

WHITE MOTHS

In Ontario her mother knew a girl named Delores Peters (she remembered the name, “sad stones” her mother said, “it means sad stones,”) whose father had purchased a carnival ride and brought it home on a trailer hitched to the back of his Mercury. It was a children’s whirly wheel, blue metal cars like stumpy little shoes, each with a black rubber safety belt and running around a sheet metal track, the track scuffed and burnished to a dim mirror where the car wheels ran and the children walked getting on and off the ride. The cars were attached to the ends of blue steel spider arms with a string of Christmas lights down their centers and ran round and round the polished metal track without spinning or rising, one behind another until you squeezed the handle of the greased upright brake and slowed them to a stop.

It had been a bargain. The man who sold it owed a gambling debt to a gangster from Niagara Falls and he needed to move fast. He showed a picture round the taproom of a tavern in Crystal Beach, itself an amusement park town. The picture had scalloped edges as if cut with a pinking shears and the image was a little faded in some parts and enameled in others, or so her mother remembered over the years. She knew that Delores Peters kept it even after her father’s death.

The tavern parking lot was unpaved and huge, large enough that sometimes tractor trailer drivers parked there while they had an ale, easily pulling in and out without the need to turn their rigs around. It was a dusty space that left a taste of stone in your mouth when you walked across it.

There hadn’t been time to go back home and get the pickup truck when Delores Peters’ father bought the whirly ride and so the man who sold it threw in a ball hitch as part of the bargain and then helped him balance the load of the Mercury using blocks of wood to shim the shot springs. The ride was surprisingly compact on its trailer. The blue cars stored up on end like cupcakes, the curves of their metal pitted and scarred from being painted over where it had been chipped. The spider legs folded like a pocket knife when their bolts were loosened. The engine and the upright brake were bolted to the trailer together with a folding metal stool where the operator could sit to take tickets or run the ride.

The whirly wheel ran on either 220 or 440 power and had a noisy gas powered generator for when there was no power available, although the generator roared so bad it made the ride unpleasant and sometimes stalled or spewed black smoke which tended to frighten children. Delores Peters' father paid nine hundred dollars cash for the whirly ride in 1965. He was a farmer and his credit was good and the bank in Crystal Beach lent him the cash on his word. It was something you could take from fair to fair or just set up on its own for children to ride.

There hadn't been time to go home for the pickup yet he and the stranger went into town to get the loan and the cash. For an awful moment after the stranger drove off Delores Peters' father feared that he had been fooled and his stomach felt hollow from the beer, the sunshine, and the dusty stone parking lot. But the ride ran just right when he got it home and he was able to set it up without much trouble although it hadn't come with any directions but the fading scalloped snapshot.

He tapped power from the 220 line in the barn and ran the thick black rubber cable to a nice shady space not far from the chestnut tree. There weren't neighbors nearby to watch this effort or it might have gathered a crowd. Even so Delores and her mother watched expectantly and not without some puzzlement. Despite the shade her father sweated, his dark shirt turning moist under the arms and a damp upright swatch forming from his chest to his belly. Sometimes when he caught her eye he smiled.

There was a trick or two to getting the whirly ride set up just right. You had to be plumb level or the spider arms would shudder slightly and groan and the wheels of the blue cars would skid or balk a little by turns. Still he got it going all right.

"Have a ride," he said to Delores when he was done. He gestured toward the blue cars on their track like someone pointing to a dance floor.

"You too, love," he told her mother, "It's strong enough for both of you if you ride across the way from her."

At first it was very strange for them, mother and daughter on opposite arms, one at three o'clock and one at nine. They were not certain whether they were chasing each other or balancing each other, and if chasing each other who came first and who behind. It was also very quiet at first, only the wobbly rubber noise of the greased black wheels along the burnished track and the soft, urgent straining of the electric motor. For awhile they may have wondered if they should have made a noise, whether squealing or laughing brightly, and how exactly they should let him know when they had had enough.

He watched them happily, the ride was running smoothly and it was a bargain really, though he wasn't really one to show a range of emotion. In time he discovered a small basketweave suitcase tucked next to the wheel of the trailer, the straw colored basketry frayed and torn but the latch and hinges still shiny brass. Inside there was a record player with a large speaker and two different records with tunes to play along with the ride. It was a surprise. They waved when they wanted him to stop.

Delores Peters' father wanted her to invite her friends over for a ride on the whirly wheel and she of course wished to do likewise at first. From the beginning there was something wanting in the experience, a curious sense of mixed expectation and loss. It isn't common to go somewhere where there is a single amusement ride unless it is a carousel and then the mirrors and all the llamas, camels and horses make it seem more than a single ride and the calliope and colors form a spectacle.

The whirly ride was modest and not a spectacle. In the sunshine the uniform blue enamel had the flatness of weathered house paint although it was clearly fresh and even possessed of a little sparkle. The blue cars seemed somehow Dutch, perhaps on account of the delft color, perhaps because their snub shape suggested foreshortened wooden shoes. Still Delores' mother and father did their best to make the occasion something festive for her friends. Her mother made a frosted cake with roses like a birthday and put a jug of lemonade on ice in a washtub, covering the jug with a dishtowel to keep the yellowjackets away. Her father added other records to the two which had come with the record player in the straw colored suitcase. The song called "How much is that doggie in the window?" was a favorite with the girls. He

also found ways to vary the speed of the cars, manipulating the brake somehow to add variation to the ride and making the girls squeal at first. When that wore off, Delores' mother ripped strips of muslin to make blindfolds for any girl who wanted to ride with them and both her parents helped tie them over the girls' eyes.

Before long of course the girls drifted off to other play but Delores Peters' father did not seem disappointed. The ride was a success in what it brought together and it was beautiful in its way even when it went around without any riders.

Most of the girls had to go home before nightfall which was still fairly late then in Ontario in August, but for those who could stay the whirly ride was wonderful with its arm of strung lights in bright colors. The music from the record player seemed both distant and near in the summer night, like a dream and a memory at once.

The girls who remained rode dreamily, taking interest in the ride again under these new circumstances. Delores' father adjusted the rheostat which controlled the speed of the cars so that they circled lazily and the hum of the wheels softened to a low buzz like locusts. The ice in the washtub had melted to a dark pool and white moths caught themselves on its surface struggling against wet wings.

As the parents of Delores' friends came to pick up their girls, they would mostly stand there for awhile watching the spider arms of light go round and flash against the chestnut tree, the barn, and their own faces. Her father nodded silently from where he stood by the upright brake, foregoing his seat at the folding stool, keeping watch over the ride in the night. He waved to the girls and their parents as they left.

Finally when everyone was gone, he invited Delores and her mother to ride again at three o'clock and nine. This time they seemed to spin like people holding hands, not chasing each other at all.

Her mother did not know what eventually happened to the ride. She seemed to think that Delores Peters' father had rented it out once or twice to a church

fair or a volunteer firemen's picnic over the years. She also felt certain that he pulled it out from the barn and set it up near the chestnut tree from time to time again, one time in particular when they were teens and rode the whirly wheel ironically with their boyfriends, cramped one to a car. Her mother also wasn't sure what had happened to Delores Peters exactly. She knew Delores had married unhappily but then remarried happily. She also knew Delores' father died before her mother, who in fact she thought might be living still in Ontario since farm wives tended to be hardy.