**The Haunting of Idora Park**

My old man would say, “You don’t know how good you got it here, champ. Youngstown shouldn’t be slept on…hell, Youngstown’s a place where you sleep with one eye open, because you never know what you’re gonna miss.” He’d take a drag on his cigarette, and those stubby yellow-stained fingers would curl around the butt like fucking cocktail weiners. Then every damn time he’d smile, “Unless you got the mob after ya, then you might be sleepin’ with one eye open for another reason…”

Like clockwork.

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October, 1984: The air was unseasonably warm, the dope was skunky as hell, and I wanted to blow off a paper on some dead author for my “Intro to Writing” class at Youngstown State University. My friend Billy knew this guy, Mikey—everyone called him Boulder though. Not sure why. I think it had something to do with wrestling…or football? I just know that Boulder brought Canfield High some kind of glory in the old days.

Anyway, he graduated two years before us and worked at Idora Park in the summers up until it closed. He said if we bring the weed, he’d bring the beer and sneak us into the deserted amusement park

It sounded like a pretty good way to spend a Thursday night to me.

There had been a fire that April that closed down some of the best rides. They tried to keep the park alive but it basically just became a corporate money pit, so we went with Boulder partly out of curiosity, but also as a final goodbye or whatever.

Listen, let me stop here for a sec…some shit happened that night. Shit that I’m legally not allowed to talk about; but the NDA I signed didn’t say anything about *typing*. I’m older now and am feeling honest, and tired of being the only one who knows about that night, and I think it’s time to come clean to someone, and you seem trustworthy, right?

So, you promise? Won’t tell a soul?

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First things first, now that I got your word, let me tell you about Cher. Not the singer. Cher was my girl at the time and I’m not sure how but she always smelled like strawberries, not the artificial kind, but like the ones fresh on the vine. Almost as if she spent all of her life laying in the field at White House Fruit Farms.

It was hot that particular night and she had on the shortest shorts she could possibly wear without getting cited for “indecent exposure.” I took my dads powder blue Camaro without asking and we picked up Billy right after sunset.

Boulder told me to park around by the South parking lot, and to turn off my lights when we got close—cops liked to hang out to stop the trespassing. Cher was blasting that new Prince song on the radio, and I still can’t listen to that song today without feeling like I’m going to throw up.

We parked along the fence and waited for Boulder.

When us teenagers in the 80’s had time on our hands, we either made out, or smoked, so Cher and I did one of those things, and Billy did the other. I’d say it was a much better way to pass the time than just staring at some screen.

A few minutes later we heard three sharp whistles from the treeline, and Boulder ducked around the corner with a six-pack in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

“You ready?” he had asked, throwing the butt into the grass and stomping it with his foot.

He led us along the fence down quite a ways until there was an opening and we were able to slip in.

Right inside the main entrance, we walked past something that had looked like it was straight out of a horror movie. All of the animal statues and paper eater things were lined up like they were about to be executed by firing squad. Boulder said they were up for auction.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out an old gum wrapper I’d stuck in there and I walked up to ol’ “Porky the Paper Eaters” mouth one last time as a final salute to my childhood.

Right before I turned back to the group, I swore the beady eyes of the towering rooster beside it followed me. At the time I brushed it off as “seein’ things,” but now, I have no doubt in my mind that they did move.

My folks would take me to Idora a lot as a kid, and I spent pretty much all of my allowance shooting cork guns where the woman tending the booth kept a pet skunk in a cage beside her all the time. It was weird as hell to walk into the park that night smelling the Mahoning Valley air instead of caramel corn and french fries.

As we got further down, it started to smell like fire though. The scent was thick like the black clouds that burned in the smokestacks of the remaining mills.

“You gotta check this out,” Boulder said, tossing his bottle cap onto the ground.

We came up to the entrance of the “Wildcat” roller coaster, its huge hills towered into the sky, making me feel like an ant or something. Now, ask me to hop a fence today and I’ll bust my seams from laughing too hard at ya, but then, I leapt over without a problem.   
 “This is bitchin’,” Cher said, her hand in my back pocket as we walked up the pathway. She looked so hot that night.

It was pretty fun for a while, all of us climbed into the old roller coaster cars that were covered in a chipping yellow paint, smoked a blunt, drank beer, and sang “Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go,” at the top of our lungs.

For a moment, it felt like I had being 19 all figured out.

Then we started to move.

Cher was kissing my neck—god was she good at that—and shot her head up; I saw a brief look of confusion and then it was fear. Pure fear.

“What the fuck is goin’ on, Boulder,” Billy yelled, “This shit ain’t funny!”

Boulder was just as scared as Cher.

Before we could even think to jump out, we had picked up speed. I shoved Cher down onto the seat and yanked at the safety bar, but it wouldn’t budge. “Hold on!” I yelled at her. Her hot pink nails dug into my arm so tightly that it drew blood.

The four of us flew along the hills, winding sharp curves, and a plummeting deep drop made my stomach do cartwheels. I screamed, we all fucking screamed bloody murder.

Just below the next hill, I saw the lights of the carousel turn on and loud carnival music then played as if there were speakers on the tracks. The dark tentacles of “The Scrambler” jutted out beneath us.

Wooden roller coasters always made me feel uneasy. Sure, I loved riding them, but the slow *dut…dut…dut…* of the wheels on the tracks always amped up the adrenaline.

That night, the *dut’s* were grating.

We crested over another hill and just about 30 feet ahead, was a huge break in the track where the fire had burned.

Cher’s scream at that moment still haunts me.

I had been about to die if I didn’t try something. We were in the last car and I gripped Cher’s hand and turned around and crouched. “You jump with me!” I shouted at her, a tear from her cheek splashed onto my face from the wind.

Just as the first half of the train went over, we sprang from our seats

Billy and Boulder fell,crashing right into the pavement below.

I don’t know how, but I had grabbed onto the edge of the track right before the spilt. One hand was on the singed wood, the other holding onto Cher. She was a little thing, but it felt like my arm was about to rip out of its socket at any moment as she just dangled there.

“Help!” she cried, over and over, sobbing so hard that it shook me. I tried to yank her up, but I just couldn’t hold on.

I started to slip.

Now…this was the worst night of my life, and I was truly in danger. Before I tell you this next part, I want you to know that I’m a pretty good guy. No felonies, no murder, hell, I’ve never even kissed one girl when I was with another. I pay taxes, work at a dead-end job like any other upstanding man, and I reach into a case of Milwaukee's Best light beer every night to drink myself to sleep. Normal shit.

But that night, I had looked up from Cher’s face for one second and just off in the distance, I saw two figures standing in the middle of the abandoned courtyard. It scared me so bad that my body recoiled and I let go.

It was instinct. “Fight or flight,” is what I think they call it. I was able to catch myself and get a better grip but a millisecond too late, I’d realized what I’d done.

She landed right on top of the pile of cars that were crushing the bodies of Billy and Boulder. With a loud *crunch,* her spine broke directly in half.

Death is normal right? We all do it. Well, watching three people plummet to theirs didn’t feel all that normal, still doesn’t nearly 40 years later.

My body was numb, like really, truly numb. I didn’t exist, I didn’t think, I just hung there in the wind.

Then the carousel turned off and I saw red and blue lights emerge quietly from the side of the fence. The cop that was on guard said later that they had heard a woman's scream. It didn't feel right, so they wanted to investigate.

I hung there for 25 minutes. I’m still not sure how, but I like to think that it was to honor Cher. You see, she died so I could live. So I figured that I better fucking *live*.

The coroners zipped my friends up in body bags faster than they got me down. I watched them pull Billy’s body from the rubble. His legs were like a bloody pancake.

Once I got on the ground, a couple of the cops sat me down. There were things at Idora that the city or some important people wanted to keep secret, and a fine young man like myself could keep a secret, couldn’t I?  
 That’s when I signed the paper, and once I did, everything was erased. I never stepped foot in the park that night. Cher was mad I didn’t go, but I had a paper to do like the good student I was. They all went without me, and was walking on the tracks and slipped and fell.

I think they bought off the families.

Three people died, and I just walked right out of the park like nothing ever happened.

But something *did* happen.

As I walked out, I remember turning back one last time to look, and a man and woman, dressed up in clothes my grandparents would wear, walked arm and arm down the midway towards the remains of the ballroom.

The moonlight shone through them. I watched as they disappeared through one of the walls, and off in the distance, I could hear the soft sounds of swing music and the shrill cackle of Laffin’ Lena as I walked away. I never planned to come back.

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I left Youngstown after that. Finished my semester and then transferred to a school in Nebraska. About a month or so ago though, I came back to the remains of Idora Park, where it is all just now a leveled patch of land and parking lot next to Mill Creek Park.

But what people don’t know is that there’s spirits there. My friends are there. That couple is there. Probably others. They’re sunken deep into the surface with feet encased in concrete.

To them, Idora Park is home. To them, Idora Park lives on.