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**The Ghost of Frank Stanford
The Most American Place on Earth
Life Cycles**

One Night at the Fair

by Andrew C. Miller

The sun set an hour ago, but Neshoba County Fairgrounds are still hotter than a sack full of rats. Reanna's on a lawn chair behind the counter, eyes on the big guy in the sweat-splotched shirt. He's behind the rope, hefting a baseball, squinting at the target. Another sucker, she thinks. Her dad's in the cage, perched on the wobbly seat over the tub of water.

"You're no baseball player," Dad shouts.

His voice—singsong and whiny—slices through shouts and whistles from the midway crowd, the faraway notes of the Ferris-wheel calliope. The big guy shields his eyes from a bank of lights in the next lot, winds up and throws, shoots wide of the target. The ball whumps against the canvas backdrop.

He points at the lights, spits on the ground. "Goddamn things blinded me."

Dad cups his hands around his mouth and moos like a cow. He hasn't been dunked since supper and feels cocky.

"Three for a dollar," Reanna yells. "Knock the skinny dude in the water." She holds up three balls. Four young guys in tan khakis line up at the counter. Two are wearing Mississippi State shirts. She'd been thinking about State since the recruiter showed up at school two months ago. Plan ahead he told them: take the SAT this summer, apply during the fall.

"College boys," Dad shouts. "Give them the special: six for two-fifty." Dad's not crazy about her going off to State. It's not just the money. It's her doing something nobody in the family's done.

They each hand Reanna a dollar. Their hands are smooth as lard in a pail. Reanna checks her watch. Ten o'clock—three more hours. Later she'll go down to the stables, see

Connor. He goes to State and might know these guys.

Whomp. The canvas hiccups, dust flies. Whomp-whomp. One after another, they miss the target. Balls roll down the fabric, gather up in the wooden trough below. Dad runs a battered saucepan back and forth across the bars. "Teach you to throw like that up at State?"

Whomp-whomp. Whomp.

"I'm still looking for a baseball player!"

The tallest one drops two bills on the counter. Sweat lines his forehead, sluices down his cheeks. Reanna hands him six.

Whomp. Whomp-whomp.

"Hey boy, what sorority you in?"

He throws one after the other like punches at a free-for-all. Dad lets loose with the Woody Woodpecker laugh. For God's sake, Dad.

The kid fires number six straight at Dad. Might have drilled him except for the cage. "Fuck you, old man." They stand around muttering, then walk off. Good thing.

Little before one, Dad says it's time to quit. He unlocks the iron box, scoops out the cash. "Let's snatch us some dogs," he says, "onion rings from Little Ralphie—take them back to the camper." Little Ralphie would pack a bunch of leftovers into a cardboard to-go box, let them have it all for half price. Toss in a handful of pickles, condiment packets. Reanna pictures Dad stuffing rings in his mouth as they weave through crowds back to the camper. Once inside, he'd peel out of his jeans, stiff from plunging in the tub, slam about in the cupboards for that half-full bottle of Bacardi Black.

A text from Connor. He's at the stables.

Connor: *U missed shrimp boil.*

Reanna: *Working.*

Connor: *Got leftovers. Hungry?*

Reanna: *B there few min.*

Cold boil—better than anything at Little Ralphie’s. See the horses, talk about Mississippi State. Reanna hoists her backpack, slips off the midway, stoops beneath strings of 60-watt bulbs, past the two-story pink and blue and green clapboard cottages. She hops a gulch reeking with septic tank overflow. Just a hint of a cool breeze slides off the hills—it’s flushing away the midway smells: sour vomit and stale piss, fried catfish remains, half-eaten corn dogs, buttered popcorn. The only sounds are the night hawks buzzing the lights for insects. The stables are ahead, past the blackberry thicket. She’s buoyed by the sudden quiet and cool air, the far-away aroma of horses.

The last race was at 7:30 and Connor rubbed down the horses hours ago. She asks to see Apache Runner, the Arabian. Connor leads her to the last stall. It’s dark, except for stray light seeping through cracks in the wall. She presses her cheek against the Arabian’s smooth flank, twirls the black mane between thumb and two fingers. Imagines whipping the coarse hairs into dark braids. Wonders what it’d be like to be on his back, charging through a grassy field. Connor’s been riding since he was a kid. She’d never been on a horse like this. Just ponies at church picnics. Connor hands her the sheepskin mitt. It’s warm and soft. She runs it around Apache Runner’s haunches; his muscles taut like coils of cable clutched in a duffle. The big horse chuffs, shakes his head, stomps his feet, kicks up straw. Reanna holds out a palmful of treats, greenish-brown cubes thicker than a man’s thumb. They smell of oats and apples. Apache Runner’s lips are warm and wet, feel like innards of a just-killed chicken. Yesterday she’d been afraid he might bite, but Connor said, no, he never does that.

Connor dumps the contents of a brown bag into a cardboard tray. Shrimp, corn on the cob, red potatoes the size of golf balls, chunks of sausage, handfuls of quartered lemons—all dusted with paprika, black pepper flakes, parsley sprigs. They eat with plastic forks, drink sweet tea out of chipped coffee cups. When finished,

they wipe their fingers and faces with paper towels. He squeezes in close, rubs Reanna’s neck with one hand. His breath is hot against her cheek. Yesterday he’d talked about his freshman year: frat parties, football games, classes. Tonight, she’d planned to ask him about scholarships, registration.

Reanna leans back, rests her head against the wall. The manure smell, which earlier seemed pleasant, hangs in her nose and throat like a curtain. She exhales, begins to breathe through her mouth. Ten o’clock tomorrow morning, she’ll be on the midway, selling chances to dunk Dad. Three for a dollar. Another day and they’ll be in Vicksburg. Soon it will be mid-August and she’ll be in school. The sycamore leaves already show signs of crisping up and turning brown. The business with Connor was fun: talking about Mississippi State, rubbing down Apache Runner, eating cold shrimp boil. But it didn’t have much to do with Mississippi State. ▲▼▲