

Carnival of Promises

Trista Hurley-Waxali

“Step right up, take a toss and win big! Maybe for the lady?”

“God, can that attendant be any more cliché?” the woman sneers. A stuffed green bear’s head leans down from the top shelf with its perfectly sculpted torso appearing more like a hand stitched piece of contemporary art than a novelty toy made in China.

“Babe, I’m going to give one a try.” Devin says.

“What are you nuts?” his girlfriend says, “you have no chance of winning, you’re better off to buy a souvenir.”

“The point is to win.”

“Yeah, any loser can do that.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Devin smiles and walks towards the attendant. Each step moving over the asphalt of this once thriving parking lot, leads him away from the local gossip to winning something inside of him as proof he’s not like these people here.

“Ah, I see you have what it takes,” the attendant says while pointing over the pricing board and stepping off his stool to stand at only 4 foot 7. “My friend, the rules are simple, your hand can’t cross the red line, you aren’t allowed to give your rings to anyone else and three, you can only win here one time a day.”

“Oh right, like anyone ever wins,” Devin’s girlfriend says, “do you really think you can win?”

“I do,” Devin says, “give me \$10 worth”

“Alright, good start,” the attendant waddles over as best he can in the small space and reaches down to a bucket of rings. The food grade bin is full with a couple inches of room to lift off the shelf.

“Good luck,” Devin’s girlfriend reluctantly says.

“I promise you, I’ll win this.” She softens up before he casts his first throw.

The first few seemingly falls between the bottles, in that sliver of space that offers plenty of room for the house to win. The next few ting off of neighbouring bottles and bounce aimlessly in the air. The last ones come close to the top of the bottle and glide over the edge.

“Good try but no cigar,” Devin’s girlfriend says, “Let’s ride the roller coaster!”

“I think you mean bear,” the attendant says, she rolls her eyes.

“Naw, I think I’m going to try again now and then I can meet you at the roller coaster?” Devin says, not looking over at her.

“What?! You want to stay here instead?”

“I just want to try again but I don’t want you to wait for me, I can just text you when I’m done and we can plan on where to meet.” She looks around like she’s imagining this.

“Great,” Devin’s girlfriend says and walks away, “I came to hang out with you.”

“So how many rings this time?” the attendant asks, resting his elbow on the red line.

“\$100.”

The attendant hands him a set \$10 bucket in intervals as each throw gets Devin closer to what he imagines is the sound of stability of the ring on the bottle. A win that he must believe in as he’s developing his aim. He knows the years made them unbalanced plastic rings but those are constants in this gamble. He must also trust the rules of the game, that one of these rings have landed on top of a bottle, that someone won without cheating. He has that person in his mind's eye, then a previous player stands in his peripheral, someone is there but he can’t see them. His phone vibrates, it’s a text from his girlfriend. He opens it and sees a selfie of her standing with a group of people in line and then of them on the roller coaster. The text reads, ‘The drop felt insane!’ But Devin knows better than that, he knows what it is to feel that, to really let your mind risk reality for the sake of an oversized prize.

“You’re doing well,” the attendant says, bringing him back.

“How many do I have left?”

“\$40.” He nods and texts back his girlfriend. He waits and doesn’t see a line of bubbles to show she’s texting back, so he continues to toss.

What does she expect? That he’s going to give up after he’s invested, by perfecting his skill from this angle facing the board. Should he give up and join them taking place in another line? Where they will then be herded like cattle into a seat on the roller coaster, to have that momentary excitement at the top of an engineered thrill. To then be positioned on a curve for a photo. A shot to show everyone how much fun you had at that very moment, the moment you can say, ‘this is insane.’ Shot. Shot in the back, betrayed by boredom, he throws another ring and blinks his eyes. He lets the water leave a film over his eyes to better focus. He pauses and looks over the tops of the glass bottles and just past the enclosed area he sees a cage being pulled by a small tractor. Inside that cage stands a unicorn, tilting down and ignoring the hay.

“What is that?” Devin asks the attendant.

“Did you win?”

“No, there’s a unicorn.” Devin blinks his eyes and then sees a tiger.

“Ah, the games play tricks on you,” the attendant teases.

“Right.” Devin throws again and again, and clears his area for the final 10.

He meets her in front of the photo booth for the roller coaster she said would be her final ride. But Devin isn’t looking for their reactions posted on the screen but for she turns the corner and she lays her eyes on his green stuffed bear.

Author Bio:

Trista Hurley-Waxali just finished a stint living in LA for 6 years and is enjoying her new adventure living in the South of France. She has performed at Avenue 50, Stories Bookstore and internationally at O'heal Poetry Series in Cork, Ireland and a TransLate Night show from Helsinki Poetry Connection. She writes weird short stories and is working on her novel, *At This Juncture*.