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Funland Elegy

The duck’s ass haircuts had given way to bald spots and silver ponytails. Lanky builds had become doughty. Street drugs, booze and other ignorances that defined the lives of these guys couldn’t be denied. Yet Phil looked fairly unchanged, not much older than the out-of-step sixteen-year-old he’d been at Funland.

In the funeral home with so many ride operators, all now twenty-some years older, memories of that first job came back and Phil could almost hear calliope music, smell hot dogs and the sweat of a summer Sunday. Phil still felt like he didn’t fit in. He wasn’t streetwise and tattooed. No comb-streaked Elvis hair. But he had reasons to hold kind thoughts toward his old boss. When he read that the man died, a routine death at 84, he decided to pay his respects and perhaps redeem himself. He was a lot cooler these days.

This didn’t start well. Upon arriving, he indulged in a glimpse of Clarisse’s cleavage. She was the boss’s assistant, a bombshell way back when, but still hot. Phil bent over to take her hand as she sat in a plush chair. He said he was sorry about the boss. But staring at her bulging breasts was unavoidable and she caught him, nailing him with a hard look.

In the chapel Phil joined the reception line waiting to greet mourners who sat in the first row accepting handshakes and kind wishes. Phil anticipated a chance to console them and outshine the others with poise. This uncultured herd couldn’t have acquired the groove Phil attained in college, business, life itself. He wasn’t the kid he used to be.

Phil thought back. A mid-summer Sunday. Funland’s ten-to-ten, an unconscionable shift for a sixteen-year-old in the world of jobs for the first time. He started in morning sun and ended in the buggy neon night twelve hours later. He remembered things that made him feel comically, sometimes frighteningly, out of place. They might have happened during that one Sunday or they might be scraps of memory from other parts of the summer. They came and went, these memories, flashing and disappearing, then reappearing again like the world as seen from one of Funland’s spinning rides.

What a loser I was, Phil thought. Maybe he still was. Maybe when the time came to shake hands with the grieving widow he’d freeze and say something weird like he did when the dead boss helped him off the ground. No way. He arrived in a Beemer. Phil was confident he’d be articulate in expressing modest sympathies. There were two guys being buried today. The dead boss and the inept Phil.

Actually, the new Phil was a lamebrain because of what he will say in a moment, but he didn’t know that yet. What he did know is that he was a coward once because he let a thug ride Funland’s roller coaster without tickets. He was a horndog because of his downshirt experiences. And he was a spaz because he couldn’t hop a fence.

Other ride operators flipped their snake-thin bodies over the waist-high fences encircling rides. They’d grab the rail, kick out, go over and land on both feet. Every cool ride operator, and they were all cool with their rockabilly hair, Levis, cowboy shirts and boots, could do this. Phil tried it on an overcast afternoon when Funland was nearly empty and fell on his back, slapped
breathless by the sudden ground. And there was his boss, the future dead guy. This man knelt over Phil and helped him up, brushing away bits of gravel in a fatherly way.

“You okay, son?” the man said. Phil replied, “Yeah, fine. Thank ye.” Where had that come from? Thank YE? Sure, there might have been some head trauma from the fall. But no, it was just his tongue being as un-coordinated as his body. He couldn’t negotiate the flip, and when flustered by the boss, he couldn’t negotiate the word “you.” This made him sound like a Quaker, which still causes Phil to flush.

What a name, Funland. It was no fun. It was a lot of fun. A dumbed-down Disneyland on Chicago’s busy 95th Street where there was a head-on crash late that Sunday. Casualties lay in roadside weeds holding T-shirts to cut faces. Their shirts grew red, lit by the neon of the Ferris wheel, which Phil broke seconds before the crash.

The collision made a sudden gunshot of sound. Kids cried. Adults jostled popcorn, grabbed their chests. Phil got an instant toothache. It hurt so much that he had to go to an emergency dentist the next day. In a bloody procedure, the man gouged out a wisdom tooth that he’d diagnosed as the root of the problem, but Phil felt the crash was the cause.

The memory of this accident was linked with sexy thoughts Phil had before he broke the Ferris wheel. He even worried that sex caused the crash. This seemed improbable, but during adolescence there had been confusing signals about what God wanted versus what the body wanted. He’d been lost in carnal musings, then broke the Ferris wheel. Maybe drivers saw this and drifted from their lanes.

The sex in Phil’s blood got there not entirely because of downshirt sights, and probably not by his flipping up the dress of a pretty lady. That had been an honest accident. And not even by the exchange he’d had with the hot mom on his merry-go-round. It came from a daydream Phil had during a dinner break in the Funland kitchen where calliope din still found him. This daydream, while Phil was relaxing, filled with fries and slightly sun stroked, became a sleeping dream in which he answered the door to find Clarisse.

The dead boss’s assistant was in her twenties then. She was famous with the ride operators for being built like a “brick shithouse,” a term Phil hadn’t heard prior to Funland, and never entirely understood. She wore nothing, sweet swarthy Clarisse, casually naked. She had breasts he could clearly see, and that little mystery fluff. Phil was naked, too, in the dream.

That was the sexiest part. Naked Phil and naked Clarisse looking at each other, smiling; nothing more. Phil woke in the greasy kitchen warmth with the feeling that he’d somehow turned a corner. He went to his shift on the Ferris wheel, which he’d soon break. And the cars would crash giving him an unforgettable toothache.

The Sunday-dressed funeral line inched along. Soon Phil would be at the mourners’ couch where he’d pay quick respects. There was a good feeling here, a comradely vibe, though somber, a sense of being part of Funland again.

The room’s closeness lulled him back to reverie of that long Sunday at Funland. Seeing so much hand clasping as guests and grievers came together, he was reminded of a hand clasp on his merry-go-round. It was unplanned, happening when he saw that the hot young mom who lived on his block had boarded with her two kids. She was hoisting them onto the wild-eyed horses that would rise and fall, accompanied by tunes that started out festive, but grew into a musical water
torture. Since she had kids, she must have done whatever it took to get them. She knew the ins and outs of going all the way, even looking so young, she knew.

Phil started the ride and hopped on from the operator’s area in the center. He walked against the wheel’s motion, cool and swaggering, a wrangler of horses, and riders handed him their sweaty tickets. Phil must have collected sixty or seventy. When he reached the hot young mom, she recognized him from the neighborhood and said, “Hi” as she offered her tickets.

Phil ignored these and instead gave her all the tickets he’d collected, holding her hand firmly for a moment as he made the transfer. Over lilting calliope he whispered, “Here, it’s okay.” The tickets were worth a quarter each depending upon how they were purchased, individually or in streams of twelve that made them somewhat cheaper.

She looked flustered. Phil, taller than she and feeling at home on the moving ride, was uncharacteristically assertive and closed her hand around the bunched tickets. She whispered, “Gee!” Later, as riders streamed off and new ones crowded on, a young balding man called out to Phil, saying, “Hey!” It was the hot mom’s husband, and when Phil looked at him the guy said, “Thanks!” And gave Phil a thumbs up sign.

Phil didn’t know why he’d implicated this young family in dishonesty, a Chicago act of clout. He didn’t talk about it with them after that day and doesn’t remember seeing them again. He recalls that he’d felt momentary pleasure, at the time, in seeing that the young husband was balding. Phil winces at the unkindness of this, although a smile creeps in. Not cool, he thinks, shaking his head in the funeral home.

And what kind of guy would give into the downshirt game? When he operated the little cars, boats or planes, moms would seat their kids and secure the straps. Or, at ride’s end they’d reach in to unstrap. Phil would hover nearby, overseeing the safe loading and unloading. This was a job requirement, entirely innocent.

Yet when the moms bent forward, shirts invariably fell open revealing bras and breasts. Phil couldn’t help this. It was physics. He was obligated to be there so he couldn’t look away. Often, he’d see more than breast tops. He’d see darker, pinker points and this became a guilty pleasure. Sometimes he’d keep a tally. How many nipples, half-nipples, almost-nipples. Phil at sixteen, shameless exploiter of women. No, exploiter’s not fair; admirer’s a better word. But, then and now, he felt—and could it be wrong?—that the women knew what he was doing. Did Clarisse, minutes ago, know? She threw him a look that said “shame,” but this carried a hint of playful “boys-will-be-boys” indulgence.

Phil’s dream of nude Clarisse at the door might have been brought on by the downshirt moms. But Phil didn’t see the connection then, unaccustomed to self-analysis let alone dream analysis. And maybe it wasn’t breasts. There had been the upskirt incident by the little boats. Accidental, but it did give Phil that unforgettable view of a cheeky butt in tight panties as the day faded and neon lights lit up Funland.

Phil had been so tired. This was the time in a twelve-hour shift when ride operators hit the wall. He’d received word from the dead boss to switch to the boats so their operator could break for dinner. Phil arrived, and there was the fence that every other ride operator could hop. He figured he’d do a “false jump.” Anyone could do it. Just put a hand on the rail and swing one leg over, then the other. For a second his crotch would hurt as it took his weight, since no actual jumping was involved. But this worked.
Up on his toes, leg-extended, big kick. This time, instead of getting his foot over the fence, he got it caught under the dress of a young woman who’d picked that moment to cross in front. Phil’s shoe lifted it quickly until her backside was revealed.

She felt this and screamed. Nothing like the noise of cars crashing later on 95th Street, but jarring. She spun, pushing her skirt down, facing Phil, angry but showing a bit of shocked smile. She was with a fit-looking guy whose expression went from confused to dangerous.

Phil said, “Sorry, sorry, sorry!” and waved his arm, a time-out signal. “Sorry, it was an accident!” He explained everything, the silly truth blathered quickly, how he was putting his foot over the fence. “An accident. Sorry.” And he said he was sorry again.

Phil got away with it. Later, leaning against the entry to the little boats he thought about the girl’s butt, curvy on both sides below tight, low-ride panties. And the look on her date’s tough guy face. The surprise in his eyes. That was close.

The boyfriend reminded Phil of a tough guy who’d extorted roller coaster rides the night before. It had been lightly raining and the park was nearly empty. Phil was waiting for the boss to close early. Then he’d turn off the ride and drop its canvas walls. Even though he was paid hourly, closing early was a treat.

But the rain eased and the park was open when a known hardass named Duke showed up with friends. These were gangland guys who carried brass knuckles and switchblades. Duke was their leader, famous across Chicago’s South Side for ferocity in rumbles. He vaulted into the front seat of the empty train (showing a maddening grace that suggested he could easily jump any Funland fence if he’d wanted to) and his friends took seats behind him. Duke waved with dangerous friendliness, saying, “let’s go, c’mon.”

No ticket was offered and Phil didn’t ask. Besides, Funland was empty, the night a washout. Phil pushed the handle, releasing the train. It rolled down a short incline then onto a slope where the undercarriage was grabbed by a clanking chain that pulled it to the top. When the train returned, Phil pulled back on the handle but Duke yelled, “Keep it going!” Phil let them go five times, maybe six. Duke and his buddies didn’t leave until the loudspeaker announced that Funland was closing. Then they ran down the ramp, ungrateful.

As he secured the roll-down canvas, Phil thought he saw his old boss in darkness behind the ticket booth. A cigarette glowed orange there. Phil remembered the man brushing gravel off his back. Maybe the guy had been watching. Maybe he would have stepped in if Duke got rough. Maybe he hadn’t even been there.

Phil’s shift on the little boats ended. Sunday was winding down. The sky over Funland’s neon turned orange and purple. The calliope tape played Elmer’s Tune for what must have been the hundredth time in that twelve-hour day. He took a break in the kitchen where he dreamed the Clarisse dream, then headed to the Ferris wheel, relieving a guy so zonked from spinning lights and pushy riders that he said nothing.

The wheel was at the edge of Funland, rising above 95th Street so traffic could see it spinning, an ad for fun. Riders sat in swaying baskets with bolted doors that were opened from the outside at the loading platform. Phil would stop the wheel by pulling on another of the day’s handles, unlock a basket, let riders out and wave new riders in, take tickets, bolt the basket, grab the handle, move the next car into position and so on until the ride’s population had been turned over. Then he’d let it run before doing it all again.
The spokes of the Ferris wheel were lined with colored neon. One glowed red, the next yellow, green and so on. There was a white one, too, and when it came around, Phil’s face grew ghostly. Then Phil turned green or whatever was next. The wheel kept spinning, the music kept playing, the kids kept coming.

Phil had been running the wheel for an hour. He fought off sleep as the ride ran, and was daydreaming about naked Clarisse again. Suddenly parents were yelling. The door on one of the baskets up high was swinging, banging into metal and glass. He hadn’t locked it. The basket was rocking and still rising. Its door slammed into the neons, splattering them onto Phil, then caught in the wheel’s support structure. Metal locked horns with metal. There was the squeal of machinery. Kids were crying. The motor stopped, reeking of hot ozone.

Then the two cars crashed on 95th street, head-on. As though naked Clarisse, the broken wheel, crying kids and panicking parents all needed a cymbal clash to underscore the chaos they caused in Phil’s tired world. Crowds ran to the fence, bypassing Phil’s broken Ferris wheel for a better spectacle. His young passengers cried more loudly. Their parents saying, “do something, get someone!”

The serious dead owner of Funland and his maintenance guy, a creased ex-Marine named Red pushed into the heart of the problem. They had tools and knew what to do. Phil felt tears coming but held them back. When he read Kipling’s, “If,” years later, the idea of “keeping your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you,” brought this moment back and made him feel somewhat better. He hadn’t cried.

The dead owner of Funland put a hand on Phil’s shoulder and said, “Take off, son.” No anger, just a guy doing a job. All in a day’s work, a night’s work, a long summer Sunday’s work, a life’s work. “Go, it’s okay.” Phil wasn’t fired, just relieved. He moved away and joined the crowd looking over the fence. Phil’s toothache filled the world, his exhausted, neon-lit, buggy, horned, darkening world with accident victims in weeds.

That shift would end but Phil wouldn’t be the same. The tooth needed fixing. He was lessened by last night’s cowardice with Duke. He’d need to figure out a way to get girls like Clarisse into the picture. He’d stop looking at accidents. The blood was sickening. He’d learn to hop a fence. And he’d have to stop thinking of himself as a loser.

Today Phil’s no loser. He might have been one during that summer at Funland. But he soared past those guys. Unlike them, Phil’s life hadn’t been made of lateral moves. He went to college, worked in tall buildings, wore ties, made money, got style. He didn’t get tattooed and doped. Didn’t get beat up and toothless. The only tooth he ever lost had been that wisdom tooth, yanked after the crash twanged a nerve. Phil was a smooth operator now, not a ride operator.

The receiving line petered out, with not many standing behind Phil. Instead of moving on, well-wishers lingered above seated mourners, quietly talking. Phil watched as old ride operators greeted the family. Then Phil was facing the dead boss’s wife, a nice-looking woman who appeared younger than her husband’s 84, though tired.

Phil took her hand as others intruded on the privacy he’d anticipated. This might have thrown the old Phil, but today’s Phil didn’t mind going public as he said the simple words he’d rehearsed during his approach to the couch. He planned just two words in order to keep things short and sweet. These were “my condolences.” Nothing original, just a mature, well-modulated...
expression of heartfelt dignity. Phil looked into her sad eyes, smiled warmly—as he really did have warm memories of her husband—and said, “My congratulations.”

She nodded, having been primed to hear so many perfunctory sentiments. Then Phil’s comment registered. She squinted up at him, her face somewhat twisted into a wordless “huh?” He backed away, smiling. Then the echo of his words hit. “My congratulations.” As he moved away from the couch, away from the wife, curious looks, frowns and smiles followed him.

Did he say that?

“Congratulations” was a word of similar construction to “condolences,” beginning with the same hard “c.” And it was spoken when shaking hands with people in the spotlight. Explainable. But excusable? No way. Phil pivoted toward the wife. He had to set things right. To say, “Sorry! Sorry! I meant My condolences.” He said this under his breath, needing to get it into the world, on the record.

But the crowd moved toward him, against him, into him, as people dispersed to take seats. A eulogist appeared and was tapping a microphone, signaling the beginning of whatever was to come next. The reception line had run its course. Any chance of returning to the widow was lost. This was an irrevocable fact, made clear by the presence of a pony-tailed former ride operator, a guy all width and bulk, who stood in Phil’s way.

This man was shaking his head, grinning slightly as he moved them both toward seats. Phil imagined the big guy getting together with ride operator buddies over shots and beers later that day, laughing about how not to console a widow.

Phil saw that he couldn’t get past this wall of a guy, couldn’t undo his slip of the tongue or anything else, and he just had to keep moving. There was no going back.
Author Notes

Mike Lubow’s short stories have appeared in national magazines, including Playboy, and in prestigious literary journals in America, Ireland, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia. He also writes a popular column called “Got A Minute?” for The Chicago Tribune, and has recently completed a novel.

About the Work

About “Funland Elegy.” Some fiction is make believe, just entertaining lies. Some fiction is hardly fiction at all, because it’s memoir, the truth. Sometimes a story is a combination—partly made-up, partly true. That’s “Funland Elegy.” I was a teenage ride operator and lived through the day described in the story. But some things I made up. And some of the story’s moments came from other incidents in my life. I never said, “Thank ye,” to the boss of Funland. But I did say it—this confounding slip of the tongue—to the CEO of an ad agency where I worked as a nervous copywriter.

You might have noticed that the narrative spins around a bit, introducing partial descriptions of events that will only be fully explained later. And it repeatedly recalls events that were previously described. This gives something of a merry-go-round quality to the story that matches its setting and repetitive din of calliope music.

But that’s enough. Best not over-analyze. A story, especially a lightweight one like this, should not be stripped naked. It’s not fair to its sense of reality. It’s not fair to you. Let it be itself, just a simple moment in a place and time that exists in your mind as you read it. It’s supposed to entertain you.

It entertained me to write it. And since it’s out in the world now, in print, on the internet, I’m pleased to know that experiences I had (or made up) will live on somewhere apart from a corner in my mind. They’ll live on in a corner of your mind. That’s a good reason to write stories and to be grateful when they get published.

Mike Lubow on the Web

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