

Waking Up at the Fair

I didn't expect to find you at the fairground – after all, rabbits don't like noise – but when I walked through the gates, something about the air alerted me to you. The smell of your skin filled my nostrils, and images of you – your jaw, your breasts, your stomach – flashed through my mind.

The fair was just waking up. Men and women in jeans and oil-stained tee shirts ambled around the site, making small talk with each other as they pulled up the shutters of rides and food stalls. The ghost train was the first to open: a monster with glowing eyes painted on the outside. Three cars were lined up on the tracks, little bulbs lighting up and dimming in canon, waiting.

I passed the big wheel and the waltzer, and headed for the carousel. Predictably, it wasn't running yet. I sat on a bench opposite and scanned the ride. The usual array of intricately decorated horses filled most of the platform, punctuated with some more unusual animals: a goat, a tiger, a reindeer, and more, all held in place with floor-to-ceiling golden poles.

One of the oily-clothed men ambled over, with a slight limp. He looked about sixty and well-tanned, as if he'd spent every day of his life outside. Putting his good leg forwards, he negotiated the steps to the carousel and entered the box in the middle. He fiddled with some controls, and the traditional organ music crept into action.

I approached the ride, deciding between the grey horse or the reindeer. The man emerged from the box.

"Another ten minutes," he said.

He moved between the animals, running his hand over a couple of them, giving the poles a tug, and glancing up to the ceiling to check the attachments.

“Is it old?” I said.

He frowned at something on a black horse’s neck, then rubbed it with his hand.

“Some of them are,” he said.

He grimaced as he made his way down the steps, the trace of sweat on his forehead, then leant on the railings between the carousel and the rest of the fair. Presumably the railings were to prevent people climbing onto the carousel without paying, though that seemed absurd on a such a quiet day.

“Are they all different ages, then?” I continued.

He adjusted the belt of his trousers, pulling them higher. “I picked up the tiger about ten years ago,” he said. “We were in a small town in Scotland, and a local zoo was closing down.”

“A zoo?”

“You didn’t think I went to China to get him, did you?”

“I suppose not.”

“That one at the edge, there,” he said, gesturing towards a large green and silver chicken. Its head was bent forwards, as if looking for crumbs on the ground. “I bought her cheap at the market. Doesn’t lay anymore, and too old for meat.”

“She used to lay eggs?” I said.

He nodded. “No chicken does forever, though.”

I looked around at the animals. It was true that they seemed to have more life-like poses than other carousel animals I had seen. The red-brown reindeer’s legs were in a trotting pose, but his body appeared still, as if his legs had been arranged for him. He had one antler longer than the other.

“What about the reindeer?” I said.

“Before my time,” the man said. “Bill, the guy who owns the fair, got him. Poor creature had fallen into a quarry, so Bill climbed in and rescued him.”

“How is putting him on a carousel, rescuing him?” I said.

For the first time since we started the conversation, the man looked me in the eye. “Don’t you be thinking this is cruel,” he said. “Those animals are lucky. They’ve got a home for life.”

I tried to keep my face as open as possible. “Why are they so still?”

He pursed his lips: the facial equivalent of a shrug. “They think they’re paralysed.”

“They think?” I asked. “But they’re not, actually?”

“Well, yeah, they are. Just not physically.”

I heard voices behind me: a woman and a small boy were approaching.

The man straightened up and looked at his watch. “You can get on now.” Then he turned to the new customers. “Hello madam, sir,” he said. “Coming on? Only a pound each.”

He held open the metal gate in the railings, and the two of them stepped through. I followed, handing him a pound coin, and climbed up onto the carousel. I heard the gate close behind me. I approached the reindeer and smoothed my hand down his neck. On closer inspection, I could see the individual hairs of his coat. It felt much warmer than I’d been expecting too, but it was smooth and hard, as though covered in dried glue.

Behind me, the woman and boy sat side by side, on a leopard and a black horse, respectively. Heading back to the control box, the man paused next to me.

He rested his hand on the crest of the reindeer’s neck. “Notice his antler? That happened when he fell into the quarry. Never did grow back.”

I stepped onto the metal foothold and swung my leg over the reindeer. I lowered my weight onto his back more carefully than I usually would.

The man switched a lever and the carousel came to life. The tiger was in front of me; did I really see him tense his spine?

The reindeer moved forwards and upwards, to a slight jolt, then slowly back down again.

I leant around the pole and towards his head. “Are you really in there?” I whispered. There was no response, of course, but I swear I saw his left ear, the one furthest from the organ, twitch.

To the side, the park was quiet, just rousing, even though it was midday. A dark-haired woman walked her two collies along the path that ran through the trees. As the reindeer loped around to the other side of the carousel, we were back in the fair again.

The tea cup ride was the only other ride in full flow. Three little girls sat in one teacup, shrieking and laughing as it rotated its way round the circuit. The young woman running the ride stood with her weight on one leg, smoking a cigarette. She idly pushed their cup as it went past her, making it turn. The children screeched again.

I settled into the rhythm: up and down, round and round. The music droned on as the animals did. I adjusted my position so that I could see the reindeer’s eye, but it gave nothing away. These animals had been tricked into thinking that this was the most they could ever expect from their lives. The reindeer couldn’t want me on his back, but I rode him anyway.

I sat back and rested my hands around the golden pole. It occurred to me that you had been here already. The fair may have, in fact, been one of your first ports of call. I could imagine you finding this carousel, and understanding what it meant. You would have headed straight to Bill’s office and banged on his door, begging for him to let you join. Then, there you would be, frozen like ice on the wooden platform, in among the animals.

I rode on the carousel eleven times that day, trying a different animal each time, thinking that on that turn, they would take me to you. But when I stumbled out of the fairground and vomited into a bin, I knew that you'd been there, every single time.