

# *Aunt Frankies Family Fun*

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**U**nCLE Louie's Shock-Toberfest was too big to be called a carnival—it was a goddamn World's Fair. Customers streamed in between columns covered in gauzy cobwebs and jaunty skeletons. Tricked out like an insane asylum, the box office was manned by sexy nurses selling tickets, swiping credit cards, and taking in loads of cash.

As experienced carnies, Cousin Timmy and I knew how to beat the lines. We followed a service road around the back where we could hop the fence. By the time we had ridden the Scrambler a few times, someone tipped off Uncle Louie that we were there. Dressed like a demented doctor, he made a beeline for us as we browsed through merchandise in the Witches & Warlocks Gift Shoppe.

“You two can fuck off!” he yelled, a fake stethoscope flailing about his neck.

“Uncle Louie. *Language*,” I teased. “There are children nearby.”

“Go back to Aunt Frankie's!”

Timmy came closer toward him. "We haven't seen you much since the divorce."

"I know she sent you here for a loan. Her carnival is going bust because she hired you psychopaths to run it. Neither of you is worth a bucket of spit!"

We stood among the bat hats and pumpkin glasses, caught in a feud not of our making.

"Aunt Frankie is doing fine," I lied.

"Before you leave," he seethed, "put back what you shoplifted."

"C'mon, Louie. We're family," I said. "Everybody knows you still love Aunt Frankie. Everyone *also* knows you have a thing for tarot card readers." I reached for a candied apple on a tray behind the counter. When I crunched into its flesh, sugary goo pooled in the corners of my mouth.

"You're the worst of the lot," Uncle Louie muttered, jamming his finger into my chest.

"Worse than Timmy?"

"People go missing when you're around. If I see you on my property again, I'll kill you."

I grinned at him, red ooze dripping onto the Gift Shoppe's floor as if I had taken a bite of his neck.



I would do anything for Aunt Frankie.

She didn't like us getting high, but working at Aunt Frankie's Family Fun made it impossible to stay sober until

closing. Cousin Mike kept a case of Miller Light under the Wind Jammer's control panel. I'd smoke weed on my break to keep a friendly smile slapped across my face. No one likes a sad carnie.

When Daddy was alive, we smoked meth at work a few times, but only on special occasions. A couple of years ago in Savannah, he crashed a go-kart into an oak tree. His lifeless body ended up tangled in Spanish moss. To celebrate, Mike took a sheet cake off a bakery truck. Oddly enough, the one we stole was meant for a retirement party, which seemed fitting at the time.

My blue eyes and black curly hair came from Daddy. "We got the *handsome* genes," Daddy would brag, unlike his sister, Aunt Frankie, who was built like an M-48 Patton tank, just not as cuddly.

Daddy taught me most of what I knew about women. "Let them talk as long as they want. Nod once in a while so they think you're listening." He wasn't wrong. That's how I landed my first girlfriend, who taught me the rest of what I needed to know about women at the top of the Ferris wheel. She'd hung around the carnival, waiting for me to get off work. I kissed her neck, stroked her blonde hair, and wrapped it around her throat until she was as blue as my eyes.

Daddy also told me 19-year-old boys were only good for digging ditches or fixing carnival rides. He wasn't wrong about that, either. Aunt Frankie had given Daddy the one job he had loved most: ride jock. He could assemble a Tilt-A-

Whirl by himself with a handful of pins, wedges, and R-Keys.

The first time I pieced together the Gravatron, I lost a finger while lining up the bolt holes. I never saw Daddy laugh so hard. That's when I learned that chopped-off fingers are as bloody as head wounds.

Soon I was driving Aunt Frankie's biggest trailer. Mobilized like her own personal army, me and my cousins set up the carnival in vacant fields, dead mall parking lots, and Catholic Church grounds. We sold tickets, spun cotton candy, powdered funnel cake, hustled midway games, settled fights, and loaded trash dumpsters.

The carnival's transient nature was good for selling drugs, but bad for romance. I was half in love with a drop-dead brunette who cried when I told her she couldn't see me anymore. When she asked why, I leaned over and gouged her eyes out with my thumbs.



It's easy to tell when a carnival is going bankrupt. Ride lights are burnt out, dead roaches are painted over, and food counters remain unwashed, speckled with hardened ketchup and dried mustard.

In late September, Aunt Frankie called a carnie meeting in the first aid tent. We sat on cots, restless, anxious to start loading the trailers before the traffic got worse. I was

especially antsy as I had a redhead waiting for me to smother her with kisses.

“Blankaroo, boys.” Aunt Frankie frowned. “I can’t cover the carnival’s expenses any longer.”

We were speechless, panicked about what we were going to do with our lives. Carnies have very few transferable skills.

“How bad is it this time?” Cousin Lee asked.

“Bad,” Aunt Frankie replied, scratching her scalp beneath a bouffant wig. “I’m cutting you loose and going to work for Uncle Louie’s Shock-Toberfest. It’s sold out through Christmas.”

“What?” I cried. “Why would you do that?”

Aunt Frankie turned her massive head so fast that I thought it’d spin around entirely. “Because half of you come to work high and the other half pickpocket our patrons.”

“We’re completely capable of doing both,” I suggested. The cousins laughed. Aunt Frankie did not.

“Aunt Frankie's Family Fun is shut down as of today.”

“But—”

“We’re done. Tomorrow you’ll drive this shit back to the Jersey warehouse. Then I’m selling it on eBay.” Aunt Frankie stomped out of the first aid tent, rattling the bandages and ice packs.

“We got to do something,” Mike muttered, standing, pacing. “We need some cash to fix this for Aunt Frankie—and for us.”

“How?” Cousin Andy punched a table until his knuckles bled.

“What can we do?”

“Anything and everything,” I growled.

“I got it.” Timmy’s scowl transformed into a malevolent grin. “Tell the cousins to pack their bug-out gear.”

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“We’re going trick-or-treating.”



The throngs of revelers at Uncle Louie’s Shock-Toberfest had long since left. When the cleaning crew had loaded their vans and turned onto the highway, eighteen of us cousins scaled the farthest fence, dressed in black, silent as phantoms. Since infiltrating Uncle Louie’s lair was a special occasion, a few of us fortified ourselves with a little pick-me-up meth. We padded down the asphalt huddled together, shoulder to shoulder.

The venue, now emptied, seemed dispiriting, as the animatronic zombies and devilish demons and mutant monsters were silent and still. We assumed Uncle Louie had cameras everywhere, so Andy cut every wire he could get his hands on.

“I know you’re here, boys,” came a disembodied voice over the loudspeaker. Klieg lights snapped on, lighting us up like the Fourth of July. Uncle Louie’s guttural voice echoed throughout the park. “You’re trespassing, but it’s too late to

leave. And you boys know I have the right to defend my property against looters.”

I heard the rifle shot just before Cousin Billy's head exploded.

We scattered like cockroaches under a hail of gunfire. While Uncle Louie reloaded, we made our way to the assembly point: The Snow Cone Hut.



Before Timmy had been dishonorably discharged from the Army, he acquired a few military hand signals. He held his hand at eye level, extending his pointer and middle finger.

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked.

“Column formation.”

“Then say that.” I shook my head as the other cousins snickered.

“Based on my intel,” Timmy said, “Uncle Louie's strongbox is in the heart of the Haunted House. That's where he had concrete poured last winter.” He waved his palm back and forth.

“Do you want us to come with you or not?” I asked, irritated to the point of wanting to choke him out.

Timmy nodded, and we fanned out through the fair's sprawling lanes, passing by the food stands for Mummy-Dogs and Hamboogers.

Approaching the Haunted House with its steeply pitched roof and dormer windows, I was reminded of the French

architecture in Louisiana, where I once fed a Cajun girl to the alligators. But Timmy's advance left no time for rumination, so I pulled out my Bowie knife and followed his lead. Andy crowbarred open the oversized front door, noisily swinging wide on its squeaky hinges.

"It's cold in here," Cousin Mike remarked before a mace swung across the expansive foyer. It smashed into the side of his face with enough force to pop his eyeballs from their sockets. He collapsed into a mangled heap.

Andy knelt by his side. "He's still got a pulse!"

"Not for long," I said. "One of the spikes nicked an artery."

Timmy turned to walk down the first long corridor, lined with funhouse mirrors that made us monstrous in the flickering oil lamps. I scampered up to walk by his side.

"Too bad about Mike," I whispered.

"Fewer people to split Uncle Louie's money with." Timmy grinned, shrugging in a *shit happens* kind of way. I drifted towards the back.

Carrying an assortment of weaponry, the remaining cousins crossed into an ornate dining room. Candelabras lit up a long table, glutted with crystal glasses and fine china. Bottles floated in midair, pouring wine of their own volition. The floorboards abruptly retracted, causing most of our cousins to slide down into a subterranean chamber. A long drop muted their subsequent screams.

Timmy flashed more hand signals. We hastily retreated.

Our exit route followed the unmistakable smell of pipe smoke wafting from the cavernous library, lined with dusty books on uneven mahogany shelving.

A small glowing door inset into the far wall piqued Timmy's curiosity. He cautiously turned the brass doorknob, cracking its door open a sliver. Flames shot out like a blowtorch, igniting Timmy and the rest of our cousins behind him. A sticky accelerant spurted from hidden nozzles. The men howled as their skin melted.

Disregarding the stench of burning flesh, I proceeded up the staircase to the second floor, looking for three things: boobytraps, Uncle Louie, and his strongbox.

As the flames followed me up the landing, I remembered something Daddy used to say: "It's easy to call down devils, but it's harder to control them."

*Call down devils.*

"Down, down, down!" I slapped myself on the side of the head.

Of course Uncle Louie would be in the basement. He was the biggest devil of us all.

Alone, I took the back staircase as black smoke filled the upper floors.



The basement was barren except for one long corridor that led to a safe room.

It was lucky for me that Uncle Louie still loved Aunt Frankie. I successfully punched in her birthdate on the keypad to enter.

“You!” Uncle Louie screamed.

“Trick or treat—” I entered, gripping my Bowie knife.

He started to speak, but since he was still dressed as a doctor, I felt compelled to play a game that we cousins enjoyed as children: Milton Bradley's *Operation*.

Afterwards, I did a little smash-and-grab for old time's sake before hoisting Uncle Louie's strongbox onto a pickup truck and heading out of state.

But not before making one last stop.

Poor Aunt Frankie had lost her business, her family, and her ex-husband—all in one night. No one should have to live with that much grief.

And you know me.

I would do anything for Aunt Frankie.

# THE END