

PEANUT CIRCUS  
*Rhona Sterling*

When I was seven years old, the circus came to the Bronx, squeezed into our local armory, roaring, spectacular and dusty. We all gasped and stamped our feet and cheered our hearts out, a thrilling, unexpected wartime treat!

One morning, our second grade teacher, round and soft as my babushka's matzoh balls, made an announcement: "Children, I want you to make something at home that has to do with the circus and bring it in on Monday to share with your classmates. Now, don't forget to put on your thinking caps!" (the only phrase that confused and annoyed me more was: 'lock your lips and throw away the key'.)

Anyhow, I skipped home, so excited by this assignment and not having any clue as to what to make. My thinking cap was askew, falling off, nowhere to be found. Mommy, of course, was immediately very available and without a beat, suggested a peanut circus (or, Russianized, a pinatt ceercoos). I remember jumping up and down with joy at this terrific idea. As I think about it now, why peanuts? I don't recall that we were nut munchers but with all the food rationing in those years, who knows? Also, my mom, an émigré from the Ukraine and an aspiring artist, had worked in the fledging New York cartoon industry, mostly as a sketcher for Betty Boop. (After my birth, she became a full time, all-enveloping mommy.) Maybe Ms. Boop and her friends danced with peanut characters, forerunners of Mr. Peanut et al. Besides, in those days, my daddy worked for peanuts!

"Make a list, Rhonochka, my mom ordered breathlessly, already planning our venture. "We will need peanuts, toothpicks, clay for the bases and tempera paints."

After our little shopping excursion and a quick hunt in the cluttered sewing basket for colorful remnants and buttons and sequins, all the

fixings spread out on our worn kitchen table, I poured the peanuts out of the Grand Union bag and stared at them, wrinkly and veined like my dyehdushka's fingers. In a flash, my festive mood vanished – I had not the faintest idea of how to begin, what to create. Of course, my mom jumped in with a great idea: “Rhonochka, make a circus elephant” she directed. Tentatively, clumsily, I picked up a few peanuts, trying vainly to connect them by pushing fast breaking toothpicks into hard, resistant shells, quickly crumbling like my defeated face. This strange medium was beyond me – I so missed my trusty finger paints! Naturally, my mom offered to ‘help’. Relieved, I watched her expertly fashion the most adorable peanut elephant and then a lion, an acrobat, A clown, a tightroper walker... She worked in a concentrated trance and I....I was the willing fetcher. “Rhonochka, I need another toothpick, Find me a red cloth for the elephant's blanket, a blue sequins for one eye, a red buttock for the other.”

When my mother was well into her eighties, shy and lost, a widow, marking time at Leisure world in California, I remember her, bent over a drafting table, her hair, a few white stragglers, peering at sketches for her Chinese Brush painting class with such fierce concentration and meticulous detail, once again and finally an artist. Oh, and how that image reminded me of her as my young mommy, her soft brown wavy hair, a chaotic tumble, crafting each figure to perfect completion. And me? I felt so connected to her, so in awe of her talent, so swept into the process of watching these creatures emerge, so in her shadow, that her handiwork magically did become our circus.

By Monday morning, when I brought the transformed peanuts to school on a tray, overwhelmed by the teacher's gasps of admiration and my classmates' applause, this astonishing creation became my circus, my achievement. ~~Shy~~ <sup>quiet</sup> and barely noticed, I was now the star.

Over the spring holidays, as the enormity of the deception gradually set in, I felt a growing sense of unease over this praise and prize for a beautiful job that was not mine at all – a sham, I was clearly thinking -capless, inadequate, smaller than the tiniest peanut. My teacher greeted us, that first Monday back, fluttery and nervous, like one of those agitated New York pigeons that flapped around my

sixth floor windowsill. “Children,” she informed us, in an apologetic and sad tone, looking straight at capless, hapless me, “I’m afraid the mice ate Rhona’s peanut circus all up.” The circus tray was displayed, bleakly empty except for the skeletal toothpicks, munched on and discarded. Smart mice.

I remember initially feeling devastated at the loss of – what? The Peanut circus? My fifteen minutes of second grade fame? My mom’s lovely performers, gobbled up forever? And then, an instant later, a deep, powerful, very private sense of freedom, of release from the burden of a first place honor (or any honor) that was not rightfully mine ...except perhaps for the tempera red nose dot on the elephant’s trunk.

Optional addenda:

This week, my grown daughter, a gifted artist and graphic designer (A generation skipped – I stayed with the piano, a safe haven) listened to my peanut circus saga and exclaimed, “Mom, I’ve got the perfect ending. Do you remember the circus poster that I made in the third grade of a seal, dressed in a tutu, balancing on a ball, that won second prize? And how hard I worked while you guys were out all day and how exhausted the sitter was when you finally came home?”

Yes, of course I remembered. The sitter couldn’t believe her tenacity – Eight hours straight with barely time out for a snack. “And mom, do you remember who one first prize?” I didn’t. “My friend Lani...or rather her mom!”

What I do recall is that the school lost the poster, never to be found, never to be proudly framed by mom and dad but forever framed in memory; a charming, completely original, un-coached, un-encroached circus poster, ~~untouched by mom~~, down to the last dot.

*my child's solo triumph*