

## How To Leave Your Childhood Behind

It must be twenty years ago now but I revisit that night often. It's stuck to me, stuck down hard on my memory like a Bandaid over a wound that'll sting like blazes - you just know it - if you try to peel the plaster away. The hurt from that night has healed, of course. The hurt's gone wherever hurt goes, but the scar is there, like a callus on my brain. That night has become part of who I am. There's no forgetting it now.

I'd tried to get out of going. Tried to bullshit my way clear. Unleashed a 13-year-old's battery of lame excuses.

'Nah. Thanks anyway, Dad. Can't be arsed. Plus the Show looks dumb this year.' He gave me one of his looks. Disbelief. Weariness. Something in between. Puffed out his fleshy top lip, let it go with a horsey snort. Parental dramatics.

'The Royal Show dumb?' he said. 'Dirty. Loud. Crap food. Sure. But dumb?' I shot him one of my own looks. Disinterest. Scorn. Added a frown for transparency.

'Aw c'mon!' he said, whining for effect. 'One last Show. Just you and me, kid. We'll go at night, hey, so no-one will see you scream like a girl on The Octopus.' I shoved him. Hard. He laughed. It was a done deal.

The crowd hustled forward, a tide of bobbing heads surging along Sideshow Alley. A mash of teenage boys, older than me, bigger than me, overtook us in a fug of sturdy bodies, sweat, armpit stink. Their newly gravelled voices were hoarse from shouting. I heard the word c^nt hissed loudly over my shoulder and flinched with embarrassment as the glamazon blonde in front spun around. Did she think it was me? I feigned sudden interest in my jacket sleeve, pretending not to see her. Hoping she wouldn't see me, the boy at the Show with his Dad. I belonged to the old man in the mustard Polo with the beer-hardened paunch. The Dad who plastered his hair with VO5 gel and forked it back with a wide-tooth comb. 1980s Gordon Gecko. That was the look he was going for - the Dad with the firm grip on irony that no-one else understood. My schoolmates thought he was being funny on purpose with his slicked hair and his cardigans and suede shoes. Glamazon blonde stared straight at me. Oh God. Then her eyes flicked over my head. Found their mark. The foulmouth behind me laughed loudly. She giggled. Caught between them, I twisted around to get a look at him. Tall. Big shoulders. Lots of hair. I was invisible to her. A knot of anger

tightened in my throat and I swallowed it down, silently cursing Cool Foulmouth as he jostled past me, hooting. Glamazon blonde tracked him, her eyes shining.

All along Sideshow Alley, generators thumped their diesel fumes into a troposphere of dust and stale tobacco, sweetened with wafts of sherbert. Standing in the window of a pink caravan, a cute girl with red lips shook a cloud of cinnamon over a giant tray of hot doughnuts. She looked up. Stared at me, staring at her. Mortified, I sped up, almost collecting a gangly bloke in a silly paper hat, emptying a drum of old chip fat into a drain.

'Sorry,' I mouthed. He scowled. I glanced back at the red-lipped girl. She was smirking at me. Overhead, the Octopus gathered speed and sprang its tentacle arms, suckered with blinking lights. Two girls, hair flying, shrieked their second thoughts to a gaggle of friends waiting below. Dad pointed to the ticket booth.

'No way,' I mouthed, horrified. Wouldn't be seen dead on The Octopus. Not with him. He grinned. Sidled over and punched my arm:

'Chicken shit.' I punched him back. Harder. Watching us, a weary-looking woman wearing a dirt-stripped apron smoked beside her popcorn van. She forced a smile at me and motioned to her awning, pegged all around with toffee apples. I shook my head. Dad propped himself at the shooting range. I caught a slice of his red jocks as he bent over to cock the kid-height rifle butt. Bum in the air, he lined up the sight and plinked the trigger. No balloon exploded.

'Unlucky, mate,' barked a male voice through a tinny mike. The stall guy, tattooed, bearded, reached across the prize board and pulled a fluffy toy from a basket. He tossed it to Dad, who looked around and - spotting me hovering nearby - lobbed it my way. I kept my arms at my sides and watched the toy land in a puddle of spilled drink.

'Nice,' Dad called. I shrugged. Kept walking. The crowd hadn't noticed the last smear of orange sky retreating over the horizon. I watched the darkness swagger in. It did not speak of what was coming. In the gloom, the scariest rides came alive. The crowd ramped up in anticipation. I could sense the force-field of adrenalin hovering over the teenagers as they queued for their hit of terror. The giant Rollercoaster thundered above us. Screams stabbed the air as the carriages plunged into their dives. The night pressed itself upon us, gave away its shadows to the carnies who shrank beside their tents to light up a fag and swig cheap booze from

hip flasks. Deaf to the roar of their machines, they looked content. Or bored. I couldn't tell. A huddle of girls in Reeboks, tight jeans, low ponytails - debated which ride to try next. One of them was in my Maths class. Ophelia her name was. Imagine that. I watched the carnie's eyes glide up and down her legs. Felt a bit sick. Then did the same myself. Beside me, the Ghost Train rattled violently inside its two storey haunt. A small boy, mounted to his father's shoulders, absorbed the terrifying spectacle of fantasy overriding reality, his eyes round, glassy. A wooden witch, impaled on her broomstick, lurched at us from the rickety façade, her cackle exploding from a nearby speaker. The kid and I recoiled, but I don't think anyone saw. Dad was nowhere. I was pleased at first. Relieved. Then edgy. The longer I was alone the more I circled, scanning for Gordon Gecko hair and mustard. Dug my hands into my pockets, scuffing my sneaker into the dirt. Tried to make it look like I was hanging, at ease, waiting for mates. Better still, girlfriends.

There! Dad was throwing baseballs at milk bottles stacked in pyramids. I could tell by his body language he was getting worked up. So could the carnie, a scrawny little bloke with long greasy hair. Roaring into his mike, he started taking the piss, one hand clapped to Dad's shoulder, like they were a double act. A gaggle of onlookers stopped to watch.

'Ladies and gentlemen, come see how it's done.'

Dad's knee was up, like a pitcher winding up on his plate. He tried for a curve ball. Missed the bottles altogether. A titter rippled through the bystanders. I saw Dad's jaw clench.

'It's a screwball, Daddy-O!' rasped the carny, clearly enjoying himself. 'Step on up! Surely you can do better! Only a dollar a ball.'

His voice cracked, like he'd finally blown his pipes from squawking all day. Dad threw up his hands, made a pretence of being offended for amusement's sake. He wandered over to me as the rubberneckers dispersed.

'Slimy bastard had his bottles rigged,' he hissed in my ear.

'Well, duh,' I snorted, though I had no idea what he meant. For a second, Dad looked wounded. I felt a prick of guilt. We'd nearly covered the steep rise of the alley. At the top of the hill, the Ferris Wheel sat like a blinking lodestar, gliding through its orbit. It had been a Showgrounds fixture as long as I could remember, as long as

Dad could remember, each boat sheltered by an umbrella roof painted in a different colour. As I watched, the wheel began slowing to take on new passengers. A trickle of people exited down the stairs. I looked up at the sliver of white moon partly obscured by the top-most gondola as it rocked on its pivot. Why was it rocking? The other cabins hung motionless. I noted its sole occupant - a man. He was standing unsteadily, gripping the yellow awning above his head. Was he young? Older than me. Younger than Dad, I guessed. I squinted to make him out against the liquorice sky. Long pants. Short sleeves. Hair long enough to be ruffled by the wind. For a moment, I envied him, on top of the world like that, with the guts to stand up and rock his boat. I tried to picture his view beyond Sideshow Alley: the floodlit pavilions, the night folded across the canvas of a Friday night and beyond - the dark canopies of the gums and pines of suburbia. Television sets would be turning to the 7 o'clock news. Mr Caldwell next door would be sitting on his porch cracking his first or fifth beer. At home, Mum would be washing the dinner dishes. My sister would be whining about having to dry. But beneath the Ferris Wheel, on the last night of the Royal Show, no-one seemed to have noticed the Standing Man but me. What was the point of being alone up there, pulling a stunt like that? He needed an audience bigger than one kid at the Show with his Dad. At least a bunch of mates to egg him on. And then in one smooth movement, he hooked his leg over the metal gate and swung out onto the rigging. I gasped. Wheeled around to Dad but he'd kept on walking. I marked him, ahead, talking to a woman I vaguely recognised. She threw back her head and laughed at something Dad said. He looked pleased with himself. Was holding in his spare tyre, I could tell.

I stayed where I was, staring up, fixated on the man who'd now anchored himself to the steel cable below his cabin, his body stretched taut, arms pegged to an invisible strut above his head. I sensed he was moving - almost imperceptibly - feeding his hands along the line. His feet, a beat behind, edged along the spoke that met the rim of the wheel. What was he doing? I squinted to measure the length of his arm against his distance from the carriage gate and concluded the safety of the cabin was now beyond his reach. The tails of his shirt fluttered. His head was at an odd angle, neck stiff, as though he couldn't look down. Shouldn't look down. The herd parted around me, oblivious to what was happening over their heads, tired from traipsing around the Show, pissed off at the expense, the shit food, the crap showbags and now - vaguely irritated by the lone boy gawping upwards, blocking the flow of traffic. It was too much. I bolted the dozen footsteps separating me from Dad.

He was winding up his conversation with the mystery woman. The lady eyed me, gave Dad a cheesy smile and moved off.

‘Look!’ I pointed up. He followed my finger but his eyes jagged on the Exterminator, whose spinning limbs had reached warp speed.

‘No. The Ferris Wheel. At the top.’ Dad saw him. His body stiffened.

‘Something must be broken?’ I said.

‘No tool belt, sport.’

‘Maintenance?’

‘No harness.’

Standing Man was almost at the Wheel’s rim now and running out of spoke. He’d covered a tiny distance, maybe a metre. To my mind, he’d shown no hesitation. No fear. He’d moved with purpose, determination, like he had somewhere to be. Another engagement. One by one, people were spotting him now. Their curiosity became contagious. It spread in the nudges and points, the lowered voices, the hands cupped to open mouths. In the collective catching of breath. The crowd stalled. No-one tried to muscle forward. Kids looked around blankly, feeling the tension. A sea of heads now tilted back.

Someone yelled: ‘He’s a stuntman!’ A frisson of excitement.

A shouted reply: ‘Where’s his parachute then?’ The anticipation fell away. Three men in dark overalls darted between us, around us, then leapt up the steps of the wheelhouse, shouting and flailing their arms at the driver.

‘Is it a stunt Dad?’ Like a Show stunt or something?’

‘I don’t know, champ. I don’t know what he’s doing up there, but whatever it is, it’s not maintenance. You do that at the bottom. Not the top.’

‘Dad?’ I said, feeling the first sickening thud in my chest. He didn’t respond.

Cool Loudmouth and his mates appeared from nowhere, jostling for space, cramming themselves in front of us. I shrank back as they stumbled and shouted over the top of one another, competing for the crowd’s attention.

'Freak!' hooted the tallest boy. Cool Loudmouth signalled to someone with an overhead wave. Glamazon Blonde, trailing two friends, weaved her way towards him. I saw her hook his elbow, try to drag him away from his huddle. He shook his arm free and bellowed upwards:

'G'arn, you loser. Jump!' I'll never forget the way Standing Man leapt forward. Tensed his thighs. Sprang forward. Sailed outwards. Leapt. Like he wasn't going to be *that* loser. Leapt. So no-one would ever think he fell. I pressed my face into Dad's shirt. Thought of Mum's face. Her big honey-coloured eyes. The way she massaged my neck while we watched TV. I thought so hard about her I didn't hear the screams. Dad's hand was crushing my forehead into the muscle of his shoulder. I couldn't have moved had I wanted to. I didn't want to. I wanted to see only black. Hear only silence.. Anything to stop the screaming.

For weeks afterwards, the only thing I saw when I closed my eyes was his silhouette, momentarily airborne, backlit by the pavilion floodlight. Even now, twenty years later, I can summon the precise arrangement of his body mid-flight. Legs hip-width apart, loose, not locked at the knees. Arms outspread for one beat of time, the single second I watched him. I still wonder what was going through his mind as his feet left the solidness, the reassurance of that steel strut. When there was no way back. And no future. Had he noticed us below him - all of us - staring up? Did he hear Cool Loudmouth's taunt? The goading voice, loaded with teenage swagger? I cannot describe the sound of a world crashing. One life ending. I left my childhood behind that night.

Years later, coming back from a field trip, I ran into Cool Loudmouth in a butcher's shop of all places. Took me a moment to place him but then the penny dropped. He was still bigger than me. Still sported the broad shoulders but middle age had weighed in, thickening his neck, thinning his hair, abrading his good looks. He ordered a pile of chops. I tried to picture him as a Dad. He was wearing a wedding ring. The butcher disappeared into the cool room and Cool Loudmouth half turned to acknowledge me – apologetically - for his large order. There was a heaviness about him now, like a man forced to admit his life is no longer full of possibility. I wanted to ask whether he thought about that night as often as I did. Did he replay it, over and over, adding and subtracting his guilt with the same, infinitely recurring question: *Was it me? Did Standing Man die because of me?*

I can remember his exact intonation, the menace in his voice as he bawled upwards:  
*'G'arn, you loser. Jump!'*

I wondered if that night at the Show had shadowed him into adulthood, whether it would dog his conscience until his old man's body was feeble and his addled brain was weary of living. Would that night remain as potent and terrifying for him as it was for me, a memory fired like clay, in a kiln hotter than hell, into something unforgettable. A permanent scar. Until the last breath went out of him.