

## The Longest Ride

A fragrance of stale popcorn and spent funnel cake oil rode over radiant waves of heat emanating from the black asphalt lot. An artificial breeze from the rotating Scrambler and Tilt-a-Whirl pushed and pulled the aromas in every direction, while multicolored midway lights twinkled against a moonless sky. Their light dimmed and flickered to the hum of the sputtering generators that powered them, creating artificial constellations each punctuated by the periodic twittering of a bulb threatening to burn itself out. While most of the small crowd congregated around the amusements, one young man wandered toward a small, tented, back alley, the hesitancy written on his face echoed by a wiggling tongue that darted about at the upturned corners of his mouth. Freak Show Alley, as the locals called it, offered little more than lack-luster, painted signs advertising a variety of unusual and bizarre attractions. The faded caricatures and vignettes spread themselves across large, canvass billboards hung on rickety polls at regular intervals between the temporary stalls, their graying colors testament to a well-healed but waning age. About halfway down the nearly deserted gauntlet, standing behind a small podium on a slightly elevated platform, a barker beat out the well-worn rhythmical cadence indicative of his craft. His heavy grey mustache curled unevenly over a small slit pouch of a mouth; a tiny pointed goatee fixed neatly to his chin gave him an otherworldly appearance.

“Ladies and gentlemen...boys and girls...” he croaked to the empty lane, “step right this way. Tonight, behind this very tent, meet the magical and mystifying Madame Lyanka, the Romany Queen, keeper of the paranormal, seer, soothsayer, and revealer of the marvels of the universe.”

Dressed in an electric green and blue striped outfit topped by a union-jack festooned bowler hat, the well-practiced appeal of a worn-out cavatina failed to persuade any customers away from the dancing whirligigs and whimsy diddles straddling the midway. This grim recognition sapped the baritone luster from the old man’s expressive dissertation; he slumped forward against the podium in defeat. Quietly, the solitary young man approached the dilapidated gypsy’s tent. Spying the lad out of the corner of his eye, the barker snapped to attention and began to beat out his chorus again.

“Don’t waste your money on pointless rides and arcades, sonny-Jim. Spend a quarter here and learn the mysteries of the universe...see the future, explore the stars and planets of the solar system, experience the past of Alexander, Caesar, the Great Pharaohs of Egypt, the spectacular, and all for only twenty-five cents. That’s right...two bits, only for a mere quarter of a dollar...”

“Wow...” the young lad inhaled, “how’d you know my name is Jimmy?”

“Huh?” Rarely rattled by a spectator’s comment, the seeming incongruity took the old man aback for a brief moment.

Ramming an exuberant hand in each pocket, the boy rummaged for the price of admission. Pulling out two coins, he turned them over thoughtfully in the evening air. The silver orbs sparkled in the old man’s eyes as they caught the pulsing strands of light above his stand. He drew in a sharp breath at the prospect of a paying customer. The sideshows had fallen on hard times over the last few years, and it had become a real struggle to make enough money to eat a decent meal, much less make a living. Fear over the unexplained series of

inexplicable misfortunes that seemed to plague several of the back alley attractions, especially the gypsy fortunetellers, had hurt more than the sideshow. General profits from the gate had fallen to an all time low because of the incidents, but the troupe persevered in true showman like fashion. This year, a pair of seasoned veterans, new to this carnival, tried desperately to eek out their meager living with the sparse numbers of passers-by they could persuade to attend. Tentatively, the young customer took a step forward.

“Uh, mister?”

“A paying customer with a question. What can I tell you, my good friend?”

“Can she *really* see the future?”

“Absolutely!” The old man fired confidently.

Leaning forward on the balls of his feet, the young man drew closer to the podium. “*Really?*” He added innocently.

The barker looked swiftly in both directions. More than lean, recent times had proven extraordinarily hard for those who clung to the sideshow, and that want showed in the deeply grooved furrows of his sunken, sallow features. His eyes narrowed with giddy intent as he moved his face close to the innocent mark. “Money back guarantee,” he winked, whispering wryly certain that no one else could hear his hollow promise. An old hand at working the crowd, he could smell the money and knew that his partner inside the tent would woo every cent from this young pigeon.

Taking a last look at his precious pocket change, the lad trustingly pressed one quarter into the barker’s sweaty palm and returned the other to its hiding place.

“Step right this way,” he welcomed sweeping his hand toward the closed tent.

Moving reverently forward, Jimmy pulled the heavy tent flap back enough to slip through the opening. A black veil rent in the middle just beyond, deepened the sense of mystery. At its center, a lighted crystal ball rested on a small round table.

“Come in...come in,” a heavily accented female voice beckoned.

Startled by the disembodied declaration, the young boy stopped.

“It’s alright, my dear...” she continued, “come inside. I am vaiting.”

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, the youngster entered the veil and approached the table.

An ancient looking woman, barely visible, stood in a corner of the room. Her knitted shawl, long, dark cotton skirt, and white blouse seemed much too heavy for the heat of the tent. “Sit!” she commanded, pointing a boney finger at a rickety wooden chair behind the table.

“Are you...?” the boy stuttered nervously as he took his seat.

“Yes...” she continued taking the chair opposite. “...you have come here to ask me questions about...*your future*...correct?”

Stunned by the bold pronouncement, young Jimmy flopped wide-eyed into the hard wooden chair.

“Now, before ve continue,” the old gypsy sighed, “you must understand that each question vill cost you a qvarter, all right?”

Jimmy nodded. “That’s okay, I only have one question...and the man outside gave me a money back guarantee, so I know you can answer it...and I know he would *never* tell somebody that unless he was sure you could really see the future, right?”

“Exactly,” she nodded, “but only von question? Surely a young man like you must have many questions to ask. Then ve begin. Tell me your first question.”

“Well, actually, I only have one question.”

The seer frowned slightly at her customers’ dogged persistence. “Then ve vill begin vith that von and see vere it takes us. What is your first question?”

“Well...see...my family don’t have much money. But I save every year for the one week the carnival comes to town. Thing is, last year I only had enough to ride one ride, and it broke down almost as soon as it started. The man wouldn’t give me my money back either. So I had to go home without having any fun really. The year before, I didn’t have any money at all, but a real nice man gave me some of his cotton candy. It tasted really good. This year, I got two quarters and I gave one of ‘em to that man outside. I was tryin’ to decide if I outta get some cotton candy and ride a ride, or ride two rides. Cotton candy goes pretty quick, and so do some of the rides. ‘Sides, I don’t want a repeat of last year. I was real worried... I waited all year for the carnival to come back. I didn’t know what to do.”

“Go on...”

“I overheard these people talkin’ about you and sayin’ stuff about how you could tell the future, and then I figured you could help me decide the best thing to do. ‘Course, I only have one quarter left so what I have to ask you is even more important now than it was before!”

“All right. Come to the point of your visit. Please, ask me your question!”

Jimmy took a deep breath as he summoned the courage to continue. “O...okay...” the boy’s heart beat hard in his chest. “I just want to know...” he cleared his voice, “...which ride is the *longest*?”

The old woman reared back in her chair. Her eyes blinked furiously trying to make sense of the odd request. “I’m sorry...*what* did you say?”

“Which of the rides here is the longest?” Jimmy repeated eagerly awaiting the woman’s psychic insight.

“I do not understand. Don’t you vant to know about your future love...or what you vill become as an adult...or perhaps...”

“Nope...not really. I just wanna know which ride lasts the longest!”

“I...I...”

Madame Lyanka, stuttered, completely lost for an answer. Seeing the futility of any further argument, the gypsy put her hands to her forehead quickly trying to recover her composure. For a brief moment, she thought about naming one of the amusements, but something about the innocence of the young lad’s story would not allow her to guess or tell an outright lie. Nervously, she peered deeply into the crystal ball, stroking and caressing it with both hands and humming lowly through her nose and mouth, but the well-practiced gestures did not help provide her the convincing bluff she needed. Jimmy sat in mesmerized anticipation; his slightly smiling lips quivered, certain that he would soon be riding the longest ride at the carnival. He watched as the fortuneteller ruminated, sputtered and swayed in her trance-like state. After several minutes, she began to lose her intensity.

“I...I...”

The young lad sat on the edge of his seat, buoyed more by expectation than the wooden chair.

“I do not know,” she finally confessed in reluctant defeat.

Jimmy frowned in disbelief. This woman, who only a few moments earlier seemed to know his innermost thoughts, could not answer this very simple question.

“Well...” he finally sparked reconciled to the unexpected confession, “...then can I have my quarter back?”

“Wha...?” This question truly devastated the old seer.

“The man told me...”

“I have *no* money,” she exhaled, afraid to confront another unanswerable question.

“But...”

“Vait here...I will get your qvarter.”

“Okay.”

Defeated, the old woman hobbled out of the room. Once out of sight, Jimmy stood from his seat. Eyeing cautiously over his shoulder, he crept to the other side of the table. Approaching the translucent ball, he stared into it. Transfixed in the depths of the mysterious orb, it seemed as if its luminosity promised to transport him to another place in time. After a moment, his eyes sparkled and the corners of his mouth turned up in a knowing smile.

“Ohhhh...*I see.*” Sensing the fortuneteller’s return, he moved toward the opening in the veil to meet her.

“Here...” she huffed holding out her closed hand, “...here is your qvarter.” Begrudgingly she opened the knarled and twisted boney container that that loathed releasing its prize.

“Thanks, lady!” he giggled as he turned the coin over in his hand, slipping it back into its former hiding place. A moment later, Jimmy skipped out of the tent and ran back to the Midway.

Furious, the barker entered the tent.

“What the hell was that all about? Why didn’t you give that boy an answer? What did he ask you anyway?”

“He vanted to know vvhich ride lasted the longest.”

“Why didn’t you give him an answer?”

“I don’t know...I could not lie...he vas a child...and he may have discovered I vas wrong. Then ve would have *another* problem wouldn’t ve?”

“You stupid witch!” The barker began to unbuckle his thick leather belt. “What are you talking about? Nobody would have believed anything that child said!”

Pulling on the buckle end, he slowly drew the leather whip from its looped sheath. Madame Lyanka’s eyes trembled in knowing anticipation. She knew all too well how violent her partner’s temper could turn and took the precaution of moving behind one of the wooden chairs, putting it between them.

“We needed that money! We need food!” Raising the belt, he brought it down hard on the tabletop, loosing a thunderous clap in the small chamber.

Jimmy approached a small chain suspended by two rickety metal rails that guarded the entrance to the Ferris Wheel. A makeshift cardboard sign hung from its center. ‘Closed for Maintenance’ sprawled hurriedly across its brown corrugated surface. Bending at the waist, he quietly stepped under the inadequate barrier and onto the loading ramp. He eyed the darkened and silent amusement. Its hulking silhouette, cast only in the partial light of the Midway, darkened much of his view of the night sky.

“Wow!” he hissed slowly between his teeth in magical wonderment.

Distracted by the sound and movement, a dirty, burley man dressed in a ripped tank-top tee shirt and grungy khaki's emerged from behind an electronic control panel.

"Whadda you want?" he grunted.

Jimmy stood silently.

"The ride's closed," he barked in anticipation of the logical question, "can't you read? Go away!"

But the young lad stood his ground knowingly.

Just then, another mechanic emerged from behind the panel. Closing and securing it, he thrust a large red switch upward until it seated in a metal connection. Immediately, the exquisite beast sprung to life; its limbs illuminated by colorful lights and its belly heaving the unique life-giving sounds of calliope music. "Fire it up, Harry," he yelled. "Give her a try!"

"It doesn't look broke now," Jimmy smiled. "Could I...please?"

"I'm only gonna let it roll a couple a times, kid...just long enough to make sure everything's in order. Then I'm shuttin' her down!"

"It'll be okay...*really!*" Jimmy looked disarmingly up at the older man. "Please..."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You got a ticket?" he huffed reluctantly.

Jimmy held a single red stub between his thumb and forefinger.

"All right," he sighed, "get on!"

Jimmy skipped up to the open seat on the platform and nestled himself inside. The mechanic locked the small metal door at its front. Walking back to a long handled brake, Harry squeezed the release. Pushing the lever forward, the Wheel began to rotate. Jimmy's eyes widened as the carnival seemed to fall from his feet. His curly locks blew in the manmade breeze. Before long, he could see well beyond the Midway, to the sideshow alley and the tops of their tatty tents. As the wheel fell slowly to the ground, all took its normal perspective once again.

"Let her run a couple more times," the mechanic hollered to Harry, as the boy whizzed past.

Suddenly, two closely spaced, muffled bangs split the air.

"Wha...? Was that the wheel?" Harry bellowed.

"Don't think so. It sounded like it came from behind the Midway."

Harry shrugged as Jimmy shot around once again. "One more rotation and I'm shuttin' her down!" His companion nodded.

But while they prepared to close the ride, the crowd ran toward the sideshow area. Harry, recognizing one of the amusement operators scurrying toward Freak Show Alley, called him out.

"What's goin' on?" he yelled cupping his hands around his mouth in an improvised blow horn.

"It's the Fortune Teller..." came the breathless reply, "...the old witch has shot the barker. Killed him dead!"

The two mechanics stared glass-eyed at one another. Without hesitation, they hopped the chain and ran toward the scene of the crime.

"What about the Wheel?" the mechanic asked as he ran with his friend.

"I ain't goin' back to shut it off...you?" Without losing a step, the two men turned down the alley, disappearing from sight.

Jimmy smiled. "Too bad," he thought, looking down at the crowd gathering at the tent as the machine rose over the Midway's artificial horizon. "She seemed like a nice lady...strange accent though. She aughta know better

than to mess with things she really doesn't understand. I wonder what'll happen to her." Rolling back toward the ground, he contemplated their brief encounter. "Maybe she should have asked *me* a question."