

## ***In the communion of freaks:***

*Recalling a shameful episode of boyhood voyeurism at the Bill Lynch sideshow (2002):*

I was predictably stuck again this afternoon in the traffic jam on East Hastings. Thanks to the Pacific National Exhibition—until after Labour Day Weekend there will be at least an extra half hour of dead time in the commute.

Just as yesterday, I fumed as each wave of pedestrians surged through the crosswalk towards the PNE gates. Why such eagerness for Crown and Anchor, Miracle Knives and super-dogs (both the dancing and the edible varieties)? No wonder so many colleagues—especially the residents of the tony west side—snigger about the excitement of the “yahoos from Surrey” over the annual event.

It was in that thought that I glanced over at the jammed right curb where a Sunshine bus was unloading. Maybe a little empathy was in order. Who would deny the less fortunate an outing many look forward to as much as Christmas? At the same time across the street in the Playland line up, hopping kids were pulling on parents’ arms... Lest I forget my own thrill in the ‘midway’ forty years ago? Swiveling back to the unmoving line of cars ahead, I recalled:

Going to the Fredericton Exhibition on Labour Day was an annual event that softened the gloom of the end of summer and return to school. The excitement was not in the obligatory tour of the agricultural hall with my parents but in the couple of hours thereafter. That was when I was when I was freed with a handful of quarters to partake of the Bill Lynch Show, as the midway was eponymously branded.

In early adolescence, the midway was a pre-cannabis assault on the senses. Scents of sawdust, cotton candy and hotdogs were mingled with megaphone barks and screams from the rides. Every megaphoned tout tantalized: Should I take a chance for a prize with throwing balls, tossing rings or shooting an air rifle? Was a candy apple worth missing a ride? Was I too old for the Crazy Fun House of Mirrors? Had I worked up the nerve to ride the Bullet? Too soon, I was down to my last two quarters. Still, I kept circling—flying high amid Bill Lynch’s gaudy emporium...

In a glance towards the PNE rollercoaster, the most unforgettable attraction of the Fredericton Exhibition sprang to mind: the ‘Freak Show’:

The Bill Lynch line up included a skeleton boy, an alligator man and a dog-faced woman—at least as depicted in the lurid banner hung just inside the fairgrounds entrance gate. It wasn’t until I turned fourteen that I made the bid to pass for sixteen, the supposed age-restriction. The special attraction that year was Ronny and Donny, billed as “world famous” Siamese twins.

Although I looked young for my age, a yawning girl at the entrance took my fifty cents without looking. Upon entering the large tent, the eagerness for titillation was quickly disappointed. The ‘shrunken head’ on a pedestal, turned out to be a ceramic doll. Then there was the poor fellow in

green tights who stood with folded arms at one corner under the ‘Alligator Man’ sign’. He just looked to be severely afflicted with acne.

Meanwhile, there were additional charges of twenty-five cents each to view other attractions (e.g. the two-headed baby) sectioned off around the tent. The suckers who did pay for the extras just peeked behind the curtains for a few seconds and stepped back shaking heads. In following the arrows towards the main attraction, I already felt gyped. Even if the Siamese twins were fakes, I thought, at least they were included in the price of admission.

Under a tarp just outside the rear exit of the tent was a house trailer parked sideways. On the facing side of the trailer was a wide picture window before which leaned a knot of spectators. Hesitating by the roped-off side of the trailer, I read the inscription on the posted sign: ‘*Respect the twins’ privacy. They cannot see you from inside but do not talk or knock on the window!*’

When a man stepped aside with a solemn nod, I took a turn at the window. On the far end of the room was a sofa and in front of it a rug upon which sat two boys, wearing baseball caps: one red one blue. Their heads were turned, seemingly watching a TV out of sight across the room. The twins looked to be about my own age. They were dressed in separate pants but their baggy tee-shirt, partially hitched up, revealed a flabby single stomach.

In the moment I stood there awkwardly, the twins scuttled across the floor, apparently to adjust the TV. After they crawled back to the sofa, both heads suddenly turned towards the window. Was it really a one-way mirror or *were they looking at us?*

In an instant of panic, I looked around at my fellow spectators. The man beside me caught my eye then glanced towards my right sleeve. In his smile I bolted towards the exit arrows, justly shamed...

With the traffic finally inching up the hill towards Boundary Rd., I counted a few breaths.

Hard to believe that until a generation ago almost every carnival or summer fair across North America featured ‘Freak Shows’. While banned today—the primal voyeuristic fascination with unusual bodies has just been rechanneled through more diverse media...

Indeed, in flipping TV channels just a few months ago, I was jarringly reintroduced to Ronny and Donny. Featured in a documentary on ‘Special People,’ they were shown in their living room in Ohio, sipping soda and watching TV. Now retired, they could have been any pair of porky middle-aged men except for their sharing from waist to sternum—a common body.

“*Being put on exhibition as a medical curiosity might seem shocking today,*” intoned the voice-over, “*but the brothers are proud of their show-biz career and the money that it brought in...*”

In the same segment, the twins’ ‘normal’ brother spoke of the pair’s distinct and endearing personalities. As teens they had once had a fist fight. Yet now in middle age they were serene and grateful for their longevity. In adding the detail of their birth year (in jarring coincidence—

the same as mine) he said that his brothers would likely soon become the world's longer surviving conjoined twins...

I looked back into the rear-view mirror at the flags waving over Playland. In a shudder, it occurred that I should have immediately changed the channel. Instead, I ogled and then felt guilty for it: although not nearly as much as thirty-five years ago...

In passing Boundary Rd., the line of traffic finally began speeding up. Tomorrow, I pledged, more patience *will* be summoned for the delay at the PNE...

*2002, August*

