

The Mark

By Alicia Cole

It's dark at night. We tie down, lash the ropes good and tight. No one messes with our set-up.

Sometimes, though, I wake up and imagine the parking lot: our tents, tied proper but still visible. Our tents stuffed with blow-up prizes and soft toys. Our tents holding strong against the weather but not against the occasional prowler.

Our tents empty.

I wake up and breathe hard and stare at the ceiling. I breathe hard until I can think. What fool would steal a bunch of toys, and cheap ones at that?

When I see the parking lot full, like we left it, I breathe easier.

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Children never notice the prizes are cheap. They never will.

I like the cheap little things, though, their little stitched mouths and smooshed faces, the hard styrofoam of the extra-large prizes. The small tchotchkes that you put on your fingers or wirligig around the room.

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It's in Topeka my night terrors are proven real. It's in Topeka we have the first theft.

The front tent is sliced open and they've taken a whole line of blow-ups: the blue monkeys, the happy clowns, several cartoon characters, and half the giant bats. We have spare, of course; a quick blow up in the back and we'll be ready to run.

We'll have to duct tape the tent, though, with the black industrial kind. Another expense.

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In Lawrence, it's the same.

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In Kansas City, I wonder if it's just Kansas.

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In Topeka, I spent our day off visiting Potwin Place, eating Kansas-style barbecue.

Potwin was beautiful. And strange, with just a hint of something else lurking around each corner. But that's the story and mystery of Potwin. Supposedly, there's a ghost.

I thought about inviting him to the carnival.

It's difficult to invite a ghost.

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It turns out it wasn't necessary.

It was just like catching rats.

I mulled it over through Lawrence, but by Kansas City we'd lost too many blue monkeys, and pink ones also.

I was tired of blowing up new rubber bats. And I was particularly tired of black industrial duct tape.

The small stuffies were the easiest. I filled them, sewed them up with a quick needle and thread, rubbed a bit in their fur. Left a tub in each tent, coated each handle and rim.

Did a quick scrub on the tent's surface.

I coated the ropes next, just in case. I'm always good for a tie down.

Then, we closed for a few days.

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It's nice having more than one day off. Never happens in the busy season.

I sat in my hotel room and watched the ceiling and waited.

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With the carnival closed, he hit us four nights straight.

Wiped out almost everything from the tents.

But, the pesticide worked.

They brought a man to the hospital three days after we reopened, three days after I scoured everything clean.

We'd picked up two local concession stand workers; one of them knew a nurse in the hospital, tipped me off.

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The police are good for some things.

They never caught him before, but they found the merchandise after, hauled it back to me in industrial garbage bags, the tubs in tow.

It gave me pause while I dumped the plush and washed out the tubs, cleaned off the inflatables. What if he'd sold them before he got sick?

It gave me pause, just like my night terrors, my thoughts of the police hopefully washing their hands.

It gave me pause.

I'm not good for some things either.

Thankfully, no one got sick.

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What didn't give me pause was imagining him peeling off his gloves with his teeth or rubbing a

clean hand against a soiled one. I imagined him stuffing those big black bags, lifting fistful after fistful of poisoned plush. I imagined him wiping his mouth, eating fried chicken, chewing his nails.

Laying low for three days with his skin and eyes getting tore up, cheaper than any prize.

I suppose it's painful, fertilizer poisoning, the way it eats at your insides.

Heard it gives you seizures.

I don't much care.

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Only later did I notice strange things like the inflatables moving by themselves or the way the children's eyes would flare wild when I'd hand them a certain toy.

I suppose it's difficult to handle, fertilizer poisoning.

I suppose it's difficult to uninvite a ghost.

THE END