

Revival

I've heard that the blues alleviates the very pain it awakens. I was too young, then, to sing the blues, but I know the exact moment I connected with that pain; when those amp vibrations saved me, when that dominant E7 chord tortured me – even scared me. The song was “Born on the Bayou” from Creedence Clearwater Revival. My father loved that band. It was 1972. This was before my brother and sister, but my mother must have been pregnant that summer because my brother was born just before Valentine’s Day. The music may have created a chasm that necessitated salvation for my father too. I still hear him singing, “Now when I was just a little boy, standin’ to my daddy’s knee. My poppa said, ‘Son, don’t let the man get ‘cha, do what he done to me.’” Was my daddy singing it to me? Wasn’t I higher than my daddy’s knee by then?

I was excited, sitting in that cavernous white backseat of his red Ford Gran Torino on the way to the local carnival. Hypnotized by both the southern-twang of the song and the supernatural glow from the dashboard, I must have wondered, who was the man in the song? What had he done? When I play Creedence, even today, I recall those days of feeling my security collapsing. It’s unsettling to feel this so young.

Waiting for green at the light across from Vito’s Pizza, Dad raised the volume, but Mom spun the knob counterclockwise. “You’re gonna make us deaf,” she said.

“Us death! Us death!” I’m sure I screamed.

“Not death,” Mom told me. “Deaf. Means you can’t hear because your dad’s music will blow out your eardrums.”

I grabbed my head to protect my ears.

“It wasn’t that loud,” Dad replied.

I was a stylus on a wax-coated cylinder, recording everything: the grainy sounds of Mom rhapsodizing about rides and ice cream and lots of lights and sounds. Then she assured me: “No, no, no, there won’t be any fireworks to scare you.” I remember the hazy fears as if from a lingering nightmare: running headlong and barefoot around the floral blankets, the plastic coolers, the metal folding chairs with the frayed plastic mesh, trying to avoid the landmines – rockets ripping apart the earth. Was something trying to get me? Was it that hoodoo from the song? Mom smiled as I dove into her arms during the fireworks. Don’t most moms love being a trench? Dad laughed too, calling me a scaredy cat. I was so sensitive – a walking seismograph. My nerves could’ve registered the tremors in Asia. “These are not bombs like you see on TV about Vietnam,” she said. “This is South Jersey. You’re safe here.”

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 is far from bayou country. The air conditioning was the only thing that worked well with that car. Dad already brought the car to the Winner Ford dealership three times. That was his modus operandi: whatever he bought, broke. He stood 5’4 so the length of the car compensated for his shortcomings. With a kind, generous face, still peppered with acne, he was slight and pliable like a wooden yardstick. His was a flabbergasted face - a face that still felt the effects of having won some great lottery: like the beauty of my mother, his first love. He possessed a generous amount of brown, straight hair, combed to the left, but absolutely none on his body. He was young, but Mom was even younger at twenty-three. When judging the past I often forget to acknowledge their youth.

It had rained the morning of the carnival. The smell of wet hay, that's what I recall, the hay strewn across puddles of furrowed fields. Black tarps served as slip and slides. Of course, I tripped and hurt my arm socket when Mom tried to steady me. She should have let me fall. I would've been fine.

All the big rides must have required four tickets. I rubbed my shoulder as Mom and Dad argued in front of the ticket booth guy. Embarrassed, I half-tucked my face inside my shirt, bandit-like. Dad wanted an unlimited pass, but 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 she told Dad to buy an arm's length of tickets.

Angry at not getting his way, I suppose, he walked ahead of us. Then we lost him. Around the house he always seemed lost, especially when he was alone or when he thought he was alone, his eyes restless, his motions clumsy, as if walking in shoes far too large to find his car that was somewhere parked far beyond his power of comprehension. Then the mumbling would commence, mumbling complaints to his adversaries, but only to adversaries absent, the complaints resounding faintly throughout the house. I thought he was either on the phone or talking with Mom, but I would suddenly appear and find him alone, pacing, perhaps cursing the white-robed Fates for his meager share of the booty.

The carnival must have consumed him too; he seemed just as excited as I was. But I didn't know where he went. That was usual, though. Dad worked the second shift as a printer, worked hard, and drove an hour each way to work, and so I rarely saw him. But the money, I overheard, was decent, so he stayed with the hours. What was there for a father to do anyway, especially in the mornings? At home he must have felt like a steel ball in one of those wooden labyrinth games.

At first, the carnival thrilled me. 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. That's what I wanted, but Mom said it seemed dangerous. The rope ladder would either strangle me or the big goon-ball kids would crush me. I asked what happened to Daddy.

"If your father doesn't want to stay with us, that's his problem," she told me. "Which ride would you like to go on?"

I led her to the Tilt-a-Whirl, but a sign read '4 tickets.' Then I must have wandered to swirling, twirling Octopus with the kids screaming, but that was also four tickets. Then she mentioned her favorite: the Ferris wheel. It was only two tickets. "We could see our house from up there!"

In my imagination, the wheel ripped apart and rolled through the carnival. Worriers have vibrant imaginations. Didn't she remember the tears when I refused to climb Cape May Lighthouse and William Penn in Philly? As we waited for an open carriage, my heart raced. I sat on her lap, my head secured against her chest. She loved holding me. I enjoyed playing with her long, brown hair. I often wonder if I was just someone to hug, or worse: an accessory.

We swung high above the carnival, the green and red lights blinking against the blackness, the distant carnival song barely audible. I counted six tickets, folding them like a compressed accordion. There seemed more that way – all stacked together. "We'll be okay," she whispered, soothing me, bouncing her baby boy on her knee. "Why are you crying? Don't you like this? It's fun. Isn't this fun?"

In thinking about this experience now, I try to imagine what my dad must have been doing while I hovered in horror: after walking ahead of us, his anger evaporating, he probably thought of earning back the respect of his young wife by winning one of those huge stuffed

animals. It's kid logic. I can visualize a young girl passing him when he was angry, her eyes agog with the pink elephant, at least three times her size. Dad always wanted a daughter 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 magic of a medieval knight about my dad, the simple faith of a grail that defies all logic.

Walking down the Midway, a barker in a black hat lured Dad to a game called The Sweet Spot. "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," Dad must have said. "My wife's my special girl."

That's when we arrived, with my six-ticket tail waving behind me. 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. I asked 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. Dad loved baseball. And so Dad forked over some money. From twelve 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."

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

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

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

"I don't like any of them."

“Let me give it another try,” Dad said. “I got three last time.”

It looked like fun. I asked if I 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,” 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 me. “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. Dad often complained he would have had a better arm if his dad allowed him to play after school. But he had to work. Just how many balls did he throw? He didn’t have the skill for strikes. He could’ve just bought the damn stuffed animal, I’m sure, but that was just a matter of handing over some money. By now they were yelling again, my mother saying how much she could have bought at the grocery store that he just pitched away.

“Baby doll,” Mom said to me. “You want to eat this week, right?”

“Me eat ice cream cone.”

“You could’ve had ice cream.”

Like a baby I cried, and the barker gazed pathetically at my dad. I don’t know if my tears then were for the lack of ice cream or the missing thrill of the Tilt a Whirl, a thrill so many seemed to have. I don’t know if I cried out of jealousy for all the happy juice-stained faces of the

kids that circled around me. I don't know if I cried out of sympathy for a dad I did not know or understand. I don't know if I cried because I wanted to be understood - to hear my mother echo back my words and not her interpretation or anticipation of my words. But I know more than a few tears are now shed for the shoals that twirled up the river in that deceptive Southern moonlight with those hound dogs barking where everything seemed once so beautiful and mysterious and scary. The barker in black may have awarded me an empathetic nod, appreciating my tears, but what four-year-old registers empathy? But he may have just been motioning me along while eyeing another sucker.

“I want to get you a stuffed animal!” 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. What could've been bought with that money? Every cent was entered in black ink in her black ledger, a book more essential to our domestic harmony than the Bible. It was the reason we were able to afford the house, the car, the boat. Through the crowded Midway, the celebrants parting on either side, Mom led me to the Torino as Dad must have 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 us, ashamed, but rejuvenated, as if we were worth it after all, the water to her fire, yelling my mother's name, “Sarah! Sarah!” above the carnival of laughter and music. He never stopped charging, even after the divorce seven years later, even long after the divorce – the sounds of his ‘Sarah’ are indelibly etched on my old-fashioned wax cylinder, coarse and crackly.

As the fight continued from the front seat, I raised the volume in my mind back to that dominant E7 chord and that bang, boom, clash, clank: the swamp whiff of CCR's “Born on the

Bayou.” With no more tears and with my eyes closed, I remained inert on my back, my shoulder still tender, cold in the blue glow of the dashboard, recording the shadowy voices of those I dearly loved. Imagining the thrill of the carnival, I shredded the six tickets in fine confetti.