

Texas Carnival

By Steve Ackley

I heard the sound of a vehicle approaching from behind. Through it was still a ways off, I automatically turned and stuck my thumb out, squinting to see what it was. *It was another truck.*

"It's probably another farmer. He won't pick us up. Don't waste your time," said Blake.

I began to lower my thumb, then I stopped. "No, wait. He's got a camper on the back. Maybe it's not a farmer. And he's got Oklahoma plates!"

The truck slowed down and pulled up alongside us. Three guys were inside the cab. One was middle-aged and the other two were young. The middle-aged guy was driving. He had on a black baseball hat that was about two sizes too small. The hat rode high up on the point of his football-shaped head. Hunched over the wheel, with a u-shaped neck and a beak nose, he looked like a buzzard. There was this kind of dim-witted expression on his face as he eyed us, his head bobbing up and down.

The other two looked normal. One was a clean-cut redhead about our age. The other was a pale-skinned guy with long stringy blond hair. He was probably in his twenties. He had thick glasses, which made him look the most intelligent of the three.

There was also a dog in the back. I couldn't see what kind because of the camper shell. But from the sound it made as it pounced around, I could tell it was big.

The baseball hat guy spoke first.

"Where ya headed?"

"Up north ... Oklahoma," I answered.

He looked down the road in front of him ... contemplating, I guess. Though, from the looks of the guy, I couldn't imagine what thoughts that pointed head could possibly generate.

The other two just stared at us with these stupid grins as they puffed away on cigarettes. I had smoked all my mine and wanted one so bad - I had to ask.

"Can I have a smoke?"

"Sure," said the guy with the glasses.

He extended a pack of Salems. I wasn't really into menthol, but beggars can't be choosers. I was grateful. He then offered me a light.

"What did these guys want?" I wondered. No one had ever questioned us before. We were either picked up, or we weren't. The baseball hat, having thoroughly chewed through his thought, resumed...

"Why don't ya come with uth ... sthee the world!" He spoke louder this time and I could tell he had a speech impediment - an intense lisp. A lisp combined with a southern accent ... oh boy.

"What d'ya mean?" asked Blake.

"Join da carnival! Sthee the world!"

"The carnival?"

"Sthure! We'll pay ya and feed ya ... you can work for uth."

His eyes sparkled and it reminded me of the preacher at the Star of Hope rescue mission. He was preaching his gospel to us: *The Gospel of The Carnival*.

I was very suspicious. Blake, however, was sold on the idea.

"You can do what you want, Ackley. I'm gonna go." Blake seemed desperate. Perhaps he saw this as a chance to avoid the disgraceful return home.

"Aw, what the hell ... we'll join the carnival," I agreed.

We were gonna get in the back, but the guy with the glasses mentioned that the dog might bite. As a precaution, the redhead got out and hopped in the back, and the four of us crammed into the cab. We had joined the carnival!

Football head introduced himself simply as Dee. The guy with the glasses was Bud. The kid in the back was Clarence. We then introduced ourselves, and when Blake said his name, Dee tried to repeat it.

"Blahh ...Blach ...Blath ...Blatch." Each time it got worse. I saw Lockett wincing to hear his name massacred that way.

When we reached the carnival, a short woman holding a spatula and a frying pan gave us a *look-what-the-cat-drag-in* expression as we pulled into the grounds and filed out of the truck.

She was standing in front of a snack bar trailer. She had a small turned-up nose and straight black hair that was bobbed short. She actually could have been kind of cute, if it weren't for her sour expression.

"Where'n the hell did ya get these fellers?" she bawled at Dee.

"Oh ... teeth boys ith got da traflin spirit. Theys ith gonna join da carnival!" Dee persisted painting his picture about the romantic life on the road. We knew better though – from the moment he picked us up. And now, as we looked around, all was confirmed ... dilapidated tin trailers that housed the ring toss and air rifle games ... rusted old rides: The Hammer, The Zipper, The Scrambler, The Rock-O-Planes. And then there were the carnies themselves: discards of white trash America.

The frying pan woman was introduced to us as Marie, Dee's sister. Clarence and Bud had taken off with the dog as soon as the truck stopped. This made Blake and I all the more conspicuous – there was no one to mill around with while Dee further explained our presence.

"I figure we needed thum mo help," said Dee.

"Well, what a'ya gonna pay these boys?" Marie snapped.

"Oh, uh ... uh, well ... I take care uff it. Don' thoo worry." He purposely tried to avoid the mention of any sum to his sister, as that had not yet been discussed.

All the time they were bickering, she kept looking us up and down like we were meat or something – *like we were slaves!* I kept waiting for her to come over and pry my lips apart to see if my teeth were good. Or better yet, have us drop our drawers to see if we had any diseases ... *This one's gotta cavity, Dee. I don' want him. This one's gotta big canker on his balls, Dee. I don' want him.*

Well, I guess we passed the test ok (and while keeping our clothes on, to boot). As soon as Marie seemed pacified, Dee whisked us off and had us follow him to his trailer. (I'm sure he too wanted to take his leave of her.)

All the trailers where the carnies lived were parked on the far side of the grounds, behind the game booths. Dee's was the biggest – a long avocado-green box made of aluminum siding textured to have the appearance of real wood. Right next to it was an old teardrop-shaped job that had been painted white. The smaller trailer served as the carnival office and above the door was tacked a plywood sign that read: Citizens State Shows.

Inside Dee's trailer there was nothing but chaos going on as two bratty kids ran back and forth screaming, hitting, and pulling each other's hair. These, I later found out, were Dee's son and niece. (The niece belonging to Marie back at the snack

bar.) In the kitchen stood a voluptuous, yet somewhat whorish-looking redhead: Dee's wife.

Dee had us sit down in the front room. *Mrs. Dee* (she was never introduced) finished whatever she was doing in the kitchen and then disappeared. There was a long pause until she was completely out of sight. Her big moon-shaped buns waved bye-bye to us through a pair of tight black stretch-pants. And that was the last we ever saw of her - *a kept woman*.

"S-tho, you boys wanna join da carnival?" he asked. We both just sort of looked at him, not sure if it was a rhetorical question.

Then he kind of leaned back and rubbed his chin, like he was mulling it over. What was this anyway? He pulls us off the road and tells us he's gonna give us jobs, and now he's holding this grand inquisition.

"Y'all know how to drive a truck?" he asked.

We both sort of nodded.

"Thhh-semi?"

I said no.

Blake, however, said he'd driven one before. Of course, Blake had an advantage over me there. That's because Blake grew up on a farm and he knew about semis and crap like that. Blake then made mention of this fact - that he was a farmer's son - and Dee sparked up.

"You's a farmer's boy, eh? Oooo-ie!" I don't know why it touched him off the way it did, but who cares, it seemed to be our ticket.

"What's you two's nameses again?"

"Blake and Steve," I answered.

"Stee?"

"Right," I said with a shrug.

"And...?"

"Blake," said Blake.

"Bwahhh."

"Blake."

"Bwachhh." He couldn't say it.

"Blake."

"Bahh-ch."

"No, B-L-A-K-E. Blake."

"Mmmm ...ah-wite, I work on it."

"Y'all's ain't afraid of hard work, ith ya?"

This seemed like a weird question to me. *Afraid* of hard work? Hmm? I suppose it was just his way of making sure we were gonna tote that barge and lift that bale. Blake then started to play with Dee a little.

"Heck no. I ain't afraid of no herd werk," said Blake. I laughed at his impromptu Texas redneck accent. It wasn't half bad. The humor was lost on Dee.

Dee then turned to me. "An' what 'bout you ... You ain't 'fraid no hard work, ith ya?"

I couldn't believe this guy. What the hell was he gonna do with us anyway, put us on a chain gang? *No, I ain't afraid of no hard work, Mr. Dee.*

I shook my head no.

"Well, good then. I put ya ta work." He looked at Blake and then me. "Ya gonna have ta shabe off them two beardseth."

The idea of shaving off my beard didn't make me happy. I'd let it go for nearly a month and was somewhat proud of my scant pubic-like growth. It wasn't bad for a boy of 17.

"I don't have a razor or anything," I said.

"Oh, we find ya one."

So, I went along with it - rules are rules.

Among Dee's other rules were no drinking and no drugs.

"Y'all don' th-smoke marijuana, do ya?" (I was amazed. He pronounced the word marijuana like a Fulbright scholar.)

"No! Who ... *us*?"

But it was the last rule that really hit me. "And we don' want ya leabin the carnival for no reason."

"You mean we have to stay here all the time?"

"Dat's right."

"You mean we can't walk into town or anything?"

"Dat's the rule. Everythin' you needs is right here at the carnival."

At this, it seemed like he was finished with his talk. But there was something that still needed discussing...

"How much are you going to pay us?" I finally asked.

At this, ol' Dee began to hem and haw around like an old professional. In the end, it came down to this: He was going to pay us each \$7.00 a day in cash. Out of that we had to pay for our own food. But because we couldn't go into town, we had to buy everything from the carnival food wagon. Thereby, plowing what little money we made back into the system. What a sham! He was going to put us on the chain gang!

He also muttered something vague about putting \$5.00 a day into some employee matching fund that was supposed to gain some kind of interest in proportion to whatever profits the carnival made (sort of a hillbilly profit sharing scheme, I guess). Of course, this was a sham as well - it was obvious. The whole thing was a farce - a bald-faced lie he'd told over and over to indigent Okies with strong backs and weak minds. But, seeing as how we didn't have anything better to do, we joined the carnival. Perhaps we'd at least get a ride up north out of it.

"How far do you travel, anyway?" I asked.

"Oh ... s'far as Nebraska." *Join the carnival. See the world!*

The next thing Dee had us do was to shave those nasty beards off. We followed him between the trailers to out where the big trucks – *the "th-semis"* – were parked. He foraged around inside one of the trucks for a while and finally came back with a big wash tub made of galvanized steel.

He then led us back to the trailers. When we got back, we saw the redheaded kid tying the dog up to one of the supporting jacks under one of the trailers. The dog was a big turd-brown mongrel of some sort. As he was doing this, he also miraculously appeared behind us. *There were two of them. Clarence was a twin!*

"Hey Dee, what's up?" said the duplicate Clarence.

"Oh, hey Fray-ee! Dis here's some new boyses. Dis here is Steee, and dis here is..."

"Blake," said Blake.

"Wite ...Mmmm ...Bahh-ch."

"Blake," Blake repeated.

"How you guys doing?" asked Freddy.

"Ok, I guess," we both mumbled.

"Theys join da carnival!" Dee said rejoicingly, having landed two more suckers.

The other redhead, Clarence, finished tying up the dog and then came over.

Dee said that he was going to find a hose and disappeared behind one of the trailers.

I tried not to stare at the two. Although being a twin is not exactly a deformity, it is something that can cause one to stare, and staring is impolite. These two were as identical as they get, both with that fiery red hair, cut exactly the same.

Clarence began to explain that we shouldn't approach the trailer with the dog there because he was a *watch dog* and he'd *bite our asses off*.

"Dat's wite. He bite you ath off." Dee said, promptly returning with a running garden hose and two Bic disposables in hand.

He handed us the razors and then produced a dry sliver of soap from his shirt pocket. The razors had both been used and had bits of black hair all over them. He filled the tub. We had to shave with cold water.

It was difficult shaving the long scraggily hairs off without having cut them down with scissors first. The dull razor pulled and yanked across my chin and I cut myself twice. Dee said we could keep our mustaches and sideburns and so (to avoid further pain) I did just that. We used the rear-view mirrors on a nearby pick-up truck to see ourselves. When I was finished, I looked like a ruffian from the turn of the century, with my crew-cut length hair, my muttonchop sideburns, and the big black shiner under my eye.

"Dere, dat's better." Dee came along and kicked over the tub of water. We attempted to give him the razors back, but he told us to keep them. How generous!

Nightfall was now upon us and things were starting to buzz around the midway. All the ride boys were assembled around the snack bar, smoking and bull-shitting. Dee brought us over to join the party.

I remembered reading in a magazine article that carnivals had their own sort of caste system in which the ride boys held the lowest position. I could now see why. These guys were more motley than the bums at the rescue mission. And there we were, fitting right in.

A brief rundown of the cast of characters is in order. The most memorable of the group was Bozo (or, as Dee pronounced it, "Bow-doe"). I have no idea how he got the name, but it fit. What

helped me make the association was that the hair on the sides of his head shot out horizontally in dovetail fashion, just like his namesake's. Secondly, he was, figuratively speaking, a clown. Bozo was about 30 years old and very lean in an unhealthy sort of way. He had greasy blonde hair and a stubbly mustache that was darkened with dirt. He was a grinner and seemed very good-natured, but dumb. And he, like most of the carnies, spoke with that annoying Okie twang.

Then there was Bobby the head ride boy. Bobby was about Dee's age. He was a tall muscular fellow with his top four front teeth missing. He was incessantly sucking on a big wad of Red Man tobacco. And although he didn't have a true speech impediment, his enunciation was worse than Dee's.

Pat and Adam were the other two ride boys. I mention them together because that's how they were presented. Both were in their twenties, and both spoke with east coast accents. Accents that I later found out were Jersey (or "Joisey") accents. My guess was that they had been drifters like us and had joined the carnival in the same way we had.

After the formalities were over, Dee gave a little speech - mostly for our benefit - about what kind of crowd to expect, and about being nice to everyone, etc. Then he went away for a while and gave us a chance to relax. Blake chatted with Pat and I stood silent and listened as Bozo and Bobby resumed a conversation they were having before we joined the group. It was strange how Bozo understood and responded to every word Bobby was grunting to him in his caveman-like language.

"Houfa tyma take ya fix dat shay?"

"Well, I don't know. About three, I guess."

"Whump fuh doo ya hungya poo tay yow?"

"Maybe, but we might be better off doin' it tomorrow."

"Um sumah foot hag ingya uhm hapnah."

"Yeah, well I suppose."

It was that wad of Red Man. It made him sound like someone trying to speak Mandarin with their mouth full.

Dee came back and dispatched the ride boys to their stations. He then took us on a tour of the grounds. The first stop (and I was extremely grateful for this) was the food wagon. Now, the food wagon and the snack bar were two different things. The snack bar, which was run by Dee's sister Marie, sold things like cotton candy, popcorn, and sno-cones. In the food wagon you had your staples ... hot dogs, pizza, hamburgers, and assorted types of potato chip products. Dee told us that we needed to get something to eat and that he'd front us whatever it cost. He suggested rather adamantly that we try the hamburgers - which we did. *May I suggest the hamburgers tonight, gentlemen? They are exquisite.*

There was a girl who worked at the food wagon who was quite attractive. She had that unpretentious, unabashed, virginal beauty that only stays with pretty young girls very briefly, before they realize how gorgeous they are. She had straight blonde hair, tied in a pony tail, hazel eyes, and perfectly smooth skin. She wasn't flirtatious, but when she innocently smiled at me and said hello, I about died.

Virginia was her name. I later learned she was the late-born child of the older couple, Kathy and Walt, who ran the food wagon. Besides the food wagon, they were also owners of the pony ride. They had come from a town outside of Austin and had hooked up with the carnival a few months ago. I found out from them later that the carnival was organized somewhat like a confederacy - that all the concessions and games were independently owned and were operating under the umbrella of a

weak central contractor. (That would be Dee - the weak central contractor.)

The hamburgers were delicious. We gobbled them down in no time flat. We were starved! But then it was time to go and I had to tear myself away from Virginia's sparkling eyes and budding little breasts.

We went over to the pathetic little merry-go-round and Dee told Blake that he'd be the operator of this wonderful amusement. He explained briefly how everything was held together and about how, when the time came to go back on the road, we'd have to work until the rides were all torn apart and loaded before we'd take off (in other words, no rest). Then he said we'd drive to the next town and set up shop in the same fashion. It didn't sound too humane to me, so I tried not to think about it.

Before he got into too much detail, he called Bobby over to explain to Blake a bit further about the ride. Then Dee escorted me off to my own destiny - the snack bar. Yes, I was being thrown into the grips of the witch - his sister Marie.

"Youb awreddy med my sthister, Ma-ee." He said to me as we approached the she-thing.

"Ma-ee, dis is Steee."

And then he just left me. That was it. I was flung mercilessly into her claws.

I later learned that Dee and Marie had discussed the matter and agreed that Blake would run the merry-go-round (which Dee had been in charge of) and I the sno-cone joint, thus relieving the siblings of their nightly duties so that they might go back to their trailers and watch The Gong Show (or whatever), free from care. In short, Blake and I had been hired by Dee to serve the two.

In retrospect, I also believe the woman had a sexual longing for me. I can't be sure, but the way she eyed me, the way she put her hand on my lower back ... the way she would stand close to my butt as I would be looking under the counter for something - her general mood. It all led me to think that she was a sex-starved divorcee who, in time, would see to it that I was more than the boy who ran her sno-cone joint.

She started right off the bat giving snappy instructions as to the cleaning, maintenance, and operation of her concession. *I run a clean sno-cone joint, I do!* And then she proceeded to cluck and bitch about all the details, being especially explicit when it came to handling money.

As the darkness came, so did the people ... Texas farmers escorting their wives and children, young dudes out looking for girls ... rednecks looking for a fight. There were a few chicks, but they were mostly slutty looking - escapees from the local bowling alley most likely. All in all, it was your standard Texas fare and I'd seen too much of that already.

Marie watched me like a hawk for the first hour or so. When there weren't any customers, she'd make me wipe up the glass on the cotton candy machine, even though it was clean. *I run a clean sno-cone joint!* She must have said that fifty times.

There was only one thing worse than Marie and that was her daughter Bonny ("Baw-nee"). She was one of the little brats I'd seen playing in Dee's trailer earlier that day. She was always demanding things. *I wanna sno-cone! I wanna cotton candy! Momma, make that man gimme a cotton candy!* If Marie were there, she'd fight with the kid. If I were there alone, I'd fight with the kid. But in the end, the kid usually got her way. It was awful.

But enough about the snack bar. The mechanics were essentially the same as any fast-food restaurant or lunch

counter. When Marie and her kid weren't there, it wasn't that bad. I actually enjoyed making the cotton candy - swirling the wisps of pink sugar onto the thin paper cone. It was fun.

At the end of our first evening (about 1:00 a.m.) it came time to get paid. Dee gave Blake and I three dollars each, explaining that he'd taken three dollars out for our meal (which I later found out cost \$2.25) and a dollar for the used 16 cent Bic disposable. We were both too tired to argue and knew it wouldn't do any good anyway.

They bedded us down in the back of one of the empty trucks. As we laid there on the bumpy hard floor of the truck trailer, we agreed that we'd shake the carnival in a matter of days.

"This sucks, Blake."

"Yeah, I know," Blake agreed.

"That guy Dee is an asshole! He's an asshole!" I said.

"You should check out Bobby ... he thinks Dee is God or something," said Blake.

"Yeah, well his sister's even worse."

And on we commiserated until we fell asleep.

In the morning, I laid there thinking about Marie. About what she would be like to screw. I found it stimulating to think about those barriers falling away with each piece of clothing she took off. With her blouse went her meanness, with her pants went her distrust, etc. To hear her groan and writhe as all that jaded defensiveness melted away. She really wasn't bad looking. I laid there under my throw rug bedroll fondling myself discretely, and then ... BAM, BAM, BAM!

Bobby was pounding on the floor of the truck near the back where the doors had been left open. "Eye-ee op! (Time to get up!)"

"Oh gawd! Are we still here?" I moaned.

"Shit," said Blake as he sat up shaking his head. "What time is it?"

"Eee op! E ian! (Get up. It's seven.)"

Bobby waited while we lumbered our way out of the back of the truck. He then nodded towards the food wagon with a couple of unintelligible grunts, indicating that we should get ourselves something to eat before the day's work began. We did so. Suddenly, I remembered Virginia and grew excited.

When we bellied up to the little counter of the food wagon, Clarence (the more obnoxious redheaded twin) and two old dudes were taking up the only three stools that were there. So, we had to stand and eat our burgers. Yes, it was burgers again. The breakfast menu did not differ from the lunch or dinner menu.

The two old guys were named Roy and Stanley. Roy was under the employ of Virginia's parents. He ran the pony ride that I mentioned. You could tell that he'd been handsome at one time, but now he appeared rundown and disheveled. His unshaven face was covered with red splotches from too much booze. His eyes were misty and yellowish. He still had a pretty good build, but his skin color was pallid. And he seemed very sad and wistful.

You take one glance at a guy like that and you begin to write your own history about him - a story of good times gone bad.

The other old guy, Stanley, was Dee's father-in-law, the father of the nameless bimbo from the trailer. Stanley was a peculiar-looking sort. He did not resemble his daughter what-so-ever. A big bumpy brown nose stuck straight out from his face like a potato. It even had a big mole on it, giving the potato an eye. And underneath the spud was thinnest little mouth. His eyes were little black dots. The smallness of his mouth and eyes made his nose appear all the more grandiose. The other thing were his ears ... he had big Dopey Dwarf ears. All this capped off with a Palm Beach style straw hat, which he never took off.

Stanley sat there, perched on his stool, eyes straight ahead, fixed on my dear Virginia (lecher!), sucking coffee out of a Styrofoam cup with his anus-like mouth. Meanwhile, Roy droned on into Stanley's enormous ear about nothing.

When Kathy, Virginia's mom, came and gave us our burgers, she asked me, "How'd ya get that shiner?"

"Uh, well ... we got in a fight in Houston," I answered. "A couple of guys tried to mug us." I was a little reluctant to go into the details.

"Was they niggers?" She asked this without a stitch of reservation about using the word. Now, in the pro-civil rights household in which I was raised, using the word nigger was worse than using the word fuck. But at this time, having had the shit kicked out of me by the two black junkies, the word seemed just.

"Yeah, they were niggers."

"I hate them niggers!" piped in Stanley. "They oughtta all be shot s'far 's I'm concerned!" I immediately felt bad about using the word. I didn't want to be on the same side as this guy, no matter what.

"You boys gotta be careful about who you take up with now," came the motherly advice from Kathy.

"Oh, we will," I said.

"I'll have a little more of that mocha java, honey," Stanley asked in his sticky sweet tone. Kathy took his cup to fill it. Virginia, in the meantime, had seated herself a top of a big metal ice chest and was resting with a dazed dreamy look.

"What you doin' sittin' around, Ginny?" said Clarence. (I hated him calling her Ginny.) "Ain't ya gonna hep ya momma?" He then chortled. Why he thought he had any right to order her around, I don't know. I suppose he just wanted attention. He annoyed me.

Virginia frowned at him and said nothing.

"Can't you see that that gal ain't made for work ... she's made for comfort," Stanley cackled. He was right of course. She would have been very comfortable, indeed. But I resented the pictures that were probably dancing around in the old man's head. *What right had he?* I wanted him to leave. I didn't like him at all.

As soon as I had wished him away, my wish was granted. The two little hellions that belonged to Dee and his sister approached us from behind and whisked off *Grandpaw*.

Unfortunately, along with the ducklings came the mama duck. *Quack, quack, quack!* Marie wanted me over at the sno-cone joint RIGHT NOW! *Quack, quack, quack! Clean that cotton candy machine. I run a clean sno-cone joint, I do!*

The day's work had commenced. She had me cleaning and shining and wiping until 3:00 in the afternoon. She made me do everything twice, sometimes three times. *There's streaks on my glass! There's a spot under my coke machine! Get them little dried-on sugar specks outta them crannies!* It was hell.

During all the drudgery, I happened to notice Blake across the compound helping Bozo work on the Hammer, which had fallen ill the previous night. While Bozo unscrewed and tightened various nuts and bolts, yanked out cotter pins, and removed steel parts (all at a frenetic pace), Blake followed him around carrying and handing him tools. Blake later told me that Bozo was a madman. He had no system whatsoever in how he did things, nor did he really know his machine that well. "I'd never ride in that thing," Blake exclaimed. But, all the same, I envied Blake. At least he didn't have to take orders from Marie.

Between 3:00 and 5:30, we were given a little free time. The carnival didn't open until six, seeing as how it was a weeknight. (On weekends it opened at 4:00.) During this time, I wandered around and looked at the rides which, except for the merry-go-round, I hadn't had much of a chance to investigate. Blake caught up with me and we toured around the hulking structures powered by glorified lawn mower engines. Soon we met up with Adam who was leaning up against one of the Scrambler cars, having a smoke.

"Hey, do you got another cig?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure." He tossed me one. It was a Salem. Salem seemed to be everyone's brand at the carnival.

"So, how long have you been with these guys?" I asked.

"About a month."

"Hmm, how long are you planning to stay on?"

"Uhhh ... I can't say." His eyes darted about. He didn't seem to want to answer. He seemed edgy. Then, from his pack of cigarettes, he pulled out a thin white hand-rolled thing - *not a Salem*.

"Come on." He nodded to us and then began to walk away. I remembered that one-word Dee had pronounced so beautifully the

day before: *marijuana*. I wasn't too comfortable with the idea, but I sure could've used a buzz, so I followed. And Blake followed me.

We got as far as the back side of the Scrambler and were heading towards the empty field on the north side of the grounds when we met up with Bobby coming around from the other side.

"E-ata, ina see Dee." ("Adam, go and see Dee" - I was beginning to decipher a little bit of his speech.)

Adam walked away silently. I could tell by his facial expression that he knew he'd been caught. What would happen now?

For a moment, Bobby kind of stalled us a little. He tried to ask us where we were going with Adam, but we pretended we didn't understand. Then, to accommodate us, he did something utterly gross. He removed from his mouth this huge ball of black shit and threw it on the ground. Then he tossed a big ol' loogie in the same direction.

"Where'd you boys think you was going with Adam?" he asked. And as soon as he asked, he reached into his back pocket, pulled out his pouch, and began to curl up another big wad of gummy tobacco leaves in his fingers.

"Uh, well, we were just following him," I answered.

"We thought he wanted to talk to us about something," added Blake.

"Umph- hmm," he grunted pleasantly, seeming satisfied.

"Umph, mm-wa a-ull oun a boy. Es mmm-ble." (Uh, you gotta be careful around that boy. He's trouble.) Then he beckoned us to follow him.

We went back around the side of the Scrambler from whence we came. As we got back out to the midway, I heard loud grunting sounds coming from a ways behind me. Turning, I saw at the far southeast corner of the grounds, behind one of the trucks, the source of the sounds. Adam was getting punched out by Dee, as

Bozo and one of the redheads (I assume Clarence) each held one of his arms.

"Hoo-dah, umma goma hoo-ah marijuana!" Dee was pissed as hell. He swung at Adam's stomach erratically, like a woman.

"Eeee, umma gonna hoo-ah marijuana!" He seemed to be trying to get a confession out of Adam about the pot. But, aside from marijuana, I couldn't make out the words.

So, this was what happened when you broke the rules, huh? Well, I'd be fucked if I was gonna stick around until my turn came.

Bobby saw us noticing the spectacle and tried to hurry us along. But before I turned my eyes away, I saw Bozo freeing one of his hands and capitalizing on Dee's abuse. Bozo was much stronger and sinewy than Dee. And, whereas Dee punched like a woman and couldn't do much harm, Bozo could. For just a moment, Dee caught me looking at him. His face no longer looked stupid, rather, it was sinister. Not calculated sinister, like a mafia leader or Fu Man Chu, but crazy insane sinister, like someone who would rape a child or pour gasoline on a cat and set it on fire. He was just plain evil. This whole place was evil. All of a sudden, I was ready to leave. But I now realized it wasn't quite that simple.

That night wasn't too crowded. And except for Marie's daughter Bonnie hassling me, things went pretty smoothly. As for Marie herself, she left me alone a good part of the time, which was a relief.

Adam had come quietly back on the scene and didn't seem too worse for wear, although I'm sure he had some nice bruises on his mid-section.

The high point of the evening came earlier on, around the time we opened. Clarence-the-twin was chasing Bonnie and her

cousin, trying to scare them. He happened to run right by the snack bar where Marie was standing with the dog. I suppose the dog's instincts told him that Clarence was threatening the children. Anyway, he darted out after Clarence and jumped up and nipped him in the small of his back. It was wonderful watching him cry like a baby as he threatened to sue Marie. And Marie just kept hollering back about what a good watch dog he was and "You'd better be careful about how you treat my little girl!" *I run a clean sno-cone joint, I do!* What a bunch of characters.

We closed up about 11:00. And at about 12:00 I headed over to the food wagon and got a corn dog. With the exception of Roy, the pony ride man, Virginia and I were alone and had a chance to talk. In general, I wasn't too good at talking to girls. But seeing as how I was in the middle of nowhere, I was unusually relaxed.

"So, how long have you and your folks been doing this?"

"Oh, s'long as I've been around."

"Don't you get tired of traveling all the time?"

"We don't travel *all* the time. Every winter we put in at San Antone. 'Got ourselves a house there. I go to school there."

"Really? What grade are you in?"

She smiled. I think she was beginning to understand that I was interested in her. "I'll be in the ninth grade come fall."

This made her fourteen. "She's too young," I thought.

"You're from California, huh?" She was beaming at me. Perhaps there was more possible here than I thought.

"Yeah, I..."

"I've been out to California once ...lived thar a while," interrupted Roy.

"Is that right?" I asked.

"Yup ... use to bag lettuce down in King City. Ya ever been to King City?"

I really wasn't interested in hearing the Steinbeckian rhapsody that I sensed was coming, so I tried to cut him off in a polite but definite tone. "No."

"Well, I tell ya 'bout it..." and off he went. (*No, no, no - don't want to hear it!*)

And as he began to wax melodramatic, Virginia wiped down the counter and scooted into the back, leaving us to our conversation.

A couple of the game people joined the party and began to get absorbed into Roy's saga. He wailed away like a tenor from some miserable opera. Gawd, he shoulda been on TV. He was now going on and on about this place called Pampa Texas and about how he was going to settle down there someday. He owned a piece of land there or something.

After a while, I was kind of able to sluff Roy off onto the other two's shoulders. I then began to turn my attention back to Virginia, who had since returned.

"So, uh, you ever been to California?"

"Huh? Oh me? Naw, but I hope to someday. I'd like to go to Disneyland, and Hollywood ... and the beach!"

"Ok," I smiled at her typical answer. Whenever the word California is mentioned to anyone who has never been there, all that comes to their mind are Disneyland, Hollywood, and the beach. I guess you can't really blame them. It's the media that puts that in their minds. But there so much more ... the mountains, the farmland, the deserts.

"Well, if you come out there, maybe we'll go see Mickey Mouse together."

"Hmm ...ok." She looked right into my eyes and came closer. "How's that shiner of yours comin' along?" Her words came out so

tenderly. With her left hand, she reached up and touched my cheek. Her hand was so soft. She leaned over the counter closer to me. I really believed she would have kissed me had there not been anyone else there.

At that point, Bozo and a couple of the other goons came hunkering up to the counter and the opportunity was lost.

That night I slept and dreamed about no one else but sweet Virginia.

In the morning no one came to wake us. It turned out that Dee and his boys were occupied with other things — Pat and Adam had taken off!

Roy told us this as soon as we crawled out of the truck.

"Pat and Adam have took off! Dee and them are out lookin' for 'em." He said it like it was the most exciting thing he'd ever witnessed.

"Yeah? When did they leave?" I asked.

"Last night after closin', I reckon."

Blake and I, ambling slowly down the midway after another stiffening night's sleep, met head-on with Dee and his posse coming the other way. He was in a torrent. He shot right past us without saying a word. Bobby was right behind him, walking a half pace slower and sort of skipping every now and then in order to keep up. Bobby kept mumbling things to Dee, trying to cool him down. Walking behind the two, were Bozo, Bud, and one of the redheads.

Dee marched over to the Scrambler (Adam's ride) and began looking it over with a maddened expression. I suppose the idea was to see whether anything was missing or had been vandalized. Then he went over to the Swings (Pat's ride) and went through the same procedure.

After that, Dee entered into a very heated and animated discussion with Bobby that I shall not even attempt to render, since I did not understand one word of it. They sounded like two Pakistani camel traders, for all I could tell. All I can say is that they understood each other perfectly.

At the end of this little pow wow, Dee and his entourage turned and, just as determinedly as they had arrived, headed

back towards the front of the midway, leaving Bobby behind to further inspect the rides.

"Blah, 'ome a wi' me!" He shot a glance at Blake and beckoned with his finger. "Stee, ooo go an fine Ma-ee!" he commanded me. And with the action seeming to be over, I sulked away to my daily chores.

I ate no breakfast that day because Blake and I had agreed that, if we were going to leave soon, it would be best to pocket as much money as we could. Therefore, we would limit our meals to one a day. By about 11:00 I was starving and being around all that candy and crap didn't help. Finally, at a time when Marie was out of sight, I nabbed one of the candied apples and set to munching. Marie's little snot-faced kid caught me in the act and made me make her a sno-cone so she wouldn't tell on me. What a runt!

Marie was being a total cunt that day – three times worse than she'd been the day before. From moment to moment, I was ready to either cry or punch her face.

In the late afternoon, Pat and Adam showed up with the cops. Apparently, Dee had seized some of their property (a CB radio and some other portable electronics) when they joined the carnival and had been holding it – *for safe keeping*. They had brought the cops to ensure they would get it back.

The atmosphere around the carnival was very grave as Dee (our fearless leader) was being questioned by the sheriff. His expression was glum as he silently nodded and balked at the questions the officer was asking. I would have given anything to hear what was being said, but I kept a safe distance. Pat and Adam, in the meantime, were all smiles. Dee was getting his nose rubbed in his own shit. His great system of holding slaves captive was crumbling.

While all this was going on, I happened to spy Bud standing in front of his booth, sucking on a cigarette while watching Dee explain himself to the police. He had a dead pan sort of interest on his face. I went over, bummed a smoke, and we chatted.

"I ain't never seen nothin' like this show before," he said. "It's weird. I mean, holdin' folks hostage against their will? I been in a lot a shows before, but this feller Dee is an asshole."

"How long have you been traveling around with these guys?" I asked.

"Few months. Show only took up a few months ago. Me 'n' my ol' lady ... we's from Missorah." (He nodded to the back of him.) "We's in a show back there before this un."

I looked in the booth where his *old lady* was putting out stuffed St. Bernards. I never knew he was married. His wife was a fat, fair skinned woman with humongous breasts - the size of basketballs. She had orange hair. She caught me staring at her and I looked away. Bud smiled at me strangely. I had a quick impression of this beanpole of a man making love to that enormous woman - I quickly dismissed the image.

The row between Dee and the policeman had ended. Dee had sent Clarence to go fetch the sought-after belongings. Clarence gave them to a gleeful Adam and the incident was over.

Bud threw his cigarette on the ground. "Well, I guess that's it for those two." He turned to me. "How long to you figure on staying around?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "I figure I'll travel down the road a ways."

"Yeah?" He looked off, thinking. "Movin's the shits ... 'specially for you guys. Ya gotta tear all this shit down." He lit another smoke and also handed one to me. "Well, I gotta go."

"Yeah, ok. I'll see ya. Thanks for the smoke."

He went back to his booth. I stared out and took a look at all those rides we'd have to take apart. *Y'all ain't afraid of no hard work, is ya?*

That night I got the honor of running the merry-go-round. Blake took over the swings and Dee and one of the twins traded off running the Scrambler.

Dee, having no time to waste on the likes of me, had Bobby explain the operation of the Merry-go-round. I was beginning to understand Bobby a little more as he grunted and clicked the switches and pointed at the harnesses on the poles. In order to understand him, you had to realize that you couldn't trust his vowels. His hard consonants, like K and T and N, came out fine, but his vowels and soft consonants were muddied because of the tobacco. It's funny, but now that I think of it, it was sort of the opposite of Dee. Dee couldn't articulate Ks, Ps, Rs, or Ls, whereas his vowels were fine. I suppose if you had them recite something in unison together, it would have sounded like an English Lord speaking (or at least a well-educated Okie). Anyway, with the proper instruction as to the operation of the Merry-go-round, I was now an official ride boy.

*Jambalaya, a-crawfish pie and-a file gumbo
'Cause tonight I'm gonna see my ma cher amio
Pick guitar, fill fruit jar and be gay-oh
Son of a gun, we'll have big fun on the bayou*

The melody beat against my ears and I began to sing the words. The only recording I'd ever heard of the song before was by the Carpenters. This, however, was a lovely 8-track tape rendition by Virgil Foxx playing the giant pipe organ at Six

Flags Over Texas. The other selections of the tape included Hey Jude, The Entertainer, and the Candy Man. By the end of the evening it seemed I had listened to each tune at least 20 times. My head was nauseous with the sound of Mr. Foxx's calliope.

My main customer that evening was a grandpa and his seven or eight-year-old granddaughter. The Merry-go-round was the only "kiddie" ride in the whole carnival, so he kept putting her on and watching her go round and round. On the first spin, I gave him the little spiel about the harness that Bobby had told me (clipping it here and there, making sure it's fastened up right). After that, I let the old guy handle it himself. It seemed kind of pathetic to see that merry-go-round having only one plump little girl on it. The grandpa and his granddaughter seemed so innocent and trusting. Little did they know of what I'd been through. Little did they know that I was getting screwed royal by Dee, getting paid only seven dollars a night. To them I was just the merry-go-round man. That little girl probably saw me as some kind of hero. I remember when I was little I used to see people who did such things in an iconic light. *The merry-go-round man.*

A bit later, a little boy showed up. He was a couple of years younger than the girl and under the supervision of his older brother (about 13) who was there with one of his friends. What pissed me off was that the older kid would put his little brother on the ride and then go off and leave him. And then he wouldn't come back until about 15 or 20 minutes later, long after the ride was finished. He did this about three times and then I spoke up.

"Now, you stay there, Markie. Dave and I are gonna go ride the Rock-o-planes," said the older brother.

"Hey, wait a second," I barked. "I'm tired of babysitting your little brother while you guys are out screwing around."

Either stay here until the ride's finished or take him with you."

"Aw, c'mon, man. He won't ride on any other rides - he gets too scared. I didn't wanna bring him with me anyway - my mom made me. I didn't wanna."

Markie began to cry at this. "Aw, Markie ... don't be a cry baby."

"Look," I said, feeling quite the adult. "I don't care about your problems. Either you stay here with your brother or take him with you."

"Aw, man..."

The kid stood there and watched Markie go round and round once more and then they both split and never came back. Later on, I saw Blake across the midway babysitting Markie as the two older boys rode on the swings. Poor Markie.

All during the evening, I was only a stone's throw away from the sno-cone joint. Marie had to manage it by herself that night and I enjoyed the absence of her sniping and jabbing, and the absence of her whining little girl. This was a blessing. I looked over at her as she wiped down the glass all by herself without the help of her *boy*.

As the night wore on, I noticed some action over by the food wagon and asked one of the gamesters who was passing by what was up. The wagon had closed early that night which didn't surprise me. It was another slow night. What did surprise me was that Roy was taking in the stools and unscrewing the counter that was bolted onto the sides of the trailer. It looked as though...

"Food wagon's pullin' out," the gamester told me. "I guess they've had it with this show - ain't makin' 'nuff money."

I could see Walt backing up his pick-up to the trailer and Roy running around to hitch it up. Kathy and Virginia came around to either side and were waving directions.

"Virginia," I said aloud to no one in particular. "Oh no."

"What's that?" asked the gamester.

"Nothing."

"Oh. Well, I'll see ya." And then he vanished into the night like a mysterious soothsayer who had brought bad tidings.

I hopped out from the center of the ride, momentarily leaving my responsibilities. I could see Virginia clearly now. She had a very serious expression on her face, as did her mom and dad. It made her look more mature, more sensual. She looked up at me. I had been caught starting, but I didn't look away, neither did she. She smiled and waved and I returned the gesture. She turned towards me, like she was going to come over - she was only about 50 feet away. But then her mother called to her and Virginia turned and walked away. But before she disappeared, she looked at me again, put her fingers to her lips, and waved. Then she was gone.

"I love you, Virginia." I spoke it aloud, the sound getting drowned in the crowd noise and that terrible cacophony of the pipe organ. Perhaps her blowing me a kiss was a childish thing, but it meant the world to me at the time. That simple motion of her hand to her lips and then to me had spoken words. And those words had said *...This could have been. This could have been beautiful.*

That night, after the carnival had closed, Dee had Bobby drive us all into town to get something to eat, seeing as how the food wagon was gone.

This getting away from the carnival was a big deal. I suspected that some of those boys hadn't been allowed away from the carnival for months for fear that they might go AWOL.

Bozo, Blake, the twins, and I rode in the back. Bobby drove. One of the gamesters who wanted to come along sat up front with Bobby. Bozo was exuberant, "We gettin' to go to the stowa!" he shouted. And then he let out a scream that sounded sort of like the soo-ie call - like he was calling pigs. "Oooo, hoyah! Heee, yi, yi, yi - yah, yah!" It was strange. It was weird. It was bizarre.

Inside the store, which was a 24-hour 7-11 type place, the boys were like lunatics escaped from the asylum. They hadn't been in a public place for so long that they didn't know how to behave themselves. Bozo kept looking at all the women with those deranged eyeballs for his. I seriously thought he might do something criminal right there in the store. All of us bought junk food and candy: Twinkies, beef jerky, Pepsi, potato chips - the good stuff!

On the way back, Bozo was even more exuberant, now that he had Juju-bees and a fresh pack of Salems. "Oooo, hoyah! Heee, yi, yi, yi - yah, yah!"

We were told that, on the following night, we'd be pulling up stakes and heading for the next town. In the back of the truck, Blake and I talked it over and decided that it was time to go.

"You know, with Pat and Adam gone, and the food wagon gone, and that pony ride gone," said Blake, "we could really screw ol' Dee if we left too."

"Yeah, we'd really sink him if we left right now."

"Let's do it."

"Ok, but we should go early in the morning, around 2:00 or 3:00, before anybody gets up. That way we won't get caught."

"Yeah, ok."

"Man, I'd like to see the expression on that old asshole's face when he finds us gone."

We both chuckled. We agreed to stay awake until everyone had gone to bed - until all the lights were out.

The skies began to grow gray and there was someone moving around outside the truck. It was one of the gamesters. I saw him in the pale morning light as he urinated on the ground.

"Blake, get up! We fell asleep."

Blake bolted into consciousness.

"We gotta go - NOW!" My voice was urgent, but raspy, as I tried to keep quiet.

We gathered our belongings in an instant and plopped out of the truck onto the soft ground, the cold grass crunching under our feet. The guy urinating didn't even notice us, or else he didn't care.

Without speaking, we padded across the field to the north. The breaking sun illuminated the tall weeds, catching their halos of rising dew. As we reached the edge, I looked back across the field. There lay the carnival - an odd arrangement of tents, trailers, and contraptions, the mist coming off the field obscuring the last three days like a strange dream.