

Misadventure

It wasn't exactly the ideal summer job. I mean cotton candy? Good. Unlimited amounts of corndogs at half price? Better. Free amusement park rides on my break? Yes please. But I never even imagined that in the midst of all these wonderful things, I'd find myself sitting inside a hot booth, completely and utterly miserable. While waiting on my next victim, I mean customer, to con 10 bucks out of (who pays ten dollars to throw a ring around a pop can anyways?), I fanned myself with a stray hotdog wrapper, and regretted every decision I had ever made that lead me up to that point.

I promised myself one last summer of adventure. Maybe that was the first problem there; never promise yourself anything. It never turns out well, and this I know from experience.

I was painfully aware that my weeks were numbered; sometimes I caught myself counting down the days until I left for university. Most people would have been excited. I mean no parents, no curfew and the freedom to eat dessert before dinner? That's living the dream, I know. But there was a small nagging part of my brain that told me I wasn't quite ready for university. I wasn't sure if I was ready to meet interesting people who had seen countries, found cures for diseases and invented things I didn't even know I needed. People who actually made a difference during their 18 years of life on Earth. I was only capable of colour coding all the sweaters I wore, which usually only lasted about a week anyway. If life was survival of the fittest, I was out of shape since my toddler years.

The warning bell echoed off the empty park, signalling closing time. The sky began clouding over with stars and the faint glow from my phone was the only source of light that I used to locate the key to close things up. I remembered fondly of the last time I forgot to lock up my ring toss station: a pack of wild racoons broke in and tried to mate with the plush koala bear prizes. This made my booth a hot topic for a few days until the story was topped by someone who found a cockroach lodged in their corndog-- which just added to the flavour, in my opinion.

I hopped over the desk and with all the strength I could muster (which wasn't much) and swung shut the rickety metal gate, safely imprisoning the rows of stuffed animals. They'll thank me later, I thought.

As I started on my way to sign out, something unusual caught my eye. And when there's something unusual in an amusement park, you have to check it out, because not much surprises us anymore. It was the Ferris wheel; the rhythmic cycling of the ride was hypnotizing to me.

You see, this was weird because it was on. The only time I ever saw this ride in motion was when it was packed and overflowing with paying customers. I rubbed the day's grit out of my eyes and checked again. Yup, it was definitely empty. I don't think I could describe the amount of terror that was going through my body at that moment. I mean, it's not every day that you see an unattended Ferris wheel doing its thing.

I scanned the surroundings to double-check that all the employees had gone home. I quickly re-evaluated my situation and realized that there must have been a big red 'off' button, and I, a noble amusement park employee, had the duty (and burden) of shutting down the machine. As I approached the contraption I slowly started to notice the silhouette of a figure lounging on a foldout chair in front of the control box, with their feet propped up. A man, to be exact. He didn't seem to be doing anything. He was simply lost in thought, staring straight ahead as he slowly pulled a bottle of diet coke to his lips and then back down to rest on his lap.

"It's closed," I said, feigning confidence. I could hear my own voice shake a bit but I prayed that the man was too old and hard of hearing to notice.

He turned toward me nonchalantly and nodded in recognition but made no attempt to move. I stood there with my arms crossed, trying my best to look intimidating – a lot harder than it sounds considering he was probably three times my age and knew how to operate a Ferris wheel.

After several awkward seconds he reached into his cooler and handed me a corn dog. I shook my head 'no'. I was almost an adult but I could still hear my mom telling me never to accept things from strangers.

"You know, I've been coming here for a long time. Before you were born, that's for sure," he said as he refocused his attention to the control box and activated the twinkly Ferris wheel lights.

The brightness lit up his features and that's when I first got a good look at his face. The man looked like he was in his late 60s, but it was hard to tell from his contrasting features. He had dark eyes that sunk further into his face every time he blinked, and a mouth that appeared to be set in a straight line at all times. Wrinkles rippled down his forehead, but the faint dimples on his cheeks softened his features considerably. I stayed silent for a while. I guess I was too preoccupied with keeping count of how many stray eyebrow hairs I felt compelled to pluck from his bushy set of eyebrows – or eyebrow, technically - for a moment too long because the man cleared his throat, bringing me back to reality.

"Well then maybe you should leave and come back during the day like a normal person, or I'll be forced to call security. But if it makes you feel better, senior citizens get half price on Sundays," I said before I could stop myself.

I cringed. I had this habit of saying the first thing that came to my mind, which tended to get me into trouble a lot. But the man didn't look taken back; he simply smirked and reached into his pocket. I'm not going to lie, for about three seconds I thought those would be my last words. But the man pulled out a keychain filled with keys, just like mine, and jingled them in my face.

"Where'd you get those?" I wondered aloud.

"From when I worked here. When I was your age."

Understanding had washed over me and I quickly let out a huff of air I didn't know I was holding in.

"This place hasn't changed much," the man continued without even a pause.

He continued on and on about when he was a boy, and how the cotton candy station had been placed in a totally different location back in the day. I started to loosen up and reached into the cooler for a snack. Yeah, my sudden friendship with this man was already at the food sharing stage, but I figured, if he'd wanted to kill me it probably would have happened by that point anyways.

As the moon became more prominent, the conversation turned more confessional. He told me about his life as a big shot doctor while I drooled over the amount of money he made. And in return, I admitted how I was probably going nowhere great and that I was doomed to a life of an amusement park worker. That was when the man so kindly reminded me that this job was seasonal and that I'd have to be an unemployed bum for the other 8 months out of the year. Great, I thought. There goes my future.

That's when he did something I've never seen him do (in the few hours that I've known him). He laughed. Not just a polite little chuckle, but a gut busting howl. I'm glad this stranger found my misery amusing. At least someone was getting something out of it.

"Kid, no one knows what they're going to do at 18. Heck, I was sitting right where you were 40 years ago thinking the exact same thing. And I turned out alright, didn't I?"

That's an understatement.

After that night I never saw that man again. Looking back on it now, I feel embarrassed for ever comparing myself to those inventors and disease curers. I don't like to dissect molecules or whatever it is that they did on their spare time. But I can do something better. I've been a guidance counselor for almost ten years now. And I can't count the number of times I've given a kid the same speech I was given many years ago by that stranger.

I wanted one last great adventure, but I guess this'll do.