

Rabbits and Roller Coasters

Bright August sunshine blinds me as I step out of the dim pole barn's wide open doors. All of the sounds and smells blocked out by the metal walls hit me all at once. Hot sugary dough. Tangy lemonade. Fry oil. Across the fair grounds a metal clatter was followed by high pitched screams. Susie shuffled out behind me looking glum. Glum was one of our vocabulary words the last week of school before break. I wondered if she remembered.

Why are you looking so glum, cousin? I wanted to ask her. Glum was one of those words that doesn't sound real or like it should be a noun instead of an adjective. *Could you hand me the glum?* Maybe it just sounded like that because it was so close to gum. Glum. Gum. Glum. Gum. Gum. Gum is almost an onomatopoeia if it's repeated enough.

I already know why Susie is glum today. It's about what's in the barn, or what's not in the barn. Her bunnies are not in the barn. There will be no blue ribbon for her today, or red, or white, or even pink, the honorable mention color. I wonder if they make black ribbons.

Susie gets as far as the red picnic table and drops onto a bench. She lets out a sigh and I can't help but roll my eyes. I hope she's not like this all day. The county fair was only in town for a weekend. I understood she was feeling sad (glum), but why should that stop us from enjoying ourselves now?

"Do you want a pop?" I ask, knowing that sugar might improve her mood. "Or something to eat?"

She puffed out another sigh, blowing a wisp of white yellow hair off of her face. Susie was prone to bouts of glumness like this. Susie's mom says that she's sensitive. My mom says Susie has it tough, but she only says that to me when my aunt isn't around. I don't really get it.

Susie spends most of her time with me. What could be so tough about that? Mom never elaborates though, even when I ask.

“Can you get me a corndog and a Sprite?” Susie requests. “Please.”

Even when she’s moping she’s polite.

Susie and Sophie, our moms had thought it had been fun: two cousins, so close in age with similar names. We were in the same grade and always wound up in the same class. No matter where I went, Susie was always close behind. When I took swimming lessons, she took swimming lessons. When I joined soccer, Susie joined soccer. When I bought my first bra; she had to get one too. The constant togetherness was enough to invite the comparison and on top of that, our names implied we were a set. When things come in sets that aren’t the same, they have to be this and that. Shampoo and conditioner. Salt and pepper. Knives and forks.

So Susie is the “sweet” to my “smart mouth.” Her disposition is warm while I’m reserved. She’s the girly girl to my tomboy. We were opposites juxtapositioning each other. I couldn’t help thinking we wouldn’t be friends if we weren’t related.

Slipping between the slow walkers, amblers, and child wranglers I make my way over to the concessions. Everyone around is glistening, like they’ve put on too much highlighter from Susie’s make up videos. Testing out products and they’ve all been duped! The same look can be achieved for free at the county fair. The smell was unappealing though. I almost bumped into a man in a white tank top that was mostly soaked through. Did they have a log ride here? Or was that all sweat?

Normally, I would have told Susie to get her own stinking corndog. Her moping was getting on my nerves, but I was trying to be nice. I had been nice for so long. How could I be anything but nice to someone who had just lost two of her favorite pets?

After I get the snacks I walk back to the red picnic table. I lay them out in front of Susie. She takes a sip of her drink. Then she starts to pick at her corndog. I let her eat for a few minutes and then ask.

“Do you want to go on the roller coaster?”

Susie was the most boring person in the world. I decided this as she peeled the remaining crumbs off her corndog with her teeth. I had already known, but may have forgotten since I was busy feeling sorry for her. For at least a month I had been deferring to Susie, whatever she wanted to do we did. I had enough deference. Wait, does that make sense? Yes and no. I can't think straight when I'm irritated. I had been waiting all summer to ride the red roller coaster that was only in our town for three days each year. Susie had just told me that was not going to happen.

“Do you want to go see if we can win a goldfish?” Susie asked tentatively as she wrapped her now naked corndog stick in her napkin.

My eyes narrowed as I looked back at her. She knew I was mad. I was trying hard not to be. I was only upset because of how determined she was to suck the fun out of any situation. She was using her sickly sweet voice that always got sympathy from the adults. I wasn't fazed.

“If we won a goldfish now we'd have to carry it around for hours. I mean we could go put it in the car, you know, if you wanted a dead goldfish at the end of the day,” I snapped back.

I caught a quick glimpse at her face as I rolled my eyes again. She looked hurt and I felt like a jerk. Perhaps bringing up dead animals was pushing it too far. In the back of my mind I hear the voice that's been telling me to come clean. I push it back and make a mental note to dial myself back from cruel, to mildly perturbed. I take a deep breath.

"I'm sorry, Susie. I was just really looking forward to having some fun today."

"We can go on some of the other rides. I just can't," she stopped and sniffed. "I can't go on the roller coaster. I'm too scared."

An awkward silence hung between us as we waited in line to buy tickets. Susie stared at her shoes while I looked straight ahead. A large fly was circling just above us. I swatted at it to no avail. Susie whipped around her pigtails. The thing finally buzzed off as we reached the ticket stand. From my pocket I pulled a few grubby bills and exchanged them for a fresh roll of red tickets. Clutching them I felt a new sense of freedom.

Grasping Susie's sweaty hand I pulled her past the booth and toward the rides. At the very end of the row was the roller coaster, though it hardly counted. The highest point couldn't have been more than twenty feet. Compared to real rides at actual theme parks this was nothing, just something small that could be packed up and moved from one town to the next. All the rides were: the spinning strawberries, the high swings, the merry go round. I intended to drag Susie on as many of them as she would let me before they were gone.

Sometimes she felt like my cousin the princess. Even I fell for her charms, occasionally. If she was the princess then I got to be the knight. I could take care of all the brave, adventurous stuff: fending off bullies, climbing trees to grab kites, crushing unwanted insects. Other times

she's just a rock on my chest as I sink below the water. When I picture this, the water I'm drowning in is the lake. Maybe it's part of the memory. Susie almost pulled me under with her once when she started panicking while we were swimming. I was a strong swimmer and managed to keep us both afloat until one of the parents yanked us out of the water.

My whole life has been like that. That was being dramatic. My whole life felt like that. There are only a few times I can think of when I was literally weighed down by Susie, but one of those I almost drowned.

A few months ago, Susie finally joined something on her own. It was one of those clubs where they get kids to raise animals, grow squash, crossstitch, make jam, and things like that. Susie had seen something on TV about raising rabbits. Her mom had only agreed if she learned how to take care of them, so she signed up. Every Tuesday I now had some time to myself, and I was enjoying it.

Everything was perfect until that Thursday night in June. My mom and my aunt had been talking in the kitchen washing dishes. Susie and I were at the table finishing our homework when the topic turned to the county fair.

"Were you thinking of going on Saturday or Sunday?" my mom asked, tossing a corn cob in the garbage.

"We'll meet up whichever day you like," my aunt answered. "We'll be there both days for Susie's event."

"Oh, what's that?"

"She's showing her bunnies!"

The lead in my pencil snapped from pressing it too aggressively into my math homework. I looked over at Susie who was beaming. My aunt and mom tittered with excitement on her behalf. I felt blindsided. Finally, after many years of asking, my parents had just agreed to let me wander around the fair on my own, like the older kids. One of the caveats was that Susie and I would have to stay together.

“Will you have to stay with them all day long?” my mother asked looking over her shoulder at my cousin.

“They do the judging in the afternoon, but I’ll want to stay with them to make sure they’re happy,” Susie explained excitedly. “Mom says it’s a big responsibility.”

“It is!” my mom agreed. “At least one of those days Sophie can keep you company.”

The look on my face clearly expressed my lack of enthusiasm. I didn’t want to be stuck inside all day, especially if I was going to be trapped with Susie. More than that though I wanted to be out on my own. I hated being stuck with my family. They were the type to stop at every booth and start chatting. By the time we would get to the rides it would be close to dark and I could only go on three or four before they decided to leave.

I chewed my tongue as I dug around in my backpack for the pencil sharpener. I found it, but had dumped out my English textbook and a set of markers in the process. My mom caught my eye and gave me a stern look until I started picking my stuff up off my aunt’s floor. She must have also noticed I was fuming.

“Or Sophie could walk around with us if she wants,” she suggested.

I offered no response except to stare blankly at the math problems until the numbers started to blur. My mom knows that Susie gets to me. It’s not all the time, just every so often I

feel smothered. That's when I get angry. I think the meanest things, and even say them occasionally. With Susie when one thing sets me off, I lose it. I go from being her best friend to not being able to stand her. Sometimes these thoughts feel childish; my own mother says so. But Susie is a baby, so I must not be.

The day had gotten hotter. I watched some sweat bead up and then slide down the back of Susie's neck. After a few minutes the same sweaty man that had taken our tickets before took them again. The look he gave me may have been sympathetic, but it could have also just been boredom. We shuffled through the metal gates with the patter of younger more enthusiastic riders bursting out behind us. Susie pointed out a giant strawberry labeled with the number 7.

She had dubbed this *our* car. We had ridden this thing at least four times and had been in this car for three spins. I climbed back into the same spot and leaned back waiting for the bell to signal the start of the ride. At the last moment before the spinning started, a young guy poked his head in. He looked like he may have been a year older than us. For what felt like the first time all day, I smiled.

“Do you mind if I get in with you guys?”

“Sure,” I responded casually with a smirk to Susie.

Her eyes widened even more than her normal deer in the headlights look when the guy came and sat down next to her. His hair was scruffy and in the enclosed space I could distinctly smell his sweat. There were holes in his worn t-shirts where I could just barely catch a glimpse of the tufts of hair growing on his chest.

“I'm Sophie,” I introduced myself trying to sound friendly but not flirty.

“Connor,” he responded looking to my cousin. “What’s your name?”

“Susie,” she peeped with a yelp as the ride started moving.

Connor reached out and grabbed the wheel in the center of the car.

“Do you care if I spin us?”

He started turning before either of us could answer. Outside the other strawberry cars were sliding around; some spinning but none as fast as us. The world went by in a blur and even I had to put my hands at my sides to steady myself. Glancing at Susie I expected to see her looking green, but she was smiling. As Connor spun us faster the smile turned to a nervous giggle and finally a scream. He looked over at Susie laughing and turned the wheel faster still. I started to laugh too.

We were both stumbling by the time we exited the gate and stepped back into the walkway. Sophie was still giggling even though Connor had already streaked off onto the next ride. Searching through the sea of baseball caps and sunglasses I couldn’t spot him.

“That was fun!” Susie exclaimed, finally catching her breath.

I looked at her like she had grown a second head. Sophie thinking anything thrilling or fast was fun seemed bizarre. But I guess anything is possible when it comes to love, and my cousin falls in love with practically any guy she meets. A hopeless romantic if there ever was one. I pretended not to notice her smitten stares across the crowds searching for Connor.

“What ride do you want to go on next?” I asked, holding up our six remaining tickets.

“And please don’t say the swings again; I can’t.”

“Did you see where Connor went?” she asked, still craning her neck.

“No, but I can probably guess.”

“Where?”

“Someone like that, probably the roller coaster.”

“I told you I didn’t want to go on the roller coaster.”

“We wouldn’t have to go on it. We could just stand next to the line and maybe talk to Connor.”

Susie blushed when I said his name. Honestly, she’s the sappiest person I know.

A few weeks ago I was sleeping over at Susie’s house. My parents were out of town for something I can’t remember. Susie was sleeping in her lavender nightgown and had her hair set apart in two braids. Her snores were quiet, but enough to distract me from sleep. I flipped over in my sleeping bag endlessly. Finally, I decided to get myself a glass of water.

The house was quiet, and only the small light in the kitchen was on. I tiptoed quietly down the hallway. My uncle didn’t like when we got out of bed in the middle of the night, even if it was just to get something to drink. Standing in front of the sink I couldn’t help but stare outside the sliding glass door. The outside light was on and bugs were bonking themselves against the glass. The rabbit hutch was right next to the door. I could see them digging around in their food.

I stepped outside quickly, trying to avoid letting in any moths. Crouching down I stuck my fingers through the wire to touch the bunnies’ soft noses. Susie had shown me the bunnies, but never let me hold them. Maybe just once, while everyone else was asleep, I could scoop one up. My fingers had trembled as I unlatched the gate. The black and white one came tumbling out

and into my arms. I guess he liked being hugged. He started nibbling on my hair while I scratched behind his ears.

The hum of an engine and headlights near the driveway punctuated the darkness and made me jump. My uncle must have been working and was just now getting home. I plopped the bunny back in the cage and clumsily tried to close it back up. With a dash and a slide down the hall in my socks I made it back to Susie's room just as I heard the front door open. My heart was pounding and my breathing was so loud I was sure it would wake my cousin up. Susie just kept sleeping. I crawled back in my sleeping bag and fell asleep almost immediately.

We caught up with Connor at the line for the roller coaster. It was the only thing that warranted an additional row of space for waiting. I shrugged at Susie, noting that the only way to talk to him would be to get in line ourselves. She looked determinedly up at the roller coaster and then over at Connor. Grabbing my hand she marched us forward. She's always braver when she's besotted. That was another vocabulary word. Maybe I'd use it when I teased her about this later.

Connor didn't talk to us much, though he did smile at Susie when she said hello. He told her he was in seventh grade but didn't reciprocate the question when she asked. For the last few moments waiting we stood there in silence. Then they started boarding and Connor moved away from us. When the people in front of us took a step, Susie did too.

"Do you want to do this?" I asked her.

"Yes," she said with a nod and a look at Connor. "We'd look pretty dumb if we got out of line now anyway."

We were the last two let through the gate and got seats at the very back. Susie, who had been all flushed cheeks a second before, paled as the wheels started moving. We lurched forward. I was still holding her hand and her grip tightened.

The morning after the sleepover was a word I heard my dad say once: a shitshow. There were thunderous shouts from my uncle, frantic chattering from my aunt, and tears from Susie. When my cousin went to feed the bunnies their breakfast the door was swinging open and they were gone.

My uncle was prone to outbursts and this gave him an excuse to explode. I stood next to the wall watching him get closer and closer to Susie. He was yelling so loudly spit flew out of his mouth and onto my cousin's face. That's when my conscience chimed in. I had to do something or say something. I did, but it wasn't what I should have said. Instead of telling the truth, I suggested we search for the bunnies. The interruption was enough to deter him from his rampage. Maybe he only stopped because he remembered I was there. My aunt gave me a look that seemed grateful. My uncle flung open the sliding glass door and stomped into the yard.

So we looked for them. I helped. The yard was fenced in. They shouldn't have been able to go far. We looked and looked. Finally, Susie and I got on our hands and knees to check under the back porch. Then we found them, they were crumpled up like little ragdolls. My uncle chased us away pretty quick while he disposed of them. He came back to scold Susie yet again, surmising that drop from the back porch to the ground was what did them in. How could she be so careless, he had asked her. She knew how fragile the bunnies were.

We were already locked in our seats when I started feeling nervous. Susie was still in a far better mood than earlier in the day. Maybe she was finally getting over the bunnies. Maybe she was getting over being scared of everything. I stared at her, wondering how she had aged so much in the last few minutes. Chasing boys was normal, but using that motivation to conquer her fears was not. Was it really just Connor that had done that to her? Maybe Susie was growing up and I was the baby now. I was the one that was lying. I was the one that had ruined everything.

Click. Click. Click. The car was reaching the crest of the hill. I looked out at all the people wandering from booth to booth, some carrying overstuffed animals and food skewered on sticks. My free hand gripped the bar holding me down tighter. I glanced over at Susie. She looked shockingly calm. When she noticed me looking she gave me a small smile. I felt my breath catch in my throat. I couldn't take it anymore.

"Susie, I was the one who let your bunnies out," I sputtered before I even knew what was happening. "I'm the reason they're dead."

Her smile faded.

"I just wanted to look at them and hold one, and I thought I closed the stupid latch. But I'm an idiot and I'm sorry."

Susie doesn't let go of my hand, in fact she puts her other one on top of it. She stares at me with her big blue eyes and doesn't blink.

"Soph, my dad killed the bunnies. I thought you already knew," she explains tears welling in her eyes. "Didn't you see their broken necks all twisted? They didn't die in a fall."

"But your dad wasn't home. I mean, he was just getting home from work when I thought I closed the latch," I stammered back at her.

Susie shakes her head. We're almost at the top now.

"My dad doesn't work the night shift. That's what they say when he goes to the bar."

I just keep staring at her, aware that soon we'll be jolted down. I am jolted already. I am shaken up. I don't know what to do with all of this information that was underneath the surface that I just couldn't see.

"When he comes back from the bar, the things he does... they're not nice."

I notice her downturned face, but instead of looking sad she looks like she's readying herself. Her jaw is clenched and her body is tense. Is this how she's been the whole time? She's mourning, but she's waiting too. She's not naive, she's biding her time. But then what am I? The roller coaster comes to a stop at its highest point. We unclasp hands and grab onto the safety bar as we plummet down and both begin to scream.