

Contents

Brothers

Autumn of the year

The Fairground people

Hidden eyes

Ten

Self defence

The Winning Edge

To a Daughter

Just another miracle

THE FAIRGROUND PEOPLE

There is a road that runs from the rotary at Cowgate straight to Gallowgate at the center of Newcastle. About halfway down it the road from Fenham intersects from the right. Opposite the intersection is the town moor. This huge expanse of open ground within the confines of the city is a luxury. A vast grassed area bisected by two paths, one that parallels the road to the city center, and another that crosses it at right angles. This shorter path must be half a mile, at least, and provides a short cut for walkers and bikers going to Jesmond.

I can't say that I had spent much time on the moor until the spring and summer of nineteen sixty-two. Mostly, that was due to Mom. Even in those days boys could find trouble enough if they were to look for it. She knew that and tried to keep me close.

Dad was three years dead in nineteen sixty-two. I was in my fourteenth year. Mom knew she had to start letting go of me. I knew that it was time for me to step out a little. This knowing was in no way reasoned. Fourteen-year old boys then were as short on reason as my own kids are today. The knowledge was something deeper, something in the blood. The urge to explore was tugging at me, I was restless.

In the late spring the fair came to town as it did every year. The 'Hoppings' was reputed to be the largest fair in Europe. All the smaller traveling fairs from around England came together for one week in June on the town moor - it spread nearly the length of the moor on the Jesmond side. The fair started its week at noon on Sunday, and for the first two hours the rides were free for kids.

Philip and I made the ride from Fenham to the moor on our bikes, the noise from the fairground meeting us as we reached the intersection. She was only sixteen was high on the charts that year and every other ride was playing it. You could walk from one end of the fair to the other and hear it basting from public address systems on all sides of you. The smell of fries, candy floss, and toffee apples mingled in an intoxicating fashion that would etch itself on my memory - in the same way that the smell of gasoline and burning rubber did at the speedway track. It was a total experience for the

senses.

We stayed all day Sunday and went back Monday afternoon. The weather was being good to us. As it turned out the whole week would produce no rain and create a record for fairground week. By the following Saturday when the fair closed out I would be changed by the experience. Changed by a new found freedom, and also, by something lost. Changed by the smells and the sounds that pulsed in the air, and most of all, I would be changed because of Sheila. She was from out of town - visiting with a cousin for fairground week. We met Monday afternoon, Philip and me, and Sheila and her cousin Carol. We were aware of each other for some time before any approach took place, noticing, and not noticing each other. Then Carol walked up to Philip and said, 'My cousin likes your friend.' She didn't wait for a reply, but returned quickly to where Sheila was standing by the Ferris wheel.

After a brief huddle, time enough so that we would not seem too eager, Philip and I walked over and introduced ourselves. It was clear that we were all first timers in matters of the heart. Conversation that afternoon was like a big-dipper ride. It came in a rush, followed by long pauses. So it went until darkness fell and the girls said they must be heading home. I was seized then by something akin to panic. Overcoming my normal shyness I found myself asking Sheila to meet us the following day. She feigned uncertainty at first, but I knew at once what her answer would be. And so we met again. By Wednesday there was no world other than this space we were in. Here on the neutral turf of the fairground we had mingled with the sound, smell, and taste of this place, and each other. We had become different people, people of the fairground. This world was our world, and it was fresh, and young, and full of impossible excitement.

We didn't go on the rides after midweek. Even the fairground became a backdrop to the drama we were living with each other. As evening fell Sheila and I would stray off on our own holding hands and seeking the shadows on the fringe of the grounds. I can't recall much of that week that didn't involve Sheila. I went home at night, I got up in the morning. Everything else was the touch of her hand, the look on her face, and the smell of her hair - which was apples. I

was drunk at fourteen without the benefit of, or the desire for liquor. On Saturday, the last day of the fair - Philip and Carol took off on their own. Sheila and I walked the length of the fair several times. By now we had become easy with each other and talked freely, but as the day began to wind down a tension arose between us. We both knew its meaning. Tomorrow Sheila would be gone and our fair-ground world would pack up and leave town. I was struggling with the emotions this reality forced upon me. I didn't want to go back to the other world - that world of a week ago that seemed a lifetime away.

In the late afternoon we walked out of the fairground and down the street. A short distance from the moor was a park with a lake in it. On a bench by the side of the lake we sat. Two fourteen-year old kids living something we had not known existed a week ago. The sound of the fairground where we had spent the week together was still audible in the distance. "She was only sixteen, only sixteen, with her eyes all aglow. She was too young to fall in love and I was too young to know." The song that had shadowed us all week now took on a personal poignancy. I felt Sheila's hand tighten and I knew her thoughts were with mine. I squeezed back. In the dark, by the lake, with the sounds of the fairground in our ears - the smell of the candy floss and fries a brief memory away, she laid her head against my shoulder. The smell of apples from her hair came strongly to me as strands of it fell over the side of my face and caressed my neck. I was overpowered by my joy and sadness, not knowing where one feeling started and the other left off. And sitting there, silent, I closed my eyes and let the feelings wash over me. A week ago I had been a child - in my own eyes as well as in the eyes of others. Today I was different. No longer a child not yet an adult. I had taken a step into the middle ground of adolescence and the thought that struck me was, 'I can never go back.' For the first time in my life something had passed. Absolutely, irrevocably passed. I was on a journey to somewhere only I didn't know where. I would go back to school on Monday and the week with Sheila when we were the fairground people would be gone. I wouldn't forget. I couldn't forget. Sheila lifted her head and we looked at each other. We needed something to cement the memory and the moment. We moved to

each other - her lips were like silk as they brushed mine. In a second we were embracing. Time hung suspended in the night air as we kissed. Kissed long, and with longing. Afterward I heard myself say, 'I love you,' and it was true. It was as true as anything I have ever said to anyone before, or since. We walked back to the fairground in silence, and for one last half-hour we were the fairground people again.

The fair was never the same after that. I went every year until I was twenty or so, but it could never be the same. I would spend most of the time searching the crowd with my eyes - looking for her. At twenty I realized she would be so different now that I wouldn't recognize her even if I saw her.

A couple of years later I heard a rumor that the fair had stopped going to Newcastle. I was living away from home by then - I had moved on. I still remember though. Every time I see a fair, or smell candy floss, even the smell of apples. I can close my eyes and go back. Back to nineteen sixty-two in Newcastle. When Sheila and I for one short week, became the fairground people.