

Carnival

by Heather Parks

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It doesn't happen until they reach the top of the arc. Metal scraping against itself, gears grinding against god knows how many years of WD-40 and whispered prayers. They swing in that odd way particular only to amusement park rides, up and out and over all at once, a way which makes it seem as though they are left alone in all the world.

He says as much to her. It only seems right to say the thing that everyone says at that moment. Have you ever felt so alone?

She looks at him oddly, and even though he knows what's coming, it throws him off-kilter. Not now, is what he thinks. But it must be now. Now is the perfect time for this and where could be better than way up here, in a place where he has nowhere else to go, nowhere else to look. Then he realizes this is more for her. She is the one who needs nowhere else to go, nowhere else to look.

Over the past three years he had watched her avoid any number of things, things he could have handled with ease. Not that it was a contest. They were different, for sure. But, really, she was bad. Hadn't even told the boyfriend before him that she had met someone new until well into their third month together; and, when she had, he practically had to hold her hand as she dialed the phone. She had used a metaphor about an Italian sports car to break it off -- this engine is running, that engine doesn't work. Nonsense.

She still hasn't spoken, hasn't responded to his comment about feeling alone. Her eyes, full of the look, flicker down and then back up, down again as her right hand starts to fidget with the ring on her left hand.

"I can't keep this." She doesn't take it off, just twists it endlessly, the section of her hair, the one which won't ever be caught back in a plastic band, falling over her cheek.

It's cold up here, and she's not warmly dressed. On top, she is wearing a navy-green parka over a beige sweater. The skin under the jeans, that is where she gets really icy, really frosty to the touch. At least she looks nice. He briefly wonders if this -- the looking nice -- has been planned.

"I didn't want it to be like this. I wanted to tell you before." Her voice trails off and she looks through the metal mesh cage towards the lights on the horizon.

That's the type of Ferris wheel they're in, the kind with cages. The kind with opposing metal benches for seats. They had been lucky to get a car to themselves. He'd watched, earlier, as the scruffy-looking guy manning the controls in the booth below shoved people in together -- gesturing and grunting and pointing -- sectioning off the line into groups of fours. He'd steered them away then, out of the line and over to the game booths running down the middle of the field. He tried his luck at a bean-bag toss and basketball hoops, watched her try to slide a wingnut over a maze of copper wire without hitting the wire itself. Finally, they had won a medium-sized red frog at balloon darts. Now, it sits across from them, staring almost straight at him, as if to say, what are you gonna do now, buddy.

"I met someone." She squeezes her eyes shut, and for the effort it must take for her to say such a thing, he almost feels pity. He catches himself just in time, remembering back a few years to a time when she had stolen a pair of panties from some job she had. It was just before Valentine's Day, and he remembers them vaguely: pink with dots. She wasn't caught right away, but she was caught eventually. Her manager spot-checked the videotape. Bad luck.

He hadn't been there when they'd interrogated her, but he'd heard the reenactment a thousand times, and no matter how she told it, she always ended up sounding like the victim. No two ways about it. She had been underpaid, she said, overworked. And for a pair of panties. Oh, how he grew to hate that word, hearing it over and over again. Panties. Panties. Panties. Flung around like something in a sorority house video run amok. A pair of panties that had probably cost a quarter to make in some back-alley sweatshop in Chinatown. For panties she had been dragged to corporate headquarters, at the flagship store (mortifying), the fancy one downtown (everyone in pearls and pressed denim), then made to wait for two hours before being berated and subsequently dismissed by some man (yes, a man) who acted as though she were a common criminal.

He thinks of these things in the time it would take to reach out to her. That victim shit is there now. Subtle, but he can still see it. The eyes welling up with tears, almost

crying, but not quite. A slight shiver (finally) wracking her body. The way she seems to disappear into the lumpy middle of herself, like an animal retreating into its pen. If he says one word -- just one word -- even if it's "fine" -- she will turn it against him. If he touches her, forget it. She's no "there, I've said it" type of girl; not her. So, he remains silent and sticks his hands in his coat pocket.

Briefly, he wonders if she'll launch into another version of the sports car metaphor.

He knows the guy about whom she is so teary-eyed, and there is a part of him that is most curious about that. There was definitely a little satisfaction to be derived from the look on her face right now, framed like it was by the mesh and all. He hadn't anticipated that, the bonus of setting.

He knows the guy about whom she is so teary-eyed because he sent him to her.

Now that he was thinking of him, the guy was nothing really. Nothing special. He couldn't even remember much about him, other than that he couldn't hold his liquor or shoot a game of pool. That was how it had happened, over the pool table.

"Got a girl?" The guy had asked, one eye checking out the legs of a waitress.

And before he could come up with some smart answer, the waitress with the legs was looking at him and he knew what for. How could he say "yes," how could he think "yes" when this girl who was maybe twenty-two, twenty-four tops, was looking at him with a tray of cold beers balanced on her hip.

"I got a girl for you." That's what he had said instead. It was amazing how easily it all came out. How he had a cousin who worked in the mall. To take it real easy and don't mention him.

The way he figured, it was a win/win situation any way you looked at it. If she went for this guy, she was a bitch and he'd get the waitress free and clear. Guilt-free, like those new potato chips, the ones without the fat. If not, no harm done. She'd have passed a little test, proved her affection -- not such a bad thing.

That was almost two weeks ago -- and now here they were. At the carnival. The waiting had been the worst -- setting events in motion and not knowing how they would turn out, like god or something. How was he to know if this guy would chicken out, meet some girl in the parking lot that same night.

But, here it was. There had been no girl in the parking lot.

"What do you mean?" He keeps his tone neutral. No sense in going too far, overplaying things.

"I mean I met someone." She sighs. "Jesus, do I have to keep saying it?"

He waits for her to take a deep breath and apologize.

"I'm sorry. It's just, I'm kind of bad at this."

"Bad at this?"

"You know what I mean." She's looking straight at him now, back arched and head up, ready to launch into a full conversation. "Remember when we went hiking, up near Lake Placid?"

She asks like he wouldn't remember the place, a fact that irritates him, since, as far as he knew, she wouldn't even know about Lake Placid unless he had taken her up there.

Instead of saying any of this he shrugs: "I guess so."

"You guess so? You took me up there." She sighs again, this time in an "and you wonder why I'm leaving you" kind of way. "I met this guy, he worked at the 7-11."

Remember you wouldn't go in and get me a pack of cigarettes because you liked some stupid song that was playing on the radio?"

Of course he remembered. She'd been sulky the whole day afterwards, and hadn't even gotten out of the car to see what was left of the old Alpine slide where he had broken his collarbone one summer.

"He worked there, gave me his number. We just started talking."

"That was a year ago."

There's a screech of metal outside that splits his eardrum and she's rambling on, about transfers and moving South, about having a couple of kids.

Her mouth forms words of her own – a years worth of words. Nothing about a bad pool player who'd happened to stroll into the mall.

The car moves forward and instead of feeling free his stomach churns and what flashes through his mind is not the waitress at all. What flashes through his mind are the lyrics to "Fire and Rain" and how nice the breeze had been that day, blowing through the open car windows and gently raising and lowering her cotton skirt -- the fabric lightly brushing against her bare legs in a spot he had once, yes once very much once, longed to kiss.

ABOUT HEATHER PARKS

Heather Parks lives in New York City, where she works as a film producer and writer. When not tapping away at her keyboard, she can be found – or rather cannot be found – traveling in places described by her 6-year old Godson, Jack, as "distant lands." At all other times, she can be reached at the coffee shop on Jane Street.

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