

A Fool Rides the Wheel of Fortune

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With muddled array and a bundle of fancies over a shoulder, The Fool leaves the past behind — spurred on by hopes and fears, and pushed forward, or perhaps held back, by naked animal urges. The Fool's eyes are fixed on choices to be made, fateful and forthcoming, unexpected and important, bringing both reward and misfortune from taking risks both sorely needed and dangerously foolish. Lacking a number, or in some decks assigned the number zero, the Fool's position in the procession of Trumps is at the beginning, at the end, or wandering throughout.

I aimed to stay home that Friday night, May Day, 1970, and not traipse down the hill to the carnival. Flipping sullenly through stale magazines, I sat in my bedroom—the lights and sounds of the show bouncing into my window, and Ma sprawled on the couch in the sitting room, snoring again in front of the snowy TV.

Me, Annabelle Cory, nineteen-years young and looking mighty fine, and where was I? Clandel, West-by-God-Virginia.

To get shut of my mood, if only for a few hours, out the door I flew in a burnt hurry down the stairs, down the steep street, down the hillside our apartment clung to. Fetching up at the sidewalk along US-52, the main black-top snaking through Clandel, I leaned over the rusty pipe-rail and took in the carnival below.

On the bottoms by the train yard, colored lights danced in the night's chill. The heap of folks on the midway kicked up a flickery dust cloud, with whiffs of fried food, hot sugar, and diesel exhaust floating in the familiar taint of coal—all swoggled full-tilt by the iron arms of monstrous rides, roaring and whirling through laughs and screams, through bells, bangs, buzzers, and barkers—all amid one golly-whopper ruckus of full-blast 8-track rock-and-roll.

With no money for the front gate, I ducked under the rail and into the bushes—my feet finding and remembering the stony rut carved in bygone times of us kids scrambling down to the weedy lot between the railroad tracks and the wide bend in Black Creek. There we would play our games, and there the carnival would set up each spring. Then

The Fool

we would play their games. Skidding down between the bushes, grabbing at the budding leaves, I recalled other times with no money—my sister and me, sneaking into the show together, giggling till our sides ached.

I clambered out of the brush, and up and over the bed of slack and cinders, the oily wooden ties, the gleaming steel rails. Ahead, between the lonesome tracks and blaring midway, the carnny camp lay huddled in trembly shadows. Several cars and pickups and a pair of beat-up two-ton trucks crouched nearby a jumble of house trailers, a few curtained windows glowing like foxfire.

I put on like I wasn't sneaking in, smiling and strolling into the camp as if I knew where I was going. But in a blink, fear stole my breath, my heart leapt, my lips tightened. I spied a bright gap behind the line-up of booths surrounding the midway, and tiptoed toward it.

Just before I got there, a bowlegged Chihuahua charged out from beneath a nearby house trailer, snarling and snapping at my ankles. I kicked at it and fled to the gap, but it jumped at my leg and chomped down on the cuff of my bell-bottom jeans. Hopping on one foot, I swung my leg and the dog around and around, trying to spin it off, its pointy ears and bulgy eyes darting to-and-fro—the puny bastard in a fright about where I had it right then.

I soon spun myself dizzy, and when I tottered and slowed and grabbed the corner of a tent, the dog let loose, rolled off—no doubt dizzy too—and it wobbled back under the shabby green trailer. As I stood there, getting back my breath and my bearings—one eye on the dog, and the other eye on the crowd shifting by in the bright hullabaloo a few steps beyond the gap in the tents—the battered door of the trailer squawked open, and an old gypsy woman leaned out from the flutter of candlelight within. For a spooky stretched-out moment, she eyed me up and down—gold hoops dangling from her earlobes, red kerchief tied atop her long gray hair, a black shawl over a colory and bilowly dress.

Then her squinty gaze softened, as if she'd easily figured me out. I turned tail and stumbled out onto the midway.



Behind his table of tricks stands Le Bateleur — the mountebank — which in some decks is named The Juggler or The Magician. He conjures up confidence in himself by wielding his skills to mold the world to his will. Perhaps he shall transform his audience as they hope for any miracle at hand. Or maybe he'll bamboozle them into giving back to his own ego what he has brought forth with his creative power. At number one in the Tarot, he begins the parade of Trumps along the path of life — the first of the steps to become who we are, both divine and diabolic.

“Hey! It’s you!” he hollered, grinning wide, eagerly waving come here, leaning out from behind the counter of a bushel-basket game set up in half an over-lit metal trailer. Behind him on the booth walls, all sorts and colors and sizes of stuffed animals hung higgledy-piggledy.

I stopped short and eyed him. “Say what?”

With one hand cupping an even wider grin my way, and the other juggling two softballs, he said, “It’s a secret. Come here, and I’ll tell you.”

I scowled, stepped right up, and huffed, “What?”

He leaned into my ear. “You’re the one I see in my dreams. My dream come true.”

A dither prickled through me. “You’re full of too much coal, mister.”

“Walt. Walt Ritter. Mightily pleased to make your acquaintance. And I swear on a two-dollar bill, if I took my Instamatic camera into my dreams and snapped a shot of my dream girl, it’d come out to be of you. Mmm, hmm. You, with that curly red hair bobbin’ ‘round those wide sparkly-green eyes. Yes indeedy, you, sweet and petite, that teeny snoot, the pouty lips. Mmm, hmm. You be the one.”

“So you say.”

“If I’m lyin’ my mama’s cryin’.”

All aflutter and a mite offput, I leaned back on one leg, my hands on my hips, and told him, “You know what else, mister. A gallopus lays square eggs.”

Lifting that ear-to-ear grin higher, he stood up ramrod straight, raised his right hand as if taking an oath, and swore, “I’ve seen a million pretty faces pass by out here. I’ve known a few gals like

The Fool

wives. Yet every night I dream of you. You, who I'm huntin' for among all the others. Measurin' them up to you. Leavin' them 'cause I knew I'd one day find you. And now here you be."

Yeah, sure—I thought, as I looked him over. Though several years older and kind of lanky, I admired his big smiley jaw, his long sun-tanned nose, his wide shoulders in a pearl-button cowboy shirt and brown leather jacket. Yet I wasn't so partial to his greased-back sandy hair, Elvis forelock and all.

I crossed my arms and stared hard at him. Awaiting my answer, his feathery eyebrows wrinkled up his wide forehead like an actor's—his crafty eyes startling me with how sincere they appeared, how blue they were.

Curious, I asked, "So now what happens?"

"I buy you dinner and drinks at the Mountaineer tonight after the show closes."

Even though I ought to have reckoned this feller to be some sort of spitting snake or worse, he just point-blank felt good to me—then and there, wham, a mountain shaker. He likely was dangerous. But all I cared about was when it wouldn't be too soon to say yes. What did I have to lose? Either I see what goes with him, or I go back to the apartment. Slowly, my phony scowl lifted into a feisty smile.

He shouted, "Yes! Oh my. My dream come true. Hey, ha. You, ya!" He yelled it so loud that some in the crowd stopped to gawk at us, and a few carnies leaned out of their tents in the line-up to see what the commotion was all about.

We sniggered and smiled for a moment until an awkward hush fell between us for a few dozen heartbeats. Then we eyed each other up and down for a long look... and saw that we each admired what we were seeing.

A half-dozen junior-high kids, boys bragging to the girls, tromped up to the counter, and Walt whispered in my ear, "Baby, the boss has a rule about dream girls hangin' 'round the counter, what ain't winnin' him his money. So me oh my, I gotta get back to the ball-in-the-basket business. Have you seen the show, my sweet dream?"

"No money, honey."

"Well, hell.... What is your heavenly name?"

"Annabelle."

"Annabelle, heaven's dream, looky here...."

Reaching behind his money apron, he dug into the front pocket of his black jeans and pulled out a thick fold of cash money. Thumbing off a ten-dollar bill, he handed it to me and whispered into my hair, his lip brushing my ear, "You be right sure to see the show tonight, Annabelle, my dream.

Leery of the money, I didn't take it, and looking him straight in the eye, quizzed myself on why this feller was giving me ten dollars. When men gave you something they were likely to want something back. Ten dollars was more than I'd earn waiting tables at the diner on one slow night after another. Did he think he was buying a ticket to ride here? Or was he just a genuine mister-nice-guy? Boys had bought me beers before, but none had ever handed me money. I studied his face for a clue, yet all I could figure from his grin was

A Fool Rides the Wheel of Fortune

that he sure was glad to see me. When he pulled the apron aside to stuff the bankroll back in his pocket, I snuck a peek at the bulge of his prides.

He took ahold of my hand with both of his, pressed the ten in my palm, gently squeezing my fingers around it, and said, "Have some fun. But don't drop more than a buck or two at any of these games. Okay, Babe? Come back for more when that's gone. Come back for me, Annabelle. See? For me. Okay?"

I shrugged, and said, "Sure... why not? Thanks. I'll see you later then, Walt."

I waved goodbye with the crumpled bill, winked, and sashayed off into the midway crowd—wagging my backside likely a bit too much. Glancing back a few times, I caught him watching me from the corner of his eye—his arms gesturing, pitching his ball game to the schoolboys, their prettied-up girlfriends leaning in close behind.

The crowd swept me down the midway. To our left roared the Spider, the Tilt-A-Whirl, the Zipper, the Rock-O-Plane, the Scrambler—all lifting and spinning loads of laughing and screaming riders amid the ruckus, the flashing colored bulbs, the full-tilt rock and roll. Lined-up along our right stood the razzle-dazzle of games and sideshows blaring out their ballyhoo side-by-side—a glitzy wall surrounding the trampled midway, awnings propped high, banners strung between poles, barkers calling in all afoot.

I puzzled on what was up with this Walt feller? At other springtime carnivals, I'd seen plenty rascals like him grab all the money they could from boys trying to win teddy bears. They sure enough were of a kind who spoke right up. A thousand times, I'd ignored their ceaseless, pushy, sing-song come-ons. Most of them downright nasty, out for all they can get—and then, "Who's next?"

But this feller was another guess. The air about him somehow felt cleaner or fresher, like being near cedar in a swamp. He likely used that dream-girl line every week in every town. Yet he appeared to handily mean it.

Whatever it was he had a mind to, I was cagey enough to find out. If only a rollick in my straddle—well, if he was nice enough about it, I had sense enough to be on the pill, and might be nice about it too.

A year now out of high school, my childhood world was petering out. Three years before, Pa had run off to Charleston with another woman, and Ma now drank herself to sleep in front of the TV most every night. My big sister, Rosalie, had married-up last summer to a brush-ape named Lenny, and I scarcely laid eyes on her anymore. My best friend, Karen, had gone off to college, and other friends had married-up, or taken on jobs and bank loans. Most of the smarter boys were long gone—to school or to cities. If not carted off to Vietnam, other boys worked in the mines or downtown, and now saw me as a possible wife. To think I might marry into these hills made me cringe like a mule eating briars.

When not earning eight or nine dollars a night as a waitress at Jake's Diner two or three times a week—most of which I gave to Ma to help with the bills—I'd read novels or magazines, or stare at TV talk shows, or yarn on and

The Fool

on and on in my diary. Most folks thought me bookish, over-fattened on reading.

At the library, I chose my novels by closing my eyes and running my fingers over the books on the shelves until one felt like the one to read. Then, back in my bedroom I'd wolf it down, love it or not. When I came across a word I didn't know, I'd look it up in my tattered dictionary and whisper it in a made-up sentence.

Vaulted inside the novels lurked notions that thereabouts scarcely saw the light of day—stories pretending to be tall tales, but which rang much truer than what's what in Clandel. Being both saved from and damned to my forlorn desolation by pages and pages of spellbound ink, I'd read for hours on end to conjure up what else might be possible in the wider world.

Though I would paw through any magazine within reach, celebrity slicks were my favorites. Their photos and stories proved that far beyond these hills—up in New York City and out in California—folks talked about things other than the price of coal, or Mary Sue's new lover, or custom headers on a Chevy, or the Pittsburgh Pirates, or drinking beer and shooting pool. Or the mines.

Clandel, a clapboard and brick town cleaving to the hillsides, was the county seat for Black County—a small-time parcel in southwestern West Virginia—so named after one Hiram Black, who a hundred years before made his fortune mining both coal and people. Much has blackened-up around Clandel ever since. Black Creek ran inky from an eroded strip-mine up the cove. Soot laid low in the grooves between the bricks of the dingy buildings downtown. Faces came up from the mines smudged like minstrel players.

And amid a ceiling of diamonds and coal, on that first night of May, a fat crescent moon, floating low above the jagged ridge, shone through the thicket of trees—rocky-top high, yet ever so near. Each spring, for as long as I could remember, McCain's Magic Midway had come to Clandel, and if not rainy or too cold, it'd fetch a jam-up crowd. The soft air, breathing promises of the new season, brought out carloads of creek-and-hollow folks from forty miles around, wheeling down the twisty roads to the show—hundreds of kith and kin afoot, circling the midway. I'd been there many times before, with friends or a beau, with Ma or Rosalie, and with Pa long ago.

But that night I was there alone. And that's how I'd been lately—lonely, even among my oldest friends. Scuffing through the crowd, I saw faces I'd known forever. So why did I feel like an outsider, an oddling? Who were these people to me now? Shoot, I didn't even know who I was. I just knew I couldn't be one of them.

At the back end of the oval midway stood several sideshows lined up in a broad turn—tents, trailers, stages, and banners. In front of a smaller tent, blown-up clippings of newspaper stories were laminated onto a signboard—one headline screaming in thick letters, FROG BABY! BORN ALIVE!

Behind a ticket counter with an orange-and-blue-striped umbrella overhead, a chubby feller sat smiling—forty or fifty extra pounds on him, thirtyish,

A Fool Rides the Wheel of Fortune

with a round pink face and short curly-blond hair. Next to him up on the counter squatted the ugliest dog I'd ever seen.

I pointed at the dog, "Is this the Frog Baby's brother?"

"Nah. That there's Sharpy. Frog Baby's inside for a half-buck," he told me with an out-of-state drawl, the smirk on his fat cheeks squeezing up the corners of his gleeful eyes.

I dug into my back pocket for Walt's ten-dollar bill.

"Sharpy's a Chinese dog," he told me. "They breed 'em for eatin'. Hairless."

Bald gray folds of skin encased the dog's squabby thirty-or-forty pounds. The only fur it had were silvery tufts on its feet, and at the tip of its curly tail, and a ridiculous cowlick flopping forward like eyebrows atop its hippo-shaped head. Bloodshot brown eyes rheumy and sad, it panted happy dog-breath at me.

I handed over the ten, got my change and a half-torn ticket, and went into the tent. On a table inside stood a two-gallon glass jar. Beneath its lid floated the Frog Baby, pickled in brine. It had a head like a frog, but the body and limbs of a human baby. I studied it, and puzzled how in God's world could this be? My innards sunk at the notion that someday maybe I'd give birth to such a monster. And then what? Put my baby in a jar in a sideshow? No way. I'd raise it as best I could. The sign out front said it was born alive. Well then what did they do? Kill it and put it in a jar? I shuddered and turkey-tailed out of the tent.

Stopping in front of the ticket seller, I asked him softly, "How did that ever happen?"

His cheeks squeezed a smile so high his eyes became slits, and he said, "You've heard tell of the Frog Prince? Who got kissed by a princess and turned into a human? Well, this here Frog Baby is their direct descendant."

Taking this as plain-old sideshow point-blank tale-telling, I shunned his jolly face, and looked hard into the pitiful eyes of the dog—likely no Chinese eating-dog, as well. Huffing a little snort, I showed them my back and strode off.

A few sideshows down, on the awning over the back end of a trailer painted up with dozens of mysterious symbols, a neon sign stopped me flat. In yellow tubes of light surrounded by flashing red-and-blue bulbs, it read: **INSIDE! THE 3-ARMED MAN! ALIVE!**

Wrought-iron stairs led up to a curtain of colorful beads veiling the entrance. I dug out the half-dollar admission and handed it to a gum-chewing girl in the ticket window. Pushing the clattery beads aside, I went into a dim hallway for a few steps and then turned left through another curtain of beads. Spreading them cautiously, I faced a wall filled with photos, newspaper articles, and posters—all about this so-called three-armed man. Paying them little heed, figuring it all to be just more carnies ballyhoo, I turned to see what else was in the room.

I squeaked when I saw him there, swiveling in a black leather high-back armchair, like a boss man in his office. Large colorful cards were laid out in

The Fool

front him on a carved crescent-moon-shaped table. For a fact, the little old feller had three arms!

Two normal hands along with a smaller weirder hand busied themselves shuffling and flipping the big cards of a thick deck onto the table. With a black beret, scraggly gray hair, a leathery face, and an ill-shaved goatee, he held a favorance to a moldy acorn. A lackadaisical look in droopy eyes browsed over the cards he shuffled and flipped, shuffled and flipped. The somehow-cute little freak sported a turtleneck sweater onto which was knitted an extra sleeve to fit his extra left arm—a smaller arm that sprouted from the armpit of his near-normal left arm, set higher on his humpy shoulder. His right side appeared almost ordinary, though a mite lopsided.

He lifted soft brown eyes to me, and offered kindly, “May I read your fortune in the cards?” His calm metallic voice had a strange echo within it.

“I... I don’t know,” I stammered. Then, realizing I was gawking at his third arm, I turned away and fluttered my eyes around the room for something else to land on. In a corner nook stood a small statue with four arms, dancing on one foot and kicking up the other.

“Don’t be uncomfortable. You paid to look at me, so look. I’m quite used to it.”

I studied his extra arm. It was for real. He swept up the cards and shuffled and cut them mickety-tuck, again and again—his third hand not near as limber as the other two, but shuffling cards better than any hand of mine might ever could do.

I asked, “What’s the price to read my cards?”

“It costs your purse three dollars for three cards, and ten for ten. But what it’ll cost your soul to know what shall be, that’s a whole other deal.”

“What does your soul spend on knowing what?”

He didn’t answer—his eyes puzzling at a flipped-up card on the table, which had just popped out of the deck, a miscue from a shuffle. When he realized I was standing there waiting for an answer to my question, he said, “Pardon me?”—cocking his extra arm and cupping its tiny hand behind a long earlobe.

“You said that it’ll cost my soul something to know what shall be. What does a soul spend on knowing that?”

He set the deck on the table and leaned back into the squeaky leather. With a sly little smirk he thought on this for a spell, scratching the scruff of his neck with both left hands, and murmuring, “Hmm, good question.” I stood rigid by the table, like a possum in headlights.

Then he answered matter-of-factly, “Your innocence. When you gain knowledge, your innocence is spent in the bargain. Then you must thereafter make your own choices. Ignorance is bliss. Blessed be the pure of heart. When Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the innocence of the Garden of Eden was traded in for our ability to decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong.”

A Fool Rides the Wheel of Fortune

Appearing pleased with his answer, he leaned forward, shoveled the deck into his third hand, and shuffling cards in and out of his other two, he asked, “Three cards or ten?”

“Three,” I breathed.

“Three dollars, please,” he said, quickening the pace of his fifteen fingers.

I dug the money out of my jeans and set it on the table. At the high point of one joe-darter of a three-handed card-shuffling exhibition, he slapped the deck onto the center of the table and swept the three dollars into a small drawer that smoothly slid open and shut. I winced some, remembering what Walt had told me about spending no more than a dollar at a time.

“Cut them into three piles,” he said, leaning back to watch, his arms woven together atop his potbelly.

The deck was huge, bigger than any deck of cards I’d ever seen—over an inch thick, and near the size of postcards. I reached out shyly for them, but I felt that since I was going to do this, then I might as well do it justice. So I held my hand palm-down above the cards, and pinched my eyes shut to gather myself in that magically expectant way I would before tossing a penny into the wishing well at Stone Hollow Park. Then, carefully with my fingertips, I split the deck into three nearly equal piles.

He glanced an approving smile up at me, and as he lowered his drowsy eyes, he lingered them on the make of my hips. Leaning forward over the three piles, he flipped over the top cards—one with each hand.

“The Fool, The Lovers, and The Wheel of Fortune,” he announced. And with his shaggy eyebrows lifting a look of surprise, he added, “Hey, good ones.”

I stared at the card on my left, painted in bright colors, The Fool—a big-eyed jester with a bundle staff over his shoulder, and a walking stick in hand—strides onward, while a cat with no back legs lunges at The Fool’s hind end.

Pointing at the critter on the card, I told him, “A yappy chihuahua bit onto my pant leg not an hour ago.”

“You don’t say.”

I leaned over and studied the card in the middle, The Lovers. A young man turns to an old woman on his right, but reaches toward a young woman on his left. Above, in a circle of sun, a bare-ass and blindfolded Cupid aims a bow-and-arrow downwards at the young man’s heart.

“I just met a new feller tonight, too.”

“No kiddin’,” he whispered.

On the third card, The Wheel of Fortune, three creepy half-human animals ride around a spoked wheel—like the rides out on the midway.

Drop-jawed, I gazed down at the cards. Right there, it was all too close to what was happening to me that very night. How could these cards do this? How could this freak show know what was happening to me?

I eyed the three-armed man warily. He shook his head and said, “I’ve been turning cards for more than thirty years and they still never cease to astound me.”

The Fool

“What do they mean?” I asked—even though I felt deep down what they meant, and knew it was important. An omen.

Draping the upper of his two left arms over the wing of the chair—the extra arm dangling, its childish fingers twiddling with one another—he gestured to the card at his right hand, and said, “Well, the first card is The Fool, and it signifies you. The Fool is the wanderer. His number, zero, is at the beginning and at the end. His force comes from spontaneity. The Fool chooses without thinking, sometimes foolishly, sometimes fortuitously. And walks off into new experience.

“The cat, a symbol of intellect—being an animal that transcends its natural state to live in a higher world—pounces at The Fool, maybe holding him back, maybe driving him onward.

“This card is upright, not reversed, not upside-down, as are all three of your cards, and this means that the inner force driving The Fool is positive, not negative.

“The second card, The Lovers, is another card about choice—and again, a choice not by reason. Its number, six, is a number of ambivalence and tension. You see here on the card that the lover doesn’t know whether to choose the mother’s world or that of the beloved’s. Will it be the old or the new? Yet there will be no indecision if Eros releases his arrow of destiny. This card indicates the forces to be soon about you.

“The third card indicates your future. The Wheel of Fortune is the symbol of the ever-turning ups-and-downs of life. Your task is to be at the center of the wheel, turning the crank, not riding up and down on the rim. Its number, ten, the first double-digit number, begins a new cycle of progression.”

He paused, flipped each card facedown, gathered up the piles, and added, “So from what these cards are telling us, it looks quite auspicious as to this feller you’ve just met.”

Bumfuzzled, I could only ask, “Auspicious?”

“Yeah. That means it looks good for you kid. Good luck.”

Feeling that I’d been dismissed, I thanked him, turned away, and went back out onto the midway. The flow of the crowd pulled me along between the antic game-booths and the whirling jam-packed rides. Dazed, I scuffed through the jumble, ignoring the insistent pitches hollered at me from each booth. I had to believe the three arms and the three cards, but whatever else I believed, suddenly appeared to be not so certain.