

Freaks Rule

By
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I grew up in the Chicago area. In the mid-fifties I was in the sixth grade. During those years I had a paper route. Talk about anachronisms, the only guys who have paper routes these days are middle-aged immigrants from Cambodia who drive around in mini-trucks plastering two thousand driveways a morning. Anyway I had this paper route and it was a miserable job – dogs in the summer, freezing your tail off all winter long, and once a month I had to collect. That meant wandering up and down the streets on a Saturday trying to get jerks to cough up a couple of bucks to keep me in business. But I was good at it. In sixth grade I won an award. I've forgotten what it was for but the prize I will never forget. It was an evening at Riverview.

Now anybody who grew up in Chicago during that period remembers Riverview. It was one of those great old sleazy amusement parks, a bloated carnival on a permanent location with a wooden roller coaster and a pot load of other dangerous rides that looked like they'd disintegrate the moment you sat down on them. All summer long Riverview advertised on the Chicago TV stations. Their main pitchman was a local personality named "Two-Ton" Baker, a really fat guy who did noonday programs for kids. (Another anachronism: kids coming home from school for lunch.) So all summer there'd be these commercials showing old "Two-Ton" taking up two seats on a roller coaster yelling to display his sheer joy and probably to prove that if the thing held him it'd hold anybody. Anyway, you get the picture.

Riverview was the last gasp of an era. It died with the coming of the giant Nazi-World theme parks that we have today where everything is perfect all the time even the plants which they change constantly to make sure

everything is always blooming. Riverview was an honest straightforward temptation. It whispered to kids, “Come walk in my shadows. Come listen to my rats crawling around behind the boards. Come debauch.” We loved it.

Anyway I won this trip to Riverview and the greatest part of it was that my parents wouldn’t be going along. I’d be with a group of paperboy “winners” just like me, young delinquents in training. (This was long before girls would stoop to do such nasty jobs as paper routes.) And, the peak of ecstasy? Our “chaperones” would be the paperboy “supervisors” from The Daily Journal. Now my parents didn’t know it but these guys were absolute losers, basically lazy drunks who had been promoted far beyond their level of competence. Going with them was like going alone. They gave us cash and went off to a bar. Oh joy from heaven. Sixth grade. Money. And Riverview without adults.

Now when I say this was an old style amusement park I’m not joking. On the boardwalk it had a *freak show*. Can you imagine such a thing today? Try to picture a freak show at Disney World. Aren’t we glad that we’ve matured as a culture to the place where such things would never be allowed? Of course one could argue that Riverview simply had an appreciation for diversity but we won’t go there. So after you’ve gorged yourself on delicious little bags of dead meat euphemistically called “hot dogs” and braved all the dangerous rides at least six times, where’s an eleven-year-old boy who appreciates diversity gonna be found? **THE FREAK SHOW.**

So, I bought my ticket and walked in.

I found myself in a stark ugly little room standing with a small crowd in a roped-off area. There was nothing fancy about this. It was as down and dirty as you can get. Three feet beyond the rope sitting on wood pedestals and little chairs were seven or eight freaks. And they were the full Monty. Nothing fake here. It was a collection of poor sad human beings with

bodies that looked like they'd been created in a Hollywood visual effects house. The instant you walked in there was a seriousness about the place. Nobody laughed. Nobody talked. The freaks looked at you and you looked at them and then you left. But while I was there, something happened in that room that I will remember as long as I live.

One of the freaks was a little old woman, probably in her sixties. No more than three feet tall, her face was deformed beyond ugliness and all of her limbs bent in the wrong direction. She was just sitting there and you could imagine that she'd done this all her life.

Suddenly into the room walked a man carrying a little girl about three years old. Why this idiot had brought her there no one could imagine. I was eleven and I was appalled. Of course at the time there was no rating system on freak shows so how could you blame him? Anyway, the man with the little girl stopped in front of the little old woman. The instant the child saw this frightening creature she became terrified and started to sob. It was a horrible moment. Then as I watched, that little deformed grandmotherly lady started to cry too. Quietly without a sound the tears ran down her face. After all the years of being stared at, all the years of loneliness and pain, the humanity in her eyes was overwhelming. Then, that little woman began to talk to the little girl. Softly, with a voice like your grandmother and mine she tried to comfort her, to take away her fear, to reach out with words because her arms weren't long enough and they bent in the wrong direction. It was one gentle heart whispering to another. Now eleven-year-old boys are not known for their deep sensitivity, but if I live to be a thousand I will never forget that scene.

Over forty years have passed since that night. Riverview is long gone and I was thinking about freaks the other day. We've heard a great deal over the past months about the idea that we are a nation ruled by law. Untrue. We are a nation ruled by stories. The stories we love reveal who we are and what we are becoming. Based on that fact William Jefferson Clinton belongs in the White House. He has the moral right to remain there for the

rest of his life. Why? Because he is the living expression of our collective story. And, if we were going to make that story into a film, it would be titled, "Freaks Rule." Not the good honest freaks of Riverview, the true freaks. Us. We are the freaks who stand inside the rope watching others wallow in degradation and pain and enjoying the view. We are the fathers who sit up late at night after our wives and children are in bed sucking cyberporn off the Internet. We are the mothers titillated by the human fecal matter that we chew and swallow dished up on so-called "reality shows." We are the hip and cool young executives screwing each other's brains out after hours on the conference table and then popping pills to stave off the effects of sexually transmitted disease. We are the teenagers the generation of nightmares swimming in fake blood and gore loving vicarious mayhem and terror. Freaks all. Freaks who have managed to be born with the ability to hide our true ugliness.

What is the breadth and depth of our freakhood? Nothing less than this: As a nation, we are Monica Lewinsky. That poor young woman is simply our surrogate freak our national daughter sent to spend her holy year of shrine prostitution in the temples of power. Monica knew the proper position of a worshiper. On her knees. And we worship with her falling down before the starry host of freaks that we have created in sports and politics and Hollywood desperate for our own fifteen minutes of glory. We need a new Statue of Liberty and Monica could be the model. Coiffured and bereted, twenty stories tall, staring out at the world from New York Harbor, she could proclaim, "Give me your proud, your arrogant and your vain so that I can show them the pleasures of liberty."

As much as you hate to hear it, friends, that is our national story. And stories rule.

But, in my heart I wish I could change our story and tell a new one so radical that everyone would freeze in shock. Maybe I could make it into a film. Here's the basic outline: Let's imagine that someone new was placed in the Oval Office. Maybe for just a month. Of course, the President's chair

would be too big for her. She'd need several phone books just to be seen. She wouldn't be able to write very well. No rose-garden bill-signing parties jammed with the fatuous elite. After all her arms would be short and they'd bend in the wrong directions. When the TV cameras focused on her many of us would be filled with anger and revulsion. We'd demand to know why such an aberration had been allowed to live, why her mother hadn't ended her life in a merciful abortion. But she wouldn't listen to our raging. There's nothing we could say that she hadn't heard a thousand times before. In fact, she probably wouldn't talk to us at all. Instead she'd talk to our terrified children. And with her soft words and tears maybe they'd be able to see beyond her ugliness into eyes filled with love beautiful beyond comprehension because in her suffering she had seen the Face of God.

If only we had a true, honest freak in the White House to begin a new, national story. And, I think thirty days would be long enough. At that freak show in Riverview, it took only five minutes for an eleven-year-old boy.

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