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Opening extract from

The Last Soldier

Written by

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For Clara in the future

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CHAPTER 1

The Carnival Arrives

It was the hottest day of the summer when Captain Tom Peacock's American Amazements rolled into town. But it was 1922 and every day that year was hotter than the Devil's own frying pan.

Me and Joe felt like sizzling, spitting sausages just about ready to split our skins. We were swimming in the slow river out behind the old Mitchum farm. The water there is deep and cool. The river banks are steep and the trees on the farm side are tall, wild and shady. It was a good place to fish for crawdaddies – that's what we called crayfish in these parts. Joe reckoned they were easy to catch at this spot. I guess they liked the shade too.

This day was too hot even to fish and so we'd spent all morning just lolling and bickering. Joe

wouldn't stop on about how drop-dead bored he was. But he perked right up when he saw the carnival convoy trundling along the road.

"Look, Wade," he shouted. "Will you just look at that?"

The long line of trucks kicked up dust clouds as they rolled by. They were heading for the Mitchums' spare field. Even with all that dust we could see the strings of coloured bulbs ready to be lit. The bright canvas ready to be unfurled. And the bits and pieces ready to become whizzing, spinning rides. That line of trucks was a promise of excitement and music and crowds and laughter. Things our one-horse East Texas town of Lansdale never got to see much of.

Me and Joe stood and gawped.

"Now that's what I call a proper birthday present," Joe said at last. It was his 15th birthday that day. "Ferris wheel, ghost train, whirligig." He counted them off on his fingers in the order he was going to enjoy them. He saved the best for last.

"The Museum of Marvels too," I said. "I gotta see that again."

Joe frowned at me. "Come on, Wade," he said. "That ain't even a thing. Is it?"

"Last time it was," I said. "Don't you remember? Didn't I tell you how scary it was? There was a wolfman they'd hunted and a mermaid they'd caught. They even had a baby dragon too. You must remember."

Joe rolled his eyes at me. The older he got, the more he did that.

"None of them's real," he said. "It's just another con. That baby dragon? Reckon it was probably some ugly old alligator. They just stuffed it and stuck painted chicken wings on its back. Everybody knows there's no such thing as a dragon. Or a wolfman or a mermaid." He smirked at me. "Everyone old enough knows."

I didn't care what Joe said. They'd looked real and true to me. That wolfman with his clawed fingers and snarling teeth. Scariest thing I'd ever seen. And the half-naked mermaid with her hair like tumbling seaweed. I'd had dreams about her.

"You reckon Mama will let us go?" I said to Joe.

Joe's face fell at the thought she might not. "Why shouldn't she?" he said. "Why say that, Wade? It's my birthday, she has to." He splashed at the river, angry like.

"It'll cost money," I said. "And Mama already got you your new shoes." Truth is, I was jealous of my brother's new shoes.

"She didn't buy them," Joe said. "They used to be Pa's." And as he said it, his skinny chest puffed out and his sun-smacked cheeks turned red with pride. For him, the fact they'd been our pa's shoes made them worth more than any money.

They were Sunday-best shoes, not walking shoes, but Joe had wanted to wear them today no matter what. They must have baked his feet, but he'd not complained once as we'd walked here.

I hoped the shoes would be mine too one day, if Joe's feet got too big for them. I'd never had a real pair of shoes. Only the sandals Mama made me from worn-out tyres.

Around these parts it proved how grown-up you were if you had your own pair of proper

shoes. I already reckoned I was grown-up enough, but because Joe was the eldest he'd got Pa's old shoes first. That's why I was trying to make him see that he could save wearing the shoes out. I'd told him he should keep them for special. That way they might still be in a half-decent state when they got passed down my way. I knew a brand-new pair of shoes just for me was probably the biggest day-dream of all.

Now the shoes were up in the grass on the bank, staying dry with our clothes.

We stood with the water up to our middles and counted as many as a dozen trucks in the carnival convoy. A handful of cars too. The long line of them stretched all along the old road. Right at the back there was a clown on a motorbike that coughed and puttered along. He wore pants with white, green and blue stripes, and shoes that were as long and flat as boat paddles. His big nose was tomato red, tomato round. He wobbled and weaved in and out of the haze of dust.

I could hear someone laughing. At first I thought it was in my head, like I was looking

forward to the carnival so much I was imagining it. I could get like that sometimes. Mama called me a day-dreamer, and she was right. It was like my imagination was too big for its boots sometimes. But the laughing I could hear was real. And it wasn't fun neither, but sharp and nasty.

When I saw who it was, I wished I was dreaming. Joe swore when he saw them too.

Caleb Cubb was the nastiest piece of work in Lansdale, and he was standing on the river bank a little upstream from us. He had his friend Sonny Collins with him. Sonny was the second nastiest piece of work in Lansdale. The two of them were standing side by side and I was so shocked at what they were doing that my mouth swung open wider than a cellar door.

Joe swore again.

Caleb and Sonny were pissing into the river. Honest to God they were! They stood with their peckers in their hands and their backs bent, and their yellow piss made a big arc right out into the river.

It took me and Joe two full seconds to think about how they were upstream. And us downstream.

We splashed and scrambled for the bank.