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THE CARNIVAL

by

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Scuffling my feet through the knee high grass, its morning dew wetting my scrawny 10 year old legs, he led me over the hill when our eyes fell upon the carnival.

“Is that it?” I pointed ahead with excitement.

He tightened his grip on my hand in a way that expressed the emotion of my heart. “You are going to love this.”

In the center of the carnival, nestled deep in the valley was a twirling whirling canopy and whimsical music filled the carnival and indeed the entire hillside with the most unusual sounds ever.

“That’s it,” he said with an all-knowing smile, his blue eyes peering down through silver wire-rimmed bifocals. “The merry-go-round.”

Our pace quickened as we headed through the fields with growing excitement. Of course there were people everywhere. Some were at the ticket booth purchasing tickets. Some were being entertained by clowns with blow-up balloons and feet that were much too big for them. Some stood in line for fried food snacks and cotton candy, others were throwing baseballs at fuzzy targets, and even hitting some of them. The entire atmosphere of the carnival was filled with the hustle and bustle of laughter and joy and children and expressions of delight on the grownups.

Still the hand pulled me onward, and though I would have been curious to see any one of the other rides, each one with their colors and movements (to spend the whole day at one of them really, as each

amusement was as captivating as the last amusement), he led me beyond all that with a certain determination.

“Don’t get caught up with all that.” We turned a corner and zig-zagged through countless people, the brilliant sunlight forcing me to squint. At times it was so bright I clung to his hand with both my hands as the carnival, indeed even life itself, faded into images and shapes and muffled music. But as we drew closer I felt it. Something stirring like nothing else, not quite excitement, and not quite the feeling of peace either. Rather something akin to a living contentment deep within my chest. I opened my eyes to see the site before me, it’s red and white canopy, its endless array of giant horses, each rising and lowering with majestic movements as they circled passed.

“It’s the merry-go-‘round.” He leaned to whisper. And added with all the emotion I was feeling in my chest, “It’s the best!”

We watched the cadre of horses, camels, elephants, giraffes, slow to a stop. Still the music played on, so loud I feel it in my bones, yet not to hurt my ears.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes!”

I hopped to the wooden deck and curiously ran my hands across the smooth surfaces of the animals. I would have thought they were real if not for the golden beams and bars and sockets and hinges uniting them with the framework above. One by one I studied the circling array of horses, camels, elephants, and giraffes with awe. Each was perfect, majestic, created perfectly. In a strange way I had a sense that they were somehow alive, somehow conscious of my presence.

“Hello Mr. Horse.” I faced his massive face and ran both hands up and down its sloping nose. “You are beautiful.” His black eyes were fixed ahead, focused and undisturbed, like a race horse at the starting gate.

“Hello Sir Camel! My what beautiful humps you have! I bet you can hold a lot of water in those things.”

“Hello Ms. Elephant, What a beautiful trunk you have.”

And so on around the circular zoo. At times I could almost hear a “Why, thank you,” from the animals. I sat on a majestic throne, its back rising far above my head and glistening with precious stones. The rubies, sapphires, and diamonds reflected brilliantly from the mid-morning sun and off the golden throne in such a way that it was as if I

was a King, reigning over his kingdom, wearing a royal robe of magnificent rainbows.

I learned to love my kingdom, and might have reveled in its perfection all day, if not for a subtle, yet growing vibration under my feet. It was hardly noticeable at first but then worked its way out across the deck like a rumbling earthquake.

“What is this?” I hopped from the throne and held tight to a lion, my hand buried in his mane. “Am I safe?”

“You’ll be fine.” A warm assuring voice shouted from the other side of the lion, out there on the tarmac. “This is what it’s all about. Just hold on and enjoy the ride,” he chuckled. “This is all for you.”

“For me?”

To my surprise there was no one else on the merry-go-round. No one else to hear the music, to adore the animals, nor to sit on the throne.

The vibrations under my feet wobbled into sync and the lion came to life. He dropped down to my level as if to say, “Hop on!”

I slid over his back just before we were both lifted into the brisk mid-morning air, flying upward, than downwards, then upwards again, with all the other animals in the kingdom, each one rising and

lowering in a syncopated dance, their golden beams, hinges, sockets and framework lifting them high and low to the living music that seemed to come from all around.

I held onto the the lion's mane and stooped forward to its ear. "Are we chasing them?" I shouted above the excitement, their hoofs pounding the ground as the herd rounded the corner. "Or, are they chasing *us*?!"

Looking off the the side I noticed others from the carnival. Men, woman, boys and girls, some with balloons, others holding cotton candy appeared like blurring trees in the forest.

I looked ahead to the galloping herds, then behind to those chasing us. Music was blaring, the mid-morning sun glistened off the golden throne like a disco ball. I clung to the lion and held on tightly, watching the blurring forest race by me. I was so happy, so filled with joy, so elated, so honored to be that person there on the merry-go-'round on the center of the carnival on that day.

Later that same say, the sun now well beyond the midday glare, we stood at the top of the grassy slope, looking back at the carnival, which was now nestled deeply within the valley. The afternoon breezes

gusted around the old man and myself, jarring us this way and that, refreshing us with their coolness and bustling our hair all around our faces.

“What did you think?”

I gazed into the valley, seeing the crowds, and every so often hearing the living music emanating from the center of the carnival. “I loved it.”

“I thought you would.”

The breeze swelled and he led me by the hand over the bluff and onto the trail, heading home. I took a last look over my shoulder, still awed by the wonder, no the *glory* of it all.

“Will it always be there?” I looked up to the old man’s face, his gray hair now tucked safely under a tweed driving cap. “The carnival, I mean?”

“Of course,” he chuckled.

We zig-zagged the narrow trail this way and that way down a steep ridge and sound ourself walking on flat ground aside a trickling brooke. The old man sighed and sat upon a mossy rock, speckled by circles of light piercing through the leaves and dancing about his head

and shoulders. I was at the shore, doing my best to skim rocks off the water, but most of them just sunk.

“What about the others?” I said, plopping a stone about halfway across. “How come I was the only one on the merry-go-round?”

The old man removed his tweed driving cap, took out a white handkerchief, and meticulously wiped the lenses of his silver wire-rimmed bifocals. “I dunno.”

“But it’s always there, like that, with all the animals and the jun and everything - right?”

“Yep.”

“It never ends?”

“But I wonder...” I fingered through the millions of tiny stones and found a perfect rock. It was flat on both sides and about the size of one of those rubies in the throne I had sat upon. With a delicate strength I threw it sideways across the brook. It skipped once, twice, and three times before landing on the opposite side. I turned to the old man, his face beaming with delight.

“Nice one!” He crunched his tweed driving cap in his hands.

“Now what is it you wonder about?”

“I just wonder why I was the only one there.” I dropped to the mossy rock with a sigh, “I mean it seemed too good, too big or something, just to be all about me.”

“Oh I am sure it’s big enough for so many more boys and girls, even adults, too,” he added. “Why don’t you invite them the next time?”

“Do you think they would come? Do you think they’d believe how amazing it is?”

“Well.” The old man concluded thoughtfully. “You believed *me*, didn’t you? Why wouldn’t they believe you?”

In the years since, I have carried a certain sense of *frustrated suspension* into my elder years. I have have traversed through the slopes numerous times, zig-zagging up and down the ridges to the bluff, seeking to lead countless boys and girls, men and woman by the hand beyond the ticket booth and food kiosks, and clowns with big feet filling helium-filled balloons. Yet it has been rare to get them onto the wooden deck of the merry-go-‘round.

They are enamored with everything *but* the merry-go-‘round, which is what makes the place so magical in the first place. And

though I long to take them by the hand to the center of the thing, assuring them of its glorious brilliance, magical music, most are content to settle with the clowns, the fatty-food kiosks, helium balloons or the short-lived joy that comes when you hit one of those fuzzy targets with an old softball.

Every once in a while I get one, though. It's almost as if they are drawn well-beyond the excesses and are almost pulling me back to the heart of the matter. And the feeling I get seeing the joy on their faces as they spin around and around the place, their countenances lit with the radiance of surprise and contentment? Well, there is nothing like that.

Almost as wonderful as the ride itself.

And later, on the way home, as we are resting beside the still waters of the tickling brook, it happens. He or she plops down upon the mossy rock. That's when I hear their passion and sense their confusion for why they were alone on the ride.

"Why is that?" They often look to me and ask.

"Why is what?"

"That I was the only one there?"

When I hear them say that, something swells within me and I come alive, almost as if I were back seated on my glistening, golden throne.

“I mean it seems too great, too wondrous, too awesome, just to be all for me.”

“All for one person, you mean.”

“Yes, sir. I mean, it’s plenty big enough for everybody, don’t you think?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Do you think others would come if I invite them - you know, and even led them by the hand to this place?”

“They may.”

Beams of sunlight danced across the forest floor in sync with the rustling branches above, the trickling brook coming alive in the afternoon breezes. I rose from my mossy seat and searched the shore for a flat, rounded rock.

“It’s such a wonderful place. Too good to be true. Why would anyone even want to believe *me*?”

“So you’re going to let that keep you from inviting others into the carnival?”

There it was. *Silence*. Thoughtful and profound silence.

Then I found it, about the size of a quarter, nearly hidden among all the other rocks.

There you are.

I tossed it about in my hand, as I had so many others, then with a single effortless motion, it flew from my fingers and skimmed once, twice, and three times before landing on the opposite side. I turned back, my face beaming with delight.

“Well, you believed *me*, didn’t you?”

End.