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Baton twirlers, sash girls and red-cheeked boys with guns

by Eirene Gentle

The inflatable seal is the star of the quarterly parades along Main street which used to be Queen Street when we lived there once. People line up on both sides of the road checking their phones ‘*is it coming, it is coming*’ until the rrrr rrrr of drums slink over the hill followed by the old men in fezzes and teenagers with sashes. Miss Apple this or Squash Queen that, waving like they’re off to war, or we are. Then random floats with smiling people and finally the seal, two-storeys high and no one knows why. Grey and wet looking, big eyes like flies. Why a seal? There’s no water here, just fields and industry, squatting apartment buildings and slush clouds dripping soot on our heads. Bobbling and jerking like it might pull free, a bouncy castle blot over the sky.

In our town we have flower stalls and a glitter factory but they outlawed rainbows after the last election. My grandmother can’t get her head around it, asking ‘who can ban a rainbow?’ like it’s 2015 or something. She looks querulously out the window every day but nada. No rainbow. Maybe she’s unlucky, maybe they really banned them or maybe rainbows don’t want to shine where a seal x-rays our windows each quarter. A trojan seal grandma said when she saw it on TV, those buggy eyes and creaking skin and not a single rainbow. Even the sticker on my laptop vanished, there’s just a shiny spot where it used to be. ‘Maybe the seal keeps rainbows safe,’ Dara said which is lovely and why she never has a job. Even if she wasn’t like that there’s not much to do since most stores closed in favour of that big company and most factories closed because of offshore and the public sector was fired and our money faded like the rainbows. But we have baton twirlers and sash girls, boys with red cheeks and guns on their hips and the jail industry is thriving, so that’s something.

I heard there were raids after the last parade in the area the seal passed by, sounds of boots and smashed windows and folk hauled out by the red-cheeked boys, so fleshy you just want to pinch them or slide them a hard candy but something in their eyes warns you off. That and the detention rate. They take tourists in at \$20 a pop, everyone in cages looking right at you so you forget for a second which side of the little window is the zoo. Thank god for the lanyards, a lanyard means you’re on the side getting out and after a few minutes everyone hangs onto theirs like the oxygen mask on a spiralling plane. Maybe they’ll give tours in the seal next time. Open it up and let us walk in, offer rides so we bob along not quite floating but not stable, so buzzed even our eyes puke. Maybe one time it’ll tug so hard it tears free, a blobby Icarus spinning toward the sun. Past the clouds dripping with effort of holding up sky. Above it all to where rainbows hide.



Illustration by Holly Chilton

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