

“Colored Ferris Wheel”

Short Story

3754 words

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Jeremy always got on first. He'd push me out of the way and jump in the sticky seat that had been painted over so many times that you didn't know what color it was. He'd get on so fast sometimes that he'd slice the skin off the back of his leg, especially if it was car number twelve, which had a z-shaped squadron of ragged screws sticking up at different heights and angles. He never seemed to learn. I always took my time getting on because I wanted to make sure I was safe and secure in the seat. And I didn't want to have to get a tetanus shot. I'd heard a story of a kid who'd gotten his foot stuck getting on the ferris wheel, and his leg had been pulled off. He lived but they put his leg in a huge jar and he became one of the side-show attractions. It was just one of those stories you hear about rides at the fair, but still, I didn't want to take any chances. Someone did get killed on the Zipper one year, before I was born. It was an old man. He flew out the door of the Zipper and landed on one of the tents, but the tent didn't stop him and he ended up hitting face-first in the sawdust, right beside a singer called Ramblin' Lou who was singing a song called “Car-Hoppin' Mama.” It made the Atlanta paper. That's what I heard anyway.

It was a beautiful ferris wheel, at least for a county fair, festooned with colored lights that blinked in long dangles of different hued bulbs that made patterns and lit up the night sky. But there were two ferris wheels, the white ferris wheel and the colored ferris wheel. The colored ferris wheel was the same ferris wheel as the white ferris wheel, but when a line of people grew long enough in the “colored” line, the ferris wheel man would move the chain barrier so that the black people in line could advance forward. Just before they started to load, he would turn off all the lights of the ferris wheel and it then became the colored ferris wheel, as people called it. The

ferris wheel man would then turn off the normal ferris wheel music and switch to soul music, mostly James Brown. James Brown was from Augusta, Georgia, which is where the ferris wheel was located and the town where we lived. I was nine years old. The ferris wheel man always made the colored ferris wheel go faster, which was one of the reasons Jeremy and I liked to ride it so much.

Jeremy liked the soul music even though he wouldn't tell anybody but me. His father gave him a good beating once for catching him listening to James Brown. I liked James Brown, too. My father wasn't happy about it, but he wasn't as bad as Jeremy's father. It was a lot better than the usual carnival music they played on the white people ferris wheel. To get in the colored line, we would go down to the train tracks that ran beside Highway 221 and rub creosote on our faces. The black people all laughed at us. I guess they figured we were just mischievous kids out to ride the fun ferris wheel. The ferris wheel man knew we weren't black either, but he didn't seem to care. He'd just motion us on, taking a deep draw on his Lucky Strike cigarette that always dangled from his mouth, and always was just on the verge of falling out.

Jeremy and I rode the colored ferris wheel every night for the two weeks that the James T. Straits Shows were at the county fair. We'd try to sneak under the ten flaps of the hoochie-coochie show, but we always got caught by the Snake Man who did double-duty as bouncer. The hoochie-coochie show was at the end of the midway so that women and children couldn't see it. Somebody told us that the snake man and the hoochie-coochie show lady were married and that their child was Nature's Mistake. We were never quite sure what Nature's Mistake actually was all about so one rainy Tuesday night, we went to see Nature's Mistake and he just looked like a fat little boy, about four years old, with a scraggly wig on his head and

whiskers glued to his chin and fake ears that sort of looked like bat ears. He was inside a large jar-like thing that sat on a miniature proscenium stage that said “Medical Specimen” on it in very official-looking letters. When we saw him, he was eating Little Debbie honey buns inside his glass jar. Later that same night, we snuck down to the hoochie-coochie show at the end of the midway and slipped under the tent and saw the lady in her little dressing room. She was sitting, smoking a cigarette, and she didn’t have a clothes underwear on. Jeremy’s face dropped and then when she stood up, he ran away. I lingered. I could see a curly tangled triangle of jet-black pubic hair. It was like an arrow pointing to something forbidden. It was the first time I’d seen a real naked woman’s pubic hair. My first exposure to sex was in my father’s sock drawer, where earlier that year I’d found a Polaroid photo of a woman wearing sunglasses with a black man’s penis in her mouth. She looked a lot like my mother. The hoochie-coochie show lady hiked her right leg up onto her chair then looked at me and smiled, as if she had selected me for a private show. I heard a man’s deep grumbling voice say something like “Amanda!” so I ran. I caught up with Jeremy at the Roundabout and told him about what I’d seen, but he didn’t believe I’d seen even one of her “public” hairs as he called them.

We headed over to the ferris wheel. The black people didn’t seem to mind us riding their ferris wheel unless it was really crowded, and then they’d give us funny looks and we’d have to go to the back of the line and wait our turn until everybody else had ridden. The best part of the colored ferris wheel for me was that they turned the lights off and it went faster, almost twice the speed of the regular ferris wheel, but that might be exaggerating. It seemed more mysterious in some way to be spinning around above Augusta in the dark, with nobody knowing you were there. I felt like I knew a secret up there that nobody else would ever know, even Jeremy.

That was the same summer that there were demonstrations in town. I didn't know what Freedom Riders or really understand any of the things that were going on in the town, but my father told me they were troublemakers from the North. He called them agitators. I'd seen them on the streets of Augusta. They all wore the same sort of outfits, button down oxfords shirts and chino pants with loafers. A lot of them wore black horn-rimmed glasses. It was almost a uniform they had which distinguished them from the other people in town who were mostly farmers and wore bib overalls and work clothes and hats. When I looked at my mother during these supper table conversations about Freedom Riders, she just sort of put her head down for a minute or so until the conversation changed to something else and then looked back up and smiled at me. She didn't seem to want to stand up to my father. One particular evening at supper, near the end of the fair's run, he told me he better not catch me out at the fair during the last few nights. When I asked him why, he just shook his head and started talking about something else.

When the last night of the fair came around, I told Jeremy what my father had told me. He laughed and said all the agitators had left on a bus for Atlanta. I didn't want to go against my father, but Jeremy sweetened the pot when he brandished a twenty-dollar bill and said he'd get us into both the Iron Tongue Girl show and the Human Pretzel show. He said that if you looked closely at women in the shows, you could sometimes see a tit and sometimes even "public" hair.

When we got to the fair, it was a hot Saturday night and the lines for everything were long. I could see groups of young men wearing the agitator outfits. They usually walked around in groups of two or three. I noticed that they didn't seem to go on any rides, but just walked around and ate popcorn and drank Cokes. We tried to get in to see the Iron Tongue Girl show and the Human Pretzel shows, but the lines slithered back and intersected with the

hoochie-coochie show. For some reason we were able to get into the Zambora the Gorilla Girl show, maybe because by now, everybody had seen the girl change from girl into a live gorilla right before their eyes and then get out of its cage and attack the audience, courtesy of smoke and some rather dirty-looking mirrors. When we were done with the gorilla girl, we headed out into the midway and got Cokes and cotton candy then headed for the ferris wheel, which we usually saved for last since we might get lucky and get extra rides as people left the fair. The ferris wheel man seemed to be sweating a lot as he tried to move the chain that roped off the white people line from the black people line. We finally got on the ride. The motion of the wheel didn't do much to cool us off but at the top it did feel cooler for some reason. Maybe it was the damp cool air from nearby Uchee swamp that somehow got siphoned up into the vortex of the wheel. The mist looked like dancing ghosts as it made its way from the swamp and was drawn up by the sucking motion of the ferris wheel. I'd take the sulphurous turpentine smell of the swamp any day over the heat.

Suddenly, the ferris wheel stopped. Jeremy and I were one car from the top. The bucket was swinging back and forth like a pendulum on the old clock at my great-grandfather's house. There was a quick silence and then the people on the ferris wheel began to make noises, some started to cry. James Brown music was still playing loud and indifferent, echoing throughout the fairgrounds. The song was *Cold Sweat*. I could now see the groups of people moving out of the fairgrounds, emptying out like small colonies of worker ants, then dissipating into the cars in the large grass parking lot that ran beside Highway 221. The traffic looked like it was backed up all the way to Atlanta.

And then I looked down and I could see some men running through the crowd. Little skirmishes broke out here and there. The crowd would move and undulate with the activity and then part to expose groups of local white men with clubs and baseball bats pummeling the agitators. Jeremy and I watched it with all the horrified people on the ferris wheel to the hypnotic beat of James Brown's *Get on Up*, which was now vibrating throughout the park and into the surrounding swamp. And then one of the men down below pointed up to the ferris wheel and called out to the others. Everyone on the ferris wheel got silent. I heard people making shushing sounds to each other.

"Got to be some agitators up on that goddamn colored ferris wheel!" the man said.

Within a minute, a crowd of men with clubs gathered at the bottom of the ferris wheel. They started laughing and it seemed as if they were planning something as they talked in low tones which was intermingled with a smattering of laughter and cat-calls. Then they started talking to the ferris wheel man. I leaned over as far as I could in the seat so I could hear what they were saying, so far that it was about to tip over.

"Get that thing started," one of the men said.

"Motor's too hot, have to let it cool down," the ferris wheel man said. I could see him do his usual draw on his Lucky Strike. It lit up red as a bolus of cotton candy when it hits the saliva in your mouth.

"You lying," another man said.

"What are you going to do with that?" the ferris wheel man said, pointing at the baseball bat.

"Looking for agitators, that's all. We ain't gonna hurt nobody else."

“Don’t got no agitators on my wheel. Now get on out of here before I call the law.”

They grabbed the ferris wheel man, two from behind and two from the front. He tried to fight them but two more jumped on him and they started to pummel him. It looked like they were beating him a lot worse than what they’d done to the agitators. I could see one of the men with a club trying to get the ferris wheel started, banging hard on the motor with the club. Another man pulled a lever and I could see a rubber tire painted blueish-green engage the clutch mechanism and kick the ferris wheel gears into action. The ferris wheel lurched and started to move, but then there was a strange sound and the wheel stopped just as quickly as it had started, making all the cars swing wildly. There were screams and cries from the riders which seemed to make the men laugh. By now, everyone at the fair had scattered toward the parking lot. It was only me and Jeremy and the people on the ferris wheel. The people on the ferris wheel were starting to get uneasy again. I could hear some of the teenage girls crying. I could hear older people telling them if they’d just be quiet, the men would go away. We sat there for a full fifteen minutes while James Brown’s *Cold Sweat* kept playing over and over and we watched the men on the ground trying to get the ferris wheel going again. Then the men finally got the wheel going. One by one, they stopped the cars at the bottom of the wheel and with each car, I could hear screams as the men pulled the people off the wheel. I didn’t want to look down and see what they were doing to the people. Our car slowly progressed from the top toward the bottom. I still had a perfect view of the fair and in the distance, I could see another group of men fighting with the carnival workers. It looked like a scene from an illustrated Civil War book we had at home, like the blue and the gray lines. One of the sideshow tents fell over. It looked like the Pygmy Boy ten, but I wasn’t sure. I couldn’t tell who was winning the battle between the agitators and the men but the

agitators seemed to be putting up a good fight. The ferris wheel kept moving in bits and jerks. The men at the bottom of the ferris wheel kept trying to get the thing going again. I could see two men with buckets of water pouring it over the motor housing, trying to cool it. The ferris wheel man was laying on the ground, sprawled out across the chain that held the COLORED and WHITE sign, in sort of a comma shape. His Lucky Strike was somehow still perched between his lips, glowing.

“You think they’ll beat us up?” Jeremy said.

I didn’t know what to say. I was too busy watching the spectacle unfold below me. I could hear police cars in the distance and then I could see them coming up Willie Glover Road, but it looked like they were moving in slow motion over the bumpy road. Jeremy unbuttoned took his shirt and began to rub the creosote off his face.

“I look white enough?”

I didn’t answer, amazed at the scene below.

He grabbed me and took his shirt and started to rub it on my face, trying to get the creosote off.

“What are you doing!” I said.

“Getting the nigger off you.”

“Stop it!”

I shoved Jeremy out of the way so hard it made the seat swing so much that the Coke I’d taken on the ferris wheel poured out and fell straight down right onto one of the men below.

“They throwing stuff at us!” the Coke-drenched man yelled from below.

The Coke seemed to make them all angrier.

“Get that thing running!” one of the men said.

“Look what you done now,” Jeremy said to me. “Why don’t you want that black off your face?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“We’re on their ferris wheel, aren’t we? Least I can do is get off the same way I got on.”

“My daddy always said you was stupid, now I know what he meant.”

And then the ferris wheel lurched again, just far enough that the next seat was about four feet off the ground. The men reached up and grabbed the three people out of the seat. They looked like teenage girls, black of course. I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to see what happened next.

We were now at the apex of the ferris wheel.

“We’ve got to do something,” I said.

“What, jump? We’re at the tip-top. There’s eight more stops until we get off and get beat up, too.”

“They won’t beat us up.” I said.

“They’ll beat us just for being on the colored ferris wheel.”

It didn’t take long before we got to the bottom of the ferris wheel. We were ready to make our exits like paratroopers out of an airplane. When our feet touched ground, the men grabbed us. Jeremy tried to take off running but a man snatched him up. His legs were still running while the man held him over his head.

“What the hell you riding the nigger ferris wheel for!”

He smacked him on the back of the head like you thump a cantaloupe.

They put him on the ground and began to step on him, not really hurting him.

“Stop it!” I yelled.

A man grabbed me and threw me to the ground. Another man picked me up and I started to run but I hit the chain that separated the colored line from the white line. I did a somersault and ended up face first on the ground, with a mouthful of sawdust, right beside the ferris wheel man. We were both tangled up with the chain and sign that said COLORED. Another man grabbed me. I screamed and kicked then looked at his hands. I recognized his wedding band and the way it fit so snugly onto his finger as if the finger and the ring were inseparable. It was my father.

“What the hell you doing on the colored ferris wheel?”

I stared at him.

“And wipe that shit off your face.”

He pulled out his shirt-tail and tried to wipe my face but I pushed him back.

“Stop,” I said.

“Stop what, boy?”

“The wheel. Turn it off.”

He looked around at the other men. They started to laugh.

“That your boy, Carl?” one of the men said.

My father didn't say anything. He had a small gash right below his right eye. He kept wiping it with his sleeve but it kept filling with blood, making him look like he was crying. The men laughed louder but then someone pointed and I could see several policemen moving toward

us. The men with clubs began to move backwards and then recede into the woods that led down to the swamp. Jeremy ran in the same direction as the men, leaving me and my father alone.

“You coming, Carl?” one of the men called to my father from the edge of the woods.

My father started to unwrap the chain and the COLORED sign from my feet, but it was too complicated of a mess. He finally gave up. A policeman turned on the lights to the ferris wheel and it lit up in its brilliant colors. The remaining people on the ferris wheel let out a sigh, all at the same time, as if a great burden had been lifted from them. I looked over at the ferris wheel man who still lay in the sawdust. I could see a big gash on the side of his head. The lights from the colored ferris wheel refracted into a kaleidoscope of shapes as they danced on the ferris wheel man’s face, but he still didn’t move. His Lucky Strike was still between his lip but the tip was ash now, dark as the sky. He didn’t even flinch when the regular ferris wheel music started again. Back in the main part of the fair in the sawdust midway, I could see the snake man staggering around calling out “Amanda,” which I figured was the hoochie-coochie show lady’s real name. The Iron Tongue girl and the Human Blow torch were tending to a couple of the agitators, putting dressings on their heads and making slings for their arms. My father was crouched beside me, watching it all. He had a funny look in his eye, a look I’d never seen before, sort of like a rabbit waiting to break free from after it’s been captured, right before it runs.

“Aren’t you going with them?” I said to him.

He looked at me a moment, then reached out to touch me. He paused. I could tell something was on his mind.

“That Polaroid picture in my drawer, I know you saw it,” he said. “That wasn’t your mother.”

He pulled back from me and turned away, then stood quickly and ran off, his back hunched over like soldiers do in the movies, brushing past the girl who played Zambora the gorilla girl, and finally vanishing into the opaque grey mist that was floating out of the Uchee Swamp.

The End.