outwalked it. When we reach the avenue, it will be completely different. There, we will drive faster though never as fast as the other cars. It’s all because of the stand. They hoot angrily at us but we don’t pay attention. Dad says that if we are not violating the traffic regulations, we can drive as we please. Besides, he says, they’re all insane. And they envy us. The latter, however, he only says when he’s in a good mood, and tonight that’s not really the case.

I know why dad turned the radio on again and mom didn't tell him to turn it off this time. He wants to make it seem as if nothing has happened. Just go on from where we stopped as if we've never stopped at all. I think mom wants it like this, too. They want it so badly that I dare not speak up and ask what he did with the dog.

Only Ellie knows not a thing. She is still sitting at her end of the backseat, in the very same position she was in when the car pulled up abruptly. If I now reach out again and pinch her leg, probably everything will be repeated. But I have no intention of pinching her. Nevertheless, I'm annoyed because she is so undisturbed, and I was there and saw the dog and will never be able to go back again.

At last we reach the avenue and dad patiently waits for the other drivers to make room for him so that we can join the traffic. When this happens, we are all greatly relieved. Now we are like the other cars, stand and slow driving and all. They can't say a thing to us. Not a thing. And they certainly envy us for the stand, red as it is, just like our car, with the words Hot Dog written in yellow on one side and a picture of a hotdog, just like the real thing.

Once a boy from my class saw us and on the next day told everyone else at school. At first they tried to make fun of me but were quick to stop when I told them that at home we can eat free hotdogs and ice cream as much as we like, all year round. I'm not sure if they believed it but ever since, once the weather warms up and the ice cream stands appear all over the city, they all pretend to be my best friends and want me to treat them, especially the girls. Mom says it is probably because they like me. But I know it has nothing to do with liking. It's just that girls are indeed very greedy, greedier even than boys, although they pretend to eat very little.

My sister is not like them at all. Sometimes it makes me angry that she's not like the other girls, but others I'm happy. She might be dumb and not particularly pretty but at least she will never cheat to get something she can buy for free. My sister never cheats and never buys things. Mom buys her everything she needs. If mom gives me some money and tells me to buy something for my sister, I do, too. Mom says it's not good to let Ellie buy things for herself because someone might cheat her and take all her money for something which doesn't cost that much and is a lot cheaper.

In contrast to Ellie, however, I do cheat. Like that time when I told my classmates about the free hotdogs and ice cream. It wasn't such a big thing, nothing happened, I didn't even feel

guilty afterwards, but then I was sorry because now they all want me to treat them. If I had let them make fun of me as much as they liked, they would have long ago forgotten it. It's just that I hate being made fun of. Dad says it's bad to cheat when you are little because when you grow up you are simply forced to drop a lie here and there, so the later you start, the better. I wonder if he is going to lie about the dog, although we were all there and saw it. Except for Ellie, of course. And mom also, who pretends she didn't see anything. But I saw it so dad can't lie to me, not me.

At home it is not particularly warm and there's this peculiar smell. It always smells like this here. Mom says it's how homes smell but to me it feels rather stale and reeking of fried courgettes from last summer. Sometimes, if we are really late and the fridge is empty, like tonight, she boils for dinner some of the frankfurters which we are otherwise forbidden to eat because they are there only to be put in the baguettes. Dad says the frankfurters are the stock that feeds us, not literally of course, but figuratively, meaning that we sell them as hotdogs in order to make money. So it would be really dumb if we ate all our frankfurters as if we ate the money for the electricity bill and the water and clothes and all sorts of things.

Ellie doesn't eat frankfurters. She doesn't believe mom when mom tells her that frankfurters are made of meat because they don't look at all like the meat Ellie has seen as a steak or a meatball, and Ellie refuses to eat things that she knows not what they're made of.

I don't feel like eating either. I keep thinking about the dog. Dad observes me for some time, then warns me not to play with my food but eat it and go to bed because it's getting late. I, however, can neither eat nor tell him why as he already knows and will probably get even madder. He looks at me for a few more minutes and finally yells at me to leave the table and get away if I'm such a wimp. And I do get up and glance stealthily at mom who is right now busy with my sister. When our father yells Ellie always cries. I feel like crying, too, but I'm a boy so I'm not allowed.

Before I fall asleep, I recall how we go to the park to collect mom and each of us has his or her special task except for mom herself who has been working all day and is tired. Dad's task is to tie the stand to the car using this special hook that sticks out from under the bumper. My task is to hold the torch for him when it has gotten dark in the park and the lamps are not on. Ellie has never been given a task, so she invented one: she sweeps the ground where the stand sits with a broom made of twigs until it's clean and no trace whatsoever is left.

‘I recall,’ because it seems to me it will never be like this again, it will never be repeated, although I don’t know why. Perhaps dad will finally agree to leave the stand with the fun fair people and then mom will have to ride back home on the bus.

While I’m having these thoughts, someone opens the door slightly and looks at me through the thin slice of light without entering. As soon as I hear the door-handle click, I close my eyes so I don’t see who’s there. It’s not mom because if it were her, she would have come to me to check if I’m actually asleep. It’s not dad either because he’s mad at me, and if he’s mad, he never comes. So it must be Ellie. Ellie stands there for a very long time and won’t go away. Perhaps, having sensed that I am just pretending, she has decided to wait until she has made me open at least one eye. Of course, I only open it once I’m sure she has left. While I lie in my bed, trying hard not to move, I keep thinking that my sister is not that dumb after all. When she finally goes away, I’m almost asleep.

On the next day after classes I head straight for the park. In the daylight, it seems different, even the alley is not the same, nor are the trees or the roar of the river which you can’t see unless you go down there. Nevertheless, I have no trouble finding the spot from last night because it’s still there and all night long and all day long I’ve been walking to it never mind that I’m only reaching it now. There’s nothing on the asphalt to remind me of the dog or of us when we hit it, and later on, when we were standing beside and staring at it, and it was still alive and staring back. That’s why I cross the alley and walk among the trees, which are not that many and barely come into leaves. The roar of the river becomes stronger. Perhaps it is drowning the dog’s cry, if the dog didn’t get tired of crying and fell asleep. Or it could have died. I have seen a dead dog before so I won’t be scared if I found it like this.

It’s just that I don’t even think of it as ‘dead’. If I do, there will be nothing else to say. Instead I try to picture it. The dog looks like it is asleep and where we hit it doesn’t hurt anymore. The only difference is that it doesn’t breathe.

Under the trees and among them there’s just mud and litter from last fall. I walk further and go down to the river. It’s dirty down there. There are all sorts of junk and I don’t really know where they came from. There’s even a bowl from a bowling, and also an enormous amount of plastic bags, mostly empty. But the dog isn’t here. Nor is it on the bank, nor even in the water.

Mom is sitting on the plastic chair by the stand, not selling anything because there are no customers around. She usually scolds me when I come to see her after classes because in the park I can't study or do my homework, I can just hang around the fun fair guys and talk to them. I am forbidden to go into their trailers or anywhere where mom won't be able to see me. Mom says they're not bad people, but then who can say what they really are.

Today, however, she is glad to see me and even hugs me so tight as if ages have passed from this morning. I'm embarrassed but also lucky because at this time of the day the park is deserted and there's no one around to see. Then mom asks if I have had lunch and when I say I haven't she makes a giant hotdog with plenty of mustard, especially for me.

While I eat my hotdog, a small woman approaches us with a long black coat that almost touches the ground and a huge black dog on a leash. The dog is really big, in any case much bigger than the woman herself, and the two of them make quite a sight. When they come very close to our stand, the woman tells the dog to sit down and the dog sits down obediently and begins to sniff the smell of frankfurters, mustard and ketchup. Its head is also very big and if the dog feels like it, it can easily rest it on the edge of the stand and relax. The woman asks mom to make her a hotdog. She says it politely and even allows a faint smile meant more for me than for mom. I can't take my eyes off the dog. The woman rummages the pockets of her long coat and soon collects a whole handful of change. Mom gives her the ready hotdog and the woman puts all the change in mom's palm. This really makes me angry. I know how much mom hates it when people palm off all their change to her only to get rid of it. Like all salespeople, she prefers to be paid the exact amount, and not handfuls of good-for-nothing change.

To my surprise, this time mom doesn't seem a bit mad and won't pull secretly that face which always makes me shudder as if it was all my fault. On the contrary. She is nice and all smiles and tells the woman her dog is very handsome. The woman smiles back, this time only to mom, and straightens up so that for a second she seems quite taller. The dog stares at mom, gently shaking its floppy black ears. I am just about to ask if I can stroke it when mom takes out a freshly boiled frankfurter and offers it to the woman so she can give it to the dog. The woman thanks her but won't take the frankfurter. She says her dog likes only pure meat and won't eat such a thing. The dog looks at the frankfurter, then at the woman, shaking its ears again. Then it stands up and the two of them head down the alley.

Mom drops the frankfurter back and slams the lid. I finish my hotdog in silence. The mustard has oozed down to the bottom of the baguette, forming something like a tiny puddle. This mustard is of the truly bitter type which mom keeps for special customers only. My tongue has long gone numb with it. I eat up the tip of the baguette and feel that even my lips are burning. I guess I must be smeared all over and with a thick yellow moustache, but don't care.

Mom says the woman with the dog passes by every day and always at unusual hours.

'She might be moneyed, although she doesn't look like it,' mom goes on, speaking mostly to herself. 'Or she might be jobless. I wonder how these can people keep such enormous beasts. If I turn around for a second, he'll lift his leg and pee all over the stand, you can take it for granted. And she won't even scold him. I know it, the park is full of blokes like this.'

Afterwards, mom and me just sit and talk about stuff. That it, she sits because there's only one chair, while I prefer hanging around since I've spent the whole morning seated at school. Mom's jacket is zipped up to her chin again, although it's warm and the sun is shining. She is always cold because she stands in one place, and if one wants to keep warm one should be moving. The only difference is that today mom isn't wearing her knitted winter hat with ear-flaps and pompons, which doesn't become her at all. It's the type of hat which girls in my class wear but they are little and mom is grownup. I've never told her that I don't like her with that hat. No need to do so today either, because the hat is not there at all, and instead, mom's hair can be seen which is curly and died and very beautiful indeed.

I get bored quickly, and then customers also appear, mostly upper grade students who have finished classes and have come here to smoke and pet. I've seen them often on benches and at first I was interested but then not anymore so. That's why I head for the fun fair.

My friend Krassi is there, waiting for me. He has seen me from afar but dares not leave the Ferris wheel and come to the stand. There are two other guys with him. They are very much alike but won't tell me their names. Krassi whispers to me that they are brothers. They are both laughing loudly at something one of them has said. Then all of a sudden they ask me if I want to see the shooting sidestall and, of course, I want.

They let me do some shooting and show me how to hold the rifle and aim. But I'm not so much interested in shooting than in looking at the targets some of which move and even sing if hit. Then the two brothers suggest that I go behind the counter and look at them as much as I

want. To get there, however, I have to pass through their tiny little room where they sleep because it goes with the shooting sidestall and it all just one big trailer.

I am somewhat scared. I look back and in the distance I see mom standing beside the stand. I'm just about to tell them that she won't let me go into other people's trailers and will be mad at me, when a boy and a girl stop by the stand and mom skillfully places two baguettes on the spits. Right now she is not looking at me at all. I sneak into the trailer and the door clicks behind me. It's awfully smelly inside, it's too small and on the wall there's a calendar with a naked woman squeezing her enormous breasts so tightly as if someone wants to steal them away.

I reach the other part of the trailer where the shooting stall is and quickly examine the targets. Some are just plain circles covered with little holes from the shots. Others are shaped like animals: ducks, rabbits and hedgehogs, and there's even one painted like a pirate's head. Everywhere all sorts of soft toys are hung, mostly small and ugly, but there are a couple really nice ones, which, I guess, you can get if you hit the toughest target. I touch them secretly because before letting me in, the two brothers have told me not to touch the toys since they'll get soiled and then no one would want them. I slip back to the sleeping room and from there I get out.

Krassi is talking to the brothers, waiting for me. That's what he does all the time. Now, as I look at him from close up, he doesn't look like my sister at all. I ask him if his boss is here and Krassi shakes his head meaning no. He starts telling us how kind his boss is to him and how yesterday she even bought him a cup of coffee but I break in and ask bluntly when he is going to let me on the Ferris wheel.

Krassi doesn't seem to understand right away or pretends he doesn't. The two brothers, however, start talking him into it, saying that it's really nothing, now that his boss has left, and they'll never tell her because we're all buddies here, aren't we, and they wink at me. I wink back and they seem content. Then Krassi agrees and we all go to the Ferris wheel. In fact, it is just a large blue truck which, instead of carriage, has a wheel with seats. I take a seat and Krassi turns the wheel on. I don't see exactly how he does this but the wheel sways and begins to move, and I go up.

It's not high at all. I go up and down slowly, more slowly than I have expected, even the air isn't swooshing by my head, the park shrinking and stretching beneath me, now big, now small, and from above I can see there's more to it further away, so much more I can't see it.

Meanwhile, at the second loop mom has already noticed me and for a couple of seconds we look at each other. I look at her from above and then from beyond, she looks at me without a stir because she is tired and mad at me, then she puts all the things one by one inside the stall, locks it and heads my way. Even from the top she doesn't seem small, not at all, her eyes fixed on me while she walks, and I'm glad she's coming, and still, I'm somewhat scared.

Now there are more people walking along the alleys than before. Dad says that they have been working all day long, and on their way back they pass through the park because in this way they can go home and also take a walk and relax, which is something one can only rarely afford. But I've always thought that the people are in the park all the time. During the day, however, they probably hide under trees or benches, or in special dug-outs in the grass just like those night animals that I saw in a film but forgot what they're called. And when the dark is close, the people leave their hiding places, and go off looking for food since they're starving after the long wait. Some even come to our stand and buy not one but two or three hotdogs, that's how hungry they are. Even now I can see a couple of them passing by the stand and turning around in amazement because they don't see anyone there, but mom won't look back for a second, she walks straight ahead, so the people have to look for food elsewhere.

Finally, she reaches the Ferris wheel and begins to scold Krassi right away. I can't hear what exactly she's telling him but even from here I can see how his ears turn red. I am almost at the top and want to see the park from above one last time before mom picks me up, when the Ferris wheel suddenly comes to a halt with a kind of snort, as if it is a horse, and the seats sway more powerfully than before. Krassi rushes somewhere and disappears from view, then rushes back and tells mom something. She looks up and I am relieved to see she's no longer mad at me.

'Baby?' shouts mom from below and the people turn around to see who's she shouting at and then they, too, look up at me. 'Don't be scared. It's just a blackout but we're fixing it right away. You're not afraid to wait a bit up there, are you?'

I'd be embarrassed to shout back in front of everyone so I just shake my head and mom understands perfectly well that I'm not in the least bit scared.

I don't know how much time has passed but it begins to get dark and the darkness curls up like black smoke from the ground, pushing up the light, which raises higher and higher, reaches me and stays for a while before climbing further up, straight into the sky. The Ferris wheel is all

covered with colorful lights which are not lit up right now because of the power cut. Nothing is lit up but nevertheless I can see everything. I can see the people below scattering away one by one. Only mom and Krassi won't leave but even if they did, I wouldn't be scared. I can see a man on a bike whose headlight outlines a tiny little spot of light in front of the wheel, as if the man is trying to reach it and the spot of light keeps running ahead, leading him away in an unknown direction. Further on, at the end of the main alley, I can also make out our car with its two glazy headlights, crawling slowly toward us. I see so many things that my head begins to spin and I have to close my eyes not to feel sick. When I open them again, the park is suddenly engulfed by pitch darkness, so I get confused for a moment not knowing where I am. And then, coming from somewhere around the river, not very loud but quite clear, as if made of words I can't understand, a dog's bark reaches me.