Night in Funland

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THEY drove slowly down the highway that cut cleanly through the desert, past the glittering motels with their swimming pools of pale blue water, past the shops of pink or green or azure adobe. In the humming light of the mercury-vapour lamps, the child was a gnome in a pool of color, the shadows beneath her eyes sooty in the darkness that had overrun the mesa. The father reached over and patted her hand. She squeezed his and edged closer towards him.

"Are you sure this is the way, Daddy?"
"Of course it is, Amanda, don't you remember?"
"Well, yes, sort of, but I thought maybe it was the other way."
"The other way is east, gooseie," he said; "we go west. Look, in a minute, at the next stop light, we will see the wheel, and then you will remember."

At the intersection he slowed down as the traffic light clicked from green to amber and then to red.

"Look," he pointed at the rosy sky; "over there; can't you see the top of the Ferris wheel?"
She squealed with delight; then the light changed and they left the shining highway, and in darkness that was like a sudden plunge into unknown waters turned onto a bumpy dirt road.

"Can we get there this way?" Amanda asked. "Does this road go through?"
"Don't worry; sure it does, honey. You just wait."

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Then they were pulling into the tumbleweed-speckled parking lot. He switched off the motor, and turned off the lights, and went around and opened her door. Amanda came out slowly, and she smiled up at her spare, slightly stooped father.

“This is fun,” she said. She reached for his hand and they walked beneath the arch that spelled out F-U-N-L-A-N-D in winking colored lights. It was a clean bright place, no leg shows, no wheels of fortune, no freak tents with greenish two-headed babies in discolored alcohol-filled jars; a clean bright place on the mesa, bounded by a miniature railroad with puffing steam engine and train of cars. They could hear the whistle now at the far dark end of the park, faraway and thin and clear, and Amanda tugged at his hand again. He wanted to pull her close to him and kiss her and pat her thin hair and tell her how glad he was that she was so much better and they could go on a spree together as they had in the old days, and he patted her hand and buttoned the top button of her sweater.

“Let’s sit down a little,” he said. His heart was thumping and the palms of his hands were damp.

“Oh Daddy,” she said, “not now.”

“You must rest a minute,” he insisted; “you must remember this is the first time...”

They sat down on the bench by the small depot, and the train with its bell clanging and its whistle shrilling and its headlight stabbing at the night swung around the turn, and stopped quietly almost in front of them. The engineer, a teen-aged boy crouching precariously on the tender, got up to stretch his legs while the young passengers spilled from the coaches.

“What shall we do first?” the father asked. “Do you want to ride the train?”

“I’d like a snowball first,” she said; children were climbing on and off the train like monkeys and he thought there were too many of them and one of them might cough on her or something it wouldn’t help her, god knows, to catch a cold or something just now. She walked ahead of him slowly, a trace of her old jauntiness in the blue toreadors with the white bows tied neatly just below her knees and the white-trimmed cap on her dark head, past the pool with its boats floating in the oil-dark water, and the enclosure where the ponies awaited their riders, and the clanking fury of the scenic railway.

“This is the nicest park ever,” he said, and squeezed her hand. “I have never been in a nicer park, have you, Amanda?”
“No,” she said; “it is the nicest ever.”

At the refreshment booth he ordered two snowballs, with grape flavoring. The efficient girl in her starched white uniform pushed a button and there was a whirling sound, and the ice as white and fine as snow poured through a vent, and the girl scooped it up and expertly without touching it by hand transferred it into paper cups, and then she squirted thick dark purple fluid onto the ice, and it was suddenly magically like a sunset transformed into a violet delight, and she smiled and passed the cups over the counter.

“Keep your fingers out of it,” he said to Amanda.

They rested on a bench, and tilted the cups to their lips, and the sweet ice gushed into their mouths.

“Isn’t it good?” Amanda said. “It gets sweeter as it goes down.”

“Yes,” he said, and thought how few things were sweeter as they got down, and he squeezed his cup and the fluid was bright and clean in his mouth.

“This is the nicest park there is,” he said again.

“Yes,” she said, and drained at her snowball with a sucking bubbling sound. She thrust her thin fingers into the cup to extract the last sweet dregs. Roughly he snatched out her hand and slapped her hard, and cried by god he had told her to keep her fingers out of it and did she want to get sick all over again. She flushed and he felt as if he had kicked her, and he pulled her close to him and kissed her and stroked her hair; her thinness was like a blow.

“I am so sorry, honey,” he said, “but I have been worried about you. You must not mind when I act like this. It is only because I love you so much, and I do not want you to get sick again, ever.”

She slowly turned her head towards him, and tried to smile, and he took out his monogrammed handkerchief and brushed at the corners of her eyes.

“Now how do you feel?” he asked, and when she said she felt fine he wanted to shout and dance and sing. He held her hand as they walked away from the refreshment booth while the starched girl squinted at him, and they walked slowly over the hard-packed grayish dirt. There was very little dust, he thought with satisfaction; he had never known a place like Funland to be so clean and orderly.

Amanda suddenly broke from his grasp.

“Oh,” she cried, and ran towards a large brightly lighted cage near an open place where baby tanks puffed and grunted.

“Look,” she called; “oh Daddy, look.”
In the bright clean cage, littered with scooter, tricycle, rubber balls, trapeze, and a punching bag, a young chimpanzee sat in a baby’s high chair, munching at a banana.

“Rollo,” the sign atop the cage read, “Just Recently Arrived from the Belgian Congo Region of West Africa. A two-year old chimpanzee... just four and a half months in captivity.”

Daintily Rollo nibbled, breaking off small chunks with his long-haired, tinynailed hands and placing the fruit meticulously in a mouth like the furnace door of the small train that was again circling the far dark end of the grounds, emerging from its tunnel with a triumphant toot and jangle. The chimpanzee finished his treat, placed the parachute of limp skin on the tray of his chair, and wiped his hands on scarlet trousers. Amanda screamed with delight and Rollo swung with dedicated grace to land noiselessly on the floor with flat tennis-shoe clad feet. With strong, pink-palmed, beautiful hands he grasped the bars of his cage, and gazed at the child with stonedark eyes, like small pools of night in his clean tan face, and he opened his great lips, and smiled.

Amanda clapped her hands and Rollo whirled and leaped to the rope which spanned the cage; hand over hand, he swung from one end of the cage to the other. By ones and twos people approached, laughing and chatting, and Rollo again dropped like a sunbeam to the floor. His trainer, a gentle, patient man with a limp and a dangling cigarette and a face too much like Rollo’s to be a coincidence, reached for the roller skates hanging on the wall and attached them to the chimpanzee’s hightopped tennis shoes. He held his hand, and Rollo glided noiselessly on his well-oiled skates, skating surely and competently and enjoying himself.

When the man climbed clumsily over the low iron railing in front of the cage, and tossed a few pieces of popcorn between the bars, Rollo stumbled and almost fell. The attendant reached quickly for the chimpanzee’s hand, and frowned at the intruder. Amanda turned upon the popcorn thrower, a fat man whose hairy black nipples stared blankly beneath a bilge-colored nylon sport shirt.

“You’ve frightened him,” she said in sudden fury. “You’ve frightened him.”

In anger the fat man threw another handful of popcorn between the bars, and the trainer sadly shook his head. Still holding Rollo by the hand, he led him to the high chair and swung him up to the seat,
and removed the skates. Then he pulled a switch, and all the light in
the cage went out. Rollo sat alone, his yellow shirt and scarlet trousers
and sneakered feet now gray in the darkness.

“Christ,” the fat man said. “Who does that guy think he is, any-
ways? Christ, it’s only a monkey.”

He grabbed his fat child, a child with a face like a rutabaga, and
disappeared.

“What a horrid, nasty man,” Amanda said. “Can’t we see Rollo
again? Won’t he come out again?”

“Maybe later,” the father said; “maybe later.”

“Besides,” she said, “he’s not a monkey. He’s a chimpanzee, an
anth... anthropoid, isn’t he daddy?”

“That’s right,” he said. “He’s not a monkey, he’s an anthropoid, and
maybe he’ll come out later anyhow.”

Amanda walked away, but soon stopped at the foot of the Ferris
wheel. She gazed upwards at its swift smoothness, sparkling, a small
circle of lights winking near the hub, and a larger circle glowing in the
middle, and the whole great machine alive with an outline of red and
blue and green neon tubing, flashing as the twelve carriages, one red
then one black then another red and another black, swam miraculously
into the cool dry blackness of the starless night, some carriages swing-
ing empty, in another two teen-aged girls singing “Oklahoma,” in
others a father and a white-faced, pop-eyed infant, a young man and a
girl their arms locked around each other as they soared from the light
to the darkness, and two boys clowning and roaring. The operator
squeezed the grip-handle of the lever and pushed it and the engine
slowed down, and the wheel came to a silent stop. There was a sudden,
almost reverent hush, and a squeal of terrified delight from the occu-
pants of the carriage at the very top of the wheel swinging coldly in the
dark, and then the voices of the girls singing “Oklahoma” clear and
far away and miles and miles away in the thin cold air at the top of the
wheel, and miles and miles away from the hard gray ground and the
prancing merry-go-round horses with their flaring orange nostrils and
white champing cannibal teeth and the refreshment stand with the
efficient girl in her starched white uniform. The operator stepped on a
pedal, and a landing platform slid close to the carriage; the attendant
lifted the bar and the occupants stepped gingerly down, the father glad
to deposit the child into the mother’s arms.

“Must we ride this now, Amanda?” the father asked.
“Oh yes,” she said and edged her way towards the entrance. “Can I,” she said, and squeezed his hand, and her dark eyes glistening, “oh can I go all alone like you promised when I was sick?”

“Let me go with you,” he said.

“Don’t be a meanie,” she said. “Please, Daddy, remember you promised.”

“All right,” he said. “All right, but you must be very, very careful. You must promise to sit right in the middle of the seat, and you must keep your hands tight on the bar all the time. Do you promise?”

“Brownie’s honor,” she said and held up her hand, palm outwards and three fingers aloft in a half salute. She hugged him, and he lowered his head and she brushed his cheek with a quick kiss.

The wheel stopped again, and he gave her her money and said loudly give it to the man. He looked at the operator like a fellow-conspirator suddenly catching in a great crowd the long-anticipated signal, and again he said loudly if you do not sit right in the middle and hold the bar tightly I shall ask the attendant to stop the wheel.

“Oh Daddy,” she said. The operator smiled when she gave him the money, and placed her firmly in the very middle of the carriage, clicking the protective bar into place with special emphasis as though to say I understand the way you feel; do not worry.

Amanda sat very straight in her seat and gripped the iron bar. The operator pushed the lever slowly forward, and the wheel rose noiselessly. Amanda smiled from her perch as the operator again pulled back the lever, and the wheel stopped and an aged man and wife emerged from their carriage as though from the floor of the ocean.

Again the operator pushed the lever, and the wheel began to turn. The father ran back a few feet; he could see Amanda tiny, disappearing into the darkness. He hoped the operator would not halt the wheel with Amanda’s carriage at the summit. His scrotum tightened as he thought of her, up there alone in the dark. He saw the crouching mountains, a ragged darkness palpable against the blueblack of the night, and the city swimming in a blob of red and blue and green and orange and white lights, while to the west naked and blue the desert scattered its bones to the ends of the vanished watershed. Then Amanda in a black carriage outlined with green neon swept past him, and smiled and was gone. He started to wave, but checked his arm, not wanting her to take her hands from the iron bar to reply. Then, in what seemed an instant, she came by him again, and he winked at her reassuringly before her carriage swam upwards into the darkness. He
looked at the sturdy iron wheel and the concrete foundation. This was no fly-by-night carnival, but a permanent operation, thank God, he thought; thousands of people rode the safe, sturdy wheel each season. Again Amanda was smiling when her carriage flashed by, and he lighted a cigarette and smiled conspiratorially at the operator in his white coveralls, a sensible man with one foot resting nonchalantly near the flywheel of the generator.

He counted the carriages as they glided before his line of vision, one red then one black, then another red and another black. He awaited the passage of Amanda's carriage which he must have missed while he was lighting his cigarette. Suddenly, painfully, a hard ball of fear exploded in his throat.

This is absurd, he thought. He forced himself to stand still and look with studied calm at the swiftly turning wheel. What had been the color of the tubing which outlined Amanda's carriage. Green? No, red. Surely not red on a red, or was it a black, carriage?

The wheel made several more swift, noiseless circuits, and still he could not see the pale smiling face of Amanda. His hands shook, and sweat drenched his back and upper legs. With an effort as conscious and deliberate as holding his breath under water he controlled himself. This is ridiculous, he thought. This is an optical illusion. He said to himself, I will count each carriage very carefully as it goes past, and then I will see her, and soon the wheel will stop, and she will get out, and we will have a very good laugh about this.

He counted the carriages as they glided swiftly before his eyes. First a red with an old man, then two empties, then a black with two grinning nobheaded boys, then a red with the girls now singing "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning," then an empty, then another red, and his heart suddenly soared like a geyser only to sink hideously; it was not Amanda but a much older child. Then a man and a child and two more empties, then a red with a mother and a baby followed by a black with a soldier and a girl, then another red with an old man, the same hideous old man he'd begun counting with, and with a cry like an animal's he leaped over the low steel railing and clutched at the attendant's arm.

"Stop it," he said; "for God's sake, stop the wheel."

The attendant frowned, then smiled, and squeezed the handle of the lever, and pulled back the lever, and an empty black carriage swung like a dry leaf above his head.

"My daughter," he gasped, "the little one with the black hair," but two snottynosed boys pushed their way between him and the operator,
poking out their hands with the money in them, and climbed into the carriage snickering and guffawing and wolfing popcorn.

"For the love of God," he cried, and the popcorn-eaters looked at him as though he were an ape in a straw hat. "For the love of God, where is my daughter? I think it is time you let the little girl off. The one with the black hair. She has on a blue suit and a cap. You remember."

"Yes sir," the attendant said, and smiled. Relief flowed through him; he slapped the operator heartily on the back.

"I lost sight of her for a moment," he said. "In the dark. My eyes. It gave me a turn, for a moment."

The operator nodded, and pushed the lever, and the next carriage empty, swung past, and he stopped the wheel at the next to let the mother and baby out. The baby had wet its diaper and a dark stain overspread the mother's breast like a wound. Then there was the carriage with the soldier and the girl, and they leaned out and yelled, "What's the matter why do you keep stopping the wheel?" Then another empty and one in red with the old man, and he lost count. Amanda, he screamed; his voice was like a ship sinking darkly.

"Amanda," he screamed again, and the attendant stopped the wheel and came towards him and he was no longer smiling. People converged upon him, he was the center of a whirling funnel of blank paper faces.

"Good God, good God," he cried. "Where are you, baby?"

The children in the toy train again making its sliding halt before the depot leaned over the edges of the coaches and looked questioningly at the Ferris wheel glowing in the distance. Amanda, the father cried, and the sound tore and twisted its way above the clanking of the scenic railway and the put-put-put of the miniature tractors and the wheezing of the merry-go-round. Noiselessly the curtains of the clean cage parted, and the lights flowed on, and Rollo climbed quietly down from his high chair. He listened intently to the wild broken cries in the night. Then he pressed his tan face against the bars and gazed with comprehending eyes at the dark figure with uplifted head outlined like a corpse against the spokes of the great wheel blazing in the night.