

## Tilt-a-Whirl

"In memory, everything seems to happen to music."

- Tennessee Williams

It was an early memory that wedded his love of Creedence Clearwater Revival with the disharmonious chords of divorce. The song was "Born on the Bayou." His mother was pregnant that summer of '72 because his brother was born just before Valentine's Day. Excited, the boy sat in that cavernous white backseat of that red Ford Gran Torino on the way to that local carnival, hypnotized by both the southern-twang of the song and the glow supernatural from the dashboard.

Waiting for green at the light across from Vito's Pizza, his dad raised the volume, but his mom spun the knob counterclockwise. "You're gonna make us deaf," she said.

"Us death! Us death! Us death!" the boy said.

"Not death," his mom told him. "Deaf. It means you can't hear because your dad's music will blow out your eardrums."

He grabbed his head to protect his ears.

"It wasn't that loud," his dad replied.

The carnival was one of those traveling carnivals. This one came to the vacant lot at the old Spectrum Civic Center at the corner of Haddonfield-Berlin Road and Brace Road in Cherry

Hill, New Jersey. It was a humid evening, but South Jersey was far from bayou country. The air conditioning was the only thing that worked well with that new car. Winner Ford had already fixed problems three times. That was his modus operandi: whatever he bought, broke. His dad stood 5'4 so the length of the car compensated for any shortcomings. Slight and pliable like a wooden yardstick, he sported a kind, generous face, still rough with acne, a flabbergasted face - a face that forever evinced the shock of having won some great lottery: like the beauty of his Helen, his first love. He possessed a generous amount of brown, straight hair, combed to the left with gel, but absolutely none on his body. His dad was young, but his mom was even younger at twenty-three. When judging the past we often forget to acknowledge youth.

It had rained the morning of the carnival. The smell of wet hay lingered above furrowed fields where black tarps served as slip and slides. The boy tripped and hurt his arm socket when his mom tried to steady him. He rubbed his shoulder as his parents argued in front of the ticket booth guy. Embarrassed, he half-tucked his face inside his shirt, bandit-like. His dad wanted an unlimited pass, but his mom said that it was too expensive. The rides were probably junky, she said. And they wouldn't be safe. And some of the lines would be long. She hated to wait. Hated it. So they bought an arm's length of tickets.

The carnival was not, in fact, her idea.

At first, the carnival overwhelmed the boy. A Fun House rose up and down like a teeter-totter. Above the ride a happy clown face howled a maniacal laugh with a mechanical red mouth. It terrified the poor boy because his Mom said it seemed dangerous. The rope ladder would either strangle him or the big goon-ball kids would crush him. He asked what happened to his daddy.

"If your father doesn't want to stay with us, that's his problem," she told her son. "Which

ride would you like to go on?"

The Tilt-a-Whirl frightened him. The swirling, twirling Octopus with the kids screaming also seemed scary. "I don't think you'd like that," she said. "Plus, it's four tickets for both of us." Then she mentioned her favorite: the Ferris wheel. It was only two tickets. "We could see our house from up there!"

In his imagination, the wheel ripped apart and rolled through the carnival. Worriers have vibrant imaginations. She must have forgotten the tears when he refused to climb Cape May Lighthouse and William Penn in Philly. The line seemed to take forever. One car, another car, and then another, the passengers vanishing, whisking away into the starless night. They never seemed to return. But she would sing to him, the treble in his ear giving him goosebumps, her lips so close, as if she had fallen from one of those unseen stars, her voice a nostrum for all the anxiety in the world. She commanded an alto voice that could have competed on Broadway, but her confidence resided only with intimate audiences around the house. Her repertoire consisted mostly of show tunes, *South Pacific*, *West Side Story*, *Funny Girl*. Finally, after the third song, "Bali High," the gold carriage alighted and the rusty door opened for the two-seater. It was a chariot. The boy refused to sit alone. His heart raced. He sat on her lap, tipping the scale to the right, and nestled his head against her chest. It was the safest place. Her belly showed no signs yet of even more competition. When she pointed to the direction of their house he didn't look, but played with her long, brown hair. She was soft and lovely and beautiful. They swung high above the carnival, the green and red lights blinking against the blackness, the distant carnival song barely audible. He counted ten remaining tickets, folding them like a compressed accordion. There seemed more that way – all stacked together. "We'll be okay," she whispered, soothing him, her arms scissoring across his back like safety belts. "Why are you crying? Don't

you like this? It's fun. Isn't this fun?" Then she sang "Sunrise, Sunset" and the fear dissipated for as long as she wondered if this was still the little boy she carried.

His dad walked ahead singing "Suzie Q, I love you." It was an early Creedence hit he heard for the first time while stationed safely during the war in Baton Rouge. He thought of earning back the respect of his young wife by winning one of those huge stuffed animals. A young girl passed him, a girl like he would finally have in four years, her eyes agog with the pink elephant, at least three times her size. The father always wanted a little girl to spoil. Finally, the girl's dad had to hold the beast for her. The burden was worth the pain if the pain meant a girl's happiness. There was the kid magic of a medieval knight about the boy's father, the romantic faith of a grail that defies all logic.

Walking down the Midway, a barker in black lured the father to a game called The Sweet Spot. It was bookended by two others games: The Mississippi Queen and the Delta Blues. "You look like a lucky man to me," the barker tempted with a smooth Southern drawl. "And you look like you have a good arm. Why don't you give it a try? It only takes five hits to get one of these adorable animals. Do you have a special girl?"

"My wife," he said. "My wife's my special girl."

The son and his mother found him, after the Ferris wheel, a ten-ticket tail waving behind the boy. Kids with the cotton candy and the sno cones passed, and ones with the candy necklaces that they nibbled as they walked, the pastel juices staining their white shirts. The boy did ask for a soft serve cone.

The game recreated an old-fashioned baseball stadium, complete with crowd noise, with stands and dugouts and cries for popcorn and hot dogs and cracks of the bat. The goal was to hit five of the faded catchers' mitts. His dad loved baseball. And so his dad forked over some

money. From twenty paces he missed all five targets. He rubbed his shoulder and stretched out his fingers as the barker said, "Good thing you're not giving up now. You can't win if you don't play. You were just warming up there, my man. That was just practice."

The boy asked again for a swirled soft serve cone with chocolate jimmies.

"Your dad is wasting our money," she said.

"Which one do you like?" the dad asked her, pointing at the stuffed animals.

"I don't like any of them," the mother said.

"Let me give it another try," the dad said. "I got three last time."

It looked like fun. The boy asked if he could try.

"Maybe another game," he said. "The one with the rings and the ducks."

"We're not playing another game," she said. "It's a waste of money."

"I work hard for that money," the dad said. "This is fun. I want to get you one of those big stuffed elephants."

"Where in the hell would we put that?" she replied.

"On our bed."

"Our bed? A toy on our bed? There's barely enough room for the two of us!"

"Well, then, in, in the boy's room," he said. He turned to the boy. "Would you like to ride the big elephant?"

The barker held the long black hook ready to seize the prize. All it took was five hits. Game after game he lost. The dad often complained he would have had a better arm if he would've been allowed to play after school. But he had to work at the print shop. Just how many balls did he throw? He didn't have the skill for strikes. He could've just bought the damn stuffed animal, but that was just a matter of handing over some money.

“What are you trying to prove?” the mom asked.

The question froze his arm in mid throw. He didn’t know how to respond.

“Don’t you know?” she asked.

“To show you I’m good enough for you.”

“This is a dumb way to show it!”

“Then what can I do?”

“I don’t know,” the mom said. “Stop throwing the stupid baseballs.”

By now they were yelling again, the mother saying how much she could have bought at the grocery store that he just pitched away. Defiantly, as if to prove who had the upper hand, he threw his arm back violently and clearly missed the target, the ball hitting the canvas backdrop with a muted thud. “Damn bitch,” the dad roared. The barker laughed, or at least the dad thought. The mom smirked and said to her boy, “Baby doll, you want to eat this week, right?”

“Yeah, like an ice cream cone.”

“You could’ve had ice cream.”

“You know what?” the dad said, angry now, as if suddenly awakened. “I’ll never be good enough! No one will, either!”

The boy didn’t know if his tears were for the lack of ice cream or for the failure of confronting the fear of the Tilt-a-Whirl, a topsy-turvy terrain so many seemed to have crossed, not with fear, but with a smile. The boy didn’t know if he cried out of jealousy for all the happy juice-stained faces of the kids that swirled around him. The boy didn’t know if he cried out of sympathy for a dad he did not know or understand. He didn’t know if he cried because he wanted to be understood - to hear his mother echo back his words and not her interpretation or her anticipation of his words. The barker awarded the boy an empathetic nod, appreciating his tears.

“I want to get you a stuffed animal!” the dad yelled. “Is that so much to want?”

“It’s a stupid thing to want.”

“But don’t you see...?” She only mentioned again the wasted money. Every cent was entered in black ink in her black ledger, a book more essential to domestic harmony than the Bible. Through the crowded Midway, the celebrants parting on either side, the mom led her boy across the muddy fields to the candy-apple red Torino as the dad lingered awhile, listening to the stadium cheers from the game, staring at the mitts, and the black sheen from plastic dead eyes of the hanging elephants. After one frozen minute, he charged after them, ashamed, but rejuvenated, as if she were right after all, the water to her fire, the cold fire of reason, yelling his wife’s name above the carnival of laughter and music. He never stopped charging, even after the divorce seven years later, even after two kids later, even long after the divorce.

As the fight smoldered from the front seat, the boy raised the volume in his mind back to the bang, boom, clash, clank: the swamp riffs of Creedence. Maybe this time it was "Run Through the Jungle" or "Bad Moon Rising" or "Fortunate Son." With no more tears and with his eyes closed, he remained inert on his back, his shoulder still tender, cold in the yellow glow of the dashboard, recording the dissident voices of those he dearly loved, wondering if *he* would ever be good enough. Imagining the thrill of the carnival, he shredded the ten tickets in fine confetti.