

The Girl at the Fair

Billy Demaris wonders if he's done for the night. Resting his elbows on the counter, he stares out at the midway. Most of the fair-goers have left—those that remain head for the exits or hang back in small groups, talking and laughing through protracted goodbyes. The air still isn't cool enough to fog their breath, but it does kill the sick smell of fry grease. The carousel continues to turn, its music droning on endlessly, most of its animals riderless.

He first notices her beyond the park's gazebo, cutting diagonally across the midway, sometimes stopping to let people pass, but never diverting her path. She's heading directly for him. He tries not to stare but for short snatches, pretending to look busy and not just waiting for a customer. She finally stops in front of his game trailer, crosses her arms over her chest and exhales a long sigh. Young, maybe nineteen or early twenties, her mascara is smeared as if she'd been crying; perhaps another townie girl ditched by her boyfriend after a fight.

“Hello miss, how are you doing on this lovely night?”

“Fine. I'd like to shoot a round or two.”

“Sure. You've got until midnight, then I have to close—

rules you know.” Billy places the gun in her hands instead of on the counter. She doesn’t seem in the mood for small talk.

She studies the rifle a second or two, then looks up and shudders.

“Oh you’re freezing in that T-shirt,” he says. “You can’t hit nothing shaking all over—here, put this on.” He hands her his soft, pile jacket.

She mouths the words “thank you” and slips the jacket on, flicking her fine, blond hair out from underneath in one fluid motion. “I’m ready, let’s go,” she says, handing him a five dollar bill.

Billy places four more guns on the counter and starts up the duck gallery.

Standing erect, gun leveled, she fires away as the metal ducks come out, knocking three down with ten shots. “Next,” she says, snatching up the second gun. She pops six birds this time. “Next, speed it up a little.” *Ping, ping, ping*—the ducks fall down, five in a row, miss two, hit three more. “Next, more speed.” In rapid succession the ducks fly out and go down just as fast, sending a cacophony of sounds—smacking BBs, electronic quacks and strike bells—out across the midway.

As she shoulders the final gun, Billy pulls a trick on her and sends the ducks out in the opposite direction. She quickly

swings back to the left, misses five and then, grinning behind the sights, empties the remaining rounds into three ducks. She lowers her gun and stares at him.

“Smart ass,” she says, “you mucked up my run.”

Billy is bent forward, laughing. “You were so serious—I had, I had to.” She frowns and then a smile forms over her lips. He continues. “But you did great, you get to pick a jumbo prize.”

“I don’t need any of your stupid prizes—just came here to shoot, get things off my mind.”

“Well, you must have a lot on your mind. Least let me give your five back.”

“Naw, that’s okay. You earned it, smart ass.”

Something breaks loose inside, like the pop of a rusty padlock, and Billy decides he’s not going to die behind this counter—he’s going to marry her or somebody like her, get out of the carnival business, learn a trade and settle down. He isn’t sure how to accomplish this, or in what order, but he’s going to begin tonight.

“Hey, would you like to go for a walk, have a beer with me after I close up?” Studying her face, trying to remain positive, he waits for the possible brush-off.

“Oh, you’re smooth—I don’t even know your name.”

“I’m sorry, it’s Billy. And yours?”

“Holly. Nice to meet you. Look, I’ve got to take care of something first—can we meet in a half hour or so?”

“Sure, where should we meet?” Billy is now getting cold but he doesn’t feel cold—his mind is completely upon her—how he made her warm, made her smile.

Her head turns into a slight breeze, sending cascades of hair streaming back across her face. She flicks it away and says, “Ah, how about over at the corrals? You know, where all the trailers are parked? I’d like to see the horses.”

“Sounds great, I know where that is. We’ll meet at the OK Corral.”

“Okay,” she says smiling. “We’ll have a BB gun shoot-out.” She turns to leave but then stops, removes his jacket and holds it out to him. “Oh, I almost forgot, this is yours. Thanks so much.”

“Sure you don’t want to keep it? You can give it back when we meet.”

“Oh no, that’s okay. I’ve got one in my car.”

He takes the jacket and watches her walk away, the grass flattened and strewn with trash, wondering if he’ll ever see her again.

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Billy’s mind races as he walks toward camp. He’ll need to stop at his RV first, clean up, get the beers, and then head

over. The corrals are a bit further beyond, at the very edge of the fairgrounds. She must like horses.

The thought of her body in the same jacket he now wears—his jacket—feels right to him, and he wonders if it's a sign. He doesn't know why this girl has such an effect on him, he just knows that he could love her, take care of her, buy her a horse if she wants. His mind swirls with possibilities, all positive, all good.

He passes a splotted screen behind which sparks scatter like fireflies; there are muffled zapping sounds and the smell of burnt metal. One of the Ferris wheel crew is welding something. Maybe he could do that—he'll talk to him tomorrow. Wouldn't want to travel too far each day. They could have a little house together, with sunflowers out front, in a little town, maybe like this town. Have to find time to look into all this.

He arrives at the game, ride and food concessionaires' camp, home for now among his gypsy family. His RV trailer backs up to a creek and it's buggy; he hopes the cool air will keep the flies grounded. He enters through the narrow, sheet metal door, washes up, then grabs two beers out of his tiny frig.

Outside again, he walks toward the corrals with his head down, his mind still churning with plans, his excitement

building. No time tonight to have a beer with his carnie friends. He'll miss them, but he'll have the stories about them and this nomadic life to tell his children. And they'll have both a dad and a mom—plus a home, a school, and maybe their own ponies.

Past the harsh lights and noise of the midway, past his camp with its dark, swaying cottonwoods, the sky opens into an ocean of fiery stars. He stares at them, the first time in many years, and remembers his Dad. He used to hoist Billy up on his shoulders on those clear prairie evenings and tell him the stars were the greatest show on earth, that when you had nothing left, you would always have the stars—nobody could take them away. He sometimes saw him standing alone in their backyard, speaking softly at the night sky.

His Dad raised him after his mother left one day and never returned. He tries but can't remember much about her, only the sadness of it all after she disappeared from their lives. He felt sorry for his Dad but there was nothing he could do—nothing to stop the parade of floozies who didn't measure up, the bouts of heavy drinking, the job firings, bill collectors, nothing to stop the tailspin of a basically good man who was crushed, whose inner light had gone out.

He remembers his Dad taking him fishing on Saturdays—those were the best of times—in the noisy,

aluminum johnboat. They fished the river and sometimes they would go at night, when the waters ran dark and mysterious and bats darted and dived—black shapes against a starlit sky. They didn't talk much, but he taught him how to fish. When he caught his first keeper bass, his Dad snapped his picture at the dock with the fish in one hand and the pole in the other, and then took him to eat at McDonald's. When he got the picture back, he gave it to his son and told him never to lose it. At eighteen, Billy joined a carnival circuit and recalls the day he left: his Dad stood on their tiny front porch, smoking a cigarette, tears streaming down his rigid face. He simply nodded when Billy waved goodbye. He never saw him again after that—he had tied cinder blocks to his feet and drowned in the river, just below the johnboat.

Billy arrives behind the stockmen's camp, just before the corrals, his mind still going back, trying to make sense of his past, when a long forgotten memory unveils itself like an old family movie—silent, shaky—as if from a dream. He's at a fair with his Dad. It's crowded, full of commotion, and he's been on some kiddy rides—the teacup was one, and he remembers petting the baby goats. Now they are walking, his Dad has him by one hand, and in the other he holds an ice cream cone in terrible shape, melting from the heat. It gets knocked to the ground somehow and he begins to cry.

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When Billy comes to he's lying face down on the cool, dewy grass. His head pounds and his left side feels cold and numb. He twists his neck to get more air but can't move his right arm from beneath his body. Shifting his left arm into place, he tries to lift himself but sharp pains from his side prevent this. The arm is sticky with blood. Panicky, realizing he's been stabbed, he tries again with all his strength to get up, but there's nothing left in his shaky muscles. So thirsty, he mouths the wet grass, tries to speak—nothing. His jumbled thoughts latch onto one, final hope: the girl will be here soon; she'll see him and pick him up. But his breathing has already begun to slow, and a calming warmth descends over him. His mind drifts back to the little boy at the fair, looking down at his half eaten ice cream, melting in the grass—it was so hot and bright that day—and he remembers. His Dad was there, and a pretty girl wiped his hands off and then picked him up—she had long, blond hair blowing about her face. Yes, she was with Dad, he remembers now.