

Part One: The Funfair

Now, why in the world would this place be called a “funfair” when there is absolutely nothing fair about it?! The adverb definition of the word states, “without cheating or trying to achieve unjust advantage,” but that cannot possibly be true because my date and I just spent the past hour throwing our money away at games trying to bring home the largest plush-reptile toy. I know for a fact those basketball hoops are not perfectly circular and the water that shoots from those toy guns has to be on a delay. I’m sure of it! If that is not cheating and taking advantage of the natural shortcomings of the naked eye, then I don’t know what is.

Another definition of the word suggests “a beautiful woman,” such as in the title of the musical *My Fair Lady*. But I can assure you, this neighborhood “fair” resembles a second-hand thrift store for old machinery and games instead of any beautiful woman I have ever seen. However, now that I am standing here, waiting in line to ride the only rollercoaster here and contemplating the English lexicon, there is one more definition that I must consider. The adjective definition of “fair” is to be in accordance with the rules and standards; legitimate.

If I consider the name solely by that definition, I can accept it as something fair and make sense of the “fun” propaganda that comes with it. Yes, the games we play here are overpriced and, more often than not, we leave here empty-handed. And yes, I am waiting in line to ride a rollercoaster that I have ridden every year since I was eight years old. And yes, I am now seventeen and waiting for my date to meet me on this line with a bucket of popcorn that will be too salty and too buttery to enjoy.

But this is the only time of the year that this fair comes to my neighborhood. It is the only time of the year that I can walk hand in hand with a lover, under bright lights,

surrounded by loud noises and not feel anxious. Instead, I feel lucky! Like I am about to walk out of here with trophies in one arm, my date on the other, and a smile that stretches across my face. Now that I think about it, I feel excited too! I'm excited to feel the rush of my stomach jumping out of my mouth as we come crashing down from the steepest drop of the tallest ride, regardless of how many times I have been on it before.

This fair, no matter how janky, has found a place in my heart. It reminds me of my childhood when I first started coming here with my siblings. We would come dressed in our best gear because we anticipated seeing everyone else from our neighborhood. We came with empty stomachs, just waiting to spend our money on popcorn, fried sweets, and sugary soft drinks. It was an event. Our "night out on the town" before we even knew what puberty was. Now that we are older, it's the pit stop before our night out, but it still holds the same value in our hearts. For those reasons, we've accepted these low-standard food choices and overpriced games and rides. Our emotional attachments have legitimized this funfair. But who sets the price on nostalgia, anyways?

Finally! I see Jee's face through the crowd and am instantly brought back into the moment. We make eye contact and a smile dashes across their face. I love the way they look at me – in a way that no one else does. As if I am the only being in existence. If even just for a second, that look stops me every time. A look that does not see right through me but instead looks straight at me. Someone who sees through you may see past the illusions you put up, but that does not mean they can see past the illusions that they project. Only someone who is looking straight at you can see past both. That's how I feel when Jee looks at me.

Just as I finish that thought, Jee is running their fingers through mine and happily offering me some popcorn. Jee and I have been dating since our freshman year of high school. We are what everyone considers “high school sweethearts” but I don’t like that title. To me, it doesn’t fully encapsulate our relationship. For starters, we’ve known each other since grade school. I guess you could say we grew up together. Because of that, they’re more like my best friend. When the burdens of my world are too heavy to carry and I do not want to fight a battle alone, I know I can call Jee. They will be the first to show up for me and worry about all of the questions later.

On the flip side, when life allows me to ride high, Jee is the only person I want riding shotgun. I know they’ll make me laugh the whole way and we’ll always stop to take dance breaks. We come from the same place and share the same thirst for life. By now, we have our own language and the majority of it is unspoken. Jee is not my high school sweetheart. Jee is Jee and I am me and together we are something too grand to label.

I’ve been standing on this line for about 20 minutes now and Jee’s been here for the last five but at this point, I am growing a little impatient. I still remember the first time I rode this roller coaster. That has to have been the longest amount of time I’ve ever spent waiting to ride this thing. At least it feels that way. There I was, tapping my fingers together and tapping my feet on the concrete. I begged my dad to get on the ride with me because I was too afraid to get on it alone. Reluctantly, he agreed but said he wasn’t going to wait in any line and for me to call his name when we were up next. So I waited alone and did exactly that.

I remember how fast my heart was racing when the conductor finished strapping us into our seats and how tight my fingers were gripping the bar in front of me. As the ride started moving, I instinctively closed my eyes out of fear. My dad is not much of a talker and so at that moment all he did was place his hand over mine. Feeling his hand over mine reminded me that he was there with me and that was enough for me to feel safe.

My mom was waiting for us at the exit. As soon as my feet were back on the ground I skipped over to her to share the excitement of overcoming my fear. She couldn't help but laugh and for a second I wished she would have gotten on the ride too. My mom used to love getting on rides with me; she would laugh, shout, throw her hands in the air and encourage me to do the same. However, over the years things began to change. I cannot say exactly what changed and I suppose that's because it was not one thing in particular, but instead a culmination of things. As a result, her laughter is heard less often and her enthusiasm is almost non-existent.

I am pulled away from this bittersweet memory as Jee and I are now being strapped into the ride. One would expect my heart to be racing from excitement but the only things racing are the chemicals in my stomach in an effort to digest that nasty popcorn. As the other passengers are being strapped in, I whisper to Jee that I don't feel too well, to which they reply, "You'll be good." I roll my eyes and pay no mind to their cold response. They're just annoyed because we were one of the last ones to make it on the ride and now have to sit in the last row. I mean, I understand but it's not like we haven't sat in the front row before. Besides, I couldn't focus on that now, the chemical race going on in my stomach must be getting close because all I can feel is sharp pain. I

need a distraction. Suddenly, I start reciting the lyrics to “God’s Plan” by Drake in my head. I blame that darn radio; the station practically had it on loop during the car ride over here. I’ll be more mindful of this hypnosis moving forward. Just as I finish singing, “they wishin’ on me,” we’re pulling into the station and the safety bar in front of us is unlatched. I did it! I managed to distract myself long enough to avoid getting physically sick on this ride and all I had to do was sing a three-minute song.

“What’d you think?” Jee asks me. To which I shrug and reply, “Same thing, different year.” I want to tell them about the race that is still happening in my stomach and laugh with them about the song choice for my latest coping method but then I think, why would they care? It’s not like they can physically take the pain away or say anything to make it go away.

“I feel the same way!” they continue, “So I was thinking that we should get on it again but do it the right way this time and sit in the front row.” At this point, a blank stare is all that I can reflect to them. And even that is greeted with a smile that stretches across their face as they begin to explain that now is the perfect time because the line is short and we are guaranteed a seat in the front row. Again, I am at a loss for words. I am stuck in a moment. On the one hand, I know I do not want to get back on this ride. I did not even enjoy it the first time. In fact, after waiting more than twenty minutes to get on the darn thing, I actively distracted myself from the experience of it all. Everything inside of me is screaming for me not to waste my time and get back on this ride.

On the other hand, I have Jee waiting for my answer. Their eyes are bright with hope and they are flashing that seductive smirk. “So, what do you say?” Jee asks and “Okay, fine” is all I can reply. I guess singing one more Drake song won’t kill me and it

will at least make Jee happy. So here we are, for the umpteenth time, sitting in the front row of this roller coaster and getting strapped in. I look over at Jee, they look back at me and place a fat kiss on my cheek.

As I contemplate which one of Drake's songs I want to sing next, I see something different in the distance that I had not noticed the last time we were up here. It's a Ferris wheel! It's huge! A Ferris wheel is the one thing this fair doesn't have. Actually, that is not true. There are many things this fair doesn't have, but a Ferris wheel is the one ride I always hoped for, and there it is! It is at a different fair, one that is a little further away from home, but I can't wait to tell Jee about it once we get off of this tired thing. Maybe we can go there tomorrow.

Just as I am getting excited, waves of heat begin to cascade over my body and now my mouth is salivating. I knew at that moment that whatever race was happening in my stomach had finally come to an end. Whichever chemical won has decided that the popcorn was not welcome to pass further down my digestive tract. Now it was projecting out of my mouth at full speed, and thanks to this roller coaster, all over Jee and me. As quickly as it started is as quickly as it was all over and we were right back where we began. Where Jee was looking at me with those hopeful eyes and seductive smirk; except this time the only look on their face is rage. I can't make out what they're yelling. The embarrassment and shame I feel are sending a loud ringing through my ears.

How could I have thrown up on myself and my date?! How could I embarrass us in that way by ruining our clothes and making it impossible for us to continue to enjoy the night? We smell now. We feel uncomfortable now. We are surely getting laughed at and to top it off, we'll be a story for everyone else to criticize and share. If all of that isn't

bad enough, I am honestly most hurt by how I ignored myself. Everything inside of me told me not to get back on that ride but I did not listen. I did not even voice my concerns to Jee. I could have suggested that we play another game or that we wait a few minutes before returning to the ride. I didn't do any of those things. I did not advocate for myself and again I made someone else's desires a priority over my needs.

This is all that I can think about on the quiet car ride home. I apologized to Jee for ruining their clothes and ruining our night. They say they're over it but this thick silence laying on us makes me feel otherwise. I am so angry. I am angry with myself for ignoring myself but I am also angry and resentful towards Jee. They are not the only ones with a ruined outfit and they were not even the one who got sick! They haven't asked me once if I am feeling better or considered the fact that I gave an apology for something that I had no control over and now I am being given the silent treatment? I am mentally exhausted.

I promise myself this, I will not allow tomorrow night or any other night to play out the way this one did. Tomorrow I am taking myself to that Ferris wheel I saw today and I am going to ride it as many times as I like. And if that new fair has the same subpar food options like this one, I'll hold off and eat somewhere better. I love Jee and the thought of not considering how they'll feel about something is scary. Will they be upset that I want to go alone? Will they think I am trying to hide something? Will I be accused of being sneaky? And although I've complained a bit throughout the night, I cannot deny that I love coming to this janky fair and getting on that old rollercoaster, but now I definitely have to stay away from this place. If not because I truly embarrassed myself

tonight, then because I am ready to spend my time seeing new things and getting on new rides.

This doesn't mean I'll never come back or I'll never get on another ride with Jee; this just means that starting tomorrow night, I am beginning my exploration on my own and listening to myself before I consider another. Just as I finish that thought, Jee pulls on to my street. We give each other a quick kiss goodbye and as I slam the door behind me, "God's Plan" by Drake is playing on the radio.

Part Two: Life's Not Fair

The wind is blowing through my hair as I cruise down the expressway. It's hitting my chest like a glass of vodka on the rocks – packing a punch but in just the right way. I am in no rush. I am simply following the night sky on my way home. Usually, I prefer a tune in the background but tonight I feel comfort in the silence. Is there such a thing as being too comfortable in the silence? It seems like, these days, all I do is live in my head. With that thought, I glance over at Jee passed out in the passenger's seat. I wonder if they'll remember tonight the same way I do when we wake up in the morning.

Jee and I are on our way back from our friend Viv's house. She planned a karaoke party for her partner Rachel's 25th birthday. Overall, I think we had a pretty good time. Rachel aims to be the hostess with the mostess and she never disappoints. When we first arrived, we were welcomed with a home-cooked feast of five different dishes to choose from. All of the guests were instructed to bring their favorite alcoholic beverage to share, so it is safe to say that we were well fed and did not go thirsty. At least three card games were going and one board game for those who spent too much time with Mary Jane and wanted to play games at a slower pace.

The energy was high and good vibrations were bouncing throughout the room; so much so that Jee and I were unbeatable at the Spades table! As the night went on, Viv brought out the karaoke machine and that's when the laughs really began. It didn't matter who was on the mic, if we knew the song, we were all singing it! Jee and I even danced a bit. We don't dance as often as we used to. Now that I think of it, that's probably because I stopped asking. Anyway, I was enjoying myself until Jee and I had a misunderstanding about a conversation we had earlier in the day. One thing led to

another and the next thing I know, they're in front of me yelling and I am deafened by that internal white noise and all I see is the color red.

The episode lasted no more than five minutes but that was all I needed to feel that familiar pang of embarrassment and shame; feelings that have since gone away thanks to this calming drive home. Now I must ask myself, am I going to allow five minutes of misjudgment to ruin my whole night? Of course not, so I am going to hold onto the thought that the night was pretty good. Besides, it's not like our friends saw anything new tonight. Jee and I always bicker but we bounce back.

I am now reminded that we are getting closer to our apartment as we pass the exit that would take us to the fair we liked going to all those years ago. This year was their last year in business. Jee and I wanted to go before they closed but we never got around to it. It's been about seven years since the last time we went together. For a couple of years I went to the slightly bigger fair, with the Ferris wheel, by myself but eventually I just stopped going altogether.

As I pull onto the exit of the expressway, I begin to nudge Jee to start waking up. Highly annoyed, they grunt at me and turn over to face the window. I pull into our parking space, turn off the car and let out a big sigh as I prepare to move this half-conscious adult from the parking garage to our apartment door. I get out of the car and make my way over to the passenger side door and open it. Jee swings their feet out of the car and onto the ground. They look up at me and at that moment, as I look into their eyes, I realize that they are no longer looking straight at me. They are looking through me. In fact, I wonder if I am in their view at all?

The thought sends chills down my spine. How could this be? When I live in the silence, out of fear of causing a rift between us, it feels like I lock myself away from Jee. But when I try to connect and voice my concerns, there's disharmony and we always seem to misunderstand each other. I am trying and if they are still here with me, then they must be trying too. But if I am not even in their view, then what are we trying to do? Do we not share the same vision anymore? A sudden rush of emotions clogged my throat and I struggled to swallow the tears. I wasn't going to think about that now. It's late, I am tired, and the only thing I want to do is lay in bed next to Jee and try to forget about how unfair life and relationships can be. This must be part of taking the good with the bad, right?

Part Three: Fair Game

“Baby, you look too good right now!” I say aloud as I look at my reflection in the mirror. Tonight I decided on an all-black, casual suit that compliments my frame very nicely if I do say so myself. The only thing left to debate is how I am going to accessorize. Do I want to wear my diamond-encrusted Ankh or Buddha on the Cuban link? I decide on the more humble Buddha. Tonight is a celebration and if I feel this good then it is only right that I look the part, too. Tonight I am heading out to dinner to celebrate my friend Viv’s 30th birthday.

Viv is a great friend who I met while dating my last partner, Jee. She is one of the few things that continued on this journey with me from that time in my life. It’s been three years since Jee and I ended our relationship. In that time, I have cried, screamed, sat in silence, felt the silence, felt nausea, felt the chills, and begged for a way out of my hell loop. During that same time, I found different things to laugh at. I learned that if I speak up when I first feel the need to then I can avoid feeling like I need to scream later on. I sat in silence for so long that now when I seek the silence, I no longer feel its pressure.

Jee and I are no longer in contact. I cannot say if that is “good” or “bad” and I cannot say if all of my healing could have taken place had we still “been.” What I can say is that life is what it is. Of all of the things that it is, “fair” is one of them. The same way I continued to visit that janky fair as a girl was the same way I continued to hold onto a relationship that did not resemble the vision I had for my future. I had to learn that the hell loop I so desperately wanted to get out of was the hell loop I created for myself. One rooted in fear. Life was, and still is, only reflecting to me what I allow myself to experience. Letting go of my relationship with Jee was confronting that fear but only

one time. If I did not take the time to understand, or rather *innerstand*, where the fear of letting go came from then I would be sure to repeat that relationship cycle again with someone else.

I grab my phone from my bed and call a cab. Before I know it, I am sitting in the backseat of the cab, feeling the wind against my face and ruffling softly in my ear. It's a beautiful night. The moon is full and bright, casting a slight glow over the city. Traffic is light and I arrive at my destination within thirty minutes. My cab service was kindly met by a valet upon arrival. Both the car door and entrance to the restaurant were opened by staff for assurance of a seamless entrance.

If you recall, I previously introduced you to Rachel, Viv's partner who very much enjoys hosting gatherings. Needless to say, Rachel planned this birthday gathering for Viv and selected only the best restaurant for us to get together and celebrate life. Viv and Rachel were already a couple when Jee and I met them and the four of us share a lot of beautiful memories. When Jee and I first separated, it took some time for the dynamics of our relationships to adjust and I am thankful to Viv and Rachel for respecting our privacy and vulnerability. They both made the effort to get to know Jee and me again, apart from our romantic relationship. Surprisingly, and gratefully, Viv and I grew closer as she was able to see sides of me that were hidden before.

My relationship with Rachel took a bit more time to stabilize. Rachel is a romantic. It is one of the things that I love about her. Her romanticism allows an overpour of optimism in her life. However, not every situation calls for optimism. Sometimes we must face the harsh realities of life and accept them for what they are because if we try to paint them as anything else we are doing ourselves a disservice.

Rachel believes that love can conquer all and I agree with her. Rachel also believes that if you love something then you should never give up on it and again I agree with her. Rachel and Viv have been together longer than Jee and I were together and she attributes the longevity of their relationship to following these principles. Jee and I are no longer together and I attribute that fact to following these principles, as well. Can you see how when comparing these two relationships, based solely on living by those principles, one might feel discomfort in the juxtaposition? My relationship with Rachel, during this time, has allowed me to see the impact of perspective on any story.

Rachel and I were viewing the same sequence of events from different perspectives. Ultimately, what works for me and my journey may not work for her and her journey. That does not mean that one person will be more successful or more fulfilled than the other. This experience has helped me understand that we are not defined by who we are in relationships with, but by who we are while in those relationships. This experience has also allowed me to see the damage we bring on ourselves and our self-esteem when we focus on or compare our lives to the lives of others.

If I would have stayed in my previous relationship, in an effort to prove something to other people or in an effort to keep up appearances, I would have continued to live a life that was not true to who I am as a person for the sake of a false union. That would have been the metaphorical death of me. The worst kind, if you ask me. A metaphorical death is when your body is present but the essence of your true being is gone. The light from inside of you goes dark and you know you have traveled too far away from your

peace. That is no longer a sacrifice I am willing to make but it very much was a possibility when I was comparing my life to the lives of others.

As I take another sip of my tequila, I look around at all of the smiling faces surrounding me. I am thankful for these people. I am thankful for the love that they share with me and the memories that we are able to make with one another. I thought I would see Jee here considering their friendship with Viv and Rachel, but I was told that they are out of the country on business. It would have been nice to see their face and possibly share a laugh over a drink but I am just as happy with my current company.

Almost before I can put my drink down, I am grabbed by my arm from my chair and pulled to the dance floor. I do not even want to resist! How can I resist moving my hips to the beat of these live drums?! Of course the place that Rachel chose for us to dine has a live band playing. By now, would you expect anything less?

The music feels so good moving through me. Starting at my feet, making its way to my hips and now my shoulders are moving to make the takeover complete. My lungs fill with an infectious laugh and I release it as I spin around on the dance floor. Throwing my hands up, twisting and turning my body to flow with the rhythm of the music fills me with this unexplainable ecstasy. I am floating on air. My friends laugh with me. They throw their arms around me and hug me tightly. The music has taken control of them too. We are now all high on life and in this moment everything is perfect. I know that this moment was made for me. Made so that I can unapologetically be me with people who love me. At this moment I am free. I am free from expectations. I am free from doubt. I am free and I am happy to know and believe that everything in this life is available to me and is fair game for the taking and the learning.