Third Childhood

Craig Hildreth*

*Iowa State University

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Abstract

One fine morning, after I had been dressed and washed, (or washed and dressed, I should say), by the kind young man (Henry, I believe) who works the day shift here, and I had been wheeled out to a tantalizing breakfast of sugared mush, I got the horrible news that this was the day we were all going to the carnival...
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"Oh Mother of God," I moaned to Roland, who had been the unfortunate to drop this bundle of joy in my lap. He was a member of the '18 class of Yale, and like to listen to classical music. Myself not coming from any college, I wasn't as appreciative of the Old Masters as Roland was, and preferred to watch television. "I absolutely hate carnivals. Let's sneak out of here."

"No thanks," Roland declared. "I don't think my arms could hold out. Besides, what's the matter with a carnival? All you have to do is get some cotton candy, win a stuffed banana or a pair of doggie glasses, and then just spend the afternoon in the shade watching all of the idiots go by."

"I have, for your information, not seen a carnival since I was a boy."

"Well," he mused, "call me an old crock-pot, but I think you missed out on something. Frances and I used to love to go and eat sweet corn, ride the ferris-wheel, or just sit and watch all of the idiots go by."

Sometimes Roland was not a very good conspirator. I argued with him some more, but then Dixie, our smiley, wily Activities Director, brought some men in and had us all shuffled out to the freshly washed house van. She checked off our names as we were placed in the long van, while some of the crazy ones strained to get out of their chairs as they looked on. I guess they wanted to go, too. Hell, they could have my place, except that they would probably take their clothes off before we even got out of the driveway.
“Come on, Clara,” squeaked Dixie, “we’re going to have lots of fun there. You all are going to have tickets to the square dance.” She was attempting to get old Clara out of her chair, but Clara just got a death-grip on either side of her lap board and made some noise that reminded me of a cat caught in a dryer.

“COME ON, CLARA!” Dixie was really getting hot now, though I couldn’t hear her as well when one of her boys shut the door to the van. She was an immense woman, with cheeks that puffed out like she was chewing a wad in each. She finally gave up on old Clara and had her brought inside, all the time brushing her hands on the front of her pants. Must have grabbed the old gal by the pits, I guess.

Well, after that row, we loaded up the rest of the van (minus Clara’s spot) and took off. The driver was a young man who liked to talk to the crazy ones. He probably had a big laugh when they told him to watch out for the train roaring through the living room. He smoked a couple of cigarettes before Dixie yelled at him to cut it out.

I saw Roland a few rows ahead of me. He seemed excited, so I figured he must be humming something to himself, some Bach or Beethoven or something. I wanted to yell at him that I hate carnivals, as a kind of last word, but I changed my mind when I noticed Dixie across the aisle from me. She was combing her black hair, which fought back at her with each stroke. It was one of those webs that went straight up, and every time she touched at it the whole mess quivered like a bowl of pudding. She must have called the T.V. news station, which, if true, was even worse than the carnival. There’s nothing more ridiculous than a news story about a bunch of “senior citizens” enjoying the race track or a picnic, when all they do is sit and stare at the camera. Besides, I think it’s sad, especially when little children have to watch us. I hope my granddaughter doesn’t let her kids get all scared from seeing a group of old horses like us. On visiting days I have my best suit put on me and go to her house and eat turkey and cranberry sauce and play with the kittens and try to forget about those long, long hallways with the always-open doors and people crying.

The young man driving was tearing along the freeway now, and every time he hit a curve I could feel the seat of my pants inching towards the center aisle and Dixie. I redoubled my grip on the back of the seat in front of me and tried not to
think about her perfume. I figured she must have gotten it from the housekeeper's closet. I could see other cars on the freeway; most of them had young families in them, but then the sun came out and everything went white and my forehead started to hurt. For the past five or six years I have had a bad time with bright light, and yes, I know that nothing can be done about it. God I hate carnivals.

After a while Dixie got up and told the young driver to turn into the west gate. The van rumbled and tumbled and we all held on like bullheads on a stringer and Dixie's hair kept time with the potholes. Finally we stopped and the men put us into our chairs (I still couldn't see much), and off we went to the carnival, which must have been set up in a K-Mart parking lot. I could hear lots of young voices and the grunting of the rides' motors and children squealing.

They wheeled us across the parking lot, which must have been a maze of cables, for I was jounced around pretty good. My poor eyes finally adjusted enough to see the cotton candy that someone had shoved into my hands. The stuff was warm and sticky and I got rid of it. A corn dog and a Sno-cone later they dragged us over to a deliciously shady canopy, and it was there that I was able to find Roland.

"I hate cotton candy," I growled to him. He seemed kind of hot from the sun. Big drops of sweat were on his face. "Did you win that stuffed doll from somewhere?"

He didn't answer me, but sweated some more and I realized that he was crying.

"Why are you doing this?" He looked over to me and wiped his face.

"Frances and I," he softly stated, "used to love to go here and see the hogs and ride the roller coaster and eat jelly . . ."

I felt sorry for him, but I knew that the best thing I could do for him was to let him talk. So there we sat, in the corner of the tent, he wiping his face and me nodding. The sun seemed to burn right through the cloth and into my eyes, and I was folding and unfolding my hands. I took my watch off and he was better now and calling himself an old crock-pot, when I noticed two very serious little girls staring at us. I became aware of the cotton candy on my trousers and sweat dribbled down the back of my neck and I yelled at them and they scurried off.

We went back to the house after that, carrying our pennants and rag dolls. I dozed off for most of the trip, until
the van door was opened in the driveway of the house and Roland doors, down the carpeted foyer, past the doors of the Administrator's office, and into the living room, where a few of the crazy ones were watching *60 Minutes*. I was exhausted and about to ask if I could take a nap when I heard my name being called. It was a feminine voice, flowery and familiar; the voice of a child; more than one, coming closer; I wheeled around.

"Hi Great-Granpa."

"Hi Great-Granpa."

"Hello Grandfather."

In front of me, dressed in daisies and tennies and curls and smiles, were my two wonderful great-grand kids, and behind them, in a light blue skirt and vest, was my granddaughter. She bent over and hugged me, and I wanted to close my eyes.

"We were out shopping and these two kept begging me to take them to see where you live," she beamed, "so I had to give in or risk an uprising." She had her arms around them both, and they seemed to stand taller than they ever had before. I could feel my jacket clinging to my back and stared at the dust swirling in the sunlight over by the picture window. My old jaw was wiggling and my bony hands were white on the sides of the chair and I was opening my mouth when suddenly Roland appeared and boomed out in his Yale Cheer voice, "So you're Susan! And these two pirates must be Thomas and Caroline! Well, I'm Roland and in cahoots with this gentleman so you had better watch out!" He was laughing and shaking hands like a presidential candidate, and the kids were giggling. I slowly looked around us but only noticed the bright beam of light in the picture window, and then I reached over and grabbed Tommy and played "Now I've got'cha!" with him and we all stood or sat there, gossiping. Later we took a stroll around the block, and Roland and I told stories and the kids didn't believe us but we didn't care. I showed them my room and they all signed the back of their school pictures, while Roland said that the sunglasses I won at the carnival made me look like a Dachshund he used to know. After they had left, Roland and I sat out in the driveway under the purple and gold sky, the fragile sunbeams resting on our backs.

Before we went in, he looked at me and said, "I think my wife would have enjoyed knowing you."

That night I slept in anticipation of the coming dawn.