

Step Right Up

By Ruth Brown

“Step right up!” the carnie yelled from the raised platform. “From galaxies beyond...a real spaceship. Right here. Right now. Only three bucks! Wholesale price, my friends. Last night to see. Step right up!”

The man looked like an alien himself with a long face, oddly fat lips beneath a thin nose with an upturned piggish snout. Large hoops of silver material arched over his wimpy shoulders, the tight blue spandex of his outfit confirming the lack of muscles.

“I want to see, Daddy!” Jeffrey exclaimed, gripping my hand and pulling me forward with sticky cotton-candy fingers.

“It’s a rip off, son.”

“It’s aliens! He said so.”

I sighed and bent down still reeling from almost losing the foot-long hotdog I’d had before agreeing to ride the Scrambler. “It’s not real, Jeffrey. Trust me on this one.”

Stubbornness set in, his six-year old features tightening. “I want to see.”

“Three bucks!”

I glanced at the carnie waving his hands about in big gestures.

“Please?” Jeffrey pleaded, taking a different tack.

I moved my gaze from the carnie to the canvas tent with posters hung all over depicting the spaceship and little aliens that rode on it before it crashed to Earth. The entrance and exit openings, glowing with yellow light, were angled precisely to entice without revealing a thing inside.

“The chance of a lifetime, folks! Step right up and see the spaceship.”

I stood up straight and stared forward, Jeffrey’s voice sounding far away as I tuned him out. He was high on sugar and my wallet was lighter by some sixty dollars. What was inside? Would he cry later, dreaming of aliens and his mother not there to console him? I wasn’t good at that part.

But it was my weekend.

I reached for the zippered pouch holding a wad of money stuffed in my front pocket.

The carnie waved me over. “Come right on up, sir! Give the lad a sight he’ll never forget.” He winked at me, a co-conspirator in the drama of larger-than-life thrills, the wonder and mystery of what lay behind the curtain. Children loved to be frightened, so my mother said.

I forked over three bucks and stepped off to the side.

“Aren’t you coming with me?” Jeffrey asked, eyes growing bigger every second. His lips, stained red from a candy apple, pulled down into a frown.

“Just go in the tent and back out the other side. There’s nothing to be afraid of,” I said, almost enjoying the moment, a little bit of revenge at being manipulated...again.

He turned to the entrance, but didn’t move forward.

Ah, hell.

“I’m only kidding,” I said, imagining Vicki bitching at me for making him go in alone. She’d tell me what an ass I was and I’d say something smart in return and we’d both be reminded of exactly why we weren’t together anymore. It wasn’t worth it.

The relief showed on his little sticky face, his smile beaming at me as he took my hand, ready to go now that he had backup.

The carnie took my five dollars and waved us forward.

“I gave you a five. You owe me some change,” I said to him, while my son tugged at the end of my arm.

“Oh, yes sir!” He fished in his pocket and handed me two dollars, his fat lips split in an ugly grin that showed more than a few rotten teeth. “My mistake.”

I smiled back, thinking a moment of my last dental visit. “No problem.”

“Come on, come on!” Jeffrey bounced about, still hanging on. “Let’s go.”

I took a step forward toward the tent entrance and my mind took a step back. Siamese twins, the bearded lady, the fat man and the giant horse, all waited for me at the fair. I had stood there on my side of the rope while I stared at them in fascination, my mother clucking her tongue softly so only I could hear. At least, I thought they wouldn’t hear her disapproval at the vulgarity of such displays. I’d laid in bed on those nights, thinking of the grotesque deformed animals in jars of formaldehyde, sometimes a live calf with extra legs or a deflated half-formed head hanging off its neck. I wanted them to cut the extra appendages off. Just get rid of it.

“Daddy?”

I looked down. Jeffrey stood there looking up at me, his expression confused.

“Excuse me,” a man said behind us and I stepped out of the way. He marched on by, his family in tow.

“Are you scared?” Jeffrey asked.

I laughed then, wondering what he would do if I said ‘yes’. “No. Are you?”

He grinned and let go of my hand. “No,” he said in a solemn little voice.

“Then let’s go in.”