

County Fair

Saturday at his father's gas station Galen washed and waxed cars, rotating them in and out of the service area, the only driving he was allowed until he got his license next year. The apprentice mechanic, Butch, a year out of Vietnam, was making his usual smart-ass remarks, this time while he leaned under the hood of a car next to the one Galen worked on.

“Hey, Waxman, you still a virgin? I never hear you talkin’ bout no sweetie pies.”

Galen ignored Butch, who often talked about his conquests, how the girls liked riding in his customized Mercury with rumbling dual mufflers, how he taught them to smoke pot and drink beer.

Butch straightened and walked over to the workbench, his grease-streaked white T-shirt stretched across his broad back, long dark hair and sideburns, high topped boots with pants stuffed inside. Walking back, flipping a large crescent wrench from one hand to the other, he paused next to Galen and said, “I heard your dad talking to one of his customers, asking this guy how your piano lessons were going. I guess he’s your teacher, huh? Had a cute daughter with him, too, named Brenda. The guy says you have some talent, Waxman. Maybe I’ll see you some Friday night playing at the Dew Drop Inn, huh?”

“That’s Mr. Warren. He gives me a lesson every week.”

“What about the chick, Brenda? You know her?”

”She’s in my class.”

"Figures. Thought she might be too young for me. She's hot."

"I'd better get the next car in here." Galen put the wax can and rags on the bench and drove the car out of the garage, happy to have a break in the conversation.

Only yesterday Galen's friends, Ned and Jake, teased him for stopping at Brenda's locker before history class. For a change, she was alone and he asked her if she would like to go to the County Fair with him, but as he broached the subject, she said she had forgotten a book. Walking away, she turned and said, loud enough for Galen's approaching buddies to hear, "Oh, Galen, I already promised some girlfriends I would go to the fair with them. Sorry. See you later."

Ned and Jake knew that Galen took piano lessons because of Brenda's infatuation with a pianist who played at an assembly last spring.

At 4:30, tired of cleaning the cars and of listening to Butch, Galen told his dad he was going home to do his piano practice before dinner, because he planned to go to the fair afterwards. His dad paid him and said, "My old man used to give me a nickel and say, 'Don't spend this all in one place'. I'll give you the same advice: try to have some left tomorrow morning. Watch out for those crooks with their rigged games. But, I hope you have fun. Another thing, sometimes I hear Butch teasing you. **Don't let it bother you.**"

After dinner, Galen rode his bike three miles to the fairgrounds. It would be dark on the way home, but much of the ride passed through the town, so he would have street lights. He locked his bike in a rack with several others. He wore a Reds baseball cap and an open Levi jacket over his favorite cowboy shirt.

The air was chilly in the setting sun as Galen walked through the entrance gate. He passed the cotton candy stand with its sickly sweet aroma, pausing to watch them build a cone for an eight-year old boy who waited with big eyes. Galen still was fascinated with the process but didn't want to walk around eating the sticky mess.

Making his way through the midway, he savored the smells – coffee, beer, tobacco, farm animals – and sounds – laughing, screaming, gunshots, bells ringing, barking. He marveled at the array of people, young, old, and in between, farmers and townspeople, folks from his church, kids from his school, but no friends yet. And no sight of Brenda.

He slowed to watch dodgem cars purposely crash into one another, driven by people who couldn't stop laughing as their heads jerked back and forth with each impact. It had been Galen's favorite ride when he was 12 and 13, but now he just wanted to drive a real car. He heard the squeals from the Ferris wheel, which could still be fun for one cycle, but it depended on who was with you in the car.

Two older boys strutted by, puffing long, fat cigars, grinning at passersby, big shots like W.C. Fields or a rich banker in an old black and white movie. A stray dog nosed around a trash barrel and stretched his front paws up to the rim but could not see inside. A couple pushed a stroller containing a toddler clutching a doll as big as she was. The barker for the shooting gallery hollered at Galen, encouraging him to try his skill with a rifle. Galen just shook his head, remembering that the rifles never shot straight last year.

Galen saw a group of girls from his class standing in line for the Tilt-A-Whirl. He circled around them looking for Brenda to no avail. One girl saw him watching and waved to him,

causing the others to look over too. Galen waved back feeling like he had been snooping. Then someone slapped him on the shoulder.

“Hey, Galen, when did you get here?” It was Jake and Ned.

“Ten minutes ago. How ‘bout you guys?”

“‘Bout an hour ago, “said Ned, “Spent half my money trying to win that big panda bear throwing baseballs at those stupid little bottles. Came pretty close twice. Never seen anyone win a big prize from that guy. So much for my fastball, huh?”

Jake said, “I threw away a bundle of money doing the same thing with basketballs. What do you want to do, Galen? I saw you looking at those girls. Wanna go bother them? Or we could get some chili dogs.”

“I already ate, and those games are crooked. Right now, I’m headed over to the tractor pull. Starts in 10 minutes. Any new rides this year?”

“Yeah, Tumble Bug. People sit in a cart and hold onto a wheel that spins the cart while you’re going up and down around the track. Watched it a few times, but didn’t go. It’d be fun for three of us. We could spin the cart real fast. The girls like it because they can scream, but they spin slow.”

“Cool. Maybe we can do it after the tractor pull. I’ll look for you guys. Be there ‘bout an hour.”

Ned and Jake went their way as Galen walked past the animal barns toward the grandstand. He could hear the tractor engines revving. He bought a ticket and joined the line shuffling through the gate.

Galen climbed to the top row of the stands, which were filling up rapidly. The tractor pull always drew a big noisy crowd, and not just farmers. It appealed to young and old. Galen had driven a tractor for a few days last summer, helping his uncle mow hay. But that was a small, low Ford tractor unlike most of the tractors tonight, which looked enormous by comparison.

The drivers and their vehicles lined up on the far side of the oval track. In front of the bleachers, workmen loaded a sled. Soon the first tractor would hitch to the sled then try to pull the load as far as possible. As Galen's dad had explained three years ago, when they attended together, there's a strategy to it, a balance between speed and power. Too much acceleration make the wheels spin. Sudden starts cause a jerking motion and momentum is lost. Sometimes the front of the tractor rises up in the air like an excited stallion, ending the ride.

The crowd came alive as the first tractor left the queue and drove around the oval up in front of the grandstand, where the driver dismounted and helped connect the tractor to the sled, then climbed back into the seat.

The announcer voice came over the loud speakers. "Ladies and Gentlemen, Welcome to the Richland County 14th annual tractor pull contest. Our first category is stock tractors, the very kind you see working the farms. We have five contestants for this class and our first contestant is Bryan Crum from Haysville. Give Bryan a hand, folks!"

The crowd cheered and Bryan tipped his ball cap.

“Bryan placed second last year and he tells me that if he wins, he’ll buy his wife that deep freezer she’s had her eye on. He’s driving a John Deere that he calls Maverick. Are you ready Bryan? If so, let the contest begin!”

The driver waved. The crowd cheered. The engine revved raucously. Smoke billowed from the vertical exhaust pipe. Easing the tractor forward until the chain was taut, the driver held down the clutch and revved again even louder, then released the clutch causing the tractor to leap forward.

It was a fine start, tractor and sled moving in unison along the track like it could go on forever. The crowd shrieked. The driver hunched in his seat, eyes staring forward. The engine noise grew more strained, the tractor front began bobbing off the ground, and everything slowed until the big rear tractor wheels spun and the tractor front reared up, veering left and right, like a giant pulling a dead weight and suddenly having muscles cramp up. The driver slowed his engine and tried in vain to control the load. The sled stopped. The crowd first oohed then applauded and shouted their approval.

The crew signaled the end of the pull, unhooked the sled, marked the stopping point, measured the distance, and relayed the information to the announcer, who told the crowd that 54 ft was a new personal record for Bryan and a great way to begin the contest. People cheered the driver who waved his ball cap then drove his overheated tractor back to the far side of the track while the second tractor made its way into position.

Galen imagined himself at the wheel, wondering what it would be like to have people cheering him on. He wished he was really good at something, some sport, music, art, science. Anything where he was the best among his peers.

The second driver barely moved the sled, his tractor bucking and twisting, the engine whining. A few people hooted and jeered, but most applauded as the driver hurried to leave the scene. Galen felt sorry for him, glad he wasn't driving.

Between contestants, Galen surveyed the midway from his high vantage point. Fewer young kids now and no more strollers. A crowd gathered around the Hi-Striker, where a contestant swings a sledgehammer down on a pad trying to ring a bell. The swinger was hidden from Galen's view but the guy was pretty good because the bell kept ringing, to the delight of the crowd. A cluster of girls jumped up and down to see over the men and boys. Galen spotted Brenda, clapping her hands, hunching her shoulders, and spinning around. The bell rang again and she jumped and spun, her full skirt spiraling after her. Then the bell stopped ringing and the crowd burst into applause, making way for the bell ringer, who carried a giant teddy bear. He walked over and handed it to Brenda. It was Butch, wearing a sleeveless sweatshirt that showed off his tattoos and muscles. The crowd broke up leaving Brenda and her girlfriends talking with Butch. Soon they all drifted past a row of food stands and out of sight.

Below on the track, the next tractor driver gunned his engine and engaged the clutch to jerk the sled into motion. Galen turned toward the tractor, feeling uneasy, jealous that Butch singled out Brenda. He watched the tractor gradually lose momentum and come to a halt. The cheering died out then turned into polite applause. Galen looked around at the other people in

the stands. Everyone else was with someone. He checked his watch. If he wanted to spend time with his buddies, maybe he should go.

Galen left the grandstands and walked toward the rides and games, passing the barns that were closing for the night. The wind had picked up, cooling the temperature. Galen turned up his jacket collar. He spotted Ned and Jake in the distance and decided to rejoin them. Before he caught up to them, however, a door to one of the barns opened and Brenda came out winking backwards and giggling, followed by Butch who clutched her bear under one arm. Brenda nearly bumped into Galen before she turned and saw him.

“Oh, Galen,” she said. “Where did you come from?” She looked puzzled and turned back toward Butch. “Show Galen my bear.” Then she giggled again and put her hands up to cover her mouth.

Butch walked up grinning, holding out the bear toward Galen. “Hey, Waxman, how’s it goin?”

Galen backed away from the outstretched bear. He looked from Brenda to Butch and back to Brenda, “Been watching the tractor pull. Gonna meet up with Ned and Jake.”

Brenda kept giggling. “Butch won this big bear ringing the bell with the sledgehammer. You should have seen him, Galen. The guy made Butch stop because he could ring it every time, couldn’t you, Butch?”

Butch smiled at Brenda. “Just gotta hit that thing square. Hell, in a year or two the Waxman will be trying out his muscles, right, boy? You should see him shine those cars. “

Shifting the bear from one arm to the other, Butch lit a cigarette with his Zippo lighter.

“Want a smoke, Waxman? Brenda told me she doesn’t do that.”

Galen tensed up and had trouble breathing, like he did at his dad’s service station when Butch talked about him, poking fun all the time, wanting Galen to get angry or something. It was worse now in front of Brenda, who wasn’t paying him much attention. He wanted to say something back to Butch, but his jaws were clenched shut. He wanted to ask them what they were doing in the barn, but was afraid to.

Brenda came over to Butch and took the bear. “I should get back to my girlfriends, Butch. Thanks again for the bear. I’ll see you around. You, too, Galen.” She jogged away awkwardly swinging the bear from side to side.

Butch watched Brenda until she was out of sight, smiling and shaking his head slowly, then said to Galen, “Pretty little thing, ain’t she Waxman? If she was a little bit older, I wouldn’t mind teaching her a thing or two.”

Galen hated the way Butch looked at Brenda and finally said before hurrying off, “Damn you, Butch.”

Butch laughed and hollered, “Don’t take no wooden nickels, Waxman. Let me know if you score with Brenda.”

Angry at himself for feeling awkward with Brenda and Butch, Galen looked for Ned and Jake. In the midway, the crowds were thinning. The sky was dark. A handful of people watched

the bell ringing. No one stood in line for cotton candy. Teenagers ate hot dogs and carried paper cups of Coke. Adults drank beer or sipped steaming cups of coffee.

Ahead, Galen saw Brenda reuniting with her friends, telling them something, gesturing excitedly with one hand while holding the bear in her other arm. She pointed back toward the barns as she captured their attention. Then she noticed Galen approaching and led the group away.

Galen wondered if she was saying something about him, maybe comparing him to Butch, laughing at his awkwardness. *What was she doing with Butch in the barn anyhow?*

His anger and confusion caused him to tear up. Instead of looking for Ned and Jake, Galen hurried back toward the entrance, losing himself among the groups of people leaving the fairgrounds. Outside, he ran to his bike, unlocked the chain, putting it in the pouch behind the seat, mounted, and wove his way through the parking area toward the street. Keeping his head down, Galen pedaled down the sidewalk until he was clear of the cars then took the backstreets through town, the wind cold on his face, tears blurring the streetlights, taillights, and headlights, his nose running, mixing snot with tears, his breath coming in gulps.

As he passed through the center of town crossing the bridge where he so often had tossed stones into the creek below, a car honked at him and someone called his name, but he never looked up. He pedaled up the hill then turned onto his road heading out of town, a mile left to go, no traffic now, no more street lights. He turned on his bike headlight, which did little good. Better to let his eyes adjust to the night time. He slowed and took a few deep breaths. The tears were drying. His nose quit running.

What can I do? I'll stop taking piano lessons. I want to be tough, like Butch. But I don't want to be Butch. Maybe next year I'll go out for football. To hell with Brenda. I hate her. She can have her big teddy bear and her giggling girlfriends.

A car approached from behind and flashed its lights to signal it was passing. He could see his house with the porch light lit. His mom would be waiting for him, wanting to hear all about the fair, who was there, what he did, why he came home early, if he saw Brenda. That's all right. He could honestly say he only talked with Brenda briefly and that she had been hanging out with her girlfriends. No need to worry that his mom would ask about Butch.

As he turned into the driveway, he rubbed his face to be sure there was no sign that he had cried. The side door light came on as Galen got off his bike and flipped down the kickstand. His mother was opening the inside door. Tomorrow he would decide what to do with Brenda, piano lessons, and Butch. For now, he'd just concentrate on answering his mom's questions and getting to his room as soon as possible.