

Carousel Horses

by G.E. Simons

Marvin had worked at the carnival grounds since arriving in 1992. Long after the town stopped selling enough handmade bricks and he spent those first years sweeping and sleeping through an autumn of crimson odd jobs.

His casual labour had paid just enough to cover a share of the rent on a caravan amongst other static caravans on the spiked grass fields, scattered with corroding engine parts near the east harbour wall.

Four years later, Marvin now spent most of his evenings lying on a nylon mattress in the van. Beneath air that held a feint tang of paraffin from multi-fuel generators running two pumps that stopped the grasslands flooding with salty rainbows of water.

The caravan had an orange plastic skylight that clung with a skim of golden samphire and voodoo configurations of psychedelic maritime lichen.

The skylight had split adjustor pegs that would have fixed its height and allowed closure to stop the oily, damp air seeping in if they hadn't been broken.

But they were, so the skylight stayed open and the air seeped in.

Marvin shared the van with Turner and occasionally Sadie, a pastry chef from the Montana Hotel. Sadie only usually stayed in low season, when the staff lodgings that accompanied her job were retracted for the winter.

Turner had lived in the van amongst the vulcanised grass since it had been there. In fact he had driven it up himself, having moved from the Midlands to work a continental shift in remains of the brickyard.

Turner had also been there when the adjustor pegs were split. He couldn't remember how exactly, when Marvin had asked him. Although he did remember that it had been down to one of the seasonal shellfish pickers who shared the van with him last summer.

During that fruitful season, a rich harvest of mussels had clotted the salt-frosted rock and ironwork of the tidal stretches of estuary. Their shaved shells tick-tocking at first light as the tidal waters receded to reveal their pearly, purple shards in the crags, bloated inside with creamy orange-veined gristle.

The mussels were worth a month of minimum wages that year to the pickers bussed in to harvest them in the safish time zones between high tides.

The same rusting mini van then shuttled the salt fingered workers to shared caravans in fields to rest and wait for low tide. During which time, some would break and split orange skylight pegs out of pulsing boredom. All drowned out by the grinding sound of paraffin generators busily choking salt water into shale ditches.

I had arranged to meet with Marvin at around 9am.

In the blush of a spring morning I began to descend the short burst of stone steps that cut down from the upper pavement through a gap in the seafront wall. They took me down to a parallel pavement that skirted the industrial oceanfront for several miles.

As I began to walk towards our usual meeting place I could see him talking with two girls as he nonchalantly leaned against a community hall poster frame that was studded to the harbour wall.

His right leg was bent at the knee so that one Adidas shell toe clad foot was sole flat against the wall. He was also linking both of his arms behind himself, making a pad between his back and the brickwork, against which he gently bounced as he held court.

From this distance, he reminded me of a sleazy pink flamingo, waiting for feeding time at the zoo to deepen the timbre of his feathers and hint at the promise of a narcotic aviation before his commune of hens. But it was of course a chance to fly that would never really happen. He knew it and so did they.

The community hall itself had been demolished a few years ago, making way for a convenience-sized outlet for one of the supermarket chains. So the frame now advertised nothing but bad graffiti and the pockmarks of amber cigarette burns on its acrylic face.

As I passed the remains of an iron pier, a little group of cash strapped youths were shooting furtive glances alternatively towards Marvin and then out across the bleak shifting sheet of ocean muscle.

One of them was kicking broken, gull-dropped fragments of seashell around the industrial ridges of the concrete promenade. Another was sitting on the polished metallic dome of a docking tether point, that hadn't been used for anything more commercial than that for decades.

As I passed them they nodded at me one by one. I noticed that their hands were plunged deep into pockets and their chins were tucked deeper still into the zipped up necks of their heavily logoed jackets and tracksuit tops.

I was briefly uneasy as they all looked ready to pounce with concealed weapons and viciously open hostility. Nestling as they were in their sportswear, revealing as little of who they were as was possible.

But having returned their nods with one slow nod of my own, the uneasiness passed as I felt the salty nip whipping off the water and I realised they were just young lads keeping the cold out.

As I passed them and got much closer to Marvin, I quickly recognised one of the girls he was talking to. She had been nicknamed disgusting Estelle many years ago and it had stuck fast. No one really knew why and it was probably a little unfair but she had long since ceased to care what her name was.

The other girl was much skinnier than Estelle, which isn't easy, and had an angry cobweb of aubergine veins around her jaw line and forearms which suggested that she didn't know herself any better than I did.

She was trying to sell an iPod to Marvin, having snatched it from a commuter's messenger bag in the coffee bar at the coach station during morning rush hour. Marvin didn't like the colour, it was pink, but more importantly he didn't have access to iTunes so told cobweb girl no. She wasn't even sure what it was anyway.

Marvin turned and offered me his right fist at the end of a horizontal arm and I met it with the touch of my own clenched right hand as we nodded a silent greeting.

Marvin gave me £400 and I gave him a bag of 8 tight parcels that I had constructed from tears of cling film, twisted and beaded until they formed tight little dots of escape and imprisonment.

I gave cobweb girl £20 from the £400 and pointed at the MP3 player that she dangled from the white ear bud cables. I took the iPod off her. Then I left them talking. Marvin seemed to be leading the conversation.

The whole transaction took a few minutes and not a single word passed between any of us.

I was their mute button and that was fine by me.

I walked back along the lower pavement, noticing that the little group of youth had gone in the minutes since I had passed them. Then I mounted the little flight of steps and was quickly out onto the main pavement again.

I had taken a cab to meet Marvin but the sun was now beginning to warm a sky cluttered with gulls and drip some heat down onto what had been a metal sheet of a morning at first light.

It was low tide and the breeze that had whipped off the sea through the corridors of the little town first thing this morning had been pulled back into the estuary. The wind had also sculpted an Artex of texture in the dark, wet sand of the beach on its way back out to sea.

So I decided to walk back into town across the salt flats, which would bring me, right out right on Motor Street. I was meeting Turner in a café there and if you got the right table you could see the tips of rigged masts drunkenly swaying in the harbour.

The path cut through columns of yellow broom tangled with scrubs of creeping blue blossom and as I walked, I thought of Estelle. She hadn't looked up at me down at the harbour walls, let alone spoken but I suppose that was because of me so I really couldn't take any sort of offence and didn't.

I wondered if she still lived in rooms buried in the foil wrapped tenement buildings spattered and scattered on the edge of town. Built just before the Sixties had ended and a different way of living had begun there and everywhere.

Her brother had lived with her back then too in the smallest of the rooms, and was always taut with a phobia and boredom that you could feel. I didn't remember his name but always remembered his towers of vinyl, Roy Ayers, Zappa and Tractor amongst overflowing coil pot ashtrays made decades earlier in moderate school days.

It didn't take me long to get back into town and by the time a cup of coffee and a glass of sparkling water had arrived at my corner table in the Motor Street café, I had stopped thinking about them both.

The coffee was good and as I spooned sugar into my cup, the red fabric of a sail billowing from a trapeze of rigging caught my eye as the sloop beneath it slid gracefully out of the north gate of the harbour.

Turner arrived and immediately ordered scrambled eggs before sitting down opposite me, flashing a smile of scorched teeth. A smile that nowhere near reached his blue washed out eyes.

He was pushing 40 now and looked more like a product of the ornamental glass blowers, who worked out of the converted railway arches beneath the rail lines, every time I saw him.

His head was developing a liverish hue and had the increasing appearance of a parison. All swollen by a terminal pressure behind his eyes, then forged in the molten heat of blowpipe forges and stoned hell.

But again that was partly because of me too, so I lived with it. Even though I really was finding it more and more difficult to witness the dripping water torture of his painful deterioration.

Especially as I knew I was the reservoir.

I carried on reading the newspaper obituary I had started just before his arrival and he played line up with condiment bottles as I finished it. I'd heard that he had picked up some hours on the meat

processing lines on the headland. And now I thought about it I could suddenly smell the retch of internal meat.

Maybe it was from the years of grease in the café but I think it was Turner.

He gave me some of his processed meat factory money and I gave him his tight little parcels, then left him eating his eggs with a teaspoon, stained brown with a million brewings.

I don't know whether he had put some money by for income tax as I think he was technically self-employed at the factory. I'll probably advise he do that when we next meet up.

I often dream that Turner is dead. That he dies right in front of me, having made it to my favourite table with that harbour view in the corner of the Motor Street cafe.

Not by choking on scrambled eggs, nor from blood poisoning through his sustained self-tattooing, not even from vein complications. Rather I see his hot glassy face slip from life without reason.

When I wake and sometimes after I've met with him, like now, I'll apply a cause and reason of my own. Such as slow paraffin poisoning from the air in the van on the grass fields, amongst the generators under broken adjustor pegs.

Other times it might be more spectacular. Such as a gunshot wound following a deal gone wrong down at the harbour walls or terrible knife damage following a disagreement with shellfish pickers.

I turned and walked back to the Café, where I stood on tiptoes so that I could see over the stained net curtains that shielded the lower half of the bay windows. I wanted check that Turner was ok.

He was.

He had finished his eggs and was now drinking a chocolate milkshake through a red and white pixie stick straw. He was also typing a text message on his battered mobile phone.

