

I first lay eyes on her the year I started working with the carnies.

During the winter months, I surfed, went to school and took writing classes on the mainland, never having the time to hold a part-time job as stable as other kids on the island. The money I received for birthdays or Christmas, from my parents for doing chores or mowing the neighbour's lawn, would see me through the year. Never have I been the materialistic type; my grandfather handcrafted surfboards along the strip since he gave up the water, and I have only ever surfed with one made by him.

During the summer the carnival is in town. I say that like they never are. It's locally owned and only locals are welcome. Our community likes to gatekeep itself; we don't think mainlanders could appreciate the island in the way we do. It was an ideology that had been passed down by generations, unavoidable like the sandflies on the beach. About three years ago I asked to join the carnies. Around here, they weren't too bad, and most of them had teeth which was also a bonus. Every night for three months I helped run the place. I jumped from one attraction to the other whenever suited. I sold tickets at booths when the place filled up. I stole fairy floss from the food trucks when no one was looking. I plastered flyers all over town to tell people we were there. At 10 bucks an hour, I was making \$50 a night, so they paid me pretty well considering they wanted to hire me for free. They liked me, the carnies, and asked me to come back the following year. Usually, they couldn't care less about who runs the ticket boxes and rides, but they wanted me to come back.

The first year, I was working ticket boxes from ride to ride. At around 10 the place started to die until she stepped into the line before me. At first, I looked straight past her; her hair was dark, almost black, and cascaded just below her shoulders, creating an illusion of her blending into the darkness. She wasn't a local, it was easy to tell. Here, we were all fair-skinned and fair-haired, and she was the complete opposite. I assumed she sat on the border, where the island meets the mainland. People like her were not too often welcome here.

As she approached the box, I felt my palms go sweaty.

'Hi!' She greeted me before I could do the same. 'I wanted to ask, can we purchase tickets for the ride here? I really don't want to go back to the front.'

For any other person, I would have said no, but the somewhat desperation swimming in her eyes made me say yes. She waved over a few extras and I couldn't turn her away from the ride. The next night I caught no sight of her, and nor did I the night after. Her image remained engrained in my mind, as I redrew her features from the darkness every time I closed my eyes.

The following year the carnies taught me how to run and operate the machines. One late evening, I sat at Time Warp and I saw her again. Her hair was longer, and her skin was not as tan as the year before. She stood at the back of the line, and one of my crewmates noticed me watching her. ‘She’s not from here,’ he remarked. I nodded my head and he scoffed. Slowly, the line crept forward.

It felt like an eternity.

‘Hi. I promise I won’t ask to buy tickets here this time.’

‘That’s okay, I would have let you anyway,’ I had so much doubt that she would have forgotten me. She smiled slightly and turned away. I did the same and came face to face with my crewmate.

‘Watch it,’ he said. ‘Borders aren’t welcome.’ I nodded but disregarded his statement; it wasn’t worth the dirt we operated on. I began spending as much time as I could down the main beach and street, thinking it was possible to see her again, but I only ever saw her at the carnival.

So, I waited another year.

I was back at the Time Warp and she was back in the line. She wasn’t alone, but with a couple of locals. Unable to blend in, she still stood out amongst the blond-haired and blue-eyed islanders. She’d cut off her hair so it rested just below her chin, and the strands were lighter than the last time we’d crossed paths. She was a few people behind the front of the line but leant to the side to share a smile and wave at me.

She remembered.

It continued to baffle me in the most innocent of ways. How she had remembered my face. I never considered myself to have memorable features, but her smiles upon recognising me had me think differently.

The following night, I sat at the hotel along the Esplanade with my grandfather, sharing a bowl of oysters and my stories of late. ‘A love story,’ he had remarked, ‘I didn’t think you’d know what that is. Do you know what it is?’

I glanced over towards the beach, at the waves engulfing the sand. Love to me had always been the kiss of salt wind as the water swirled around my board. It had always been the feeling of my pen gliding across the paper page, my thoughts that lay dormant finally coming to life. I had never considered that love could be another person, that wasn’t in the shape of what I already knew.

‘I’m not sure I know what it is,’ I finally told him. ‘But I think that’s my favourite part.’

A few days later she returned, this time by herself. She was in line for Time Warp but didn't have a ticket.

'Did you need to buy a ticket again?' I teased. She laughed and motioned to the side of the ticket box. I opened the side window and she leant forward, resting her arms on the ledge. Momentarily our elbows collided as they fought for space; my skin pricked and goosebumps formed all over.

Her touch was electrifying.

'I just thought I'd say hello. My friends are over at the Galactica Circuit.'

I cocked my head to the side. 'You don't want to join them?'

She scrunched up her nose. 'Motion sickness.'

'Ah. Right.' There was a moment of silence, but it was anything but awkward.

'So,' I started, running my fingers along the outline of the window, 'you seem to be enjoying the carnival a lot.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Second time I've seen you here this summer.'

'Are you keeping tabs on me?'

'I'm trying not to.'

Silence fell again.

'I like your hair,' I told her, 'Short hair suits you.'

She scrunched her nose again - a trait I began to dote on - and pushed her hair back. 'It gets annoying, but it's easier to tame in the summer. Doesn't get in my face when I'm swimming.'

I nodded as if I understood.

'Are you just here for your friends?'

She laughed, and it was as radiant as I had expected it to be. 'You ask a lot of questions,' she told me. 'But I'm here for something else.'

She didn't come back the next night.

Or the night after.

Or the night after that.

Still, I waited. And it was worthwhile.

The last night we were open, she came back. It was the last night of summer, and we were fifteen minutes from closing. The rides were being turned off. The food vans were growing cold. I was completely indulged in my current piece of work when I heard a knock on the glass. I glanced up and found her smiling at me; infectious, heart-pumping. My own muse before me, as if I had conjured her from the ink at my fingertips. I dropped my pen and slid open the window to greet her, asking how she was, her plans for the night, if she was here with anyone else. This time, she was completely alone.

A soft, neon glow highlighted the side of her face from the lights on the ride to the left of the ticket booth. She wasn't wearing makeup, maybe a bit of lipstick. I wanted to wrap one of her curls between my fingers, trace the sun freckles on her cheekbones.

The crackle of a speaker startled us out of our gaze. The final call for the carnival rides was announced, and I found myself exiting the ticket booth and grabbing her hand. I pulled her behind the trailer lot, my fingertips brushing her wrist, and gently positioned her behind one of the cars by her hips. I pressed my lips against hers and she wrapped her arms around me; the crooks of her elbows holding my neck in place. A cool summer breeze drifted from the esplanade a few streets over, and she pulled me closer to keep herself warm.

And yes, in case you were wondering, she was wearing lipstick.

And I was that something else.