

Right and Wrong

by Gita M. Smith

Jake had been raised by Carnies and trained to view human beings as walking wallets. By the age of nine, his vocabulary contained a wealth of disdainful words: *rube, mark, sucker, chump, patsy, yokel, sap*. His Uncle Tee, a dog handler, taught all the camp children their basics: how to "make change" from a \$10-bill, how to slip a hand into ladies' purses, and how to make their smiles warm and endearing.

"You hold the advantage over any adult if you have the right smile," he would say, walking down the line of eager pupils, tilting their faces up and correcting their expressions.

"Eyes a little wider," or "give us more teeth," he'd say, holding up a mirror greyed with age. "When we send you out there, you will be prepared to smile like an angel or cry like a little lost lamb. Now let me see some tears."

Jake went first. He slumped a little, dropped his head and began breathing in a ragged rhythm. He gave voice to the breaths, a whimpering throat-caught sound, and covered his face with his hands.

"Good, good, a little more, now secretly blow your nose into your hand, yes, very good."

Jake took his hands from his face, then wiped a small amount of mucus from his nose while keeping his face crinkled. It was important that the mark see the mucus as proof that the boy had been genuinely upset.

Uncle Tee had set a lot of children along the path to larceny in his day, and he judged Jake to show outstanding promise. "Remember, boy, your ability to cry well is better than a knife or a gun in this life."

Schooling was sporadic. Everything about carnival life was sporadic. One day you could be eating a funnel cake and laughing

with friends; the next day you might be packing your gear and fleeing town just ahead of a wrathful crowd.

“It all comes down to skill,” Uncle Tee would say, as he steered his truck pell mell down a winding road. “If you have the right moves, the suckers will never know they've been taken. Someone gets sloppy, someone gets greedy, the sucker makes noise and then you get the law on your tail.”

Jake started out at age 12 on the Midway, on the nickel toss. His dark brown hair was bleached a sandy blond, and he wore light blue t-shirts with khaki pants. Colors on the Midway have significance to Carnies. Their children always wear light blue tops with no writing or logos so that, if one should go missing, the search is easier.

The very few times in carnival history that a Carnie child was abducted, the predator was found swiftly by the camp dogs and the child's extended family. They did not temper their fury or the cruelty visited on the kidnapper. Some body parts were brought back to camp as reward for the dogs.

In later years, as a defense strategy in a court of law, Jake described his childhood this way: “I always felt like I was in terrible danger, and yet I was told I was safe. I did wrong, sometimes terrible things, encouraged by people who said I was doing right. They used love on me while they taught me to hate.” Then he would bow his head in his hands and sob heartbreakingly before a wide-eyed jury of rubes, marks and suckers.

