

## THE OCTOPUS

*The year I turned thirteen, Firemen's Day fell on the day after my birthday. Mother said Em would take us into town and, after the picnic, I could go to the carnival while she called on Phoebe Ferris. We had to be back home for milking, but it would be my first time at the carnival alone. I knew Mary Alice Jensen would be there because she lived in town. When our class had divided into teams for a school debating match, she had chosen me for a partner. I couldn't believe it when we won, since I have a hard time merely standing in front of the class, let alone holding forth on the first amendment. Though she claimed she couldn't have done it without me, the credit was all hers. I hadn't seen her since school had let out for summer two weeks before.*

*After weeding in the garden all morning I went inside to clean up and found Mother lying on the couch. Something was certainly wrong because Mother should have been getting our things together for the town picnic.*

*"I turned my ankle, Milton," she said. "I'm clumsy as a three-legged cow."*

*"Oh no. So we're not going?"*

*"We'll have lunch here and then I'll allow you to go in with Em."*

*"Really?"*

*"And don't worry about me Milton."*

*"Sorry, Mother. Hope you feel better," I said and kissed her on the cheek. I didn't do that much anymore, but had found it could make up for a lot.*

*Jake ended up going with us. I sat between him and Em, trying to keep my knees clear when Em worked the stick shift on the floor.*

*"Look here, Em," Jake said. "Mrs. Van's gone and raised a ladies' man. Shaved smooth and hair combed."*

*"He needs to shun those town girls," Em said. "They catch your eye, might's well put your leash on right now."*

*"I can swear to that," Jake said. "Hadn't been for that girl working at Ingersoll's I'd be mayor now. Or governor."*

*"What's her name?" Em asked me.*

*What had they heard? I couldn't tell and didn't give them an answer. We came up behind a girl on a bike, riding toward town.*

*"That one of them McTeel girls?" Jake asked.*

*When we came alongside, I saw that it was. The bright yellow streamers hanging off her handlebars couldn't hide the piece of rear fender that was bent sideways. She was in my class.*

*"Shirley," I said.*

*"We could toss her bike in back. Give her a ride," Em said.*

*"It would be neighborly," Jake said.*

*"She's a McTeel," I said. "They sleep with their pigs to keep warm. You'll catch whatever they've got, you get in spitting distance. And they can spit."*

*Em slammed on the brakes. In a minute Shirley's bike was in our truck bed and she was squeezed between Jake and me. Jake went along with it, but if it had been just him and me in the truck he would have gone on by like I wanted to. She wore a torn pair of jeans and an old shirt, but I guess she had cleaned up because she smelled better than she usually did at school.*

*"You kin to Sam McTeel?" Jake asked.*

*"He's my granddaddy. Dead, though."*

*"Happens to us all," Jake said. "We grew up around each other, but went different ways."*

*"Some of those carnival rides spin you like a cream separator," Em said to Shirley. "Gonna try any?"*

*"A dollar's worth."*

*"Better take Milt with you, in case you get dizzy," Jake said.*

*I shot Jake a look right across Shirley, but he was gazing out the side window to hide his smile.*

*"He'll go with Mary Alice Jensen," she said, looking straight ahead.*

*I had started out being mad at Em for stopping, then Jake for offering my company, and now Shirley for telling them. But I was jammed in, nowhere to go.*

*"So, Mary Alice Jensen," Jake said. He leaned forward to look at me, but I looked straight ahead, same as Shirley. "Some Jensens live right along here," he*

*continued as we came to the first houses in Cooper's Mill. "Look there, Prof. First I noticed any numbers on them houses.*

*"They did it for mail delivery," Em said.*

*"Mama said they put up the numbers because town people kept getting lost," Shirley said. "She said the numbers won't help since most can't count past their fingers."*

*Em found a parking spot near the carnival gate and said to meet back at the truck at three. I waited until Shirley rode off on her bike and then walked the other way, glad to finally be alone. I went on some rides with friends, but didn't see Mary Alice. Of course we hadn't said anything about meeting. I wasn't sure she was even there.*

*Thirsty from the rides, I went for a milkshake and there was Mary Alice at the ice cream stand with two other girls.*

*After we said hi she looked behind me, saying, "You alone?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"I heard you came in with Shirley McTeel."*

*With one girl I could manage a smile and a nod. Three meant instant death. I barely shrugged my shoulders.*

*"No wonder you're alone. Who wants McTeel cooties?"*

*After they walked away giggling I followed them at a distance, mostly curious, wondering if any of them would ever grow out of their nastiness. When I ran into Danny Banks, I gave him some of my milkshake. He wasn't worried about cooties.*

*"Been on the Octopus yet?" he asked.*

*It was a ride with five arms coming off an axis. A bowl with a bench inside hung on the end of each arm and spun as the arms circled the axis while also going up and down. My science teacher had used it to explain centrifugal force. The Octopus had always been off-limits for me, but today Mother had only mentioned the Ferris wheel. I'd already ridden the Octopus once, but I was glad for the company after coming upon those girls.*

*"Let's go," I said.*

*We were first, but a line soon formed behind us. It took awhile to load everyone on, which meant our bowl eventually rotated high into the air before the ride began. After the Ferris wheel, it was probably the best view of the carnival. The ball field was*

*completely covered with rides and booths. Out on the road, traffic was jammed up waiting to cross the one-lane covered bridge.*

*“Look there,” Danny said. “What're they doing? Who are those girls?”*

*Behind the outfield fence, hidden from anyone on the ground, were three girls with a bicycle. They must have dragged it through the brush because there wasn't a way back there. There were yellow streamers on the bike. One of the girls swung a baseball bat at the bike as the ride began.*

*“They're crazy,” Danny said as we began to spin.*

*“It's too far away to see their faces.” Soon we were screaming along with everyone else, but I'd recognized the clothes those three girls were wearing.*

*On the way home Em asked if I'd seen my girl friend. I said no, which was a mistake, because he probably already knew. Not that it mattered. He wouldn't say much about it. Halfway home we came upon Shirley McTeel, walking her bike. The rear wheel had a crazy wobble. I asked Em to pull up.*

*“Want a lift?” I asked her.*

*“No,” she said in a go-to-hell voice. Her cheeks were wet. “Go on back to your big old farm.” I shrugged my shoulders when Jake and Em looked to me for an explanation. “And tell Mary Alice Jensen she better keep her bike indoors.”*