

# THE WHEEL

*by Steve Lemley*

It was late morning. Although he knew the rest of the carnies would be sleeping off whatever they'd had too much of the night before, he still listened for the taped calliope music to blare out of the loudspeakers. He didn't understand why he was awake.

A trickle of sweat melted down his temple and caught the corner of his eye, forcing him to blink. He kept his eyes closed for a moment, convinced that when he opened them the Ferris wheel would be glaring like neon spokes on a bicycle tire and the grey woman would be gazing vacantly from the plate pitch with her hands buried in her change apron. The sunlight, burning through his eyelids, reminded him it was morning.

Opening his eyes too quickly, he winced and twisted his face tight until he could only distinguish black forms outlined by the brightness. He reached around to his back pocket for his sunglasses and realizing that they weren't there, grabbed the other side to make sure he hadn't left his money behind.

To his left, the lineup of trailers reminded him of the rows of cigar box houses he'd seen from the interstate. A dinosaur reared up in the shadow of the merry-go-round. Turning his head, he noticed a second monster stalking the dinosaur. The creatures were getting ready to fight or mate.

His eyes adjusted to the light. A thin coating of dust either reflected or dulled the sunlight—he couldn't tell which—making the midway look like the washed-out pictures in the National Geographic he'd found in a drainage ditch a few days earlier.

He fixed his eyes on the Ferris wheel. The faded canvas tents flashed past until he was standing in front of it. Almost looking directly into the sun, he examined each smooth steel girder from the hub out. He counted the red clown's face on each of the twelve chairs as if one might be missing. He remembered when the owner told him he was the best ride-jockey on the show.

He heard the voices of two or three teenage girls behind him and quickly slid behind the ride. As their voices faded, he walked to the middle of the midway and watched them. There were three—two short girls with close-cropped black hair in jeans and dark T-shirts and a tall blonde wearing red shorts. The blonde walked a few feet in front of the other girls.

The red shorts bounced back and forth as she ground her hips with each step. Her tan line started a couple of inches below the shorts. She stopped and the two short girls walked past her. She turned around and Football hurried behind the ride. He was sure she'd seen him.

He stepped on a black cricket, squished it into the dirt with a deliberate grind of his foot and walked back to the bunkhouse trailer.

Either hunger or the sound of the generator firing-up woke him. He stared at the rusty springs under the top bunk and tried to decide whether he wanted a hamburger or a corndog.

"Football, get your lazy ass up." The ride super was stretching his neck to see into the back of the semi. Football sat up and looked down at the fatty red face. The red face rolled around, spit and continued to yell. Football thought it might explode.

He realized that all the other bunks were empty. Pulling on his cutoffs, Football poked his feet under the bunk and slipped into a pair of flip-flops. He grabbed his towel from a nail, dug into his footlocker for a half-used bar of soap that he kept wrapped in a piece of cellophane, and walked across the midway to the public restrooms.

Football threw his body against the men's room door and tossed his towel on the shelf above the sink. Turning on the faucet, he looked into the spotted mirror. In the reflection, he noticed the man in the Shriner's hat standing in front of the urinal watching him. Football glared back at the reflection. The Shriner hurried out, still zipping his fly as he opened the door.

Football looked at the bar of soap as he rubbed it between his hands. Every few seconds, he would glance into the mirror at his pale blue eyes and quickly look back down. His dirty blonde hair hung close to his head. A St. Jude medal around his neck flashed when light hit it. His face and torso were bright red—not sunburned, but more like a rash. The veins in his neck ran down his shoulders and arms over little bulges of muscle. Under his right arm was a birthmark that everyone thought was a scar from a stab wound.

Holding his head close to the sink, he soaped up his face and hair. He tried to fit his head under the faucet, but ended up cupping his hands and pouring the water over his head. The water smelled stale. He dried off and walked back to the midway.

He guessed it was about six o'clock. The food stands were opening, so he stopped for a burger at the yellow trailer where the girl who always sang to herself worked the counter. He liked to smile at her through the greasy windows. It seemed to make her uneasy.

He went back to the semi and changed for work.

Football's uniform consisted of a dirty T-shirt with a clown's face on the front and his given name "Harold" on the back, a pair of jeans with the knees worn out, and mirrored sunglasses. He usually wore the T-shirt inside out. He sat sprawled out on a green metal stool with his legs supported on the safety





fence of the Ferris wheel. The carnival's bright lights reflected in his sunglasses.

A few people from the town were parading up and down the midway. Football stretched his arms and stood when he heard the first B-B gun fire at the "Shoot-em-Up" facing his ride.

Two little girls with cotton candy in their pigtails fidgeted at the gate to the Ferris wheel. Football pulled two tickets from the taller one's sticky hand and locked the little girls in chair #5. They squealed as he started the ride. Football noticed that the two girls with close-cropped hair were standing in front of the "Shoot-em-Up." Their faces were shiny. Through the side of his sunglasses, he saw the red shorts walking down the midway toward his ride. She was just a few feet away. He didn't turn his head.

She was maybe fifteen. Her high-heeled sandals cut like stilettos across the dust along the safety fence next to his ride. Dirt had collected in her painted toenails and thinned up her skinny calves and thighs to the pair of red shorts that her mother had bought her before she hit puberty. A baggy yellow T-shirt with the word "Physical" scrawled across it was barely tucked into the elastic waistband. Popping her gum, she thrust her hips forward and, with a little twist, leaned back on the fence like she owned it.

Football shook the fence, startling the fifteen-year-old. He stopped the ride and lifted the little girls to the ground. They ran down the midway and tugged on their mother's dress. She knelt down and put her arms around them. Football noticed the fifteen-year-old was watching him. Trying to look busy, he started picking up the trash that surrounded his ride.

A group of teenagers was clowning around in front of the merry-go-round and started to walk toward the Ferris wheel. The shortest boy was leaning forward talking close to the cheerleader's cheek. The chubby girl was holding hands with the gangling basketball player. The two girls following them whispered and giggled. They passed by the fifteen-year-old like she was invisible.

Football followed the group with his eyes and glanced back at the fifteen-year-old. She was still watching him. He looked away.

The fifteen-year-old looked at the ground and breathed deeply. Raising her eyes, she stared at a point a few feet above Football's head and balanced her weight on the high-heels. Pulling at her T-shirt, she slinked across the midway and stood near the greasy old man that ran the Scrambler. The red shorts reflected in Football's mirrored sunglasses. Football watched the old man's tattooed arm wrap around her thin waist.

Football sat on the stool and waited for the next ride.

Football examined a greasy fingerprint on the neck of the beer bottle as he emptied it into a glass. He stuck his index finger into the top of the bottle and rolled it around on the bar top. The red exit sign reflected in the mirror behind the bar. He stared at it until the cigarette smoke stung his eyes.

Football sat alone at the bar. A dozen or so of the other carnies sat at a table in the middle of the room under an orange light. They laughed and he turned around and smiled at them.

The place was called "Diamond Lil's". When she bent over to get a beer from the cooler, the seams on her flower-print polyester shorts looked like they'd burst. Little rolls of fat flowed over the bra straps under her tight tank top. Her dangling pink earbobs swung wildly as she looked from table to table to take an order. A small bald man sat at a table in the back watching a black and white TV. Football figured the small man was Lil's husband.

Football laid a dollar on the bar and Lil snatched it up. Laughing to herself,

she pulled another beer out of the cooler and sat in front of him. She mumbled as she walked to the cash register.

The reflection of the exit sign was replaced by the pair of red shorts walking through the door. The old man that ran the Scrambler followed closely behind. The old man and the fifteen-year-old walked to the table where the rest of the carnies were and turned their backs to Football. The old ride-jockey's calloused hand rested on the red shorts.

Lil darted out from behind the bar and waddled up to the fifteen-year-old. Lil folded her flabby arms and the earbobs swung back and forth. The old ride-jockey shrugged his shoulders and the fifteen-year-old started for the door. Football watched the scene in the reflection.

At the door, the fifteen-year-old turned and looked around the room. Her eyes met Football's in the mirror. She neither smiled nor frowned. They stared at each other's reflection for a few seconds until Lil pushed her out the door. Football laid another dollar on the bar.

Lil gave last call and Football steadied himself on his feet. He sat a half full glass of beer down and walked out the door.

The street was deserted. Football heard only muted laughter coming from inside the bar and the hum of a car driving on the outskirts of town. The air was heavy and smelled sweaty. Dark storefronts lined the street. Many of the windows were papered from the inside. Looking to his left, the street narrowed into a cornfield about a hundred yards away. He saw no one.

To his right, the Ferris wheel towered over the storefronts. The moon shown through its spindly legs. It glowed like it was made of silver.

He stumbled on an imaginary crack in the sidewalk as he started walking toward the midway. Football walked past three windows filled with used furniture. The sounds from "Lil's" quieted with each step. He thought he heard the sound of high-heels clicking on the pavement behind him. He stopped, inhaled deeply and turned around. He saw no one.

Walking backwards, Football watched his shadow shorten as he neared the street light. He stood directly under the light and watched his shadow jump around as he swayed back and forth.

He stopped in front of the five-and-dime and looked into the window. Football placed the palms of his hands against the glass and pushed his face up close. A car drove slowly by and the headlights glared in the window. In the reflection, he thought he saw the red shorts. He spun around. The car turned at the next corner. He saw no one.

The midway was lifeless. A cloud covered the moon and Football could see nothing. The cloud passed and moonlight illuminated the Ferris wheel. It seemed to come to life like the carnival had just opened. Football walked to it.

He stood directly beneath the Ferris wheel and stared up through the metal beams. Jumping, he grabbed the lowest cross-beam and pulled himself up. He examined the red clown's face inches away. Reaching up, he swung his body out, pulled himself up to the next beam, and continued.

Football sat on the beam at the very top and panted. His arms cramped and his legs felt heavy. He looked out over the midway and the town. The lights were out at "Lil's."

Football closed his eyes. The fifteen-year-old was standing at the gate to the Ferris wheel. She was holding a ticket in her right hand, nervously bouncing it off her thigh. With a little twist of her hips she turned around and started to walk away. The red shorts burned through his eyelids. Football reached out for her.

He lost his balance.