**Origin Story**

A word of warning. This is a cautionary tale.

You’ve probably seen those commercials for Ancestory.com with all the smiling people discussing their ethnic origins. It got me to thinking about how I might be related to Abraham Lincoln or Geronimo. Why was I thinking about that?

People have asked me about my last name. I would kid and say that I think we were horse thieves and changed it to something that sounded more respectable.

As a student of English literature, I was excited to learn that Sir Walter Scott had a character in his novel, *The Heart of Midlothian*, with the Fairbrother last name. Additionally, George Elliot had a similarly named character in her epic novel, *Middlemarch*, although the spelling was slightly different. Once, on a trip to England, a rather aristocratic person opined that “It was one of those Puritan names.”

I sometimes fantasized that we were Native Americans and that would explain the rather prominent nose that runs through my clan. My maternal grandfather was born in Montana and I was never positive that his wife was actually Irish, as rumored.

Availing myself of the latest technology, I submitted my gene test to Ancestry.com to determine my geographical origins.

I was astounded to find that 75% of my genes originated from a country I had never heard of: Karnistan. I became consumed by this fact and did research on that country. It turns out that many from Karinstan found work in the carnival industry. The most common surname from that region was Karney.

You can probably see where this is headed. Over the years as the Karney clan gained a strangle hold on the carnival industry, workers came to be known as carneys, although the word was Anglicized, changing the K to a C. In tracing my roots, I indeed discovered that my lineage included a number of people with that surname.

I suddenly came to realize why I had always identified with that heart wrenching Cher ballad, “Gypsys, Tramps, and Thieves” and could rarely resist the temptation to pop some coins in a jukebox when I discovered it on the playlist.

It also helped to explain my attraction to carnivals. Unlike the other kids, I avoided the rides and instead enjoyed talking to the greasy, gap-toothed individuals who ran them. I always felt at home talking with them.

In trying to further divine the nature of my origin story, I located an obscure document, published by Maurice M. McGillicuddy early at the turn of the last century. Entitled, *Misfits, Miscreants, and Misogynists: Tales from the Underworld of Carnivals*, I found it to be fascinating reading. Part way through, a paragraph leapt out at me:

With the advent of state fairs in the populist explosion of the last century, carneys began to message their reputation, paying attention to the negative feelings elicited by the name Carney. One offshoot of the clan, attempting to sanitize their name while capitalizing on the state fair phenomenon, adopted the *nom de plume*, Fairbrother. Their thought was to pay homage to their carnival roots but to adopt a more trustworthy name.

I finally had my answer. Fortunately, I continued reading to discover another mystery of my birth. In what seemed to be a cruel trick of fate, my paternal grandfather and I shared the same birthdate: April 1. That birthdate plagued me while growing up with all of the usual taunts that young minds can generate, generally culminating with the observation that I was a fool.

The astounding passage in Professor McGillicuddy’s work explained the following:

Due to the long, harsh winters in Karnistan, there was a general celebration on July 1 each year. The annual bacchanal celebrated the return of warm weather and there was generally much tomfoolery amongst the population as the young swains would attempt to ferret off the young lady of their choice to a nearby haystack and let nature take its course.

The Professor went on to add:

As one consequence of the annual festival, a large number of children were born in late March and early April. Most surprising is that a statistically significant number of children shared the same birthday: April 1. Stemming from this amazing fact was the frequent appellation thrown at the Karney clan in general, with them being referred to “as those fool Karneys.”

Rarely has a single document provided such edification. In one sitting, I learned both the origin of my surname and the significance of my birthdate. I also learned that knowledge can be a painful thing and finally understood the warning, “Be careful what you wish for.”