

Skybar

by Brian Hartz and Stephen King

The following story was written from a contest with Doubleday books to promote the 1982 "Do it Yourself Bestseller" book edited by Tom Silberkleit and Jerry Biederman.

There were many authors featured in the book, including Belva Plain and Isaac Asimov. Each writer provided the beginning and ending to a story.

It was up to the reader to provide the middle, hence the name "Do It Yourself Bestseller."

As part of the promotion, Doubleday books held a national contest to see who could write the best middle portion.

Each winner was chosen by the individual writer - in this case, Stephen King. Brian Hartz was 18 at the time it was written.

This story contains strong language and material that may be unsuitable for younger readers.

There were twelve of us when we went in that night, but only two of us came out - my friend Kirby and me. And Kirby was insane. All of the things I'm going to tell you about happened twelve years ago. I was eleven then, in the sixth grade. Kirby was ten and in the fifth. In those days, before gas shot up to \$1.40 a gallon or more (as I recall the best deal in town was at Dewey's Sunoco, where you could get hi-test for 31.9 cents, plus double S&H Green stamps), Skybar Amusement Park was still a growing concern; its great double Ferris wheel turned endlessly against a summer sky, and you could hear the great, grinding mechanical laugh of the fun-house clown even at my house, five miles inland, when the wind was right

Yeah, Skybar was the place to go, all right - you could blast away with the .22 of your choice at Pop Dupree's Dead Eye Shootin' Gallery, you could ride the Whip until you puked, wander into the Mirror Labyrinth, or look at the Adults Only freak tent and wonder what was in there...you especially wondered when the people came out, white-faced, some of the women crying, or hysterical. Brant Callahan said it was all just a fake, whatever it was, but sometimes I saw the doubt even in Brant's tough gray eyes.

Then, of course, the murders started, and eventually Skybar was shut down. The double Ferris stood frozen against the sky, and the only sound the mechanical clown's mouth produced was the lunatic hooting of the sea breeze. We went in, the twelve of us, and. . .but I'm getting ahead of myself. It began just after school let out that June; it began when Randy Stayner, a seventh-grader from the junior high school, was thrown from the highest point of the SkyCoaster. I was there that day - Kirby was with me, in fact - and we both heard his scream as he came down.

It was one of the strangest ways for a person to die - the shadowed Ferris wheel turned in the sunlight, the bumper cars honked and sparked the roof and walls of Spunky's Dodge 'Em, the carousel spun wildly to the rise and fall of horses and lions, and the steady beat of its repeating tune echoed throughout the park. A man balancing his screaming son in one hand, ice cream cones in the other, little kids with cotton candy racing to see who's first to get on Sandee's Spinning Sombrero, and in the midst of all the peaceful confusion, Randy Stayner performing a one-time solo swan dive 100 feet into the solid steel tracks of the SkyCoaster.

For a while, I wasn't all too sure the people around me weren't thinking it was just an act - a Saturday afternoon performance by a skilled diver. When blood and bone hit, however, it was clear the act was over. And then, as if to clear the whole thing up with a final attempt to achieve his original goal, he rolled lazily over the bottom rails of the SkyCoaster into the brown murky water of Skybar Pond, swirls of red and grey following him.

The SkyCoaster was shut down the day of Randy's dive, and despite weeks of dragging the pond's bottom, his body was never found. Authorities concluded that his remains had drifted under a sandbar or some unmarked passageway, and all search ceased after four weeks.

Skybar lost a lot of customers after that. Most people were afraid to go there, and other businesses in the town began to boom because of it. In fact, Starboard Cinema, which showed horror movies to an audience of four or five during the parks better days now showed repeats of "I was a Teen Age Werewolf" to sell-out crowds. More and more, people drifted away from Skybar until it was shut down for good.

It was during those last few weeks that the worst accidents started happening. A morning worker, reaching under a car on the Whip for a paper cup, caught his arm on the supporting bar between two clamps just as a faulty circuit started the machine. He was crushed between two cars. Another worker was fixing a bottom rail on the Ferris wheel when a 500 pound car dropped off the top and smeared him onto the asphalt below. These and several other rides were shut down, and when the only thing left open was Pop Dupree's .22 gallery and the Adults Only freak tent, the spark ran out of Skybar's amusement, and it was forced to shut down after its third year in operation.

It had only been closed for two months when Brant Callahan came up with his plan that night. We were in a group of five camping in back of John Wilkenson's dad's workshop, in a single five-man Sportsman pup tent illuminated by four flashlights shining on back issues of Famous Detective Stories, when he stood up (or rather scuffled on his knees, due to the height of the tent) and proposed we all do something to separate the pussies from the men.

I tossed aside my Mystery of the Haunted Hearse, leaned teach in the glow of Dewey Howardson's light, and squinted halfway at the hulking shadow crouching by the double-flap zipper door. No one else appeared to pay any attention to him.

"Come on, lard-asses!" he shouted. "Are ya all just going to sit around playing Dick-fucking-Tracy all night?"

Kirby slapped at the bugs attacking his glowing arm and looked from Brant, to me, to the rest of the guys still gazing with mild interest at their Alfred Hitchcock tales of suspense, unaware of any other activities going on in their presence. I gazed at my watch. It was 11:30.

"What the hell are you raving about, Brant?" His face came to life now that he was being noticed, and he looked at me with great excitement, like some dumb little kid who was about to tell some terrible secret and was getting the great flood of details together to form a top-confidential plan.

"The SkyCoaster."

Dewey looked over the top of his magazine and shot Brant a look of mild interest.

"Skybar's SkyCoaster?"

"Course, ya damn idiot. What other roller coaster ya gonna find in Starboard? Now the way I figger it, we could make it over the barbed wire and inside to the SkyCoaster easy enough."

"What the fuck for?" I asked. Brant was always pulling stunts like this, and it was no telling what the crazy bastard was up to this time. I remember one year when we were out smashing coins on the BY&W tracks by Harrow's Point, Brant got tired of watching trains run over his pennies and dimes and dared us to take on a real challenge. Whenever Brant came up with a real challenge, you could almost always count on calling up the You Asked For It or Ripleys Believe It or Not crews for live coverage. Not that the challenge was anything like that man from Brazil who swallowed strips of razor blades, or that fat lady from Ohio who balanced fire sticks on her forehead - Brant's dares were far more challenging than those. And, as young volunteers from his reluctant audience, we were obligated to take part in them or kiss our reputation for bravery goodbye.

Brant reached into his pants pocket that day and pulled out a small cardboard box wrapped tightly with a red rubber band. Unwrapping it, he revealed four or five shiny copper bullets, the kind I used to see on reruns of Mannix when Mike Connors would stop blasting away at crime rings long enough to load up his revolver again. They were different from T.V., though. On the tube they appeared to be no more than tiny pieces of dull plastic jammed into a Whamco Cap Pistol. In front of me then, they sat mystically in Brant's hand, the shells glittering bright rays of light in the late afternoon sun, the tip of greyish lead heavily refusing to reflect any light at all.

Then Brant clapped them all together in a fist and headed up the bank toward the tracks. I started after him, half expecting him to wheel out a gun for them at any minute, hoping he was just going to relieve himself rather than starting to open fire on something, or trying some other dangerous stunt. It was dangerous, as it turned out, but I didn't say anything. I just stood there by the rails, taking a plug off the chewingtobacco Dewey brought along, my mind watching from some faraway place as he set them up single file on the left rail.

"The train wheels should set 'em off the second they hit," he smiled smugly, eagerly forming his plan. "All we have to do is stand here by the rails until they do. How's that for a challenge, huh? Oh, and the first one to jump is pussy of the year."

I didn't say anything, but I thought a lot about it. About how stupid it was, how dangerous it was, and how weird a persons brain had to be to think things like that up. I thought about how I should bug out right then, just yell "Screw you, Brant!" and take off for home. But that would have made me green. And if it was one thing we all had to show each other back then, it was that we were no cowards.

So there we were, Brant, John, Dewey, me, and Kirby, although Kirby wouldn't set foot near the tracks, bullets or no bullets, with a train coming (he began to conveniently get sick on the tobacco and had to lie down). We lined up next to the rails, determination in our eyes as the bullets gleamed in front of us. John was the first one to hear the train, and as we stepped closer to Brant's orders, I could hear him softly muttering a short prayer over and over to himself. Dewey stood on the far right side of me, the last person in our Fearless Freddy Fan Club

Then the first heavy rumbling of the cars came, John reeled as it got louder, and I thought surely he was going to collapse over the tracks, but he didn't, and we all stood still as the train came on. The churning squeak of the wheels hit our ears, and I stared blankly at the bullets in front of us, thinking how small they seemed under the wheels of the 4:40. But the more I looked, the larger they began to appear, until it seemed they were almost the size of cannonballs. I shut my eyes and prayed with John.

In the distance, the whistle rang out a terrifyingly loud Hooooo-HOO Hoooo, and I was sure it was on top of us, sure that I would feel the cracks of lead pounding in my ears any second, feel the hot metal in my legs. Then the steady thud-thud-thud of its wheels grinding closer bit into my ears, and I screamed, turned, and fell down the slope to where the black gravel ended and the high meadowy grass began. I ran and didn't stop or look back until I was what felt like at least a mile away, and then collapsed in the sticky high grass, my hands and knees filling with sharp pain.

Behind me, five or six bullets roared into the air consecutively, and I wondered vaguely how Mike Connors could stand such a loud sound every time he squeezed the trigger. My ears filled up with a steady EEEEEEEEEEE, and I lay back in the grass, my hair full of stickers, my pride full of shame.

Then Kirby was in front of me, telling me I was all right. I sat up in the grass, and down the hm about ten or fifteen feet from me, Brant, Dewey, and John sat puffing loudly, laughing, out of breath. The air filled with smoke and I collapsed again into the high sea of shrub and stickers, feeling fine.

Brant admitted time after time that we were all brave for going along with him that day, but he never brought up the fact that we all had run away, he and Dewey in the lead. Somewhere in my mind, the fact appeared to me that somewhere in Brant, his ego ended and his brains began. That's why I listened along with the others, and why we all wound up going with him that night when he began scheming up another mastermind stunt.

"First we make it over the fence. When we do, we head for the SkyCoaster. Here's the trick: we'll all meet in the station and start up the tracks - not the wooden beams - the tracks, and, in single file, climb to the King drop, then back down." "You're fuckin nuts, Brant." "Maybe. But at least I'm not fuckin' pussy." "Who's pussy?" I asked, pulling my Converse All-Star tennis shoes on. "You in?" asked Kirby, his lower jaw shaking. It was almost like that shaking jaw and those glassy, scared deer eyes of his were trying to pull me back, to help me forget about the dare and get back to reading another chapter in *Amazing Detective Stories* - as if that once shaking jaw were a sonar, bouncing off waves of detection and coming up with the same reading: *Dangerous Barrier Ahead*.

"Don't be ridiculous, Kirb. 'Course I'm goin'" I shot a glance at John and Dewey, who both gave me nods of bravery and confidence, mixed highly with regrets of Brant's ever being with us that night. We left the flashlights on in the tent in case John's dad peeked out the back windows of his house to check on us. It turned out he never did.

Skybar can be pretty damn dark at night with no lights on. Few people know that like I do since most have only seen it in the daytime with sunlight bouncing off of the metal roofs of Pop Dupree's and the Adults Only freak tent or at night with the magical lights blazing lazily around on the Ferris wheel and bulbs flashing crazily in single file, creating a racing form of neon display up and down the hills of the 100 foot high SkyCoaster.

There were no lights that night, however. No lights, no moon, no light clouds, zilchamundo. Brant had stopped on the way to pick up a couple of his friends from the White Dragons. The Dragons were a street gang that held a high position in the field of respect with all wise kids back then, and luckily they brought spare flashlights, matches for their cigarettes, and 5-inch steel Randell switchblades (in case some maniacal drunk or thug was claiming the park space as a home base for his operations).

Both of the White Dragon members appeared to be gods in the eyes of all of us that evening - their hair slicked back to their scalps James Dean style, black leather jackets with pale, fire breathing dragons on them, a general air of confidence and security beaming off them as if they were more protective beacons for us than general good company joining us in the daredevil fun.

Five more members of the Dragons were to meet us after a field party they were having up on Grange's Point. Brant hadn't let us in on that fact at first, but when I found out they were supposed to meet us at the front gate at 12:30, more confidence rose in me, and it began to feel more like we were heading toward a late game of craps or penny ante poker instead of a 100 foot climb on slick poles. What we didn't know was that they were practically carrying the party with them, each with a bottle of Jack Daniel's Black label, or Southern Comfort, or Everclear, and each was singing in rickety unison the agonizing 75th stanza to "99 Bottles of Beer."

Excitement heaved up my chest to my throat as we approached the outer gate, and I can still remember how mystic and strange the park looked in the dark night air. The chain fence stretched onward in both directions to what seemed infinity, sealing us out from its unknown hidden powers, and I recall that it almost seemed that it was shielding Skybar inside, preventing it from wielding its wrath on the innocent people living outside its domain. Once you crossed the barrier, however, there was no turning back. Here was where the two worlds divided, and the choice was made - pussy or man.

Everybody was anxious to get inside the park's gates to prove where he stood. With the gang you felt cold and nervous while awaiting the wrath of whatever might be lurking inside-but outside, the chances of surviving any lurking danger alone made you even more nervous- jittery enough to crawl up into a ball and piss your pants at every crack of a twig.

So, you see, it's not that we all wanted to go inside. But even if we were scared to death of climbing the cold rails of the SkyCoaster, staying alone while the rest of the bunch climbed over and ventured inside was even worse than the original dare itself. Surprisingly enough, Kirby was the first one up the fence to lay his jacket across the barbed wire and hop to the soft asphalt of Skybar on the other side. The rest of us followed, thud, sputt, thud sounding through the night air as we each dropped to the ground on the other side. We were in now. Eddie Frachers, the shorter of the two White Dragons, lit up a smoke, flicked on the flashlight, and led the way with Brant.

The station was empty when we got to the steel rails of the coaster, and climbing the steps to the gate station was an unusual experience in itself since there was no waiting in line for an hour while an old man standing in front of you blew cigarette fumes in your face in the riding hot sun as your stomach turned putred, your facial skin pale. Now it was home free between the coaster and us, free space all the way.

Hurry hurry step right up!

The metal floor thundered hundreds of beats under our feet as we made our way across the vacant station to the terminal gates, and I looked several times over my shoulder as we walked the deserted leading board, my senses ready for anything that might decide to go more than "bump" in the night. I was the first one to hear it, in fact, and my body grew limp, my bowels limp with it when I heard the direction it was coming from - the coaster cars.

They all sat in front of us, grey and orange from rust and age, their silent features corrupting the night with an evil air, and I recall standing there as the others began to hear it too, my hands shaking, legs drooping, mouth hanging open stupidly as I attempted to say something - I don't know what - and nothing would come out.

I don't know how long we all stood there, waiting for something, anything to happen. The cars seemed mystic in their own way as they stood their ground and refused to let us any nearer by chanting some evil spell among themselves to keep us back. A spell is one thing, but if you've ever thought you heard a car (or possibly some dangerous lunatic hiding behind a car) singing something, you'd understand how we all felt that night. Even Brant and the two White Dragons appeared motionless in the soft glow from the flashlight, but somehow Eddie brought the flashlight up to meet whatever was occupying the first car.

"Hey! Turn it off damnit!"

A surge of relief at its at least being human swelled up in me, but I still stood there, motionless and quivering, even as Eddie and the rest of the bunch, even Kirby, started toward the coaster. I must have still been in a daze, because I found myself wanting to stop them, to pull them back to me, to end it all, turn around and get the hell back over the fence. But I still stood there as fog rolled around my eyes and my sight blurred, leaving only my ears to tell me the horrible fate of our party.

"What the hell are you..." ". . . are you sure that it's them . . ." "What are they doing here like this..." A long, ear-piercing scream followed, the kind women usually scream in those horror movies at Starboard Cinema when the vampire wraps his cape around his victim and starts sucking the living blood out of her. It rose to almost unbelievable splitting levels then faded away with suppressed laughter followed by "59 bottles of beer on the wall, 59 bottles of beer..."

A hand touched my shoulder and I reeled to find Kirby at my feet, telling me that the other guys had gone ahead without me and I'd better hurry up. I ran and caught up with them by the main track, where they had already begun the climb. Brant was first, then the White Dragons, and then Dewey and John, clinging tightly to the steel tracks behind them. I ran the 20 feet to the final, highest 100 foot drop, and started up after them.

The cold steel rails clapped clamily into my skin as I started shinnying up, looking to where Brant and the Dragons were perched high above. I couldn't weigh the amount of energy I had left to figure how I was gonna climb 100 fucking feet barehanded. It's kind of like that joke about the little ant crawling up the elephant's hind leg with rape on its mind. I probably wouldn't make it, but I had high hopes.

Kirby never touched the rails. I couldn't blame him after the train event, maybe something happened to him when he was younger, or something. Kirby told me a lot of things best left confidential, but he never told me anything about it either. He may not have wanted to climb, but to me he was no pussy.

A lot of things go through your mind when you're 45 feet off the ground climbing rail by rail on a ladder without rungs. One hundred feet of sheer pole climbing with occasional crosspieces to hang on to isn't much, and you begin to wonder, What if Dewey slips and falls into me? What if I lose my grip and sail to the bottom? How will I get down once I'm up there? Can drunk Dragons fly? And then you look at the bottom, and all of your fears are summed up in one phrase:

Don't look down.

Hand over hand, pull over pull, I made my way upward, trusting that the pace of those above me wasn't too slow. I never really looked up to where Brant and his friends were while I was climbing. Even to this day I remember the blackness of the night sky mixing well with my own blackout as I shut my eyes tightly to the things around me. I was climbing to the top, and I just couldn't stop. Hand over hand. That's when the screaming started, loud and forceful, over and over, with an occasional splashing behind it as if someone below were enjoying a late night swim and horseplay in the murky pond. Ignoring my own rule, I shot a glance down.

God, how weird it looked. If you've ever been on a roller coaster right as it goes down the steepest slope, you can understand the feeling; the depth, the rails shooting together as they plummet below right as you drop over the top. Imagine yourself frozen in that position. Below, the rails meet and your stomach assumes a new position in your throat. And standing on those gleaming rails, still holding Eddie's flashlight and stained with the dark was Kirby, gazing back up at me, a look of confusion, horror and what to do next? written across his face. He scared the hell out of me the way he just stood there, arms at his side, staring at me but saying nothing.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" I shouted down with extra force. No answer. "Kirby, what's wrong?" By then I knew damn well what was wrong. The tracks had begun to drum under my hands, and the frame of the SkyCoaster itself had begun to sway rhythmically from side to side. Then the awful sound of the roar of a coaster car spinning around some distant bend, fading out, then coming back in, fading out again-and coming back with thunderous racket that sent my stomach and my heart both jumping on top of my tonsils.

Then Brant screamed. It was like the scream of a woman's that I described earlier, but louder, blending in with the steady clack-clack-clack of a chain-dragged coaster car on an electrified track. I didn't ask any questions, but simply locked both hands together, swung both feet together and slid down the rail to the bottom.

If you've ever been on a roller car as it plummets the final hill - the Granddaddy drop - you'll probably know the feeling of fear that builds up in you. There's always a chance that you may fly from the car to the steel tracks below as the force presses your spine against the back cover and shakes you with head-splitting strength to the bottom. There was no car for me to ride in that night - no seat, no belt, no safety bar to pull against my slumped torso. And as I sailed to the bottom, my mind made a different rule that I was forced to follow - Don't look.

The wind stopped suddenly in my hair, and I realized that I was down on the bottom rails of the coaster, hanging dreadfully close to the murky waters of Skybar Pond. And as I hung there momentarily I could picture Randy Stayner waiting below, a mossy green hand beginning to emerge to the surface, and as I imagined this, I also visualized others like him in a sea of arms, reaching for my dangling shirt tail as I hung there, all of them coming up to the surface to get me, or desperately reaching out as they were dragged down. A splurge of violent bubbling water popped to the surface, jolting me back to Skybar and, getting to my feet, I pulled myself to the shore and somehow managed to pull Kirby with me. He was still standing in a daze, eyes fixed on the tracks where the coaster car was falling toward us.

And as we ran through the depot station past the empty coaster cars, I could hear the steady thud-thud-thud of the one car advancing on us. I shot a glance over my shoulder as we both ran on, my feet and eyes growing with every step.

Then I let go of Kirby. I can't clearly remember when, but I remember all that ran through my mind was Run Like Hell! I flew up the chain link fence behind Pop Dupree's, cutting my hands severely on the barbed wire. After jumping to the safe ground on the other side, I didn't stop running until I was almost a mile away on Granges Point, where I could still hear the soft screaming laughter of the seabreeze through the Funhouse clown, and could see the vague form of the SkyCoaster winding through the trees. Somewhere behind one of the tents - I can still swear it was the freak tent - a light glowed softly. I sat there, staring at it, wondering if it was Kirby trying to find his way out of the dark. Then I heard the cracking grass of footsteps behind me and whirled to find Kirby standing in front of me. My legs were shaking, and my teeth began to chatter softly, and he walked up to me and put his arm around me.

"It's okay. We made it. We're pretty brave, huh? Right up and right down those rails. We're far away from it now, though. We're not there now" I stared at him and wondered how the hell he got there. I couldn't recall dragging him with me. I couldn't believe how calm he stood there-how he acted like it was all a scary movie at Starboard Cinema and we were walking home in the dark trying to calm

ourselves down. Then he turned me toward the park and started to walk away.

"Coming?" "Kirb, you're headin' the wrong way."

I turned toward home and started to run again. After a while. Kirby came running up to me, and we didn't stop until we were five miles away from Skybar and on my front porch. I can still see the horror in poor Kirby's eyes as he saw his best friends and the Dragons drop to death before him. Even after seeing that smiling, rotting freak clambering from behind the safety bar of the coaster car that had rolled over Brant and the others, he stuck with me at the bottom and didn't run. The only ones who acted as bravely as Kirby were the drunk Dragons who jumped at the first sight of the coaster car coming toward them. Maybe it was bravery, maybe it was the liquor, but it doesn't matter because the 100 foot dive to the pond was a mistake either way. Brant and the rest may have tried to slide, but they never made it to safety and the authorities still haven't pulled their bodies from the murky pond waters to this day.

And still, in my dreams, I feel Kirby taking my hand and telling me it was okay; we were safe, we were home free. And then I heard the thud-thud-thud of a single SkyCoaster car rolling toward us. I want to tell Kirby not to look - "Don't look, man!" I scream, but the words won't come out. He does look. And as the car rolls up to the deserted station, we see Randy Stayner lolling behind the safety bar, his head driven almost into his chest. The fun-house clown begins to scream laughter somewhere behind us, and Kirby begins to scream with it. I try to run, but my feet tangle in each other and I fall, sprawling. Behind me I can see Randy's corpse pushing the safety bar back and he begins to stumble toward me, his dead, shredded fingers hooked into seeking claws. I see these things in my dreams, and in the moments before I wake, screaming, in my wife's arms, I know what the grown-ups must have seen that summer in the freak tent that was for Adults Only. I see these things in my dreams, yes, but when I visit Kirby in that place where he still lives, that place where all the windows are cross-hatched with heavy mesh, I see them in his eyes. I take his hand and his hand is cold, but I sit with him and sometimes I think: These things happened to me when I was young.