

AMUSEMENTS

*I lower a frayed rope into the depths and hoist
the same old Indian tears to my eyes. The liquid is pure and
irresistible.*

—Adrian C. Louis

After summer heat and too much coat-pocket whiskey, Dirty Joe passed out on the worn grass of the carnival midway and Sadie and I stood over him, looked down at his flat face, a map for all the wars he fought in the Indian bars. Dirty Joe was no warrior in the old sense. He got his name because he cruised the taverns at closing time, drank all the half-empties and never cared who might have left them there.

“What the hell do we do with him?” I asked Sadie.

“Ah, Victor, let’s leave the old bastard here,” Sadie said,

but we both knew we couldn’t leave another Indian passed out in the middle of a white carnival. Then again, we didn’t want to carry his temporarily dead body to wherever it was we were headed next.

“We leave him here and he’s going to jail for sure,” I said.

“Maybe the drunk tank will do him some good,” she said, sat down hard on the grass, her hair falling out of the braid. A century ago she might have been beautiful, her face reflected in the river instead of a mirror. But all the years have changed more than the shape of our blood and eyes. We wear fear now like a turquoise choker, like a familiar shawl.

We sat there beside Dirty Joe and watched all the white tourists watch us, laugh, point a finger, their faces twisted with hate and disgust. I was afraid of all of them, wanted to hide behind my Indian teeth, the quick joke.

“Shit,” I said. “We should be charging admission for this show.”

“Yeah, a quarter a head and we’d be drinking Coors Light for a week.”

“For the rest of our lives, enit?”

After a while I started to agree with Sadie about leaving Dirty Joe to the broom and dustpan. I was just about to stand up when I heard a scream behind me, turned quick to find out what the hell was going on, and saw the reason: a miniature roller coaster called the Stallion.

“Sadie,” I said. “Let’s put him on the roller coaster.”

She smiled for the first time in four or five hundred years and got to her feet.

"That's a real shitty thing to do," she said, laughed, grabbed his arms while I got his legs, and we carried him over to the Stallion.

"Hey," I asked the carny. "I'll give you twenty bucks if you let my cousin here ride this thing all day."

The carny looked at me, at Dirty Joe, back at me and smiled.

"He's drunk as a skunk. He might get hurt."

"Shit," I said. "Indians ain't afraid of a little gravity."

"Oh, hell," the carny said. "Why not?"

We loaded Dirty Joe into the last car and checked his pockets for anything potentially lethal. Nothing. Sadie and I stood there and watched Dirty Joe ride a few times around the circle, his head rolling from side to side, back and forth. He looked like an old blanket we gave away.

"Oh, Jesus, Jesus," Sadie screamed, laughed. She leaned on my shoulder and laughed until tears fell. I looked around and saw a crowd had gathered and joined in on the laughter. Twenty or thirty white faces, open mouths grown large and deafening, wide eyes turned toward Sadie and me. They were jury and judge for the twentieth-century fancydance of these court jesters who would pour Thunderbird wine into the Holy Grail..

"Sadie, I think we better get out of here."

"Oh, shit," she said, realizing what we had done. "Let's go."

"Wait, we have to get Dirty Joe."

"We ain't got time," she said and pulled me away from the crowd. We walked fast and did our best to be anything but Indian. Two little redheaded boys ran by, made Indian noises

with their mouths, and as I turned to watch them, one pointed his finger at me and shot.

"Bang," he yelled. "You're dead, Indian."

I looked back over to the Stallion, watched Dirty Joe regain consciousness and lift his head and search for something familiar.

"Sadie, he's awake. We got to go get him."

"Go get him yourself," she said and walked away from me. I watched her move against the crowd, the only person not running to see the drunk Indian riding the Stallion. I turned back in time to watch Dirty Joe stumble from the roller coaster and empty his stomach on the platform. The carny yelled something I couldn't hear, pushed Dirty Joe from behind, and sent him tumbling down the stairs face-first into the grass.

The crowd formed a circle around Dirty Joe; some thin man in a big hat counted like Dirty Joe was a fighter on the canvas. Two security guards pushed through the people, using their billy clubs for leverage. One knelt down beside Dirty Joe while the other spoke to the carny. The carny waved his arms wildly, explained his position, and they both turned toward me. The carny pointed, although he didn't have to, and the guard jumped off the platform.

"Okay, chief," he yelled. "Get your ass over here."

I backpedaled, turned and ran, and could hear the guard behind me as I ran down the midway, past a surprised carny into the fun house where I stumbled through a revolving tunnel, jumped a railing, ran through a curtain, and found myself staring at a three-foot-tall reflection.

Crazy mirrors, I thought as the security guard fell from the

tunnel, climbed to his feet, and pulled his billy club from his belt.

Crazy mirrors, I thought, the kind that distort your features, make you fatter, thinner, taller, shorter. The kind that make a white man remember he's the master of ceremonies, barking about the Fat Lady, the Dog-Faced Boy, the Indian who offered up another Indian like some treaty.

Crazy mirrors, I thought, the kind that can never change the dark of your eyes and the folding shut of the good part of your past.

THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO SAY PHOENIX, ARIZONA

Just after Victor lost his job at the BIA, he also found out that his father had died of a heart attack in Phoenix, Arizona. Victor hadn't seen his father in a few years, only talked to him on the telephone once or twice, but there still was a genetic pain, which was soon to be pain as real and immediate as a broken bone.

Victor didn't have any money. Who does have money on a reservation, except the cigarette and fireworks salespeople? His father had a savings account waiting to be claimed, but Victor needed to find a way to get to Phoenix. Victor's mother