Carny

Connie Simmons∗

∗Iowa State University

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Abstract

"Hey, Charlie," Mac called to me, “Get those big black legs of yours movin’ and get on over here. I’m ready to go eat.”
“‘Hey, Charlie,’” Mac called to me, “‘Get those big black legs of yours movin’ and get on over here. I’m ready to go eat.’”

I strolled over to the booth. “‘Okay, Okay! I’m here. Go on and eat. Thanks for takin’ over for me.’” Mac ran off towards the eating tent. He ran the dart game next to me. He was okay for a white guy. He never called me “nigger,” like some of the others did. Working in a carny isn’t bad, I guess. You meet a few nice people, like Mac, and you get to see a lot of places. I’d never been out of the city much, not ‘til I joined up with the show.

It was really hot that day, so we were really busy. At first, I didn’t see the little kid. He was squeezed right up next to the booth, staring up at me. He had a double dip ice cream cone squeezed tight in his fist. I thought he was gonna crush the brown sugar cone, he was holding it so tight.

“‘Hi!’” I said, as I looked down at his grubby face. “‘You lost?’”

He didn’t answer. He just stared up at me from his big brown cow eyes without saying a word.

I went back to work.

“All right now!” Who’s gonna be the next winner? Step right up, sir. Three balls for a nickel. Just knock down three pins and you’ve won yourself one of these lovely little teddy bears. Hey, hey, hey! A pretty good throwin’ arm you’ve got there. Just one more hit and you’ve won! Oh-h-h! Too bad. Give it another try? It may be your lucky day. Three balls, just a nickel.”

The man went away with a purple teddy bear tucked under one arm and a pretty blonde girl hanging on the other. You know how girls are when their fellers win
something for 'em. They go all googley-eyed and get kind of mushy acting, like it was a million dollars the guy had won instead of a teddy bear.

Well, I looked down to where that little kid had been and sure enough he was still there, staring up at me. I was beginning to think he didn’t have any eyelids. He never blinked. I'd seen pictures where the people didn’t have eyelids, but I thought that was just because it was a picture and not a real person. Standing there, watching him not blinking made me nervous. The more I wondered about his eyelids, the more I blinked my own. "'You wanna play, kid? Is that it? Well, give me a nickel and you can. I started to hand him a ball, but he didn’t move to take it. "'Where're your folks? Huh? They’re probably out lookin' for you right now.'"

I decided there wasn’t anything I could do except call the cops, and I was too busy to do that. Someone had just stopped to play. '"Go on, kid. Beat it! If you aren’t gonna play, I ain’t got time for you."

He turned around, and his blond head bobbed off through the crowds of people. I watched him as that mob scooted him along, then he was gone. It was like he was just swallowed up by that huge crowd. I guess you could say he was swallowed up in my mind, too, 'cause I just forgot about him.

"'All right! Here we go. Who's gonna be the next big winner? Three balls, just a nickel.'"

The heat parched my skin and lips, and I started thinking about that boy’s chocolate ice cream cone and how cool it looked. I always liked chocolate ice cream. Finally, the heat just got to be too much, and the people started leaving. I stopped shouting. The few who were left didn’t really care if they could win a teddy bear or not.

Now and then a noisy, sweaty group of people hurried by, heading for the main entrance and probably for home. I watched one man stroll past with his hands in his pockets and his eyes looking down at the ground. You see people like him all the time. Either they’re trying to get past you without having to look up and meet your eyes, or else
they've got an awful bad stiff neck. If he'd looked up, I
think I'd have stuck out my tongue and wiggled my ears.
Wouldn't he a been scared then? I'll have to do that
sometime, just to see what happens.

Some music drifted over to where I was, and when I
looked towards the side shows, I could see that some of the
girls had come out on the stage. They weren't doing much,
they didn't do an awful lot inside, either, but there was a
group of six or seven guys standing around watching
them.

One of the girls' names was Rhonda. She had real fair
skin and blond hair. She came over and talked to me
sometimes when it wasn't a very busy day. She'd lean her
elbow on the counter and put her face up real close to
mine. Then she'd say 'Hi, Sweetheart. How's business?''
I guess she thought she was doin' me a favor by talkin' to
me, 'cause one time when I asked her for a date she kind
of hem-hawed around and then finally came up with some
excuse for why she couldn't. She didn't talk to me much
after that. I try not to let those things bother me, too
much, though.

A loud squeal came from the ferris wheel, then. It
was slowing down to a stop. Pete ran over and unlatched
one of the seats, and two blond-headed girls climbed out,
then ran off giggling towards the gate. There was no one
waiting to get on, and I could see old Nellie's head nodding
as she sat dozing in her blue and white striped cage.

Nellie's been with the show a long time. Longer than
anyone else. She was a pretty good old girl. She always
talked to me real nice. And she'd get on the others if she'd
hear 'em makin' fun of me bein' black. I found out later
that she'd been married to a black man from Chicago. I
guess that explains her bein' so nice to me.

The gears needed oil. That's why the ferris wheel
groaned so loud when it was stopping. Usually I didn't
even notice it. The noise from the people and all the other
carnival rides drowned it out, but on such a still quiet
afternoon it sounded like a bomb going off.
I turned from the ferris wheel and glanced over at the merry-go-round. There was just one little kid still riding. His black horse slid up and down with the brass pole as he went by, moving around to the other side of the circle. I watched the other horses glide past, out of my sight, until the little boy came around the other side, still sitting on the black horse. The carousel music cut through the still August air, as the horses and the little boy slowed down to a stop. I watched as the little boy climbed down.

He shuffled through the dirt, walking towards me. His bare toes curled under as he walked. His hands were out of sight somewhere behind his back, and his head was cocked to one side. His mouth was pulled into a thin tight line, and his lips slid back and forth across each other as he shifted his jaw bones from left to right in a sawing motion. As he came closer, I could see dark, sticky stains on his chin. His brown eyes stared at me like I was some kind of freak in one of the side shows, but he kept on coming closer.

"You still here, kid?" I asked as he reached the booth. "What's your name, anyway?"

He just stood there, not blinking, not saying anything. A funny thing happened to me, then. I started liking him, even though he was white and even though he didn't have eyelids. He was honest. You get a lot of kids who hang around, waiting for a chance to take off with your cash box or something like that, but not this kid. He was just there 'cause he wanted to be. He was really little, too. He couldn't have been over seven or eight. He probably didn't even know how to steal.

The sky was starting to get black. A storm was coming. There's always a storm after it's been that hot. I told the boy it was going to rain and that I'd be closing up soon, but he didn't make a move to leave. He just reached up at me with his sticky fingers and lightly touched my hand. Then he blinked. I was really glad he did that. Otherwise I might have gone on forever thinking he didn't
have any eyelids. I could hardly believe it when he opened his mouth.

"I ain't never seen a nigger before," he said. That was all. He didn't say another word. He just turned around and ran off towards the main gate.

Like I said, the kid was honest. I wonder what his folks said when he told them he'd touched a nigger's hand. Maybe he even got a licking for it.

I hope not.