The Wheel of Wasted Souls

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I stepped off the familiar, narrow dirt path and turned right, into the forest. Every evening for years I have walked that path and not once diverged, but tonight as I crossed the half-way point, a strange buzz moved down my spine and I stopped. Then a thought, like an itch, took root in my head and persisted, begging to be scratched.

I turned right and that is how I found the Ferris wheel.

The satisfying crunch of forging my own path through the dense undergrowth put a thrilling pulse in my heart. The air inside the towering Douglas Firs was cold, thick and refreshing. I zipped up my parka and sucked in deep breaths.

For several minutes there was only the crunch crunch of my feet, a few birds saying their good-nights and the buzzing itch in my head to keep going. Then all sound was sucked away, leaving behind only a subtle creak creak creak of metal on metal.

I quickened my pace, followed the sound.

Suddenly, the dense brush broke open into a clearing, unnaturally pristine. A perfect circle of flat, undisturbed dirt and a large Ferris wheel erected in the exact center.

The creaking sound stopped.

I blinked, tilted my head.

Two steps forward.

The monstrous wheel was more plant than amusement. Ivy vines had long ago claimed their territory, forming clumps in the passenger carts and dripping from the metal spokes. I walked forward and put a hand on the platform surrounding the wheel. The instant my skin touched the rusted metal a bizarre, creeping coldness started at the top of my head and traveled down my body. I hissed and jerked away.

The creak creak creak returned, louder now, close. I stumbled back, worried the whole thing might crumble down on top of me, but the wheel was a mountain. I followed the sound around to the other side.

I tripped, fell forward, barely catching myself with my hands. With a grunt I rolled over and sat up. There, embedded in the dirt, was the corner of a metal sign. I crawled to it and yanked it from the ground. Brushed away the dirt.

The Wheel of Wasted Souls.

I looked from the sign to the wheel, looming over my head. I ran my fingers over the moist indentations of the words and again a bleak, cold feeling moved around inside me, an eel in a cave.

I tossed the sign aside and stood, brushing dust from my pants. My head snapped up at movement in the trees, my heart punched my ribs. I squinted into the almost-dark night. The shadow of a black figure, tall and wide, moved soundlessly among the trees.

My lungs stalled. The figure stopped just inside the tree line, hidden in shadows, a barely-there phantom. My stomach knotted and a terrifying thought sprinted across my frantic mind.

Stay. Climb into the wheel and stay.

A strangled gasp escaped my lips.

The creaking grew unbearably loud.

I ran.

My heart was still beating uncomfortably and chest oddly tight when I ducked into the safety of my small apartment. I hurried into the kitchen, flipped on the light and filled a tall glass with cold water. I gulped it down greedily, rinsing away the acrid taste of fear. I filled the glass a second time.

Eventually my breathing slowed, my heart calmed, but still fear moved under my skin, like worms. My mind played the images of the clearing over and over, trying to form them into some semblance of sanity, but there was no standard mold.

I turned to place the glass in the sink, but stopped short when I saw my shadow. Words, ghostly white, written on the black tile floor, like chalk on a chalkboard. They said:

COME BACK.

My throat closed. The words were unmistakable, bright and pulsing with an otherworldly glow, printed on my shadow. I stared, waiting for it to disappear, for my mind to right itself.

Instead the words morphed into a shadowy image of the Ferris wheel.

I squeaked out a scream and pressed my eyes shut.

After a slow breath I opened them again to a blank shadow. I exhaled and put a hand to my chest, asking my heart to slow. I took a few steps toward my room. A flash of white. It read:

YOUR CART AWAITS.

The words dripped away like rain down a window and then my shadow showed me one more image, flickering on the black floor, a silent horror film: my hand around a hot mug of tea, another hand reaching out to take it.

I wanted to scream, over and over, but instead I whimpered and fled into my room.

Two powerful sleeping pills were not enough to keep away the music.

Daa, daa, daa, daa, da, da, da, daa, da, da, da.

I sat up in bed, my body painfully tense. The carnival calliope music floated all around me: airy, wobbly and haunting. It's breathy organ tones danced and swayed from one side of the room to the other. A thick, looming shadow in the corner of the room shifted.

In one quick movement I flipped on the bedside lamp. I was alone. The music continued. I put my hands over my ears, hot tears forming in the corners of my eyes, and my throat burning as I tried to hold them back.

Daa, daa, daa, daa, da, da, da, daa, da, da, da.

The calliope played louder, beating against my skull and pulsing inside my gut. Amid the breathy tones I heard a whisper, deep and resonating, "We are waiting."

I jerked at the words, shook my head, pressed my hands harder against my ears.

"Come."

The music followed me into my car, tinkling notes of torture. I drove fast, then faster, racing through the nighttime streets. Control slipped away as the sounds drove deeper into my mind. Sobs hiccuped in my chest.

I pulled into the parking lot at the edge of the forest, threw myself out of the car and ran down the path. Moments later I was standing at the edge of the clearing, mouth open, heart punishing my chest and bare feet bloody and cold-numb.

I leaned against the trunk of a tree and watched the Ferris wheel turn, bright and alive. The vines had disappeared and blinking lights, lining every spoke and the circumference, sent shards of color against the trees. The rust was also gone, replaced by glossy white paint, luminescent in the night. And the calliope music was vibrant, fast and bouncing on the air like bubbles.

My mouth grew dry from hanging open. I closed it and tried to swallow, but choked when I noticed the people. Each cart held one lone passenger, staring forward, gripping the safety rail with both hands. I blinked, squinted. Each face was blank, the cheeks sunken, sallow. The eyes vacant.

A wave of nausea pulled at my stomach.

Stay. Climb into the wheel and stay with us. I shuddered at the unwanted thought, ice in my blood.

The wheel made one turn.

I inhaled a shaky breath and started to back away when a figure came around the wheel. "Hello," he said, his voice booming and unbelievably deep. "So glad you could come. We've been waiting."

I froze.

The dark man was tall, unnervingly tall, and his thick, muscular arms hung at his sides like slabs of meat. His bald head was polished to a high sheen and reflected the colored light. Clothed all in black, he stood like a shard of the night.

But all his extraordinary features paled in comparison to his face. In place of eyes, two round mirrors, the size of Mason jar lids, were embedded into his skin. Below the grotesque mirrors was a long nose and a mouth, smiling, the teeth as glossy white as the wheel.

"Come over," he said, beckoning with his skillet-sized hand. I moved forward, involuntarily, pulled by the lilting timbre of his unnaturally deep voice. I stopped in front of him, my neck folded back to see his face. His mirror-eyes shone down, reflecting my pale, terrified face back at me.

"Welcome," he boomed, the word vibrating in my quivery bones, "to the Wheel of Wasted Souls." He turned to the wheel and beamed with pride. The small sign gleamed from a wooden plaque mounted on the platform. "Your cart is ready."

"What?" I fumbled out, my voice wavering. My wide eyes turned to the wheel.

"Yes, indeed. Right here." He waved his thick arm and a cart appeared on the wheel, empty and waiting. The ride came to a silent halt, the expectant cart in place by the platform. The wheel man stepped to a set of stairs. The handrails boasted more lights, blinking upwards, inviting me to climb.

I looked at the giant man and then to the cart. It swung gently in its place, creak creak creak. I took a small step back. I turned to run, but that skillet-hand seized my shoulder.

He spun me around and leaned down, bent almost in half, his face hovering over mine. I stared into his mirror-eyes and my stomach clenched, heaved over. "So sorry, but once you have reserved your cart you cannot leave. Now please, get in. The others are eager to start the ride again."

"But, I didn't…"

He grinned. "Oh, but you did." He lifted a hand. Light burst out of his palm, angled toward me. He gestured to the ground. I turned, my neck stiff, and looked down at my shadow. "Your reservation," he whispered ominously.

The images flickered to life on the dirt, in grays and black, each one a splinter of pain wedged into my heart. This is what I saw:

The large beautiful kitchen. Me grinding a pill to powder and then carefully mixing it into a cup of hot tea. My hand giving the tea to another, her naive smile as she accepted it. Me slipping into her room, quietly, purposefully. Standing over her unconscious form. The razor blade in my hand sliding across the soft flesh of her arms, next to the group of white scars. Washing blood from my fingertips. Her face, wide and horrified, mouth screwed open in wretched pleas for help as they took her into the facility. The doctors somberly shaking their heads. My own contradictory smile as the doors closed behind her.

Then blackness.

Glacial tears moved down my cheeks and something inside me, shriveled and rank, came to the surface. I bent over, vomited. The man waited until my stomach was empty and then turned me to the stairs. "Up you go," he said with sadistic cheer. The lights blinked successively upward. My body heavy, unresponsive. "Up, up, up," he encouraged.

I put one foot on the stairs and then two and then I was standing on the platform.

"Here we are. Custom made for you. Very nice, don't you think?" The wheelman opened the tiny door to the cart - my cart. "Have a seat."

I looked at his expectant mirror-eyes. I saw me.

"Everyone is waiting."

I looked up and twelve blank, sunken faces haltingly turned to stare at me. Impatient. Accusing. Knowing.

Numbly I stepped into the cart.

I sat.

I put my hands on the rail.

Two ivy vines slithered out from the bottom of the cart and encircled my wrists, digging into my skin. I gasped, my heart pumping loud enough to hear the valves sucking shut. I turned to the man and said with pathetic desperation, "I can fix it."

His grin grew into a wicked grimace. "Hush now," he crooned in a sugar-sweet tone. I tried to pull my hands from the pinching vines. "Oh, oh. Don't struggle. You'll rock the cart."

I stopped.

"Good girl. Now," he stepped back and waved his hand, "enjoy the ride!"

The wheel jerked to a start and all the carts swung in the air, creaking in unison. My body grew cold, bitterly cold.

I stared forward.

The lights blinked brighter.

The music grew louder.

Daa, daa, daa, daa, da, da, da, daa, da, da, da.