

The Washington County Fair

I used to refuse to pay to get into the Washington County Fair. If you held your head high and acted like you were supposed to be there, the enormous, chair-ridden ticket checkers wouldn't bother stopping you. Some years, I saved double digits via this trick. Enough to fund an extra dessert almost every time I went. Generally speaking, my experience wasn't worth the effort.

I went because during the Washington County Fair, everyone is at the Washington County Fair. Most of us spent the afternoon, and most of the night, wandering around the grounds, not wanting to pay for rides or games, and inevitably spending the entirety of our summer allowance on fried dough and bad pizza. As I exited middle-school, I spent more time among the farm animals that were being shown in various competitions. This part of the fair had the pull of various neighborhood crushes of mine who showed their family goats or oxen, but the fair's rides and games also pushed me a significant amount.

Carnies had always bothered me. Not by their lack of hygiene or general creepiness, but by their ability to attack my sense of pride and convince me to hurl basketballs at hoops that were not only too high for my spaghetti arms to dream of launching a ball into, but also noticeably smaller in diameter than the ball itself; not to mention the milk-bottles (still a commodity in my neck of the woods) that had clearly been cemented or bolted together too sturdily for my change-up speed softball toss to knock them down. These games were actually much more solidly and carefully assembled than the rides which my friends willingly—and I unwillingly—stepped into.

The Zipper, a two-person compartment ride that twirls and spins in various directions, was notoriously and visibly held together with duct tape. Chase LaBarron had famously ridden it seven times in a row before spectacularly throwing up his strawberry sundae into the ready-and-waiting trashcan. Sarah Chowder was the first to convince me to

put my body on the line. As I stepped into the cage, I noted the change, keys, and other personal items scattering the floor of the tiny, seatbelt-less box. And as it flipped over and over, with Sarah and me inside it, the change showered down on us. Sarah basked in the glory of her own poise, laughing at my rigid body, wedged with locked elbows between my white knuckles, clenching the unconvincingly latched door, my stiff back pressing into the hard seat. In truth, after the moment when we started moving and my eyes closed, I remember very little.

When the ride stopped, I stepped out, dizzy but confident that I had successfully wooed Sarah with my display of courage and determination.

“Come on!” she said, pulling me past those waiting in the long line. She dragged me past twirling bodies and flashing lights, pausing at each line to check whether I was willing to go again, which I wasn’t. Finally, in the far corner of the lot, she suggested the Hang-Glider. It looked harmless enough, and the average age of those in the long line was about half our own, if you didn’t count their accompanying parents. With the confidence of The Zipper incident clouding my judgment, I agreed.

Lying on our stomachs, our hands linked, we were slowly lifted up from the ground as we rotated around the central pivot. It was my first, true hand-hold, and as the wind passed gently over our faces and hands, I knew that I would have no regrets. As we wound to a stop, I managed to tilt my head towards Sarah and imagine just how suave it would be to kiss her before re-angling it downwards and releasing the contents of my stomach. Unfortunately, the ride was designed such that the plastic under my chest and the plastic under my head was continuous and slightly concave, funneling the half-digested fair food onto my new, back-to-school, starkly white, Adidas sweatshirt. Even the carny gave me a disgusted look as he lifted the safety bar that was holding me down in my own sick.

Later, Sarah would become my first, non-truth-or-dare kiss, and soon she would start dating my soccer teammate, and middle school frenemy, Larry Bindle. The next year I saw them climbing over the fence as I walked through the ticket station.