

"Coming of Age in the Modern Midwest" by Catherine Johnson
Copyright 2019 by Catherine Johnson
Finalist story in the 2019 ACM Nick Adams Short Story Contest
Associated Colleges of the Midwest ACM.edu/NickAdams
Note: This story is reprinted with permission. Reproduction of this
story without the express, written permission of the author is
prohibited.

Coming of Age in the Modern Midwest

By Catherine Johnson

I don't know how many times I've been asked what lemon shakeups are—people don't have them in other places, and I talk about them a lot, I guess. The people asking me generally don't have small town roots. My hometown's flat vowels and rounded consonants aren't common in the circles I travel in now. Lemon shakeups aren't lemonade; they're sweeter and tangier—one whole, battered lemon and so much sugar it settles in a gritty layer at the bottom, beneath the ice cubes that rattle around the bottom of a sunny yellow cup covered in cartoon lemons. They are summer through a straw, inseparable from the heatwaves that roll through the country every June and July. I don't know why other states' fairs can't get that right. It's not like Illinois is the golden standard for carnivals.

One summer, a ride stalled while Max and I were at the top. We were suspended in a gingham sky, soft cotton blues and fluffy clouds scudding over rolling fields. I felt heat radiate off our little black car and sweat slick up my thighs as we hung upside down, the blood pooling in our heads as fear began to pulse in the pits of our bellies. Twenty feet below us, I could see a repairman taking apart our ride and scratching his head. The ride was broken, Max was oblivious, and I didn't say anything. He kept trying to flip our shiny car, send us in circles at that crazy angle, but his ten-year-old body couldn't counter our gravity. We rocked ominously instead of spinning. That was so typical of our friendship—Max blundering ahead and me along for the ride, more aware of the consequences than him but unable to resist the wild glint in his

eyes. It hadn't changed since we were little. So I laughed at his jokes and pressed my eyes shut as tears squeezed themselves from between my eyelids and mixed with the sweat running through my hair.

Another summer, I convinced Max to ride The Zipper with me. Its cars swirled independently of the enormous machine's gyrations in a maddening whiz through the LED studded carnival. We clung to the front of our cage and screamed as we spun through the hot summer air. Getting him on the ride hadn't been easy—I had to wound his pride a little bit before he would join the line snaking beneath the battered red machine, full of excuses and swiping his hair out of his eyes. He had one of those stupid Justin Bieber type haircuts at the time—they were all the rage in eighth grade. I felt a little bit bad about teasing him. We staggered out of the ride and he held my hair back while I swore and dry-heaved into the bushes. He laughed the whole time and offered to split a funnel cake with me, so I guess we were even.

We ate the steaming dough on a bench in the shade of a big oak tree on the edge of the fairground, playing one of our favorite carnival games. We never played the official games, the ones with big stuffed bears as prizes and men barking challenges. We always wanted to spend our money on tickets for rides and fair food. We had a lot of traditions. Max and I had been coming to the carnival together ever since I could remember. People watching was our favorite thing to do when we needed a break from the rides. Sometimes we competed to see who could spot the worst behaved kid, the creepiest uncle, the most awkward first date. This time, we were looking for the tackiest tattoo. I saw a woman with the absinthe fairy tattooed on her belly in lurid green and orange. The design peeked over the waistband of her shorts and spread down her thighs like spilled ink. A blatant display of sexuality, a sickly bruise. A secret she never had the intention of keeping.

That evening, we soared above the cornfields in an animatronic whirl. I watched our

shoes streak against a golden summer sunset while the carnival swung wildly below us. It was the summer before high school, and I felt every inch of air between our bodies. I would have never put it into words, but a part of me was wondering if this friendship would survive the onslaught of pure hormones that was descending upon us. We were completely out of control and we knew it, clinging to a friendship that was about to change drastically. Clinging to our car's railing as gears ground together, whooping in unison.

The rocket ship ride has never been my favorite. It's a little boring; sure, it goes high in the air, but where are the flips? The lurches? But Max has loved it ever since we were kids, back when he dreamed about being an astronaut, so I only pretended to be suffering when he dragged me into line the summer after our freshman year. It was tradition. Tradition that overcame hormones when our hands bumped into each other on the bar in front of us.

The best thing about that ride was the view—like riding in a convertible that moved way too fast while oscillating up and down in tight corkscrews. Max and I had our hands thrown up and were laughing at the terrified kids around us when I leaned against the door of the car-- and I felt it move. Max and I struggled to hold the ride together. With every rotation I slipped towards the door, scrambling to avoid slamming into it. Max and I were a tangle of limbs as we tried to keep the door closed while gripping each other. The bar across my lap seemed like a joke. I tried not to think about the kid who had fallen out of The Zipper somewhere in Missouri last week. The screech of metal on metal and the hot rays of the sun gave us strength—these normal fairground sensations were suddenly threats that galvanized our resolve to not let the door slip. To not lose control of the ride. But when we touched down, the door wouldn't move more than an inch and a half. We laughed at our lack of faith, at the bored disdain of the ride operator who rolled his eyes at us. At our fear of the heights we had flown and the hot whirl of the machine.

The battered Chevy made a strange noise every time we went over a pothole. Max had bought it after saving up his pay checks. He had taken time off painting houses to go to the fair with me, and I was grateful, but I couldn't help but roll my eyes when I saw the truck. I teased him about his new chick magnet, and he gave monosyllabic answers, pretending to be annoyed but secretly proud. He had started working on houses the summer before, and then waiting tables during the school year. Physical labor had melted away the last of his baby fat, and I knew he made a lot of tips. I also knew that the money he'd spent on this truck he bought from a cousin should probably have been saved for college. It also wasn't my place to say so, though, or to mention the fact that the Chevy could probably use a new muffler and brake pads. The reason he'd gotten such a good deal was more because this car was a piece of shit than any sort of familial discount. Max seemed to think the truck was a good investment. There was no doubt in my mind that Max used his newfound cheekbones and secondhand truck to take a lot of girls out for rides in the country. But there was only one type of ride I was interested in, and we spent the drive arguing about whether we'd go on the Ferris wheel or the Octopus first.

The top of the Ferris wheel makes it feel as though someone has paused the world. We hung in the sky, gazing down at the main street of our home shining in the daylight. My world was so big but so far away. The fringes of my town blurred into lush fields and the vacancies that pockmarked the main streets were concealed by distance. From above, all the houses looked pristine—you couldn't tell which ones were falling down and which ones were abandoned. The empty lots could be parks. Heat shimmered over the battered roads, turning the asphalt into something ethereal. Our neighbors became anonymous speckles, and a perfect summer illusion unfolded before us—a town that was unmistakably ours, but with the details dropped away.

Separate from this aerial view. For a golden moment we were suspended at the top of the ride's arc and could see a glimpse of our town's essence. And then gears ground together, and we returned to reality.

The summer after Junior year, I tried to explain American carnivals to my French foreign exchange student. Not what a carnival was, but what it meant to me. She had only been in the country for about a week, and I was anxious about taking this visitor, this stranger, to something so trashy, so country, so redneck, so magical. Maybe I was learning to be ashamed of carnivals—learning that the gap-toothed carneys with the colorful ink on their arms weren't at fairs in richer places. Learning that the rides I used to hope I was tall enough for were maybe meant for younger kids than me. I was caught between loving the glitz of the giant metal monsters and seeing their grime. Seeing the trash that gathered in the corners of the fairgrounds. Noticing that poverty wasn't suspended by the fair but somehow highlighted by it.

I was glad to see Max walking towards us through the crowd. He was so much better at untangling these feelings than I was, or maybe at just ignoring them. He didn't think this town was too small for him, or that he was too old for the fair. He had a way of bypassing those qualms. He had given up on college, or maybe he'd never seen himself there in the first place. Anyway, he wasn't going. We never talked about it—we didn't talk about much anymore. The strength of our traditions held us together: the cookie baking at Christmas, fireworks on the Fourth of July, and, of course, the fair. He still came to my shows, I still wrote notes on the receipts for his Reece's blizzards from the Dairy Queen where I worked. And I wouldn't say that our friendship was hollow or based on convenience—I'd just say that it had changed. In some ways it was easier. I was busy studying and looking at colleges, he was busy working. I know he

was proud of me and excited for my future, even though everything was still so uncertain. I knew that the chances of me getting into one of the colleges that sent me shiny brochures was slim—I didn't even recognize most of their names. Not many kids from my school went to top out of state private schools. And everything came down to money, always. I had decided that I wouldn't have a dream school; that I wouldn't pin my hopes on anything until after I'd seen the financial aid awards. But he was excited for me. Any time I started talking about money or about how I didn't know if the education I was getting in a small-town school district could compare to that of the kids at private schools, he would tell me to shut up. "Shut up and start getting used to ramen, nerd." It was unconventional support, but it was getting me through the common app. And I was excited for him, too. A little worried that this town would swallow him, but I was happy that he felt excited when he looked at his future. I respected him for it.

I could feel Amelia straighten when she saw Max approaching, the way a lot of my friends did when they saw him, trying to not let me see. It just made me laugh. We left Amelia with my sister and headed for the lemon shakeup stand. On our way there, something caught our eye. We watched a porta-potty rock back and forth, out of step with the loud fairground music. We watched incredulously, sure two people wouldn't fit inside the tiny stall. Sure two people wouldn't want to fit inside. Sure whatever romance a fair held couldn't translate into portapotty trysts. The door opened, and Max's boss emerged from the acid green door. We ran away as he adjusted his fly, holding in our laughter and revulsion until we collapsed on a bench. We never saw if anyone followed him out.

A tattooed god loomed against the sky. He gnashed his crooked teeth and laughed, holding up a pin that had formerly held a car to the cold metal arms of The Scrambler. A tiny

scrap of metal that could send an entire car flying. A fearful stillness anchored my legs to my seat. I was frozen in solidarity with the other passengers, all of us locked into a ride that suddenly seemed ridiculous under the charge of a man who was suddenly the most powerful being in the universe. The noises of the fair blared around us, a mockery of the drama unfolding between this sinewy carney and the big man who sat shaking before him. The sky was a bruise—a sickly yellow fading into a deep purple hue. The angry titan laughed and pushed the pin back into place. He pulled the lever and we sat in a dizzy whirl as the world slid by, oblivious.

Max and I got off the ride shaken. We walked to our favorite bench under the oak tree and didn't say a word. I thought about all the times I had heard that the carnival wasn't safe. All the times my friends had told me they didn't go because they were scared of the place and the people. I had always laughed off the fears of my friends; why would I be scared of my neighbors? Of a carnival I had been visiting since I could remember? But the look in the ride operator's eyes had been so—

“You want a lemon shakeup?”

Max's voice cut into my thoughts. It was injected with a forced, shallow cheeriness. It pissed me off. So we weren't going to talk about the experience we had just shared. We weren't going to talk about our helplessness, or our fear, or the fact that we had just ridden in a ride that was probably operated by a drunk. Of course not—we'd avoid the subject, drink a lemon shakeup, keep putting the fair on a pedestal. Avoid the memory like the plague, the same way we had been avoiding talking about the fact that I left for college in a few short weeks, and Max left for basic training a few days after that. The same way we ignored the empty storefronts downtown, the kids who didn't make it to graduation, the smell of weed that hung heavy in the evening air.

But another part of me was so relieved. Because I didn't want to talk about leaving, or about the National Guard, or about things changing. All I wanted was a lemon shakeup with Max at a fair I would continue to love in a town I couldn't wait to leave but would always be home. And thank God we had tradition to fall back on, to bypass our discomfort and help us shelve our fear. To let us move forward.

“Yeah that sounds great.”

The coffee table was covered in napkins scribbled with long division. I'd given up on trying to tutor the two girls in front of me, happy that I managed to squeeze 45 minutes of work out of them before they devolved into fits of giggles, talking about all the things they were going to do at the carnival that night. I could hear the sizzle of fair food and the whoosh of rides and the heat of the humid air in their voices. Their excitement was palpable—these girls were on the threshold of high school, excited to see friends and boys they hadn't seen since the start of summer. Excited to ditch their parents, but not before they separated them from some money. I remembered those days, my head stuffed full of romance pieced together from reruns of *Grease*. They asked me if I was going to go to the fair and I told them probably—for the food if nothing else.

Hours later, I'm riding next to Max in his blue Chevy on the way to the fair. It still needs a new muffler. We are singing along to songs he picked because he thought I would like them. It's a mix of today's greatest hits, the kind of music you'd expect at a college party. The playlist is fine, but we could have had a better one if he'd asked me what I liked, or even just played the stuff we used to listen to. But maybe it wouldn't have been better—a part of me feels like this is as good as it gets, laughing and singing together, windows down, green fields rolling out in front

of us, caught up in our favorite tradition. I briefly wonder if Max is trying to prove that he still fits into my world, but that doesn't sound like him. I can almost pretend that we are ten or thirteen or fifteen together. We are almost timeless, but something is slightly different. It isn't the bright orange wristbands or the summer heat that rolls across our bodies. It isn't Max's worn blue jeans, the faded t-shirt flecked with paint, or the way we argue about what we should ride first. He feels far away. I wonder if the distance between us is a chunk of the road that stretches from this town to my school.

Max doesn't mind when I eat most of the funnel cake we got to share. I watch our shoes streak across a sunset as we hurtle in dizzying circles far above the ground. Laughing, we slam into each other on the Scrambler and he tries to convince me to go on the Zipper which I will not do. Now we're in the tiny car of the Zipper and I'm laughing because we're flipping like crazy and I don't care that the ground is rushing up to meet me or that the fair lights are a blur above me and below me as we hurtle through space on a ride I was too scared to try before he called me scared and my damned pride made me get in line for the fucking thing but I'm glad because all that matters is the heat of his body pressed against mine as we flip over and over and over again.

Now there are fireworks and he puts his arm around me. He pulls me close. I'm surprised when he whispers "I love you" into my hair, but I'm not surprised when I whisper it back. It is both a physiological reaction and the truest words I have ever spoken. The distance between us melts away.

This summer is my first summer away from home. I haven't seen those little girls-- I hope they are still enchanted by whatever magic held them last year. I hope they don't think they're too old for the fair yet. This summer I am far away from the fairground with the lemon

shakeups and the creaking rides and the smell of funnel cakes. I wonder if Max went without me. I wonder if he took someone else. The boy I kissed under stars and carnival lights and fireworks is gone. He's hurt that I moved on and I'm tired of hurting him.

This summer someone brought a gun to the fair.

This summer the air of the carnival was filled with the shrieks of children who were strapped into rides and the screams of young adults who wished they were with their parents. The desperation of families trying to find each other. The heavy darkness of the summer night pressing around panicked bodies, lurid green and red lights distorting faces, the sound of sirens layered against the noise of carnival games. Wrenching gears. Blasting music. Gunshots.

I found out through facebook first. That almost hurts the most. I froze. My heart stopped when I hung upside down in a broken ride, when I thought I would be thrown out of the rocket ship, when I watched a mechanic hold a piece of metal against a blazing sky. But when I saw that headline shared a billionfold my lungs contracted. Seized up. Air I didn't know I was holding left my body as though I had been sucker punched. I felt empty. I never knew what that word meant before.

I read the words of my neighbors. I expect to find my town hidden inside their sentences but instead I barely recognize my home. Many people say it was only a matter of time. Some say that this is why they've never let their kids go to the fair in the first place—that the carnival isn't safe. Their words phrase poverty as the terrorism they have always seen it to be. It is a new iteration of an old tradition, one that redirects fear and keeps us from moving forward. Their words link trash and class and danger and safety with jagged lines, separating themselves from the roots of the violence that pervades my town. The violence that bubbled to the surface next to the red ride I've ridden every summer next to an oak tree I've sat under so many times with a

boy I want to call but can't because of pride and history and God knows what else. I wasn't there but I can see that spot. I can feel the fear of my town as it waits to exhale—waits for the owner of a gun without a serial number to be caught. A false victory that is a treatment of symptoms.

The true cancer runs deeper.

And I want to talk to Max more than anything. But I am heavy with the knowledge that hearing from me would probably hurt him, open up wounds that may or may not have healed. And I can't even untangle the real reasons I want to call him—if it's to see if he is okay, or to process this terror, or to see if he went without me. If he took some other girl to our carnival. Or maybe I just want to hear his voice. But I don't think I could talk to him about the fair. I don't think I could stand it being ruined again. I don't think I could take another heartbreak. I don't call.

I am still sitting at the kitchen counter when my roommate comes home. Willa is weighed down with reusable grocery bags, and I let my phone screen go dark and help her unpack them. I am surprised by how easy it is to listen to her workplace gossip and laugh when she tells me that she walked in on two interns making out in a supply closet.

But then she turns her eyes on me.

“How was your day? Anything to report?”

The reverberations of laughter are still pulsing through my body but feel perverse now. My lungs are lead. I shelve a box of pasta and grab a can of tomato sauce. She is unpeeling a banana, leaning against the counter. I can't look at her. Whatever I say will be her complete picture even if it isn't the whole story, and that scares me almost as much as the thought of being alone with this news.

So trashy, so country, so redneck, so magical.

I bend down and open a cupboard. It muffles my voice a little bit.

“Yeah, I guess. Sort of. I got some bad news from home today.”

Shoes against sunsets, shaking portapotties, purpling skies.

She has set down the banana and is twirling a dark curl around her index finger. Her eyes are big with sympathy.

“There was a shooting in my hometown.”

The sentence sticks in my throat, feels unfamiliar in my mouth. It is cold and metallic. Heavy. I wonder how many times I’ll say it before it feels like history. Maybe it would have been better to not say anything at all.

Sticky dust chokes the fairground. The sickly-sweet smell of the food stands. Tattoos on warm skin.

She is frozen. So am I. I wonder if her heart stopped or if her lungs contracted or neither. I wonder what my physiological reaction would have been if our roles had been reversed.

Now the words are coming out of me in a rush.

“Nobody was hurt though. And it wasn’t necessarily a crazy guy who just wanted to kill people or anything and I mean I wasn’t even there it isn’t about me at all it’s just that it was at this fair I go to every year and I know a bunch of people who were there—”

She is nodding. Sympathetic. This is so far away from her world. Do I tell her about the meth the police found at the scene? Where do you draw the line between too much information and an incomplete picture? Does the truth matter if it can’t be the whole truth?

Nicotine stains on mechanic’s fingers, a patina of rust on creaking rides, paint flecked jeans, fireworks.

“—It’s just that I go there every year—”

I remember the look in Max's eyes when he told me I'd changed and my voice breaks. "—
Or I used to anyway—"

Willa's arms are around me and she pulls me close. And it doesn't matter if I have said too much or not enough because I am sobbing into her shoulder and I can't say anything anymore. Maybe there is nothing more to say. It somehow feels wrong that I am so close to her—as though our proximity is an indicator of the distance between me and home, or maybe between me and the person I was last summer. But she is solid and there for me even if I can't explain my home's sickness.

And for some reason I can't explain, I start thinking about lemon shakeups. They aren't a powdery mix of distilled lemon extract. They are inconsistent, and filled with seeds, and the sugar at the bottom is gritty and the lemon chunks are sometimes too sour, but they are what separates my fair from polished, consistent amusement parks. They are what make the sweltering heat of a clear summer day worthwhile. They are what make you stand in a field watching illicit red and blue lights bloom in the sky while watching for red and blue lights on the road nearby. They are what make you confuse a bruise on your psyche for a soft spot in your heart. I can't explain the fact that I'm nostalgic for something that endangered my loved ones and neighbors. People almost died and I'm framing it with a goddamn metaphor about glorified lemonade. Home is unsafe, and changing, and soon I won't be a part of it. How soon before the next shooting is a secondhand problem? Is it already? Or maybe what I love is already gone—like the view from the top of the Ferris wheel. A different golden illusion to come crashing down.

It's dark. I slip out of bed into the kitchen. Outside the window there are more city lights twinkling than stars. The pure silver of a full moon mixes with the dirty gold of street lamps,

painting the concrete with swathes of metallic light. I wonder if the carnival will continue tonight or if it was cancelled. Would people go if it wasn't canceled? Would there be sullen workers, empty rides, a handful of families rattling around an almost empty lot? No one left but the brave, the stubborn, and the dependent.

My phone sits in a pool of moonlight on the counter where I left it hours before. It is cool and smooth as I turn it over in my hands. For the thousandth time I weigh a relationship that lasted less than a year against one that spanned my whole life. I come to a decision instead of an answer. My fingers trace Max's number instinctively and my heartbeat remains steady as the phone begins to ring.

I have no idea what I will say.