

Ron Yates

FUNHOUSE

Clay Hannah and Anna Townsend are each walking from the outside in, from the periphery to the center, and they're both pretty pissed off. Strangers to each other, they're like taxpayers to Bethlehem, coming from opposite directions to the same destination. They've led similarly disappointing lives up to this point and are now moving through a time-honored spectacle, the State Fair, in the middle of which resides an oasis of sorts, a place to sit down and grab a corndog or a semi-homemade burger. The booth operated by the ladies of the Order of the Eastern Star is a permanent fixture amid the changing landscape of carnies, hawkers, and ride operators who descend every year to milk the locals. The Eastern Star ladies do their best to provide a safe haven of value amid an ocean of hucksters. Safe haven is what Anna and Clay need as they have each just taken a beating.

This is the fair's last day and judging is complete, judging that's supposed to be impartial. Anna worked hard preparing for the pageant—her figure, hair, makeup, teeth, outfit selections, practicing her talent and answers to those stupid questions—and she scored lower than last year, didn't even place! Clay also worked harder than ever in preparation for the Market Steer competition. Months of tedious effort went into feeding his calf Otto up to the ideal weight, achieving the correct fat-to-muscle ratio, halter breaking the animal, grooming, cleaning, and studying for those stupid questions, only to end up in the bottom half of the rankings. The judges look for certain traits of conformity; that's what it boils down to. Apparently neither Clay nor Anna is conformist enough. At least that's the way it seems to them. They're sure those judges don't know shit. So they walk in frustration, each having left the groups they arrived with.

Anna feels she's spent enough time rehashing the judging flaws with her girlfriends, relatives, and parents. Aunt Eve's encouragements especially were wearing thin. She kept saying, "We'll get 'em next year!" as if she had the vaguest idea how it feels to lose. Anna isn't sure there'll be a next year, another round of fuss and anxiety. She's beginning to gain clarity on the real problem: she doesn't want it badly enough. Was being a pageant girl ever really her idea? She can't remember where the silly notion came from.

Clay is sick of the smell of animals. Sick of the grooming, washing, measuring of feed. Sick of holding the halter and show stick a certain way. Otto is just a dumb steer on his way to slaughter. Why does any of this even matter? Both his dad and Uncle Bob told him it was important, that 4H and prize ribbons could help him get a scholarship. He could study animal husbandry, become a researcher even. Oh wow. He told them he'd rather be riding bulls than showing steers, but they wouldn't hear of it. "Too dangerous," they said. "You gotta think about the future."

A scholarship isn't the answer for everything, Anna thinks as she walks past a bunch of rowdy teens, guys trying to be gansta with their chicks, shoving their way into the long line to ride the Tilt-A-Whirl. She's amazed at their immaturity and the way they're dressed, slutty girls only a few years younger than she. Booty shorts and belly shirts! She doesn't see

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much chance of a scholarship in their future, but they don't care. Nobody does. Having fun and being yourself is what really matters, and not worrying about being judged by someone else's guidelines. She'd rather be an idiot, she decides, like those kids in line laughing and ass-grabbing, than a puppet.

Clay feels like he's on a string being jerked up and down, being made to go through meaningless motions to meet the expectations of others. Rodeo is what he loves, not holding a stick while parading a dumb steer around a ring. He's competed a couple of times in calf roping, riding his cousin's trained horse. He did okay but handling that rope wasn't his thing. Bull riding, that's it! Being able to ride such a crazy, powerful beast—hell, just getting up there and trying to hang on—would show everyone he's tough, brave, and his own man. He knows he can do it if given a chance and a little support from his folks. Why can't they understand?

He couldn't even get Dad, Uncle Bob, Mom, and the rest to stay for the show tonight. They were ready to get Otto and the gear loaded up and head to the house. It's a thirty-five minute drive back to Harrah, and Dad doesn't like pulling the trailer after dark. Clay's staying, though. He told them that. He isn't going to miss the Rowdy Riders NBRCC-sanctioned event. The top riders are touring, competing for points in the national rankings. Afterwards a fireworks show is scheduled and a concert featuring Shaylee Rakestraw, Clint Gritters, Beau Rails, and several other country performers. Some extreme riding and good music will help him get his mind off the bogus livestock judging. He begins texting his friends about meeting at the big arena; hopefully, there'll be some girls.

The talent part is the only pageant aspect Anna cares about, but it doesn't count for much. Stupid judges value things like poise, platform, and evening wear over being able to actually do something. She wanted to perform one of her original songs, but Mom and Aunt Eve discouraged the idea. "Sing something the judges will recognize," they said. "Your personality will sparkle through." Her personality and Carrie Underwood's aren't the same. Anna wonders why they can't get that. They wouldn't even stay for the concert, even though the performers are rising stars. Anna will be there, though, as close to the stage as possible. She admires Shaylee for her songwriting ability and counts her a major influence on her own music. It must be awesome, she thinks, to play and sing for thousands of people who actually appreciate and get what you're doing. She wants to study Shaylee and the other musicians to absorb what they have into her blood. She'll be where they are someday; she just wishes her folks could understand.

Walking past a food trailer with garish signs advertising their toxic products—deep-fried jalapeno-and-cheese stuffed potato cakes, pork sausage nachos, and chili-cheese fries—she thinks about the evening and how it might be salvaged. She decides the bull-riding show before the concert, with all those hunky cowboys, will be fun, and she hopes she can get Ava and some of her other friends to meet her at the arena gate. She finds a corner to lean against, beside the entrance to a busy public restroom, and starts texting. Between messages, she watches the parade of humanity. All shapes and sizes ridiculously dressed, like those People of Walmart videos that show up on Facebook. Fat women in yoga pants. She shakes her head

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in mild disgust. Then she remembers her original destination, the Eastern Star food booth, and realizes she's hungry for something real.

Clay and Anna, although they're coming from different directions, pass through similar scenes as they walk. The livestock areas and the theater are on opposite corners of the expansive fairgrounds. In between are pavilions, exhibition halls, and the Kid Zone. The Eastern Star booth, one of the oldest structures here, is a low-roofed, wood-frame building painted hunter green. The roof extends over a counter and screened porch with stools and a few tables. The signs on the building's exterior, providing the organization's name, symbol, and a list of menu items, are drab compared to the lurid adjacent areas that are filled with purveyors of unwholesome concessions, hawkers, rides, and games. The Eastern Star is positioned between the loud attractions and the promenade that wends through the permanent section of exhibition halls and pavilions.

Anna and Clay could arrive at Eastern Star without passing through the carnival area—referred to as The Midway—but they are drawn there by the bright lights, the odors (fry grease, hot motors, vomit, cigarettes, and sweat), the screams and laughter, and the hum of this place where kids run with cotton candy, boisterous teens laugh and curse, and young men throw money away trying to win stuffed animals for their girlfriends. The frenetic blur of colored lights, the vulgar cacophony of hip-hop and rock and clanging bells and amplified voices blaring from bad speakers, and, woven throughout, the thread of raunchiness hinting that almost anything can happen here—these are the combined forces that draw Anna and Clay and hundreds of others with similar urges to The Midway.

Clay pauses before an elaborate ride called The Vortex, a circular platform that spins riders standing along its circumference around a horizontal plane that by way of a hydraulic arm slowly tilts and elevates to fully vertical. Centripetal force holds the riders in place, screaming in exuberant panic, as the giant wheel turns round and round. The entrance to the ride is shaped like a garish, laughing skull. Speakers in the eye sockets blare popular hip-hop music in an endless loop. A group of black teens gathered around the skull have surrendered themselves to the thumping beat. Brown-skinned girls in tight shorts are twerking as their boyfriends laugh, clap, and sway about them. The guys repeatedly double over in laughter and elbow each other, clapping, and pointing to show their support of the frenzied ass-shaking. Clay lights a Marlboro and watches, fascinated in ways he can't understand. Their ability to abandon themselves to the sensually charged moment produces an envy that's checked by his knowledge of God's disapproval and that none of those kids has ever done a good day's work. He's sure their kind—regardless of color—will break society and are intent on doing so, although he doesn't ponder the specifics.

As they separately draw nearer their shared destination, Anna and Clay pass by, within minutes of each other, the same people and spectacles: rides, games, the Funhouse with its distorting mirrors, and parents of little children struggling with rented strollers shaped like race cars and caterpillars. Some of the families are foreigners, people with brown or yellow skin and dark eyes. They speak in different languages. Some are overdressed in the latest expensive styles. Others wear garments that reflect their cultural heritage. Clay and Anna observe and wonder. What is

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happening? Where are all these people coming from?

Then they're there, at a place that's quintessentially American. A true oasis. They arrive at precisely the same time. Clay remembers his upbringing and holds the screen door open for Anna. They each nod and smile before turning away.

It would be natural and easy for them to sit side by side and strike up a conversation if not for the Muslim family. The woman in her hijab is surrounded by children, and they take up most of the counter, even blocking access to the sliding window where customers place orders. A silent bearded man with black eyes sits at the nearest table, overseeing the exchange of money for food.

The scattered tables are small and wobbly. Anna takes one on the far side. Clay experiences a moment of uncertainty, feeling that he should somehow assert himself. Instead he takes a table on the other side. They resume their texting, glancing up occasionally, while they wait for an opening at the order window.

Anna goes first, deciding to insert herself between the Muslim children, who are talking and gesturing with constrained animation. She orders a chili slaw-dog, fries, and sweet tea. She pays the Eastern Star lady, closes her purse and notices the smallest child, a boy about five, squirming next to her, trying to control his energy. He bumps her leg then looks up and smiles. His eyes are large, lips glistening and full, parting to reveal small white teeth. His dark bangs are shiny over full arching brows. His mother grabs his arm and pulls him away, speaking in sounds that rise sharply from her throat. Anna turns and goes back to her table, feeling a twinge of regret over not interacting.

Clay takes his turn at the window without acknowledging the children who are continually in the way. He pulls out his billfold and pays the lady for his cheeseburger, fries, and sweet tea. Back at his table he resumes texting while he waits for his order.

The three women behind the counter are swamped, and the food is slow in coming. The Muslim children grow more restless, and the mother struggles to keep them in check as the father watches sternly from his table. Finally, a critical mass of energy and ingredients is achieved and the finished orders proliferate at the window. Language problems ensue along with much confusion over who gets what as more customers are coming in, the black teen twerkers and their boisterous boyfriends. Clay and Anna have about had enough. Conversation between them is impossible now. They sit sullenly at their separate tables and choke down their food, the Muslims and teens between them.

Via text messages Clay and his friends agree to meet in just a few minutes at the north gate of the arena. Anna and her friends will be meeting soon also, but at the south gate. She wipes her mouth, sighs, drops her phone into her bag. She stands as Clay is reaching for the door. Again he holds it open, allowing her to pass through first.

He pauses there for a moment, feeling he's forgetting something. He pats for his billfold in his back pocket and finds it in its usual place against his hip. Anna rejoins the crowd on the midway and pauses to look at the

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darkening sky reflecting the unnatural glow of artificial light. She blinks to dispel the image of the little Muslim boy's face. She thinks about the long drive back, after the concert, to her little town of Renner and hopes Ava will ride with her. Clay also notices the dull sky and how it seems to glow dimly like a bedroom ceiling on a moonlit night. Near yet far apart, they walk in the same direction, but they will soon veer off to arrive on time at their separate gates. Separated by the moving throng, Clay Hannah and Anna Townsend are driven by similar desires.