

Jean Harper

HARD PLAY

I

AUBURN, INDIANA

Sunday, September 22, 1996

Gary sits in the cab of an idling semi and waits. The engine mutters, the flap on the semi's exhaust stack punctuating the wait: *cling, cling, cling*. The town square in Auburn is a chaos of equipment, of trucks, game joints, partially assembled rides, half-open concession stands; the streets are crisscrossed with heavy duty electric wires, water hoses; people on foot, on bikes and in golf carts dodge in and out between pickups and semis. Gary sits behind the wheel of the semi that carries the Merry-Go-Round. He needs to move the semi from his corner of the square to the other corner a few blocks distant, but a pickup truck pulling a fried onion concession stand is in the way. The driver moves forward, stops, jerks his steering wheel right, backs up, hits the brakes. He can't figure out how to maneuver his booth into its spot. Gary's brother Tim zooms by on his mountain bike. He sees what needs to be done, jumps off his bike, stands behind the pickup and guides the man into his spot, gesturing to him, coaxing him: *C'mon back, C'mon back*. The onion booth slowly edges into place, until finally there is enough room for Gary to pull through. The huge semi rolls forward, inching down the crowded street. Tim guides him into a straight course. Then he jumps back on his bike and zooms off to solve another problem in another place.

As it has been all summer, there are a thousand unremarkable details here that need to be looked after before the carnival can open. There are rides to be spotted and assembled, wiring to be laid out, hoses to be uncoiled and hooked up, windows to be washed and steam tables cleaned, stock unpacked and hung up, help to be hired and trained and watched. But this is the last time, the last fair of the season. James says aloud what everyone has been thinking, and his words echo in our minds: *One more time . . . one more time . . .*

Friday, September 27, 1996

This is the night that should be the first night of the biggest weekend of the season for Poor Jack Amusements, this is the one night that should be more

profitable than entire weeks in April or in May. But it will not be so. Tonight is a miserable night. There is the cold, a penetrating damp chill, and there is the rain, a frigid, unrelenting rain. Hardly anyone is out tonight, and anyone who is out is hardly spending any money. By eleven P.M., the carnival will close.

On this night, there is one thing to look forward to: the drawing for the help. The right ticket is worth two hundred and fifty dollars. After the show closes for the night, by carnival tradition Jack Bohlander, Poor Jack himself, will draw the winning tickets. He has done this year after year: drawing the tickets, announcing the numbers, congratulating the winners. After eleven, the workers gather around the office trailer. Jack sits inside and his son Gary stands outside on the porch of the trailer holding an industrial-sized can full of ticket stubs. Jack reaches out through the window and draws the tickets from the can, handing them to Gary, who announces the eight winning numbers one by one. The winners come up the porch steps, show their tickets to Gary and catch a glimpse behind the window of Jack, who nods to them, slow, preoccupied.

Even as they are gathering, waiting for the drawing to begin, the workers begin to whisper and the words ripple out until everyone knows: *Jack is inside*. Through the mist of rain and the slanting glare of floodlights, behind the office trailer window, Jack is a shadowy figure. We watch as he reaches out the window, dips his hand into the can and gives a ticket to Gary. We fall silent and stand witness through the drawing, watching Jack reach out, touch his son's hand with the first ticket, and the next, and the next, until the last number is called.

Saturday, September 28, 1996

On this last day of the fair, the morning sky is clean, clear, a brilliant bowl of blue above our heads. We walk into the streets of Auburn believing that this day—this last day—has begun with a promise. But by noon, pale wind-whipped clouds have edged in. By four, the sky is shrouded, whitewashed, the air chilled and raw. This is autumn. In this ragged season, this waning of the year, no promise will be kept. There is only thin hope: the rain might hold off, the people might come out and spend at last, we might all be all right somehow through the long winter.

As the day ebbs, the square in Auburn is layered with sadness: This is the last show, the season is over, there are people here we will never see again.

Some will go south, some will go home, some will vanish into other lives. Some are ill; Jack is ill. *I've got no get up and go*, he says. We know it's more than that, but we don't talk about it. What would we say? There are no words large enough, deep enough. We don't know what to say to him or to each other, but because the last night allows it, we can at least say good-bye. We say good-bye to these people we've worked with, these friends we've made, these lovers we've known. We say good-bye to Jack. Each time we say good-bye we believe in all that the word can hold. We say good-bye and we mean: *God be with you*. We hope: *Fare Well*. We promise: *I will see you again*.

Saturday into Sunday, September 28–29, 1996

Midnight. In the raw night air, Tim wears a pair of battered insulated coveralls and stands alone in the middle of the street directing the fierce, quick flow of the rumbling trucks around the square. The semis are fast. Without trailers attached, they rumble in, bearing down on him like disembodied brutes, their engines belching acrid fumes into the street, muttering out a racheting diesel clatter and growl. There is no pause. There is only the forward urge of this teardown. There is only now.

That night—even as the semis bore down on him and he directed their trajectories forward, backward—did Tim think: *This is the last show my father will see*. Did he imagine: *This is the last time my father will see his life's work before him*.

That night—what had always been still was. The last night of the fair, and teardown, the trucks, the dark streets, the controlled chaos. Tim's father sat inside his trailer out of the threat of cold, and listened to the sounds of his life outside: the forward growl of a semi, the banging metal plates of a ride being disassembled, his wife's voice calling someone nearby, the *cling, cling, cling* of an idling engine, his son's voice in the distance.

That night—Tim heard what his father heard. He stood on the dark street behind a looming semi. He caught and held the driver's vision in the side mirror and gestured to him large and sure, his gesture part wave, part command: *Watch me*. Tim did not see his father's face in that mirror. He saw his father's face everywhere—in the whole of the truck, in the yellow glow of the still-open Corn Dog stand, in the plain sides of the shuttered joints, in the darkening street. He didn't think, or imagine, or say to himself: *My father is dying*. He knew it.

There are no words for a deep fear held back. There are no words for a son's love or for his grief. There are no words; there is only what we know how to do. Tim kept his eyes on the mirror and motioned to the driver—*Come on back*. He called to the driver, loud and clear enough that his father could have heard him—*c'mon back, c'mon back, c'mon back*.

II

INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA

Sunday, May 25, 1997

On a gray and drizzling morning in the last week of May, John McGinley arrives at an abandoned parking lot in downtown Indianapolis. John is the lot man, the designer of the carnival's flow, the engineer of inches and equipment, the architect of this movable place. He comes to the parking lot with a measuring wheel, a yellow scrap of paper, and a piece of chalk. These are his tools. The scrap of paper lists the names of all the joints and rides and concession stands that will go in this lot. John knows the exact dimensions of each piece by heart; he will use his wheel to measure out those dimensions on the lot. His chalk will mark the spot where each piece will finally sit.

John stands in the parking lot, and takes stock of the place. Before him is the main road, to his right runs the drive into the lot, behind him squats a line of boarded-up stores. To his left and scattered in front of and behind him are dozens of parked semis and trailers, the joints and rides and concession stands that he is here to organize. He looks at his list. He will spot a ride first, the *1001 Nachts*. He stops, bends down, and marks the pavement with his chalk. *Start here*. He paces off the width of the ride, striding beside his measuring wheel, the wheel ticking, precisely measuring each foot. John stops again, chalks the pavement. *End here*. One ride spotted. One ride checked off the list. Next:

Chalk. Pace . . . *tickticktick* . . . pace . . . *tickticktick* . . . pace. Chalk.

A second ride spotted. Another off the list.

Chalk. Pace . . . *tickticktick* . . . pace . . . *tickticktick* . . . pace. Chalk.

A joint spotted.

In the abandoned parking lot, John is a solitary figure. He wears a long dark green poncho, a navy blue ball cap and he works alone. His thick glasses are dotted with rain; his mouth is set in a stern, level line. He is inscrutable, focused. He is completely unaware of any of the people around him, waiting, watching. For now he owns this lot. No one interrupts him.

They say that John McGinley is the best lot man in the country. He is a master of using every inch on a lot, of fitting in one more joint or one more ride or one more booth no matter how late any piece shows up, no matter how cramped for space the midway is. He seems to make magic happen on the midway. On this grey and rainy Sunday, this cluttered parking lot doesn't seem as though it will be transformed by tomorrow afternoon into a tight square jammed with whirling rides and jangling joints and sweet concession stands and you. But it will.

RICHMOND, INDIANA
Wednesday, June 11, 1997

At four in the afternoon, on a perfect June day, in a small parking lot behind a Catholic church on the west side of town, the carnival is getting ready to open. The rides are up: the Gravitron, the Orbiter, the newly painted Space Shuttle, the usual kiddie rides and the Merry-Go-Round. The joints are crammed in shoulder to shoulder. Tim angles in the last of the concession stands. Workers begin to clean, to set up their stock, replace light bulbs, tighten loose bolts and tend to all the final details to ready the carnival for tomorrow. The lot is busy, humming with work, with the noise of machines and voices and competing boom boxes. As usual on the night before the carnival opens, tight fast packs of small boys ride their bikes in and around the emerging midway, making it their playground. But one boy stands alone, watching everything, as if he wants to drink in every light and all the noise, mystery and flash of the carnival. We look at him: mouth half open, eyes wide, unguarded, rapt. He is pure attention. He sees everything—

He sees Hippie sweep the steps of the Gravitron. Slow, slower than it seems sweeping can humanly be done, Hippie sweeps. He sweeps one step at a time with a worn straw broom, one step and then the next as if the act of sweeping were a form of mournful meditation. The boy sees Misty and Robin clean each other's joints, washing off the mud from Greenwood, rinsing off the dust from the road, making their joints new again, clean again, their cleaning becoming a kind of courtship as they work. He sees two boys measure themselves up to the cartoon rulers on the kiddie rides and the thrill rides, and he hears them ask each other: *Are you tall enough? Am I tall enough?*

He sees two-year-old Alex help his mother wash the ticket booth. With a bucket and rag, they wash the booth inside and out. The wash water runs off

the booth and forms a soapy river across the parking lot, a river that spreads into a wide black and glistening flood plain. The boy watches Alex soak a rag in the water and toddle back to the ticket booth, applying towel to booth. Back and forth Alex goes and he is exquisitely happy, humming, immersed in his task. The boy sees how the clusters of bubbles in the water glow in the fading light of the blue and salmon-streaked sky and in the bright lights from the rides, the joints. He sees that Alex's rubber sandals have lights of their own embedded in the soles and that the lights flash whenever he steps, sees that they blink red, yellow, green, against the black glimmering pavement as if two-year-old Alex were a tiny carnival ride himself.

The boy stands alone, watching everything. He will come back every day and every night the carnival is here. He will always come alone and all week we will see him watching and listening, devout in his pure attention to these people, to this brief and movable place, to this carnival.

LIMA, OHIO

Friday, August 15, 1997

Early in the morning, on opening day, the carnival midway is a still and emptied place. The joints are mute—no operators, no players. The concession stands are calm—no one cooking, no smells of sugar or hot grease, no long lines of waiting people. The thrill rides and kiddie rides are idle, silent. In these morning hours the midway resembles a stage—set and ready for the first act, needing only actors to perform and an audience to watch.

The audience appears first. Three small boys wander on, coming in stage right, playing at javelin with long sticks. They pitch their sticks up and out into the air, hurling them down the midway. When the sticks skitter to a landing the boys measure out the distances with elaborate paces. Then (stage left) an older man, a tired 4-H leader in search of coffee, steps in from behind the Tilt-a-Whirl. He cuts straight through the boys' game, oblivious. Behind him, a woman walks on carrying two perfect, still-warm pecan pies, one in each hand, each pie labeled and ready for competition. The boys pause, their noses lifting into the trail of sweet scent. Then, from behind the bright erect girders of the Skywheel, the first midway actor steps out: a middle-aged man, styrofoam cup of coffee in hand, metal change maker hanging from his belt. He walks to his joint, tilts up the flat side as if it were a giant awning and then steps behind it, disappearing into its shadow. Next, a slight teenage boy ap-

pears. He unlocks the door of the Elephant Ear booth and stands there gazing in. Then, a young blond girl shuffles out and slumps onto a bench beside the Merry-Go-Round, lights a cigarette and watches.

Not last, but still not first, Tim walks out onto the midway. He steps into his golf cart, turns the ignition and lets it idle as he sits, as he gazes at the slowly awakening midway still mostly empty of people, but crammed with rides and joints and concession stands, few of which were there the morning before. He will think what he always thinks on the first day of any fair: *How did we do this?* How did this empty space of grass and asphalt become transformed overnight into this midway, this stage, this carnival where hundreds of people will come out to watch and spend and buy? He will say to himself, and to you if you will listen, what he always feels on the first day of any fair, season after season: *I've been doing this all my life and still I get a sense of awe before we open.* He will think that, but only briefly. Awe is a luxury. He shifts the cart into drive and heads into the midway. The boys step aside to let him pass.

III

COLUMBIA CITY, INDIANA

Friday, June 27, 1997

The first corn dog. Pick it up by the stick, pick it up with a square of waxed paper. *Mustard? Ketchup?* I point to the two pots—yellow and red, a paintbrush in each. The woman says mustard. I paint on ketchup. I see her look at her husband with a smirk as if to say: *See? I told you they were all idiots.* Right now I am an idiot. I've been in this trailer for three minutes and I can't think straight. Training? There's no time to train. Learn while you do it. Tonight they'll forgive me for being stupid. The first time.

The second corn dog. A teenage boy with an earring in his left eyebrow wants a corn dog, mustard on it, and a large lemon shake-up—no, hang on, *small*—and he wants fries and his vacant-eyed bleached blond girlfriend wants a foot long with chili *and* cheese and she wants a large lemon shake-up and an order of onion rings. *Okay*, I say, and I start making the shake-ups, one large, one small—lemon, water, ice, sugar and then shake in a big paper cup like a giant martini (get the sugar off the bottom) and I'm adding it up: a large shake-up is \$3.00 and a small one is \$1.50 and mustard is yellow and a foot long with chili *and* cheese is \$2.75—no, it's \$3.00—and fries are \$2.00 and rings are \$3.00 and I'm adding it up in my head and thinking *yellow, yellow,*

yellow as I pick up the paintbrush and slather on the mustard and then I tell the kid the total is \$14.50 and he says *Man, what a rip-off* but he hands me a crumpled twenty just the same and I give him his change and his food and then he and his girlfriend are gone, out onto the midway, suddenly anonymous, one and two in the hundreds and thousands of people here tonight. From inside the Corn Dog, we look down on the midway and it is a sea of people packed so tight we can only see heads and shoulders bobbing along the midway. We see that, but only in the moments between corn dogs and shake-ups. Mostly we work, slipping into the rhythm of making food and serving food, taking money and making change.

The one hundred and ninety-fourth corn dog. A tanned woman and her tanned husband, both wearing neat expensive casual wear (I see the Nike swoosh, the Tommy Hilfiger stripe, the tiny Polo mallet) order corn dogs. They each want ketchup. I pluck two dogs, paint them red. I smile: *Four dollars*. They hold out four bills, take their dogs, don't bother smiling back. I'm just a pair of hands handing them their corn dogs, taking their money.

At midnight, the ticket booth closes and the midway starts to clear. It's mostly kids now, kids out late past curfew, kids drunk or high or just out and they aren't buying corn dogs or shake-ups or anything, so we clean: pots, fryers, counters and then we start to close down. The kids drift away and then it's just workers getting a night's meal, charging their food against their earnings. I look at their faces: they are deeply exhausted but also wide awake, wired, hours away from sleep. They look at my face: I am the same.

Just before one, the night is over and I walk away. I don't have to come back, but they do, and they will, working here night after night just as they did last year, and just as they will do next year and the year after that.

Look at them:

YOUR TOWN *Summer, 1997*

Watch Nancy make cotton candy: she dips a wooden wand into a vat of whirling sugar, swirls the sweet fluff into a beehive do, tucks in the stray strands, pops the do into a plastic bag and then does another do, another bag, again, again. All the while she makes up her bags of blue and pink cotton candy, she talks. Spun sugar, spun tales.

Watch Kelly make an elephant ear, and if you order one, time her. Watch this, less than a minute, GO: She flattens a ball of raw dough into a slab the

size of a dinner plate (seven seconds) slides the slab into a well of extra-hot fat (one second) taps the dough with her tongs (one second) and then waits (less than half a minute) waiting with full attention, waiting as if she is listening for the elephant ear to tell her it is ready and when it is she plucks the sizzling crisped deep-fried ear out of the fat (one second) lets it drip (one second) shakes on the cinnamon-sugar (two seconds) slides it onto a square of waxed paper (one more second) and hands it to you, smiling a warning—*it's hot*—(one second). *Next?*

Watch Sonya: up before the carnival opens, up and working, just as anyone who works with food is up, always early, always out an hour before anyone else. Sonya eases a coil of raw sausage the size of a spare tire onto the grill. The sausage will steam on the grill all day, but first she goes about flashing it. This business is all about flash: gaudy lights, bright-colored stock, good-looking food, constant music and come-hither banter. Sausage, in this raw pinky glum stage, needs a lot of flash. Sonya cuts up a generous heap of onions and green peppers, parsley and tomatoes. She adorns the hill of meat with these and a handful of ice cubes and it is a handsome thing, this mound of meat, these bright vegetables, this cool ice, this theatrical rising shroud of steam. You glance at it as you walk by on your way to the ticket booth, your two children in tow, your wife beside you, and you think what you're meant to think: *That's what I want*. Sonya sees you, smiles.

Dollar by dollar, the carnival is a living. There is nothing romantic in this, nothing much different than running the corner store. You buy from them, they survive. They sell you something you can't get anywhere else: it's flash, it's their practiced performance, it's your town transformed for a week into a gaudy vibrant place. For you, this is all different, this is an edgy treat to be idling along on Poor Jacks' midway, filled with the fragmented sounds and smells and sights of this carnival. You become an adventurer in your own town, a little amazed and much amused. But for the people at work, there is no fragmented amusement, there is the only the ebb and flow of you, and you, and you. For Nancy and Kelly and Sonya there is the focus on work and the focus on you and on the next person and the next and on the endless repetition of spinning sugar, frying ears, steaming sausage, and on the flash and the banter and the buying and the selling and on doing the work. Do they see you? Do you see them?

FRANKLIN, INDIANA
Thursday, July 17, 1997

At five in the afternoon, for one hour, the fair stops. All the joints close, the food booths stop serving, the rides quit. Lights go off, awnings come down, windows slide shut. The Johnson County fair pauses, momentarily silent and still, giving everyone an hour off. The carnival workers of Poor Jack's take this time as their own, drifting to their bunkhouses and campers to find some "A-C," to eat, to lie in the cool silence of their own space, to smoke, to think, to rest.

As they do every year, the Bohlander family takes this hour and makes it a gift. They host a generous dinner for the fair board, the County Fair queen and her court, and a core of people close to the family: Mike, Red Dog, John, and—this year—us. The meal is grand Midwestern hospitality: pork chops an inch and a half thick, baby back split ribs, mounds of scalloped potatoes, bean salad, cool watermelon, vanilla pudding studded with nilla wafers, pitchers of lemonade and iced tea, a heap of fresh rolls, and bowls of ice swimming with miniature tubs of butter. We line up, fill our plates and then sit and eat under the canvas tent by John's Waymatic food trailer. The sun leans on the tent, the meal is hot and weighty, we sweat, smile, talk, eat and eat.

The fair board president, a big blond man, gets up as we're finishing, thanks the Bohlanders for the meal, then asks them each to introduce themselves and their families. So they do, as they always have, in order of birth.

Pat Bohlander

Pat gets up first. *Thank you all for coming*, she says. Last year and the years before it was Jack who stood and spoke, Jack who thanked everyone for coming, he who turned to his first son, Gary, and introduced him, and then to his next son, and then to his daughters. But this year it is Pat alone who stands: gracious, warm, quietly funny. As she speaks and thanks the fair board for coming, thanks everyone for sharing the meal, we let ourselves imagine we see Jack beside her again, see him smiling at her and us as she turns to their first son and asks him to stand up and speak.

Gary Bohlander

I'm Gary Bohlander, the oldest, he says and stands, lanky and dark, the image of his father when he was young. Gary smiles in his distracted way, sucking his tongue against his front teeth and squinting as if trying to remember his

lines. He gestures to the solid, black-haired woman sitting beside him. *This is my wife, Ruthi.* Ruthi stiffens slightly in a moment of self-consciousness, but smiles back at everyone. Gary introduces the two willowy girls beside her, each as tall and handsome as their father, each emanating the calm wisdom of their mother. *This is my daughter, Allison, and my other daughter, Lauren. Our son, Brett, is at basketball camp this week.* Gary squints again, taps his tongue against his teeth and folds himself back into his chair.

Tim Bohlander

I'm Christy Bohlander. I'm Tim's wife. Everyone turns to listen to this animated blond woman. We all know her solid, amiable husband and how much he resembles his father as he was later in life. Christy tenses under the gathering's attention, but she keeps talking, resolute, cheerful. *Tim's not here, but our children are. Lindsay is over there.* . . She points to her daughter sitting at a table with a cluster of children. Eleven-year-old Lindsay pops up, poised, alert. Christy turns to look for her six-year-old son. Not until someone points him out behind her does she see him. Spencer is between a cluster of house trailers, supervising the construction of an elaborate water slide out of plastic portable playground equipment, a blow-up wading pool and a water hose. Someone stage whispers: *Just like his dad* . . . Christy laughs: *There's Spencer.*

Nancy Frost

I guess I'm next. I'm Nancy and my husband Weasel is at St. Chris tonight. But our children are here. Nancy points to Lindsay's table. Three small, female versions of the wiry, tightly wound Weasel grin at their mother. Nancy returns their grins: *There's Heather and Katie and Abby. Three girls.* There it is with her too, there when she smiles at the girls: Nancy is her father. She is him in the rooted way she stands, in her open laugh, in her unapologetic pride in her girls, in how she can measure your character by how you talk and listen, and by how you laugh.

Kelly Horner

Kelly and her husband Eric are also in St. Chris tonight and couldn't be with us, Pat says. Sharp and funny Kelly, the artistic one, the daughter who painted on the side of the Raiders a gorgeous jungle of wild animals and birds and plant life, a painting that is part self-portrait in its intensity and wit and part memorial to her father. She began the painting in the last months that he was ill and

in the spring after he died she finished her work. The only mark of the memorial is an epigraph written in block letters on a panel beside the clenched jaw of a silent, watching alligator:

K. HORNER
FOR DAD

Becky Wampler

I'm Becky. I'm the baby. She says this with a consciously funny, self-mocking grin. She looks like her mother looked when she was young, when Pat and Jack first met and drove down the main street of Cambridge City, both wide open to the world, radiant with energy, youth and luck. In Becky's face is her mother's face, the face her father fell in with love forty years ago. Behind Becky now is a quiet man, sitting alone, watching her as she speaks. She introduces him and he nods. Becky turns and looks for their curly-haired two-year-old and she sees him: he is helping his cousin Spencer construct the water slide. They are both soaked, thrilled. Becky laughs; these are the carnival's children.

Betty Dance

I'm Betty Dance, Jack's sister. She smiles tightly, getting up to introduce herself at the urging of the fair board president. She starts to sit again quickly, but as if Jack is behind her, nudging her to get up again, encouraging her, she stands and carefully, graciously says, *Thank you all for coming.*

Jack Bohlander

Then it is six o'clock. We walk out from under the tent into the reawakening fair, into the whirl and blur of lights, the jangle and racket of rides and joints, into the smells of hot grease and spun sugar, into the heat and press of the eager crowd. He did this. He was here. In what he has left behind—family, memories, friends, this carnival, this midway, his life—he is still here. We look and we listen and we remember.

IV

DARREL

Come on in and win guys. Water fun with the water gun guys. Grab a gun and have some fun. Fifty cents a race. Come on in and win.

Darrel is a muscled coil of enthusiasm, energy and good-humored wit, bantering funny and fast with the crowd, using his microphone headset to tease, cajole, flirt, wheedle and gently heckle. His joint is always busy, there are always five, six, a dozen people hunkered down over the water guns, shooting at the target to make the stuffed red dogs race up their poles.

Guns up out of the holders and aim them at the orange dot. Ready, Aim, Fire! Hey! Don't shoot my dogs! Hey, a winner guys, look at the size of the prize on that one!

Darrel works the length of his joint, sliding back and forth on the slick of spilled water from the guns, making change at one end, flirting with a single mother and her two girls in the middle, deftly keeping a knot of rowdy adolescents in line at the other end. He's twenty-seven years old, and his past is marred by abuse and neglect, but that's the past. This is now. This is his life and it is a good life with good money, good people and this work is the best challenge he's found. Better than pure physical labor, better than the intellectual dance of being a waiter, here he is physically and mentally on for twelve hours straight, keeping up his dryly funny banter with the crowd all day and night, seducing them with his talk and his walk, punctuating the midway with his refrain:

Come on in and win guys. Water fun with the water gun guys. Grab a gun and have some fun. Fifty cents a race. Come on in and win.

Canned, tinny Beatles music plays over and over as the dogs climb the poles—*It's been a hard day's night, and I been workin' like a dog*—and then the bell clangs again: A winner! Darrel hands a stuffed dinosaur to a little girl. *There you go!* He looks at her sister, the one who came in second. She is disappointed, but well-mannered about it—no tears, no begging for another game. A good kid. Darrel considers her, tilting his head in an exaggerated imitation of someone weighing alternatives. *Should I? Shouldn't I?* Then, as the girl watches—hoping, hoping—Darrel produces a toy elephant out of thin air. He looks at it, suddenly bug-eyed, as if astonished to see it in his own hand. The girl wiggles like a puppy in anticipation—*oh please oh please*—Darrel shrugs—*this must be yours*—and gravely presents the elephant to the girl. The mother beams—*you just made two kids very happy*. Darrel politely turns aside the thanks; this is part of the job, this is part of what he does. The family leaves and walks down the midway but they'll be back, and others will too. Darrel watches them walk away, turns off his microphone and says, softly, almost to himself:

That's what I like—seeing the kids have a good time.

DOYLE

If someone looked at my blood they'd see little C-shaped corpuscles. "C" for Carnie.

Doyle is thirty-eight years old, master of the stick joints, and he laughs when he hears himself say this. But he's right. There is nowhere for him but here and here he is a genius. Ask anyone about Doyle and the Bottle-Up game. Players pay fifty cents a game. They get a bamboo fishing pole about six feet long with a string dangling off one end. Tied at the end of the string is a plastic "O" the size of a teething ring. The object of the game is to snag that ring around the neck of a horizontal beer bottle, and then, without letting the bottle fall off its one-foot square platform of plywood, to pull the bottle to a vertical position. People play for hours, losing money, patience, girlfriends and time on this deceptively simple game. For the uninitiated, it is nearly impossible. But Doyle is its master. He can do it in two seconds, a twitch of the ring over the neck of the bottle, a flick of his wrist, and: Bottle-Up. Dan watches, he's seen it before, but still he watches. *Doyle can do it with his mouth*, he says. Doyle can. He takes the pole and the string between his teeth, dangles the ring over the bottle, pulls. A man who has sunk ten bucks and forty-five minutes into this game with no results shakes his head. No way. But, yes, again: Bottle-Up. Doyle doesn't laugh or gloat. He has been better in his time.

I used to be able to pick up four bottles at a time, two in each hand, until the Tourette's got worse.

Tourette's runs in his family: his twin sister has it, her son has it, his cousin has it, Doyle has it. Tourette's doesn't define Doyle, but it describes him, making him taut and jerky as if he were pulled by invisible strings. This is an odd neurological syndrome, one that causes its victims to stutter, blurt out obscenities, twitch and veer through life jagged and hyperactive, distracted and distracting. Toward the end of a twelve-hour day, when Doyle is tired and the medications wear off, the Tourette's is at its worst, jerking his jaw into a nasty grimace, twisting his body in jerks and spasms.

But the syndrome is not the man. Doyle is much more: intense, tightly funny, carnival wise. He has been a carnie since 1979 minus about four years. He left once when he fell in love. He fell out of love, came back. Then, he fell in love again, got married, left again. Now, he's back again, single again, older, wiser in the ways of himself. He will do this the rest of his life.

I am a carnie. It's in my blood.

CARNIES

There are kids with the carnival every summer, teenage kids along for the ride or running away from home or playing the part of the carnie. A very few will last the season, even fewer still have what it takes or have the wit to understand what it takes. They play at it, try too hard, annoy the lifers. One night a new kid, rural green help, came up to Doyle wanting to offer a makeshift secret handshake: swaggering backwards, he held his hand out behind his back, palm up: *Hey man— whassup—shake—Hey man*. Doyle wouldn't shake the kid's hand.

The kid wanted to know why: *What's the matter with you?*

What's my name?

Doyle

What's my last name?

I don't know

You don't know my last name and you want me to play your game? You don't even know me. You get to know me and then I'll play your game. Maybe.

The kids come and go and when they go for good they aren't missed for very long. But then there are people with the carnival who are like James. James works hard, he's fair, he's straight with people. But he doesn't always finish seasons. He comes and goes and when he goes he's sorely missed, but he always comes back. When he's with the show, he works fiercely hard and is gentlemanly and kind and good to have around. But he can't stay. There is a restlessness in his blood, that of the road and his truck and the call of his life in the mannerly south, and this runs stronger than the call of the carnival.

Then there are those people on the midway—and if you ask, Doyle will name them—who are the real carnies. They work hard, they are fair, they are straight with you. They like to party and have a good time, but they're decent, smart and loyal. They come back season by season, they work their way into the body and soul of the carnival, knowing it, living it, becoming it. They do have it in their blood. There's no need for secret handshakes.

V

FLASH

Summer, 1997

THE WAYMATIC

Two hundred and forty-six yellow, red and blue light bulbs

THE WACKY SHACK

One hundred and forty-two light bulbs, all clear

THE SPACE SHUTTLE

Two hundred clear light bulbs around the open roof

In the cone under the roof:

Ninety-six red bulbs One hundred blue One hundred and eight yellow

Five hundred and four light bulbs

THE GO-GATOR

Thirteen green bulbs in the "G"

Twelve blue bulbs in the "O"

Two blue bulbs in the "-"

Sixteen red bulbs in the "G"

Fifteen green bulbs in the "A"

Nine blue bulbs in the "T"

Seventeen yellow bulbs in the "O"

Nineteen red bulbs in the "R"

One hundred and three light bulbs

THE WATER GAME

Three hundred and twenty-six yellow and blue light bulbs under the
awning

Thirty-eight forty-watt bulbs Nineteen twenty-watt bulbs

Three hundred and eighty-three light bulbs

THE BOWLER ROLLER

Three hundred and fifty-eight red bulbs and white bulbs
and twelve gold light bulbs that light up when you win

Three hundred and seventy light bulbs

*(Some of the light bulbs are clear, some are colored, some are clear with colored
caps, some are fluorescent, some are incandescent, some are made here, some
in Europe, some blink, some don't, some are old, some are new)*

MR. FROG

Two hundred and ten green light bulbs

and two hundred and ten yellow light bulbs overhead

Fifty-two yellow and green light bulbs on vertical poles

Four hundred and seventy-two light bulbs

THE ORBITER

Forty-eight bulbs in the "O"

Twenty-seven bulbs in the "R"

Thirty bulbs in the "B"

Sixteen bulbs in the "I"

Twenty-three bulbs in the "T"

Twenty-eight bulbs in the "E"

Twenty-seven in the "R"

Two thousand nine hundred and eighty-six

red, orange, yellow, green and blue bulbs in the arms, tubs and base

Three thousand one hundred and eighty-five light bulbs

THE GRAVITRON

One hundred and forty-four red

One hundred and twenty-eight yellow

One hundred and twenty-eight blue

One hundred and twenty-eight orange

One hundred and twenty-eight green

Three hundred and thirty-six red and blue on the sign spelling out *THRILLER*

One hundred and thirty-six red light bulbs spelling out eight "G's"

Forty red, fifty-five orange, twenty-eight green and forty-eight blue light bulbs on the sign that says *Gravitron*

Three hundred and two yellow bulbs in the lightning bolts

One thousand, six hundred and one light bulbs

THE ROCK-O-PLANE

Six hundred and twelve light bulbs in pink and white

THE TICKET BOOTH

Eighty red, yellow and blue light bulbs

THE MERRY-GO-ROUND

One thousand three hundred white light bulbs

THE SCOOTER

Three thousand three hundred and sixty-four cream-white light bulbs

THE ZIPPER

One thousand five hundred and forty-one light bulbs

THE SCRAMBLER

Sixty fluorescent tubes

THE 1001 NACHTS

We stopped counting.

BROWNSTOWN, INDIANA
Morning—Sunday, July 20, 1997

You should count the light bulbs. That's what this business is all about: Flash.

Tim laughed when he said that, but he meant it. So, all summer I counted. On one morning, at the Jackson County Fair, two of the carnival kids were hot and bored and followed me. We counted the lights on the Merry-Go-Round, the Raiders, the Zipper, the Scooter, the Orbiter, the Scrambler, the Spider. Then we got to the *1001 Nachts*. This ride is an attraction, a stately ride a few stories tall that works something like a giant pendulum. The base of the ride is a wide aluminum deck with steps fore and aft. On the deck sits a car the size of a small barge; two rows of seats face out. Counterbalancing the car is a heavily weighted arm studded with white lights tracing the outlines of a sword, a turban, a star, a moon and the words *1001 Nachts* at the top. When the car is in motion, it swings left, then right, then left, right, and up and around to the top of a sixty foot arc before it swoops down again in a stomach lurching drop. Throughout, the car stays level with the ground as if it is a magic carpet.

The kids and I stood on the midway and counted the light bulbs we could see. But then we stopped; too much of the ride was too high to see. One of the kids had an idea: run the ride and then stop it with the car above us and the words *1001 Nachts* at our eye level so we can see to count the light bulbs. *Okay*, I said, and with the help of the ride jock, we ran the ride. The huge bulk groaned into action, swinging left, right, gaining momentum, until the car climbed to the top of its course. There we stopped it and it stayed: overhead, looming, paused. We climbed onto the deck of the ride. The car was huge above us. In that calm morning nothing seemed precarious or imminent, but still we counted as though we didn't have much time, counting sword, turban, star, moon, words.

Then, we heard a bellowing yell, a shout that seemed to come from inside the ride itself: *HEY! HEY! Get off that ride! Now! All of you! Get OFF that ride!*

Weasel strode up in a white hot fury and bellowed at us, at the ride jock. He clenched his fists at his sides and he yelled over and again not at us but at the ride jock: *I told you not to do that! GODDAMN IT! I told you!* We climbed off—fast—stood on the midway and watched the ride jock take Weasel's fury—what we deserved—realizing only then how reckless we had been. It wasn't the ride jock's fault and we all knew it. I half-heartedly stepped forward as if I might intervene, calm Weasel down, take then what would

eventually come my direction anyway. As I stepped forward, one of the kids who'd been helping with the counting shook her head and said quietly, as if from experience, *I'd let him cool off if I were you*. I looked at her small, intent face and knew she was right even as I knew I was a coward. I stepped back and watched.

Afternoon—Sunday, July 20, 1997

Later, Weasel found me on the midway. He looked me full in the face, and said in his raw and gravelly voice: *I told him before not to do that. He knows better*. I tried to say it was my fault, not the ride jock's, not the kids', but Weasel cut me short—not forgiving, not blaming—*It ain't your fault*, he said. He looked at me, serious, intent that he be heard and understood:

I saw the ride from the parking lot. I saw it up there and I was pissed that he was leaving it up there again. I didn't see anything else, but then, when I came around and I saw you all standing there and I saw those kids standing there under it . . . those weren't even my kids.

He paused as if he couldn't express the white heat of terror in his head, in his whole body, as if it were impossible to put into words how he felt when he walked around the back of the ride simply irritated with the ride jock, but then saw people under that car, saw us. This is what he saw: the gleaming barge-sized car stopped overhead, paused, pure potential. He saw how it could have moved at any moment, how it could have slipped and swooped down and like a ferocious hand smacked us all off the ride. Weasel knew what could have happened. In his mind, as he walked around the ride and saw us, and saw that ride poised over us, he saw it happen. His knowledge of the midway, of that ride, was the root of his vision and then of his terror and then of his rage.

He turned to go. As he was walking away, he turned around and said quickly, as if it were an offhand remark: *The ride doesn't have a conscience, but I do*.

LAFAYETTE, INDIANA
Friday, April 25, 1997

The Loop-o-plane is an old ride, one of Poor Jack's original thirteen. It is powered by a gas engine, and when it runs, it squeals and rattles and shakes, knocking and pinging like an old sedan. Riders sit in two tubs on the Loop, each tub attached to an arm, each arm attached on one side of the engine.

The arms spin fiendishly fast clockwise and counterclockwise on two vertical planes. Usually Toby runs the ride, operating the foot pedals and hand levers that operate the gear shift, the clutch and a brake. He loves to make the tubs whirl first one way, then the other and, in between, stop the ride with the tubs at the top of the loop and the riders inside hanging upside down, screaming gleefully.

When the college students get tanked up they like this one, Toby says and breaks into a genial gap-toothed grin. He loves this ride, its quirks, its fans, its history. But one night, it turns on him. On a Friday night in April, he suddenly can't stop the Loop from spinning. There are four people riding in it, and though they aren't in any immediate danger, the ride simply won't stop. Toby is helpless. The emergency "Off" switch is unreachable. It is tacked on the engine, between the whirling tubs. Toby radios for help—fast. Tim comes running, and John, Becky, and Pat toting little Alex. Toby yells: *It won't stop!* He stands there, his hands at his sides, his palms bloodied and raw from trying to muscle the clutch into action. Between them John and Tim realize that the bolt that allows the clutch to shift has snapped. *This ride is running wide open*, John says grimly. He finds a two-by-four and chucks it at the engine, aiming at the "Off" switch. The engine shudders to a stop. The spinning tubs lose their momentum, slow, come to rest. The riders climb out, not knowing at first anything has gone wrong. But one, a college boy with a very pretty girlfriend, sees the crowd that has gathered and says, loudly, belligerently: *Did this ride break while we were on it?*

There is no answer from Tim, John, Toby or Pat. But someone else volunteers: *The ride inspectors just OK'd the ride. It all checked out. This could happen if you rode in an automobile, or a plane. Things happen.* Then, of course, the boy realizes: something *has* happened. He isn't hurt, and neither is his girlfriend, but his eyes take on a calculating, tough look. He glances about him, as if looking for evidence, a witness. He blurts: *Is this Poor Jack's ride?*

Pat turns to him and says in an even and unflustered tone, *Are you hurt?* Her question is concern and challenge. The girlfriend looks at Pat holding Alex, at Becky, and she shakes her head: *I'm okay.* She reaches for her boyfriend's arm—*come on, drop it, let's go.* He wants to argue, to get something—money, attention, his pride back, anything—but she pulls him away. Toby watches them leave. Then he turns to watch Tim and John working on his ride and he stands there silent, as if bereft. Becky stands beside him, lets a pause hang in the air for a moment, and then makes the joke that breaks the tension and that

will be retold all season: *They got two rides for the price of one. . . . We should have charged them twice.*

VI

FRANKLIN, INDIANA

Friday, July 18, 1997

At midnight in Franklin, after the fair closes Friday night, John orchestrates the teardown of the office tent. The red and white striped, open-ended tent is erected by tradition over the office trailer and it has to come down and move to Brownstown and be put up there by Saturday, tomorrow. There are a few hours to do the task and John is in charge. He stands under the tent and barks a brief explanation to the help, all men, gathered around:

If we work together we can get this done. Just pay attention to what I tell you: You guys over there, pick up that pole, untie those ropes, pull those stakes.

John points—*over there, do that, get those*—and a core of workers steps in: Red Dog, Toby, Rick, Josh, Dawg. They know what to do. The inexperienced green help are bewildered by the sudden flurry of John's commands. They step toward one task, then another, hesitate, fumble and inevitably screw up. John gives commands that make little sense to anyone new to the task. He knows what he means, and the seasoned workers know what he means. They have done this before. They move forward, surely, right behind John as he strides across the width of the tent, pulling the tall aluminum tent poles out of the ground and thrusting them backward behind him. He pulls and thrusts pole after pole without looking to see if anyone is catching these missiles. The seasoned workers keep up but the green help falter and fall back. They nervously keep an eye on the canvas roof of the tent as if expecting it to collapse. It won't, but they are unnerved by the sagging canvas, the clang and pitch of poles. John barks commands again: *stack these poles, don't let the tent hit the office trailer, do what I tell you.* One green help gets sideswiped by a backwards flung tent pole and has to dance out of the way. As he stumbles, catches himself, his face is panicked, exhausted. The experienced workers ignore him. They are with John.

By one-thirty in the morning, the tent is down, rolled, stored in the back of a semi. The poles are stacked, the ropes are coiled. The job is done. Tomorrow, the job will be done again but in reverse, the tearing down becoming the setting up. By the clock, tonight is already tomorrow. But for most of the help, seasoned and green, tonight is still tonight. They drift away to drink, to

smoke, to sleep. John stands alone in the open space by the office trailer. He too will sleep, but for him this night is already tomorrow, already the last night of the fair. For him, the circus jump from this fair to the next has already begun. Tonight has become tomorrow and the long sleepless night that follows and the blur of time into the next day and the night beyond.

There is no time. There is only the work to be done and the roads to be driven and the spaces to empty and the spaces to fill.

CIRCUS JUMP

Saturday, July 19, 1997–Sunday, July 20, 1997

Franklin, Indiana to Brownstown, Indiana

Midnight—First down in Franklin are the kiddie rides, closing before the rest of the fair; then the stick joints and trailer joints come down. The workers dismantle their equipment as quickly as they can. Some move to help other people, some find quiet ways to disappear. Music blares from boom boxes, the Wipeout, the Gravitron. Shouts pierce the night. Two-way radios squawk out complaints, calls for assistance, jokes, advice, answers, each voice part of the ongoing fragmented narrative of the carnival. What was only an hour ago an organized circle of light and music and entertainment is now barely controlled chaos.

1 A.M.—John drives the forklift, barreling down the midway from task to task, moving joints, ticket booths, rides. He is grimly oblivious of anyone in his way. The workers listen and watch for him. The family stays clear of the path. The kids, who usually reclaim the midway at night for bikes and basketball, give John a wide berth. John owns this space, this midway, these hours.

2 A.M.—The first vehicles of a straggling convoy head south under a full moon, stopping briefly for coffee at the gas station outside the fairgrounds. Coffee and stale doughnuts. This is the finest part of the night. There is a joy in being on the road and driving into the night, as if this all is an adventure, as if each person is suddenly anonymous and free. For many, these hours are also a rare moment of rest.

3 A.M.—The fairgrounds in Brownstown are in a grassy elliptical basin, mostly empty, dark and quiet, spotlighted only at the south end by a few high-powered farm lights. John has already been here: small triangular orange flags and a taut grid of ankle-high string mark the intended locations of the rides, joints, and concession stands. The bunkhouses are in place, the office tent is up, but little else is here. By tonight, this empty space will become the noisy midway, but now there is this pause, this wide stillness to lean into.

3:30 A.M.—A trail of lights appears, one after another vehicle snaking into a lot tucked in a hollow below the fairgrounds. There is enormous promise in this line of dusky trucks, trailers and cars rolling into the fairgrounds in the dark. The vehicles park and wait, engines idling, drivers watching. The faint sound of voices rises and falls. A cigarette glows. Someone coughs. This is the longest hour.

4 A.M.—Paul zooms through the fairgrounds in his golf cart, checking John's flags for the location of his joints and rides. He is ready to go, to set up and be done, but he'll have to wait until he gets the okay to move in.

Dawn—John and Debbie drive into the grassy fairgrounds, towing their housetrailer. They pull in the silent lot, stop, get out and open the back doors of their pickup. Their youngest children, Jeremy and Kathleen, stumble out, groggy, trailing blankets and sleep. John holds open the door of the housetrailer and ushers his children in. He closes the door carefully behind them. Not a word is spoken.

8 A.M.—M. has quit, disappeared in the night. He will be missed for his skill with the Skywheel, but little else. Rick and Josh will set up without him. No one will discourage them but everyone worries. The towering Skywheel is treacherous, tricky to put together even for the most experienced worker. But then—as if a plea had gone out for someone, for anyone, for one man in particular—James appears, arriving in his truck as if he had never been gone. Even those who don't understand his comings and his goings are pleased to see him. He has been with the Skywheel before and knows it well.

10 A.M.—At this hour, when it seems impossible that the carnival will ever come together in time, Tim reaches for his wife Christy in the broad daylight of the midway and kisses her so hard that she bends backwards, amazed at this spontaneous passion born of sleeplessness, fatigue, worry, and heat.

11 A.M.—The Zipper, Tilt, Swinger, Scrambler, Skywheel, Wipeout, kiddie rides, stick joints, and endless concession stands are all going up at once. The crowd that will come tonight won't see this work: these men and women working under a fiercely hot sun, awake for over twenty-four, thirty-six hours, hefting machinery and steel girders, cleaning windows, counters and steam tables, appeasing inspectors and fair boards, dodging the barreling surge of semis, golf carts, forklifts, tempers.

Noon—Etha, four months pregnant, beet-red with the hundred-degree heat and her own fatigue, reaches over her head to tighten a rope on the Merry-Go-Round's roof. She laughs and repeats the line her sister gave her: *People think that we plant carnival seeds and it just pops up.*

3 P.M.—The metal plates that make up the floor on the Scooter are so hot the workers must first hose them down. Then they handle the plates and I-beams with their t-shirts, using the shirts like outsized pot holders. Today, even men and women with suntans will become burnt by this hot sun. Becky ferries ice water to the workers setting up the rides. They gulp down cup after cup, some dousing themselves with the cool liquid. Tim watches the crews of men finishing the set-up of rides and says, softly: *You got to admire these guys, in heat like this.*

5 P.M.—A circus jump is like a magic trick: there today, gone and somewhere else tomorrow. Less than twenty-four hours ago, this carnival was in full swing in another town almost an hour's drive away. Now, here they are: another fair, another town. Same workers, same games, joints, rides and food. Different spot. Magic, not magic.

8 P.M.—Rick and Josh sit on two lawn chairs set before the great Skywheel. They sit as though they never want to move again. Their faces are drawn, sunburnt and dehydrated. They stare straight ahead, not speaking, just watching the crowd drift by. Occasionally one will lift a can of Mountain Dew and drink. When someone comes to ride their ride they ease into motion, standing and taking tickets, ushering people onto the swinging bucket seats of the Skywheel. Then as the ride swings into motion they watch it, their faces tilted up, lit by its green and yellow turning lights. They watch as if amazed.

Midnight—The crowd ebbs and the workers drift away to find rest. Darkness and silence settle in. The midway becomes quiet again, aloof and empty again, close to what it was less than a day ago: a midway of the imagination, sketched out on this grassy field by orange triangular flags and a tight grid of string.

VII

AUBURN, INDIANA

Friday, September 26, 1997

This is the night that will be the first night of the biggest weekend of the season, bigger than entire weeks in April, in May. Tonight is a cool dry night, the weather calm and inviting. There is an early chill in the air, but it is not too cold, and there is no rain. There is a decent crowd tonight, and they are spending money.

On this night, as it always is on the second to last night of every season, the drawing for the help will be held. This is a carnival tradition, this is a family

tradition. After midnight, the workers gather around the office trailer. This year the two youngest members of the Bohlander family stand on the porch of the trailer with their uncle Gary. He holds an industrial-sized can full of ticket stubs and explains to them and the help how the drawing works. The right ticket is worth two hundred and fifty dollars. Last year \$2,000 was given away. This year, six people will win. We wait and watch as the kids take turns picking tickets and handing them to Gary who calls out the numbers. The winners step up to verify their tickets: Bo is a winner and Annie and John-O and Kevin and Berry Jeff and Paul. When the last number is called, Gary explains the final teardown: Saturday night they sleep, Sunday they move. Monday, Gary will organize and roll canvas and Tim will coil cable. If everything is done by Monday night, everyone will get paid—salary, bonuses, drawing. But tonight, even as Gary is talking the workers begin drifting away. The season is nearly done. There is one night left to party, to celebrate or mourn, to say good-bye.

We walk away, walk through the dark square of Auburn, past the Corn Dog, past the Elephant Ear, past the Skywheel, past the sawhorses that mark where the carnival ends and the town begins. We walk away, listening to the voices of these people, listening to the muffled sounds of their conversations, to the far-off sounds of the kids on their bikes, to the quiet sound of a door opening and then closing.

Saturday, September 27, 1997

Robin stands on the street corner in Auburn on the last morning of the last fair of the season and squints into the sun in the blue, blue sky. He takes a last drag off his cigarette, flicks it into the gutter and smiles a slow smile.

Nice weather for Jack, ain't it?

Later, Pat stands in the doorway of the office trailer, holds the storm door ajar, and looks down the midway, distracted, waiting. Someone tells her what Robin said and she nods, yes:

He would have enjoyed this day. He's smiling down on us.

We hope so, we want to believe it is so. Pat is waiting for a representative from the local fair board to arrive with a contract for Poor Jack Amusements to return to Auburn next year and the next. The fair board is stalling. They said they would be there in the morning, then in the early afternoon. Now it is three o'clock. Pat doesn't say it, but we all worry: will the board deny the contract because Jack is gone? That kind of thing has happened before to

other shows in other places. As Poor Jack Amusements is, many shows are a family affair. If someone dies the family changes and so, by the nervous logic that rules this business, the show may be likely to change too. The Bohlanders have made it through the first year without Jack and they know they are being watched, not only by this fair board, but by all the fair boards and all the street fair committees and all the shopping center owners and every one of the church bazaar organizers. They are being watched by their workers, by their friends, and by each other. They have been known for thirty years as a “Sunday School” carnival, a carnival that doesn’t cheat the foolish, drain the town marks, hustle the kids. Their joints are fair, their rides are solid, their food is safe, and on that their past was made and their future rests. But this year, all of Poor Jack Amusements’ history might not be enough. There is no contract until there is a contract. That worry has been with them all season; today it is on the surface.

Pat holds the office trailer door ajar and waits. One more hour, another hour. She waits. She will wait all day—finally, later in the evening, with no explanation for the wait, she will get a contract. A three-year contract. They will come back to Auburn for another three years, and today that is what matters: Poor Jack’s will be back.

Saturday, September 27, 1997 Late afternoon

The Scooter faces west on a side street in Auburn. The sun slants into the operator’s booth. A man sits inside, his back lit but his face in shadow. The golden melancholy light of fall fills the booth. It is the last day of the fair.

A line of people waits outside the ride, waiting for their turn to drive the shiny beetle-shaped cars. As soon as the operator takes their tickets, everyone races to leap into their favorite cars. The operator makes sure they’re ready, set, then: GO. He turns on the power and the drivers careen in their electric cars around the floor, bashing into each other like homicidal maniacs. Sparks zap and fly off the ceiling and the floor. Everyone is grinning, whooping—the kids who drive like this is their own Indy 500 and the kids who can’t steer and get bashed into again and again, and even the adults, their heads bobbling like crash test dummies. But then, as quickly as it’s begun, the ride is over. The lights go out, the cars come to a stop and everyone groans—*ohhh, ahhhh*—with genuine disappointment.

When you step onto a ride you are transported. You are shaken up, scared out of your wits, spun in circles, plunged to the ground, thrown up in the air.

You feel as if you leave the earth; you do leave your ordinary life. That's why you came to the carnival, that's why you will come back. Jack knew that; he did this for you. He did this too because he grew up with it, and because it was an interesting way to make a living, and because he was good at the business of making fun, and because he had a remarkably generous sense of humor about life and living. But mostly he did this for you. He loved to see people laugh, and he loved to see your kids laugh and then you laugh right there with them.

If I could make you believe it, I would tell you that Jack is right here with us still. He is in the whoops and hollers of these kids. He is in the grin of the small girl who got the elephant. He is in the magic of Doyle's Bottle-Up tricks. He is in Rick's strength and Christy's quick wit and Toby's loyalty and Red Dog's energy. He is in Kelly's art and in Nancy's magic whirl of cotton candy and in Tim's genius with all things mechanical and in Gary's distracted braininess and in Becky's funny charm. He is in Betty's resilience and in John's brilliance with space. He is in Pat's good humor and her grace. He is in the flash and the romance of the Skywheel. He is in your delight at how your town has been transformed for tonight and tomorrow. He is in the touch of a man's hand on his wife's neck as they walk the midway.

The Scooter faces west into the late afternoon sun. The warm light of autumn slants into the operator's booth. A man sits inside, his back lit but his face in shadow. He takes the tickets from the children standing in line, from their friends, their parents, from you. He smiles at you. *This is for you.*