

AN INCH ABOVE THE FLOOR

A short story by

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.... Last summer the boys had snuck away to see a small roadside carnival. Devon couldn't remember the name, recalling only that it sounded vaguely Italian, like something from Pinocchio. A day of bliss. Unchaperoned, the boys gorged on cotton candy, rode rides, and dared a plethora of games, none of which ended in victory.

They couldn't know what a rarity they'd stumbled on, that few such carnivals still existed, or that even fewer still carry that most disturbing and politically incorrect of attractions...the freak show. "Oddities" was how the sprawling banner read, a tattered, graying sheet. Torn edges bore patches that revealed the sign had once been white. Now grime covered the banner. Wording that had once been lined in inviting yellow and red were distant memories to the dried bloodstain brown and dingy ochre they had become. Had Devon known of the barkers who once graced the stage in front of such exhibits, enticing the wary with teasing dialogue, he would have been disappointed with the recording that mumbled incoherently through a cheap PA. But in his innocent ignorance the speakers granted a disembodied voice to those tall canvas paintings hung unevenly on either side of the ticket man's booth. Cheap tempera works depicting the cobra-woman, dogboy, the two-headed hermaphrodite, demonicus, and the mysterious fish man all seemed to speak to him.

Devon weakly professed a penchant for bad dreams when Christian pressed him to enter the freak show. He pleaded, citing problems with bedwetting. Finally Christian,

who was not quite brave enough to go alone, acquiesced and they wandered off in search of tamer thrills like those that spun you at great velocity a hundred feet above the earth.

Time may fly while having fun, but to a pair of nine-year-old boys it simply vanishes. Coming off the tilt-a-whirl Devon became suddenly aware that it was twilight, had been in fact for nearly an hour. It was clearly time to head home. A near accident outside the portable bathroom stalls had left Christian with just enough dampness in his jeans to itch, particularly when he stood still. He didn't relish the bike ride back, but if luck was with him he'd manage a change of pants before sitting down to dinner. If fortune truly smiled, a larger accident committed by his infant brother Austin, would hide his own telltale smell.

Approaching the front gate Christian paused by the gingerbread vendor and suddenly dodged back into the crowd. Panting, Devon caught him standing transfixed before the pale specter in the oddities booth. The languid figure eyed them through thick, dreaded strands of hair.

"Hi," Christian hazarded.

He boys felt naked, scrutinized as the man leered, but made no reply. Christian tried again. "Um...hi? Are you in charge of this thing with the odd'ties?"

Did the man smile? Not quite. Probably a trick of the fading light. "You mean the freaks?" he hissed. He leaned forward and the boy's could see more clearly how bad the man's skin was. His eyebrow was pierced with an imperfect circlet and when he spoke there was a brief glint of metal in his tongue.

"Can we go in?"

This time the man did smile and the stud in his tongue clicked audibly against his teeth. Devon shivered, the sound reminding him of biting into the foil on a baked potato.

"You wanna see 'em, eh?"

"Me and my friend Devon," Christian nodded. "'Though he's kind' scared." Devon felt Christian's hand on his arm and found himself steered between them like a shield.

"Ho," the man said nodding, "but not you." He leaned over, so close Devon could feel stale breath on his forehead, "you ain't scared, he?" Devon was jelly, his gaze arrested on the man's eyebrow pierce. He felt, as much as heard, the braids' beaded ends click softly together.

"N-no, sir. I-I'm not scared," Christian swore.

Not quite a purr, hardly a whisper, the ticket man hummed "Why, sure you are." Rearing his head back he peeled laughter across the thoroughfare. Devon bolted with Christian close behind. They ran down the wide dirt road that separated games from rides. A hundred yards away, Devon slowed to a stop, abruptly yanking his friend sideways. They found themselves standing in an alleyway created by two large trailers with huge, painted, wooden facades. One was a funhouse (which had pretty much lived up to its name). The other was a sound effects laden haunted house, too lame even to scare eight-year-olds.

Devon hunched over, hands on knees, watching Christian move farther into the shadows. "Where are you going?" Devon called after him. Christian made no reply. Only his silhouette danced ahead.

The alley was completely cut off from the lights of the midway. Hand over hand Devon made his way, groping forward slowly along the trailer's edge. Christian's dark

figure darted sideways and disappeared. Something wooden scratched at Devon's legs. Something brittle tugged at his hair. Why would people waste time inside the haunted house, he wondered. He was terrified out here. He came into an overgrown, grassy field. A pitiful fence ran behind the carnival in both directions. Tar soaked railroad ties were planted upright in the ground every half dozen or so yards. Strung between them, more often limp than taught, were three thin strands of barbed wire, forming a feeble barricade. Looking down the length of fencing Devon could see that some parts of the attractions extended over the weak partition, effectively cutting over the clear path behind them. He would need to weave through the fence to follow Christian.

"What are we doing?" Devon whispered.

"I have to see it," muttered Christian and a new chill ran through Devon. His friend sounded wrong, the way Riel's dates sometimes sounded in the next room when Devon would rise late at night to pee. Before Devon could stop him Christian lifted a flap and vanished into the freak show....