

## ORANGE CRUSH

It sounded funny the way Emily's mom told it, in her Yankee accent. One of the kids in her class kept asking if she had seen the "far."

"What far?"

"The far, out in Gray."

"A fire? What burned?"

"No, the far, the FAR! The AppalATCHian Far!"

Every year, during what would once have been called Indian summer, the Appalachian Fair came to Gray, and all the people from six counties around had to show up, though at most half of them wanted to. The younger half.

Emily was not prepared for Mom's suggestion that she take cousin Carson along to the fair, since Carson wanted to go real bad. Carson was only twelve, five years younger than Emily. And while five years wasn't much of a difference between, say, Mom and Dad's ages, the five years between twelve and seventeen were a lifetime.

"I don't want to go with Carson! Can't she go with somebody her own age?"

"She doesn't know anybody here," Mom said. "I thought this would be a good way for you to get to go."

Emily heard what Mom wasn't saying: that she, not Carson, had trouble finding friends her own age. And she loved the fair. But she'd never met Carson; they weren't

really related. One of Mom's cousins from up north had married Carson's mom, who was from Canada. Emily had heard the little girl even spoke French. She would have nothing to say to her, even in English.

Then Mom said, "Carson is afraid of heights."

That's when Emily knew she would have to go. Because she didn't care for heights either. Not the roller coaster heights you were supposed to take pleasure from. Especially not those nasty take-'em-down set-'em-up rides like the fair had. She liked to experience the fair through all her senses: the warm serenity of cows, glassblowing, all those nerdy displays of historical craft you sure couldn't find in the mall.

If Carson needed an escort to keep her off the rides, that would be okay. And would be an excuse for Emily if anyone should wonder why she, herself, was not on the Vomit Comet.

"All right, Mom. I'll take her on Saturday."

"Good. I already told Aunt Lucie that you'd drive."

Aunt Lucie came to the door at 10 A.M. on Saturday, dressed up nicer than most people were for weddings or funerals. She wore a bright white, sleeveless dress, which made her skin look more tan, and white sandals. Emily wanted to doff her hat, only she wasn't wearing a hat, since Mom wouldn't let her "dress like a boy." She stood up instead.

"So nice of you to take Carson along." Aunt Lucie made it sound like Emily's idea and Emily wasn't sure she liked that, but as with most things, she didn't have a choice, since she still lived at home. "She's already in the car."

“My car?” This Emily had to attend to right away. Not that she owned the car, but it was the one she drove. She couldn’t believe a twelve-year-old she wasn’t really related to was out there climbing all over it.

The girl in the passenger seat had a couple of years left to grow, but Emily could see she already looked quite a bit like Aunt Lucie—dark hair and a complexion that would tan. Nobody in Emily’s family looked like that.

“You’re Emily, right?” Carson said. “I’m so excited. I’ve never been to a fair. All those animals.”

“Yeah, okay.” Emily started the car, making sure, because Mom would ask, that Carson had her seat belt on. It had been five years since she was Carson’s age and in those years, she’d learned not to show excitement.

Gray was a good half hour’s drive and Carson never shut up once. “I can’t wait to be thirteen. When you’re twelve, everybody still thinks you’re a little kid.” She was, though Emily wasn’t about to say so. “But when you’re thirteen, you can just sit back and relax.”

Where did she get this shit? Turning thirteen was the worst single thing that had ever happened to Emily. She was careful not to look at Carson, since feigning interest would interfere with her driving.

“How old are you?” Carson said.

“Seventeen.” Emily attempted a James Dean sneer.

“I bet you can’t wait to be eighteen!” Carson said, and though it was just a counting fixation this startled Emily, because it was also true. At eighteen she would graduate. Move away. She could wear hats.

She wanted to ask where Aunt Lucie had gotten a name like Carson, but what if it had been Carson's dad's idea? That might make her sad, and Emily couldn't stand girls crying. They made her head hurt.

When they got to the fair it was already crowded, and despite the fact that it was uncool, Emily was afraid of losing Carson in the crowd, so she pulled her close. Carson didn't seem to mind being tugged along by a scowling teenager who was a head taller than she was, and had hacked off her own hair. Maybe Emily shouldn't worry so much about looking cool. It was a lost cause anyway.

They started on the bumper cars. Emily had liked these since before she could drive a real car, and that was how she drove them now—not crashing into other cars and getting jammed up, but skillfully and at great speed maneuvering past them, sometimes spinning the wheel with one hand and shooting backwards. Carson pressed close to her side, emitting what in young girls was called a giggle, but which from Carson was deeper and less annoying.

After they'd had their fill of activities that could disrupt digestion—all on the ground—Emily suggested lunch. She meant the sandwiches Mom had packed; their family never bought or ate overpriced junk food. But Carson had five dollars she said Aunt Lucie had given her for lunch. Emily was prepared to swallow her pride along with her peanut butter and let Carson buy her own lunch, but Carson said, "Let's just buy drinks, super large. Orange Crush. I love Orange Crush; we never have it at home."

So Emily stood in line and exchanged five dollars' worth of tickets for two obscene thirty-two-ounce souvenir cups of Orange Crush.

They toured the displays of cattle, saw a summer squash the size of Emily's car, or so Carson said. Carson was fascinated by the cows, their gentle eyes and grassy breath. For Emily, used to seeing cows all her life just out the window, it was odd to find everything about her region regarded as exotic, like a giant squash.

At the shooting gallery Carson proved a natural, knocking over ten ducks in under thirty seconds to win an enormous cowboy hat. She plunked it on Emily's head. Emily removed it reflexively, then felt Carson's eyes on her, and flashed on her instinct to doff her hat to an older woman. She shrugged, grinned, put it back on.

It was getting on towards evening when Emily suggested they had seen just about everything and ought to think about leaving. Carson said, "I think I'd like to try the Ferris wheel."

Emily didn't think so. It was a rickety, rusty contraption and the cars were liable to swing, never mind your legs just dangling loose out there.

"Please, Emily. I won't be scared, but you have to go with me."

"All right."

They swapped their last tickets and started up. When they stopped for the first time close to the top, Carson leaned in and said, in a small voice, "Okay, I guess I am scared of heights."

That was all it took to make Emily almost panic. She didn't want to be up there in the first place. Above them, young boys who had just learned to cuss rocked their car wildly back and forth, shouting "Assholes!" to the wind. Emily took Carson's hand, to steady them both.

She smiled to reassure her young cousin, who smiled back, bravely. In between that stop and the top of the wheel, Emily didn't notice the distance to the earth below. What she saw in those twelve-year-old eyes was a look she recognized. It could mean "I want to be you," or it could mean "I want to grow up to marry you." It might mean that in five years, or ten, Carson would take up the guitar, or vegetarianism, or some activist cause; grow her hair out, or maybe shave it off. It could mean all these things or none of them.

All this lay ahead, Emily thought, as the wheel creaked once again and they began their descent. Carson let go of her hand and pointed out over the grounds of the fair, which would be packed up and gone after Labor Day, like Aunt Lucie's white clothes.

That was the thing about being twelve. All the future lay before Carson. She was right.