

The Summer Shill

by Ronnie Walter

Born smack in the middle of the baby boom, there was no shortage of neighborhood kids to babysit and my sisters and I were the go-to family for available child-wrangers. Between the seven of us there were usually 2 or 3 prospects on any given night--and unless there was a football game or dance at school, my Saturday night dates wore footy pajamas and drooled Cheerio juice down their fronts. I had a standing weekend gig with the three preschoolers next door while their parents went out for a few cocktails blessedly child free, at least for a few hours. Since my mother was in such close proximity, I could call on her to break up a toddler impasse or deal with a particularly disgusting diaper.

Even at fifty cents an hour I was able to pay for my own plaid mini-skirts, an after school hamburger with my friends at the local Red Barn and the occasional Temptations record.

However, I was looking for a way to increase my income as I was in need of a new bike. Too young to drive, I either walked to school, took a city bus or hitched a ride with the 5'3" 250 pound Algebra teacher who lived in our neighborhood. It was tight squeeze with Mr. Ekimoff in a Volkswagen Beetle, but it beat the heck out of being outside on a cold winter morning. While I tried to figure out how to up my income, an opportunity presented itself. Our neighbor Ron had started a little import business. For some reason, after he ended his tenure as a US Marine Recruiter, he started importing and selling Genuine Mexican Onyx Figurines. They were funny carvings of sleeping men in large sombreros, cacti, Nativity sets and an assortment of farm animals. And even though we had a pink lava lamp displayed prominently in our living room, even *I* thought those figurines were pretty tacky. He decided to debut the collection at the Crawford County Fair in Meadville Pennsylvania, 30 miles south of where we lived. The Crawford County Fair would be unremarkable as far as county fairs go-- if it weren't for the fact that Miss Crawford County 1975 was none other than actress Sharon Stone. She promptly left town, as Meadville was not the kind of place that would embrace actresses who might abandon their panties for a movie role.

Our neighbor asked my parents if I could work for him full time that week, to help with sales and the inevitable crowd control that would be needed when Genuine Mexican Onyx Figurines were introduced to the citizens of Northwest Pennsylvania. I would be paid my normal fifty cents an hour, but with the extended hours of the fair, I was just a week away from a shiny new bicycle in our garage. Of course my parents said yes and my new career as a carnie was launched.

We set up in the cavernous Merchandise Mart, just the place to purchase replacement storm windows, a Vegi-Matic or a Mood Ring to impress your date. The Genuine Mexican Onyx Figurine stall was right next to the most marvelous of them all, The Handwriting Analysis Machine--as seen at the New York World's Fair! OK, that was 8 years prior to this event, but still impressive!

We unloaded the hundreds of figurines, arranging them into adorable little tableau of Mexican stereotypes. Ron started up a conversation with the lady who owned the Handwriting Analysis machine, a woman who traveled from town to town analyzing the handwriting of fair goers across the land.

And what a woman she was. Hovering around her mid-seventies with dozens of bangles stacked up each arm and earrings the size of teacups dangling beneath her bleach blonde beehive, Maggie was a vision in bright coral lipstick. She talked with a smoker's rasp as she singlehandedly maneuvered the machine into her allotted space. In my t shirt, jeans and scuffed Keds I was in awe of this psychedelic senior citizen; in all of my 14 years I had never met anyone quite like Maggie.

After the opening day of the fair it was pretty clear that Genuine Mexican Onyx Figurines were not the hot ticket to fame and fortune that my neighbor had anticipated. But as fate would have it, Maggie's assistant had skipped out after the last fair. I noticed Maggie whispering to Ron while he slowly nodded his head and the next thing I knew I had been promoted to Handwriting Analysis Assistant! I moved one stall over, stepped up to the platform of The Machine and began my rise up the carnival ladder.

Now, I don't know how this machine actually worked, but here's what I think. I know it was an old IBM card sorter. You know those "IBM cards"? Manila cards with (what seemed to me random) holes punched, that the machine would read and then somehow it spit out data? That

kind of machine. The customer would sign a blank version of the card, hand it over to Maggie (along with their \$1.50) and with a dramatic flourish, she would hand the card up to me. I would place their signed card on a pile of other IBM cards, place the stack into the machine and push a big red button.

Bells would ring, sirens screamed and lights flashed as the cards landed randomly into separate slots making a satisfying clack as they found their position.

Hidden from the customer's view were stacks of preprinted "handwriting analysis" cards categorized by gender, age and personality. Each category had multiple cards, repeating every 5 or so. They said things like, "You are very persistent in working toward your goals" and "Other people like to be around you" or "your creative flair will take you far" Even at my tender age, I was amazed at how thrilled the customers were when they read their report. "Wow! That's just like me!" "Oh my gosh--it's so true!" Over and over I heard the same response, and I kept thinking: *They bought it? Seriously? You really think this cheesy machine is reading your handwriting and analyzing your personality? Well, ok, then...let's go people!*

By day two I was completely hooked. Maggie was amazing as she worked the crowd, bringing people closer to our booth and charming everyone along the way. During slow times I loved talking to her, as she told tales of being on the road, her gravelly voice captivating this shy awkward ninth grader. She was engaging, funny and different than anyone I had ever met. Each night I would go home and regale my parents with stories of the fair as they exchanged horrified glances over my head. I'm sure they thought I was ready to chuck it all and go on the road with Maggie, and if it weren't for tenth grade staring me in the face, they may have been right.

Occasionally we would have a skeptic in the crowd, someone who couldn't quite believe that this machine could actually reveal their personality. Remember that the preprinted "fortunes" repeated every five cards, and there were at least 10 categories. Eventually I made sure to get a good look at the person and then look at the card before I handed it to Maggie. So when the cynic laid down their additional \$1.50, I got pretty good at handing them back the exact card I had given them before. I mean, who would suspect that this nerdy teenager with frizzy hair and wire rimmed glasses would be a carnival shark? By the close of the fair, I had ever so slowly come out of my shell, and straight into a shell game.

The fair ended and I helped Maggie close down the machine and Ron and I packed up many boxes of unsold Genuine Mexican Onyx Figurines. With tears in our eyes, Maggie and I hugged goodbye. She hitched the Handwriting Analysis Machine to the back of her 1967 Pontiac Catalina station wagon and drove off into the night.

I bought my new bike--a lime green three speed cruiser from Sears. School started soon after and I dodged the inevitable question "So what did you do this summer?" with a vague "Oh, you know, this and that, a little babysitting, a few odd jobs."

Looking back, I realized that I liked the feeling I got when a customer's eyes lit up with the idea that maybe, *just maybe* their handwriting revealed the secrets of who they aspired to be. I was torn between enjoying the rush they got from the experience and my own rush of being the one who delivered it. But mostly I was given a glimpse into a world where a woman in gold stretch pants could write her own destiny, all from behind the wheel of an avocado green station wagon.