

## SUITOR NO 1: SWEET MONKEY- (KATHLEEN'S FIRST LOVE)

By Kathy Calderwood

**T**he carnival was in town. I was about four, possibly five...washed, combed, and put out near the steps to anticipate the evening and wait for my parents and sister to get ready. I was wearing a new rust-red sweater my grandmother had just made with a knitted angora kitten on the left shoulder. The fluffed out kitten featured a real ribbon around its neck. I felt beautiful. Everything around me was beautiful too. I was on fire with life.

Jay Street in early June looked like it was bursting with nature. It was late afternoon, I had 5 quarters in my pocket and anything was possible. We were going to the carnival. I like that word. Carnivore...carnival...?? Must look it up.

The next thing I remember were the flashing lights, and smells of forbidden fried things to eat. Newly cut grass...cotton candy. The excitement in the air.

Then I found myself looking up at two little monkeys in race cars. In yellow and red cars way above my head. A big crowd of people were cheering. There was what seemed a 16 ft. fashionable woman (little Lulu character) with a maroon matching hat and dress to my right.

In the crowd I was silently rooting for the little blondish monkey, but I really wanted to get to the swings. Then all of a sudden a man with a microphone was announcing that the winner monkey would pick "his girlfriend". That was the first time I knew things before they happened.

My heart palpitated. I slumped in my sweater. Oh no! Please no! Don't choose me. The monkeys were walking around on the track, and I knew the sandy colored monkey was going to pick me. It was too late to cover

the angora kitten on my sweater. I lowered my eyes like a proper Victorian woman. Please don't pick me. Please! I beg you! When I looked up the monkey was at my part of the oval track...pointing. We locked eyes. He had a very sad but hopeful look on his face. People were pulling me up to the microphone, but I pulled back. No!!

Dearest monkey it wasn't about you. It was that I had stage fright. He refused to pick another girlfriend, and I refused to go up there. I was terrified. I probably cried. I'm a crier. The carnival was ruined. Even the swings couldn't do it for me. I had refused this adorable little monkey because I was too shy.

Later, tucked in bed, I wished I could have said yes and walked up to the man saying something about how appealing the fur texture on the monkey was, and that I had noticed his pique shirt with his adorable and fashionable sailor collar, and weren't his eyes soulful? Even then I knew my fabrics. My mother was a seamstress. Corduroy, pique, French peau de soie... what else was there?

Anyway, I started realizing that I had for certain 'hurt the monkey's feelings'. My mother was big on never but never hurting anyone's feelings. His face seemed sadder and sadder in my memory as I tossed and turned in my twin bed. Maybe he wasn't fed enough or perhaps he was mistreated. Maybe he had to sleep on hay with no blankets and no mother. What did monkeys eat for protein anyway? They were probably only feeding him bananas. Those idiots!

I planned that I would sneak out in the night and kidnap him from a tent. THE tent. I made a rolled up pink blanket and pretended it was him. I kissed him over

and over and comforted him and promised I would save him from harm. I told him he was beautiful, because he was.

What to do with a hidden monkey? Here's my 4 year old idea. For breakfast Cheerios and water. For dinner? Spaghettios...cold. I would keep him under my bed so my mother wouldn't notice. I planned and planned. I would make it up to him. I sewed him a shirt with arms. Stitches on the outside. I would heal him with love. My sincere love. Monkey love.

The circus left town.

I still am ashamed of myself for not saving him. The hay...the scary microphone guy, no lunches at Woolworth's. No French fries for us together at the lunch counter. He could have been my best friend.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Much Later**

Fifty years later I was at an Eastman House photography show entitled "Why Look at animals?" In a little pamphlet was a photograph of "Circus Monkeys" 1950.

Holy lovin' Mary Mother of Jesus, and I'm not Catholic ...there was my sandy monkey wearing a pique sailor collared shirt!!!!!!!!!!!! It was him!! My first adoree!!!!

I painted a little painting of him with fireworks in the background in an imported Italian frame. I still think of him as suitor number 1.

After that, all my romantic relationships with men (I just realized) remained very similar.

Don't choose me. I'm not here. I made a mistake. I will save you. Please do me a favor and hide under the bed. I love you and I'll feed you even if you're a marshmallow on fire. Woops. Changed my mind. OK, this is not working with the cold spaghettios... goodbye, sweetheart. I'll never forget you. Till' death do us part.