



Not Everybody's Nice as You Are

by Richard Holinger

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A steamy July day welcomes the carnival to town. Trucks transform into tiny-tot roller coasters, Tilt-a-Whirls and mega-slides. Unshaven carries mechanically unfold a multitude of metal parts, ashes falling off cigarettes that never leave their lips. That night, the calliope music and blinking lights attract all kinds: clutches of the very young scurry chaotically around their adults, self-assured teenagers cling as tightly as a football huddle, and the occasional loner lingers at the edges, watching the rest, his face already worn as barn wood by the rough weather of a lot of long nights.

Tonight, in this town, call it Brainard, a man, call him Jag (a nickname from high school, shortened from Jag-off), wanders down the Midway, among the barkers whose job it is to talk to people, to yell at them, to make their presence known. It's not the business for him. He's used to switching jobs, not because he won't do what's required, but because he's a suck-up and his bosses can't stand him. Over the years, he has posed as security guard, neighborhood dog walker, 7-11 clerk, fast food server, and cutlery salesman. He lasts longest at solitary jobs.

Drifting through the crowd, hands in his blue jean pockets, Jag scans the faces, hoping he will recognize a past 7-11 regular, Burger King flunky, dog owner, or fellow guard. He wants at least to meet with someone and linger for a few minutes; that will be enough.

So when Lisa comes up behind him and pats him on the shoulder, he swivels, expecting a cop or maybe Roy Gibson, whose wife Jag met at a hotel one night after his shift ended.

"Hey, Jag," Lisa says, her lips aflame, her Burger King uniform replaced with a lightweight, white lace see-through blouse and blue jean cutoffs practically showing her crotch.

"Hi, Lisa," Jag says. "Some night, huh?"

"I love a carnival," she says, "but only when I've got someone to escort me. Otherwise, it's just something sad dressed up like fun."

Jag likes the way Lisa talks, a little off kilter, like trying for profound and just missing, but sounding poetic anyway. "I'm having fun now, too," he says, "and I'm not wearing a disguise."

Lisa hits his arm with an open palm, then puts her arm around his. "God, you're funny."

"I can buy us tickets if you want to ride something."

Lisa smiles at him in a way he understands means something more than wanting a ride on the Tilt-a-Whirl.

"If you got somewhere to go," she says, "let's go."

"Yeah, I got a place." Jag was surprised how little it had taken to convince her to spend the night with him, but he wasn't going to stop now. "You look really pretty tonight," he says, and leads her into the night. "This way," he says whenever they reach the end of a block and need to turn, the silence broken only by the fading music blared out of the rides' loudspeakers.

Once Lisa asks, "You remember Marvin?"

"Sure."

"He died in a car crash."

Jag wonders how she knows, but doesn't ask. "That's real interesting. This way."

When they reach the house where he lives in a rented room on the third floor, he gives the front yard's overflowing garbage lots of room. He's heard and seen animals climb up the sides and tip it over. A dim porch light reveals legless wooden chairs, an open microwave and a rusting swing hanging by one chain.

"Around here," Jag says, and leads Lisa up the outside stairs. Inside, he pulls the blanket up over his unmade bed.

"This is nice," she says.

Jag throws a stained dish towel over a sink full of unwashed dishes. "It's okay. It's just me living here. Want something to drink?"

"Hey," Lisa says, "if it's okay with you, let's just do this."

Jag looks at her from where he stands in front of the open refrigerator. On the shelves he sees three and a half six packs of Pabst, a leftover dish of chili and a family size bottle of ketchup. "I've got beer."

"That's okay. I like to keep my head about me. You know, in case I get into trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Oh, you know. Things happen. Not everybody's nice as you are."

Then the reason for Lisa's being here, for walking all that way, and for condescending to spend time with him becomes clear to Jag. She doesn't want his beer, his bed or his company. She wants his money. Her looks, her get-up, her charm are nothing more than professionalism.

"Who's your pimp?" he asks, looking in the refrigerator at all the beer that will not be drunk tonight.

"Come on," she says, crossing the four feet of linoleum in her thin-strapped sandals. "I like you."

"Yeah," Jag says, pushing her away, then closing the refrigerator door and staring at the name WESTINGHOUSE. "I like sunsets, but I'm not about to pay for one."

"Get real, Jag," Lisa says with an edge in her voice.

"You're not getting it any other way. Give a girl a chance to make you happy any way she can."

"Get out," he says.

"Okay. I will. But look. I'll give you whatever you want for half price. Let's call it an Independence Day special."

Jag thinks about what he's going to say, and rehearses it mentally a few times before saying, "You're not as hot as you think you are."

After he says it, he closes his eyes. From his self-imposed darkness, he listens to her walk to the door, open it, and close it behind her. He listens to each step she takes, slowly and carefully, down to the cement platform that silences her footsteps. He imagines her walking past the faint porch light, casting her weak shadow over uncut mid-summer grass. When she steps onto the sidewalk, her shadow will dissolve by the glow of the streetlights that will see her back to the carnival where she will continue her hunt.

Why didn't he see her for what she was? Was he naïve, or just blind from his own hope? Was he ignorant, or just full of himself? Why did his love always get sent back unopened? Maybe he wanted too much. Maybe he would lower his sights and find someone he knew he was better than. At least for a while. At least until it made him feel better. There were plenty of women he was better than, nicer than. He would go after them until he got back what Lisa had stolen tonight.

Jag opens his eyes, reopens the fridge door and tears a can of beer out of its plastic ring. He flicks the tab open slowly, releasing a swish of gas and bubbly white foam before drinking in one of life's last pleasures.

Richard Holinger has taught high school English in Illinois's Fox Valley for more than 30 years. Recently Kattywompus Press published a collection of his flash fiction, and he won the 2012 Split Oak Press Prose Chapbook contest, its publication forthcoming. His poetry, short fiction, creative nonfiction, and book reviews appeared in *The Southern Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Boulevard*, *ACM*, *Witness*, *North American Review*, *New Letters*, and elsewhere. He has received three Pushcart Prize nominations and degrees include a Ph.D. in Creative Writing from the University of Illinois at Chicago. He lives in Geneva with his wife and two children.

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