What Drowns the Flowers in Your Mouth

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The highlight of living in Southern California’s Coachella Valley and the so-called date capital of the world was attending the Riverside County Fair and National Date Festival on Arabia Street. The weeklong event took place in the month of February, and when we could afford it, the entire family went because it was just down the street from the low-income housing project we called home.

One year, one of my cousins was a member of the high school’s Future Farmers of America and so this was the big good-bye to the sheep he had been feeding and caring for all year. The fair offered more than a petting zoo; it was where professional farmers came to buy and sell livestock. The Future Farmers of America entered their animal charges in a competition and auction, and when my cousin won a blue ribbon, the news was met with little enthusiasm since the sheep was carted off to a real farm and all my cousin got was a college scholarship that his mother predicted he would never use. She was right. Like all her children before him, the future farmer would drop out of school by age sixteen.

But visiting the livestock quarters with my cousin offered me a glimpse of a part of the fair I never thought to see. Usually, we just beelined it to the carnival rides and stayed there until our parents hunted us down. I remember once my brother and I convinced our mother to enter the fun house with us. I think my father
egged her on, or even dared her, and she didn’t back out. The journey was somewhat fun, with floors shifting and spinning at a slow speed. But the payoff was the exit: the only way out was a slide. My mother was mortified as my father waited at the end of the chute and called out to her: “You’re holding up the line, Avelina, let’s go!” He was reveling in it.

I wasn’t sure how it was going to turn out because I never imagined my mother going down a slide. She was a short but heavyset woman wearing a pretty blouse and a large purse. But she did it, her purse flying up behind her. She was red with embarrassment but she went laughing, and I knew it was a moment I had to hold on to because there were very few times I saw my mother happy. She was constantly ill or upset at my father’s drinking, so I always remembered her sad, tearing up because she was in pain or in distress. When I went down the slide after her, I didn’t experience the same kind of thrill or joy, but that’s because nothing could beat the sight of my mom making her trip down a slide trying to look more ladylike with her legs up in the air, and then giggling at her failure.

The grown-ups didn’t participate in the rides and spent most of their carnival time in the exhibition halls that showcased student art or date products. They would sit at the outdoor performance spaces and listen to folk music or watch the annual pageant—a performance of Aladdin and the Magic Flute. It was always the same production, and although most of the audience didn’t understand English, they picked up on the visual gags, like when the fat lady in a belly dancer’s outfit comes out to be weighed on the balance scale and proves to the sultan that she’s worth more than a treasure chest of gold.

As I walked with my brother and cousins, I was constantly surprised to bump into people I recognized—other students from my high school. Most of them didn’t talk to me at school, but there was something of a contagious good mood among the carnival
games and mechanical rides that encouraged many of them to acknowledge me with a nod. It made me feel visible and it felt great. I wasn’t one of the popular kids. I wasn’t one of the popular kids at home either. I was the quiet one who preferred to read a book and hide in the back of the room. It was a way of achieving safety. I had seen how the “different” kids were bullied and ostra-
cized, and I didn’t want to be one of them.

However, many of my schoolmates were showing up at the fairgrounds with their dates, so I made it a point to walk around with my cousin Vero because I could pass her off as my girlfriend or something. She didn’t care. She just thought it was wise to travel as a pair because no one wanted to ride alone. I had yet to come out of the closet, so this arrangement was perfect. Suddenly the other guys nodded at me in approval. The girls smiled. All of us were complicit in the games couples play to show the rest of the crowd we were spoken for, desired, maybe even mature.

The only time this false impression backfired was when I ran into my other single acquaintances, the ones who were more like me—nerdy outsiders years away from a first kiss. I tried to give them the acknowledging nod, but they refused to nod back. I had betrayed them. And I knew then what a stupid thing I had done because come Monday morning, I would be back in the outsider pool, except that I had just alienated its members, the ones who sat in the back of the room with me. Though we never spoke to each other, we felt somehow protected in our huddle. A chill ran down my spine, but I kept on, making believe I was as confident as those who had always been cocky about their place among those who were there to be seen by those who were not.

“Hey, Vero,” I said to my cousin. “Can I get you a soda?”

“Yeah, I’m thirsty,” she said.

I let her wait in line to the Music Express. Since she didn’t have any pockets, I carried her cash with me, so I was able to fool anyone who might just happen to take notice or even care that I

Take a Guess

was buying two drinks with my own cash. When I returned, I saw two girls from my journalism class, chatting it up in the same line.

“Hey, Rigo,” one of them said. “Are those sodas for us?”

I blushed and pointed at Vero, who looked back with disinterest.

“Let me guess,” the other said. “Your girlfriend? She go to our school?”

“She goes to CV High,” I said, aware that I had chosen to answer the second question only.

“Ooh, kissy kissy!” said the first. I was so rattled from the teasing, I simply walked away.

“Don’t let her crush you too hard,” one called out. My face felt warm. That’s why the Music Express was so popular with couples. The train spun around at such high speed that it pushed the bodies in the car even closer together.

I handed Vero her soda. “Let me guess,” she said. “Those girls go to your school?”

I sucked at the straw to my drink. When we were finally on board the train, I was so self-conscious about the two girls staring at us from the sidelines as they waited for our turn to end that I tried to keep Vero’s body off me, which was impossible. After a few times around, I saw the girls from the journalism class pointing at how silly I looked with my shoulder grinding into Vero and Vero glaring at me. By the time the ride started to slow to a stop, Vero was so pissed off that she said, “I’m going to look for the others.”

“Wait, aren’t we getting on the Zipper?”

Vero rolled her eyes. “Why don’t you ask one of your dumb girlfriends over there?” She pointed at the girls from the journalism class, and they covered their mouths to hide their laughter. And with that, Vero took off, leaving me standing there with my hands in my pockets.

“You can always ride between us,” one of the girls called out, while the other blew a kiss. I was such an easy victim for this kind
of teasing, even from my cousins at home. It seemed as if everyone knew I was hiding something that needed to be coaxed out into the open. What that was, I wasn’t sure. That I was a virgin? That I was gay? I suppose it didn’t matter. Either one of those secrets made me a target.

Since it wasn’t quitting time yet, I decided to walk around on my own for a change, people-watching instead of feeling watched.

Around this time of year, I would hear about the so-called carnies, the white men with tattoos who worked at the carnival. In a mostly Latino community, they were obviously different from us and stood out. I didn’t know what to make of them, except that they looked like they were from another planet, especially the red-headed ones with funny facial hair. I wouldn’t have given them much notice in my people-watching except that I ran into one of them testing out the Octopus. He climbed into one of the cars and pulled along his squeeze, whom I recognized as one of my neighbors from the housing project.

Patricia was rumored to be a lesbian. She wore track suits, kept her hair very short, and wore no makeup. But that also described my grandmother, so I wasn’t sure how this was evidence of anything. Patricia rarely rode the bus with the rest of us, which meant she had her own ride. It didn’t dawn on me until much later that most of those days she just never went to school. The few times I did see her, she was looked at with derision. But if that bothered her, she never let on. As the cowardly teenage nerd that I was, I didn’t call further attention to myself by talking to her on the bus or at school.

I watched Patricia and her carny for a few Octopus revolutions, and was shocked when she actually made eye contact and smiled. My body froze. I wasn’t sure if I should wave or nod or what, so the next time their car shot out of sight, I wandered away and felt like an idiot. Still, I shrugged it off and didn’t think about
it again until I made my way back to the same spot and saw Patricia sitting next to a large sign that read let me guess. It was an odd feature among the booths. It was simply a chair next to a long, narrow plank with lettering that announced that for one dollar, this person would guess your age or weight or birthday, and if she guessed incorrectly, you would win a prize.

Wow, I thought. Patricia’s like a psychic. No wonder she was weird. I stood for a few moments, expecting people to accept the offer, but no one came around. And then our eyes locked and she waved me over. I panicked. I wanted to run away again or pretend I hadn’t seen her, but she gave me that smile again, so I thought it would be rude not to go up to her.

“Hey, Rigoberto,” she said. And I thought, oh my God, she is a psychic. She guessed my name.

“How does it work?” I asked.

“How does what work?” she said.

“The psychic thing,” I said.

Patricia rolled her eyes. “Psychic thing? Oh, you just guess. The point is to get the dollar and give them one of these cheapy toys in the box behind you.”

I looked at the carnival games slightly differently. There was one in which people tossed dimes and wherever the dime landed that’s what the player got. Over the years, only one person in my
family ever took something home: a mirror with a slogan on it that read *Drink Whiskey: It Cures What Ails You.* I once tried the ring toss and wasted my money trying to land the rings on the neck of a bottle. The more rings, the bigger the prize. And then there was that time my father tried to impress us with the BB rifle, aiming it at the conveyor of metal baby chicks. But I did see people win prizes, and girls carrying the stuffed animals around as proof that their boyfriends loved them. Since most of those who played did not win, the joy of playing had to be its own reward. Though that did nothing to assuage my father’s bruised ego when he totally bombed at the target gallery.

“Nobody really comes around anyway,” Patricia said, “so don’t worry about it.”

“How do you guess anyway?”

“A snap: if you’re going to guess a person’s age, just guess younger; if you’re going to guess a person’s weight, just guess lighter. The point is not to offend anyone. Flatter them and they stupidly give you that dollar.”

I looked at the language on the plank. “What if they want you to guess their birth month?”

“That’s easy,” Patricia said, pulling a notebook out of her pocket. “I pretend I’m writing on this page and show them this.”

The scribble was a strange-looking three-letter word that began with *J.*

“Does that stand for June or January?” I asked.

“Exactly. I’m allowed to guess within two months of their actual birth month, so this evens out the odds,” Patricia said. “Look, who cares? No one’s going to come. And if they do, tell them the guesser’s on a break.”

“Then why did you explain all this to me?”

“You asked,” she said. “Well, can you do it or not?”

I looked around me. Well, what were the chances of anyone coming over anyway?
“Okay,” I said. “But don’t take too long. I have to go home soon.”

As soon as Patricia left, I studied the wording on the plank: the fine print did state that the guesser could guess the birth month within two months, age within two years, or weight within five pounds. It was a strange scam. I simply sat on the chair and watched as people passed by, many of them curious for about two seconds before they moved on to more interesting sights. As a lark, I actually started guessing in my head what people’s weights, ages, and birth months were. But all that flew right out of my head when a middle-aged couple stopped in front of me to take stock of the setup.

“Howdy,” the man said. He had a white beard and wore a cowboy hat. His companion was dressed in all black with so much silver jewelry on her arms I was surprised it wasn’t weighing her down.

“Hi,” I said. That fantasy I had of me trying to actually guess was short-lived, so I decided to take the easy way out. “The guesser’s on a break,” I added.

“Oh?” said the woman.

“The guesser’s on a break,” the man echoed, mockingly.

The woman pulled a dollar out of her small black purse and held it out.

I started to sweat. This whole day was a terrible series of awkward moments.

“I don’t think he wants to take your dollar, sweetie,” the man said. “Maybe we should let it be.”

“No,” the woman said with conviction. “He’s going to take my dollar.”

The woman had this severe look on her face that made me realize there was no way out.

“You better take the dollar, son. Marguerite doesn’t take no for an answer.”
Reluctantly, I took the dollar, dreading what would come next.

“Can I guess your birth month?” I said, painfully aware Patricia hadn’t left me her little scribble. But I couldn’t imagine this lady wanted me to guess her age or weight.

“No, I want you to guess how long I have to live,” she said.

“Marguerite,” the man protested.

I remained motionless, staring into her eyes. There was something vaguely familiar about that look. It wasn’t fear or fury. It was more like pain. I had seen that look in my mother many times before her death. She had been dead only two years. My father, devastated by the loss, decided to start over with a new family, and left my brother and me with our grandparents. Being orphaned and abandoned during puberty left me wallowing in unanswered questions, wobbling into adolescence without guidance. I didn’t want to blame my parents, but their absence left me without an important resource. I would have to stumble through my teenage years. I suppose that everyone feels that way, even with parents within reach. Yet mine was the certainty that my mistakes would be committed without the possibility of parental rescue.

“Marguerite,” the man said again. He tugged delicately at her arm, but she wouldn’t budge.

At that moment, everything around us disappeared. The music, the shouting, the laughing, the lights, the energy of bodies and mechanical beasts—all of it faded into a haze as the stale air thickened over my eyes. Perhaps the woman’s purpose was to hand over something she didn’t want anymore and the only way to do that was to teach me some life lesson I was still too green to handle, a kind of cruelty I had been subjected to all day. At fourteen years old, I didn’t know very much about sex or love, but I did already know something about death. Marguerite had picked on the wrong pimple-faced kid for that, that’s for sure, and I was about to let her know it, give back what she had just forced on me. And so, the
following words bubbled out of my mouth, which surprised all three of us: “No more than a year, maybe two.”

If there had been some possibility of persuading Marguerite to take pity on me and back off, I had just spoiled it. Her pained look turned to anger.

“What? What do you mean by that? What do you know that I don’t know? How dare you say that to me? Are you hearing this little shit?”

The man took hold of Marguerite more forcibly this time and led her away. He looked back at me suspiciously, and I didn’t know how to interpret that expression. All I had to say in my defense was that I knew what a dying woman looked like; I had seen one once before.

The noise of my surroundings became audible again, as if someone had turned the volume back up. A few seconds later, Patricia came back, flaunting a fresh hickey, bright as a wound, on her neck. She knew right away that something had gone down.

“Hey, what happened? Let me guess, you pissed somebody off?”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I ran into the crowd, losing myself in other people’s reverie, the river of bodies that were here to have a good time while the carnival was in town, before it packed up and shipped off to another county, leaving everyone to their small, everyday lives. I wanted the comfort of familiar faces, so I went to look for the others, including my cousin Vero, who would die in her early thirties, just months after the death of my cousin the Future Farmer of America, just a few years after the deaths of my grandmother, my grandfather, my father, my uncle. I didn’t know this then, but I would outlive them all, leaving me all alone to tell the tale about how our paths converged at the National Date Festival with Marguerite’s. Her dollar flew out of my hand during my run, discarded like a ticket stub that was still good for a single ride. Someone must have picked it up. Someone must have spent it. I guess.