

## The Winning Prize

The entire time I was there, all I could think of was the fact that I had to wake up for work the next morning.

Last week was my son Caleb's 8th birthday party, but I only attended briefly. I told everyone that I was urgently needed at the warehouse like usual but deep down I knew that was just an excuse. It's true that work is always on my mind. There is so little achievement in my life in recent years that completing a day of work is my greatest satisfaction, as rudimentary as it is. At times I have such an aggressive muscle memory of filing papers and moving boxes that my arms might make those gestures at random even after I leave work. But I could've called in sick. Co-parenting is not how I wanted to spend my day off even if I needed to spend time with my son so I settled on showing up late that day after leaving the party. Seeing her face in person devastates me and destroys my mood for the rest of the week -- devastated that she's so close but still distant, that it all ended so soon after we got married, that I haven't felt a similar touch of another person ever since it fell apart. I'd lost her not long after getting her and I'm still unsure why she was quick to end it. When I told my ex-wife Mikhaila and my brother that I had to leave early, the look of disappointment on their faces was even more visceral than Caleb's. The looks people gave me were humiliating and that gave me even more motivation to abandon the scene. I could've showered Caleb with as many toys, video games, and tablets needed to keep him busy for ages but it would not have distracted him, for all he wanted that day was to just spend genuine time with me.

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After my divorce my time spent with Caleb is not as passionate as I would like. I order food for the both of us, maybe sometimes I'll try cooking, and I tuck him in bed every night before spending another several hours trying to get the most of the little time I have left until the winds of time sweep me back to the Amazon warehouse the next morning. But those are the basic necessities of caring for a child, things that are not uniquely fatherly and paternal, things that Mikhaila already handled when we were together. To make up for hardly being present at the party Caleb made me promise that I would take him to the carnival which was once again set to reappear in my city just a week after his birthday party, conveniently on my day off. That would be the real celebration. And so here I am on that day, blinded by the pulsating prisms of light radiating from everywhere around me, walking around with Caleb and, honestly, just waiting to go home.

The obnoxious lights are at least successful in keeping me awake without inhaling gallons of coffee as I usually do. It helped that we arrived at the carnival in the evening, invited to a landscape of alluring theatrics and escapism in the middle of the darkness. The spontaneity of carnivals suddenly appearing out of thin air in empty parking lots can attract anyone no matter their age so I understand why Caleb wanted to come here so badly. I don't recall ever taking him to something like this even when I was married, in fact the only times I take Caleb anywhere are times when I already have to drive to certain places to begin with and I'll stop for a quick ice cream or toy store with him on the way there. Admittedly although I do buy him video games pretty often, he's not very apt at playing them. Once he tires of constantly losing I'll complete the games myself in my free time. I have a decent collection of them by now.

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Carnivals are designed around trickery but once you enter the illusory funhouse of a carnival you already know exactly what you're seeing the whole time. Instead of being an escape from the mundane mediocrity of daily life they're just more of the same. I don't know how any grown person can enjoy all the bland rides with iffy construction, mountains of junk food splattered all over the ground, funnel cakes with enough calories to make you feel like vomiting after one bite, the brutal cacophony of children screaming, the clownish music torturing your ears, and the hoards of prizes stocked up at various booths that are rarely awarded but always wanted by everyone who passes by them. My frustration wasn't that I was simply bothered at being surrounded by these things, it was also that I was being forced to spend some of my week's pay in the midst of them.

Every step I took was a hazard. Like an idiot I wore my best pair of shoes and by the time the night was finished they were predictably covered in stains from cotton candy, powder, gum, and tons of other remnants of whatever bile was on the ground. I was irritated the entire time but for a few brief moments I was content that at least Caleb was happy. He especially loved the mirror section of the funhouse. The way that the trick mirrors completely distorted his body and morphed him into an unrecognizable blob of flesh amused him emphatically. It made me curious to try the same, but I was disappointed to find that when I looked at myself in one of the mirrors it wasn't a trick variant, it was just a normal mirror. I tried to smirk it off but after noticing a woman behind me share a genial laugh with Caleb after seeing my discontent at the mirror, I felt ill beneath my smiles.

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It was a remarkably damp night. It had just finished raining (albeit slightly) in the early morning before the carnival was finished being constructed, and the chills of the autumn weather and cloudy skies had not yet allowed the puddles of water to dissipate. So as if the funhouses weren't enough any time I looked at the ground there was a mirror. I was already anxious for the morning ahead of me but for whatever reason I was also dreading some sort of accident occurring at the carnival. Combined with the residue of raindrops easing the already tacked-on nuts and bolts on every contraption, I was always picturing myself getting on a machine and having it collapse due to malfunction. I've seen some videos of accidents at amusement parks online and they terrify me to my core. It's the one part of a carnival that I actually can't predict. Perhaps that's part of the reason I didn't want to come near this place today as silly as it sounds.

At one point I was gazing at one of those yo-yo rides where swings are raised in the air and circle around at a high velocity, mesmerized at the pattern and speed but also fearful that something could go wrong. I didn't allow Caleb to get on any rides for that reason, not unless I was comfortable going on them first. This limited us to the basic attractions and activities, certainly nothing on the level of mindlessly swinging back and forth in the air on a pirate ship with loose seat belts covered in popcorn butter. Ferris wheels weren't as anxious to me since there's no rapid movement and we did eventually hop on one. From above I tried glimpsing at the night sky wanting to finally see some natural light radiating from the moon but I was quickly reminded that it was cloudy that day. Caleb was constantly making comments in my ear about how high up we were. Really, we weren't all that high up by the usual standards of a ferris wheel. I responded to his incessant buzzing either by ignoring him or passively agreeing with him. The bumper cars too were alright, but I was incredibly annoyed every single time some little kid rammed himself right into me for no reason. Well, that is the point of bumper cars I

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suppose, so I couldn't be too mad, but they always rammed themselves on my side in particular. Unlucky.

Every time Caleb looked at my face that night, his half-hearted smiles faded immediately. I noticed it a couple times. Just as I would contemplate those moments and try to speak to him, something else captured my attention, whether it was the screeches of a toddler reverberating through the crowds or another shiny object that caught my eye -- hook, line and sinker. I mean that literally. There were a lot of fishing booths that night that looked kind of interesting, but as everyone knows, all these games are hopelessly rigged anyways. Why would I even waste my time?

Another problem that plagued me that night was the urge to open my phone whenever I was sensing myself being bored. It's a bad habit I have, even at work when we're not allowed to use phones. But by far the most persistent habit that absorbed me that night was imagining that I wasn't alone with Caleb. I'm so engrossed in these fantasies that maybe it was a subconscious motivation for going to begin with. I'm too old to be having aimless daydreams being 32 years of age but I just can't help myself. The warehouse I work at during alternating shifts is almost like a haven for me for that reason, as although the work means nothing to me I'm still distracted from everything else in my life while moving boxes around, giving me the freedom of experiencing my ambitions in my daydreams. For the carnival in particular the scenario was a perfect set-up. A single father walking around with his son having a joyous night of thrills that bonded us closer together and then a young woman taking notice of us. After some small talk and short introductions, namely mentioning that I was divorced, she would join us and help me win every prize hanging above for Caleb. She would leave me with her number before we parted ways

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when the light bulbs finally shut off for the night and the workers had to clean the grounds for the next day of euphoria. As little as I go out I still hold hope that something like this would happen each time I do. Someone walking into your life like that is the type of stuff that only happens in movies, but it's still possible.

I had already gotten a migraine just walking around with Caleb for an hour, but the reflective puddles of water were omnipresent reminders that I had to be there for Caleb throughout the night. They were shallow and easy to ignore but they still reaffirmed my presence.

"I'm tall enough now to go on there!" Caleb told me. He demanded to go on one of those elevator rides that abusively shake people up and down. I always hated those things. I responded, "You could easily get sick riding on there. Look at those kids, they're your age too." I pointed to some children who had just exited the ride looking nauseous and regretful. Caleb was swayed, just barely. I suggested to him that a carousel would be better for his size, but he thought they were too boring. "Carousels are for little kids, dad. I'm older now. I don't like them anymore."

I said to him, "You liked them when we went with mom a couple years ago. They're just as fun now."

He replied, "I was smaller when we went. And I rode them with mommy, I want to do something else with you."

I tried to dissuade him again and then asked if he wanted to do anything else for the night. He pondered for a moment then pointed past a crowd of people ahead of us towards a gigantic plushie of polar bear with sunglasses. "Do you see that? That bear. It's really cool to me. It looks soft. Can you win it for me?" Coupled with its massive size, I honestly found it just as

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appealing as he did since the apathetic posture of the bear with his slick sunglasses emanated a sense of confidence that anyone could adore. The prize was locked behind a game booth in which you had to shoot at a red star on a piece of paper with an automatic BB gun, and if the star was completely destroyed you would win. My interest in the polar bear started to wane right after noticing that. “That game is too hard. I don’t think I could do it. Do you want something else?” I asked him. “No, just that bear. Come on, dad. Just try! I’m sure you can do it if you try.” I wanted to retort back to him, but I couldn’t. I could see how elated he was at the idea of hugging that bear.

I approached the booth and handed the man a couple bucks to play. The moment I fired the gun, I remembered that most of these booths are designed to devour dollar bills like the ones I just surrendered. The gun was incredibly sporadic and fired bullets uncontrollably. Even if I managed to aim my shots by adjusting my rate of fire and slowly picking away at the red star, the paper itself was as thin as paper you’d find in a cheap notebook. The inertia of the bullets would always just push the remaining blots of the paper instead of shooting through them and tearing them into pieces. It really didn’t help that the assistant at the booth was a girl that looked around my age, and the clear anticipation of my victory on her face distracted me intensely. I knew there was no way I could win this without allowing the man who ran the booth to empty my wallet. But even after losing the first time, I decided to play again.

Something compelled me to keep playing; perhaps it was the polar bear goggling above me at a point where I couldn’t reach it even if I jumped, just barely. It was so close to me and I was aggravated at not being able to reach it even when it was always in my presence. That sensation overwhelmed me the entire night, and if I could just conquer this game I thought it may

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finally vanish. Knowing I would lose, I coughed up a few more dollars and I heard Caleb clap and say “Yay!” behind me. But the second round was even worse than the first. My shots were all over the place and most of the star was visibly intact when I was done. Not wanting to be defeated, I gave up another 5 bucks to try again with another sheet of paper, much to the dismay of the father and his daughter next to me who wanted to give it a shot. I saw that his daughter was already gleefully holding a doll in her arms before focusing again on the game.

In the third round I managed to eradicate most of the star on the paper, but the final bits that were on the tips were virtually impossible to tear since the bullets were not applying enough stress. I would move the remaining wads of paper without penetrating any of them. Yet while I was playing, I had such a fervency inside of me to win. It was so possessive that I could hardly even hear Caleb cheering me on behind me, and my only concern was to be able to feel a sliver of accomplishment after winning. I would be compensated for my efforts, embraced by the bystanders for my extraordinary performance after multiple attempts, and win their hearts once I handed the polar bear to my son. The thought of it was intoxicating. The pitch black backdrop that surrounded the white paper and red star in the center transfixed me totally and sent my mind into a stasis where my cognizance was limited only to what was directly in front of my naked eyes, nothing else aside from that creeping fantasy playing in the back of my mind of being celebrated when I was victorious. My jaw was clenched and my eyes pierced through the red star more than any of the bullets I was firing ever could, but to no avail. I lost once again, and when the man running the booth removed the paper and delivered an insincere conclusion of disappointment that I lost, I was back in reality. The female assistant then spoke up and said



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“Aww... you still did a really good job! Want to go again? You’re close!” and I wanted to be lost again.

The motivation to succeed was sapped from my body. If that prize would not come to me then I would not come to it. Recognizing the determination of my performance, she ended up giving Caleb a smaller prize: a huge swirly lollipop that was on the side of the booth. It was the size of a baseball and he enthusiastically thanked her for it, but I wasn’t amused by the gift. I didn’t earn it for him. I wanted the polar bear, not a pity prize. The massive grin on both of their faces when he received the lollipop was particularly grating to me. Afterwards, we wandered a bit and Caleb kept congratulating me on my futile attempts to win the star game until he abruptly tugged at my arm and pointed elsewhere again. “Hey, look at the game over there!” It was another game at a booth, this time one in which you had to throw a ball and knock down a stack of 5 metal bottles. It had the exact same polar bear plushie as a prize. I knew that this game wasn’t as much of a scam; I recalled that when I was young myself and visited the carnival with my friends and family, I won these bottle games before. But I was fatigued. I didn’t simply lose at the star game, I felt that I was utterly defeated.

I told Caleb that it was time for us to go. “But you said we would stay for another hour.” I responded, “I was wrong, I really need to get some sleep for tomorrow.” Caleb wouldn’t solemnly accept my words this time. “But that one is so much easier! And we haven’t been here that long.”

We both said “but” a lot that night. As he said that, I glanced over and saw the same father from before with his daughter. He was smart enough to quit the star game after the first try I’m guessing. I watched him successfully knock down the bottles at a pulverizing speed, and I

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noticed for the first time just how burly he was. His daughter erupted in applause and she was even happier when her father managed to knock the bottles down than when she won another plushie. I saw his wife give him a high five right after. Not a hug or a kiss, but an assured high five that oozed camaraderie and conviction in her husband. I felt a bowling ball drop on my stomach when their hands connected. I wasn't as strong as he was, but I would probably be able to win it. I still wasn't enticed, for after losing at the star game there was no tension and nothing to gain for me anymore. I didn't want to risk losing in public again and I can't get those stares out of my head. I put a hole in my wallet that night for nothing and I'd had enough. I declined Caleb's request to play again, and he snapped back. "Why won't you just try? Why do you always do this?" I didn't want to hear any of it and I told him to come along to the car, gripping his arm as we walked and stomping on many of the puddles of water haphazardly. He pouted on the entire way there, but relented after we arrived at the doors.

Caleb was silent during most of the car ride. My dismay at the events of the day were still ringing in my head but I still tried to focus on the road. The endless irritation of the night became insufferable at this point when the flashing headlights and stop lights around me prohibited me from moving on from my experience. Feeling a slight sense of remorse and to try and create some ease in the car, I asked Caleb if he had fun, and he initially didn't respond. Once we hit a red light on the way back to our apartment, he spoke up and murmured, "What mommy says about you is right." I said nothing else to him. During the rest of the car ride, I caught myself frequently glancing at the rearview mirror, but instead of looking at Caleb and his despaired expressions, I looked at my own reflection.