

## Freaks

Before political correctness carnivals and fairs had freak shows. I was not allowed to attend. But one steamy July afternoon my cousin, then a teenager, was allowed to take me, then age nine, to the Danbury Fair. And to its freak show.

Going to my mother's hometown, Danbury, Connecticut, in the summertime was like going to a foreign country. I lived in New York City. For me, Danbury was mystical. There were woods to walk through, trees to climb, blueberries to pick, Candlewood Lake where I learned how to swim and the Fair. Fast talking men cut oranges and apples with a gadget like no other – an apple or orange was peeled in a minute. Children led goats and lambs and horses around corrals. Roller coasters, carousels, Ferris wheels and trains through scary tunnels were joys and terrors.

Cousin said not to laugh or cry or gulp during the freak show. If I felt queasy I was to “hold it in until it was over.” I was to squeeze his hand if I felt like I might faint. I didn't know what faint was.

We handed our tickets to the man in a black top hat. He opened the curtain allowing us into the miniature arena. A lady with huge blonde hair and mesh stockings under a kind of tutu led us to our bleacher seats. Drums rolled. An elephant in a red, white and blue dress and kerchief strode across the stage. On its back a lithe girl who was doing backward somersaults and cartwheels.

Then came the parade of characters that I've never forgotten.

The fat lady. She was wheeled into the arena by a thin boy/man. She waved to us, the under parts of her arms like enormous tubs of Jello. I counted seven chins, the lowest one a mass of flesh fell on her chest.

The Total Tattooed man walked around flexing his muscles. Every piece of skin, that we could see, was covered with tattoos. Dragons and demons seemed to me to be the mantra of the tattooed man.

A girl, not much older than me, a contortionist she was called by the barker. She wriggled her arms and legs in snake like slithers; she could stand on only her toes for minutes and wrap her legs around her shoulders.

The hairiest man in the universe walked by, and if I hadn't heard the barker say he was a man I would have thought he was an ape, except his head was smaller than the ape pictures I'd seen.

Here came the duck boy. His fingers and toes were webbed. He spread them to show us as he waddled by. He smiled all the while, this poor kid, I thought.

Behind the boy a couple, hand in hand, skipped in time to the recording of Disney's Zippity Do Dah. Today they're called little people, then they were called dwarfs.

Siamese twin girls in one draped dress, joined at their one spine the barker said, marched along, their legs and feet not at all clumsy. I thought this must have taken a lot of practice, especially for the twin who walked backward.

Last came a parade of severely deformed people: a woman with one eye, in the middle of her forehead; a teenaged boy with no arms, his hands were attached to his shoulders; a woman whose earlobes reached her shoulders, an African woman whose lips protruded nearly a foot; a man carrying an attached living blob which had no face, a mermaid carried by her caretaker, said the barker; a girl, age six, as wrinkled as a scrunched paper bag, a man who had a beard that came to his knees.

I could feel my heart beating through all of this. I remember having to go to the bathroom the entire time. It was hot in the tent, and my pre-pubescent sweat glands were trying their best to function. The barker was dressed in white pantaloons and a red, white and blue checkered blouse with puffed sleeves. He flicked a wand around his head as he introduced the freaks; he called them freaks.

I felt I shouldn't have been there. I'd been forbidden. Though I liked doing forbidden, I didn't like the punishments. My parents never hit or in any other way abused me. They punished by not allowing me to go out after supper. That hurt as much as a slap. If they discovered Cousin had taken me to the freak show, I'd be inside that night while everyone else was out there playing Hide and Seek. But I wanted to ask my parents about freaks. Why were there such beings? Couldn't doctors make them normal? It didn't seem right to charge money to have us go in a tent and gawk at freaks.

Years later I told my parents. My father said most of the freaks were fakes. There's no such thing as a mermaid.

But the Siamese twins, the man with the living blob, the big lipped lady and all the others? My father said it was worse than unkind, it was ghoulish. That's the word he used. He said freak shows were banned in most states and that people born deformed were now being surgically helped. My mother said deformities were detected on sonograms most of the time. I didn't know about abortion then. My mother said there were places for people who were unable to care for themselves. I didn't know about such places. I don't remember asking then.

For a long time thereafter I was fascinated by the color photos of intentionally mutilated people in *National Geographic*. I'm still fascinated by what people do to themselves – piercings, green hair, claw like fingernails, nearly naked young people, bejeweled matrons, botoxed women and, once again, men covered with tattooed. They show them off in public gyms. Why?

I don't think often of that day at the Danbury Fair, but I've not forgotten it.

