

“ROLL UP, ROLL UP”

“Are you sure that this is a good idea?” Wendy whispered to her husband in the front of the SUV as the day’s light faded and evening dusk closed in.

“Of course it is,” Michael snapped back as though he was sick of having the same conversation over and over.

“I don’t know, he seems awfully nervous,” Wendy tried again. She was a homely woman of 36. She was usually a warm mother, but her maternal instincts had been blunted down the years by an overbearing husband and his insistence that he was always right.

“Dammit I’ve told you we’re putting an end to this nonsense once and for all,” Michael hissed as his fingers gripped the steering wheel and his knuckles whitened. “It’s unseemly that a boy of 12 should have such irrational fears, it’s an embarrassment quite frankly.” Michael was an officious man who spent his days buried inside the black and white world of accounting. He also lived his private life the same way with little deviation from rules and schedules.

Richie sat unflinching in the back seat. He was 12 with a wide imagination that neither of his parents seemed to possess and he had no idea just how he had developed his. He was a quiet child with few friends in school and tended to spend his days alone and dreaming. His imagination was both his escape and his curse.

The SUV had exited the main highway now and was winding its way through the open countryside. Their destination was no longer in doubt and there was no longer any way to avoid it. His fingernails were already bitten down to the quick but he kept on gnawing as the tentacles of fear started to grab at his insides.

A large billboard poster flashed by the car and Richie’s gaze was dragged kicking and screaming to it. He had stared at the image before when his father had first laid the flyer before him over breakfast. “Haley’s Comet Circus” the poster screamed in garish letters. The bright colours depicted various animals in states of performance. Stallions danced, lions were being tamed and elephants were posing on one leg. Trapeze artists defied gravity as they swung from the heavens and a strongman lifted incredible weights. But the one image that was burned into Richie’s retina was the small smiling face of the clown. It was a small part of the poster but to Richie’s eyes the white painted face dominated the landscape. He knew that a lot of people found clowns to be creepy and even some other children were actively scared by them. But for Richie, his was a primal terror that scorched his bones and tore his soul apart. He didn’t know when or why his fear had taken root, but it had festered like a rotting secret devouring him from the inside. He thought that maybe it was the face beneath the makeup. Skin painted bright white and slashed with red that obscured what the clown really looked like.

The fear of clowns wasn’t such a problem in everyday suburbia, but he had gone to Johnny Hudson’s 12th birthday party. He wasn’t particularly friends with Johnny, but his mother had insisted that he attend as she was friendly with Johnny’s mother. His father had always taken a dim view on his self imposed exile from the playground. As far as his father was concerned there were rules to growing up. Boys had friends and dogs. They played and fought, got dirty, tore clothes and grew up. Richie

knew that he was a conundrum to his father and that his mother kept her own thoughts safely tucked away. She was a wife first, then a mother and a woman a distant third.

He was a slender boy with a narrow frame devoid of any athletic ability. He was a ginger freckled boy with glasses that might have screamed nerd, but he was far from academically minded. His grades were decent but nothing spectacular; he was just a statistic within the scholastic world. He wasn't really any good at sports and so he didn't fit in with the jocks. But neither was he an outcast loner either, he merely surfed the middle wave.

Johnny's birthday party had been a relatively painless affair. Richie was largely ignored by the other attendees and that suited him just fine as he was only there under protest. He had been enjoying a piece of birthday cake and minding his own business when the day's entertainment had bounded out into the garden.

"JoJo" was a children's entertainer and a clown. Richie had almost vomited frosty icing onto the lawn when the clown had come around the corner. JoJo was a large man dressed in an oversized jacket and pants. His tall hat was askew with a bright yellow flower pointing proudly from it. His face was painted a pristine white with a wide red smile and black ringed eyes. His expression was one of goofy delight and the children squealed as he staggered round the garden.

Only Richie wasn't squealing in delight. He stood there rooted to the spot in absolute terror. The dancing clown rolled in slow motion, spinning and twirling as the children ran and played around him like rats following the Pied Piper. Richie couldn't move as the clown suddenly locked eyes with his. The man shambled over in huge floppy shoes and reached out probably to pluck a shiny coin from Richie's ear. But Richie started screaming. He started screaming, and once he'd started, he couldn't stop.

The clown recoiled in horror as adult eyes all turned to face the air splitting screams. Richie's lungs were ripped apart as he screamed louder and louder. A warm trickle of urine ran down his leg as the clown's padded gloved hand faltered in midair.

A few hours later he was put to bed in a daze as the sedative that the local doctor prescribed kicked in. The old man had injected him with undisguised scorn in his eyes. Richie's mother had been mortified at the party, more concerned with her embarrassment than his fear. His father had been more forceful in his condemnation. The idea of his only child becoming the laughing stock of the entire neighborhood was almost too much to bear. His father's idea of conquering the problem was emersion therapy. Hence the car ride to the circus.

Richie's heart was keeping a steady rhythm that was gradually increasing in speed the closer they got. The poster boards were slowly counting down his fate; 10 miles, 8 miles, 5 miles, 2 miles, next turn ahead.

"Mom?" Richie tried one last time as he fought to keep the tears from pricking at his eyes.

"It'll be fine honey," she smiled in return, none too convincingly. "You'll see, we'll soon have you over this silliness."

Richie hated her at that moment. She might not be responsible for bringing him here, but she had

done nothing to prevent it. He had begged and pleaded with her to stand up for him with his father. After several nights of his tears and fevered pleas she had finally relented. He had looked into her face and finally seen the unhappiness of a mother for her son's plight. He had slept that night for the first time in two weeks. To his amazement his father had not even mentioned it the next day, but now he knew why. His mother had never found the courage to voice her opinion or promised objection. Richie's horror and stupidity had dawned on him tonight as when he'd returned home from school his father's car had been parked on the driveway. Normally his father would not be home until much later, but tonight he had been ready and waiting. The proposed trip to face his fears had all but fallen from Richie's memory until he entered the house and found his father home and dressed in casual attire. The sight of his father without a tie had set off large alarm bells in Richie's head. He mentally did the math quickly and was shocked to find that tonight was the night of the circus. He shot a look across the kitchen to his mother who at least had the good grace to look away in shame.

The SUV slowed down as Richie's heart thudded painfully against his narrow chest. They pulled off the road and the car's suspension handled the bumpy grass. There were designated temporary parking areas that were sign posted with handmade scrawlings.

Beyond the parking field the big top tent dominated the horizon. The bright yellow and red panels were topped with huge flags that pierced the night sky. Massive spotlights illuminated the tent with rotating beams that could be seen for miles. Small ticket booths were handling the queuing crowds that waited patiently but excitedly as lush green notes were handed across for an evening of suspended beliefs.

"Well here we are," Richie's father said forcibly switching off the engine and leaving the car in silence.

"Dad, please." Richie tried one last time in a small voice.

"Now now, we'll have none of that nonsense," Michael said quickly as he exited the vehicle.

Richie turned to his mother, but she followed her husband meekly out into the night. He felt the rear door open and hands grabbed him roughly as his father pulled him out. He could hear the faint piped echoes of music on the wind drifting over from the big top tent. He stood in the field and felt the damp mud seep through his sturdy boots. The night air was relatively mild, but Richie felt a trembling cold in his bones. Unbelievably he felt his feet take one step after another as his father took his hand and pulled him forward. The moonlight glinted off the roofs of the hundreds of parked cars as they made their way towards the entrance. As they drew closer the music grew louder and the fragrant smells of frying food and cotton candy wafted towards his nostrils. Despite the enticing aromas Richie could not have felt less like eating.

As they drew up to the ticket booths Richie could see an assortment of carnival rides, games and eateries surrounding the giant tent. The man serving at their ticket booth looked clean and presentable, far removed from Richie's young mind's idea of a circus worker. His father paid the toll and Richie found himself carried along on a wave of excitable faces as the crowd swelled inward.

The sea parted and Richie walked through the open tent flaps with fear gnawing at his heart. There was a large circular stage erected in the centre of the big top. Two large metal columns stood

proudly on either side of the stage with a high wire running between them. The ceiling of the tent was dark and dotted with what looked like thousands of fairy lights twinkling like stars. The seating was staggered upwards and most were already full. The same music was repeating over and over again on a loop and the piped sound of the organ was spiking through Richie's brain like a march of the dead.

He felt in a daze as his father took his hand and pulled him roughly to their directed seats. It was like being in a dream that he couldn't wake up from no matter how hard he tried. He attempted to calm his mind with rational thoughts, but his fear was far from rational and wouldn't be stilled.

Slowly the lights began to dim and a spontaneous applause broke out from the excited audience. The music changed at last and a spotlight hit the centre of the stage. Richie could see a man resplendent in a ringmaster's outfit. The suit was a brilliant red topped with a jet black top hat. The man looked old to Richie's young eyes and his beard was black, small, and pointed with a matching moustache twirled up at the sides.

"Bonjour à tous, welcome to you all," the Ringmaster greeted the crowd in a strange accent. "This is Haley's Comet International Circus and we are the bringer of dreams and delights, the like of which you have never seen before."

Richie couldn't help but feel entranced by the man's performance. His fear may have been tangible, but at least he was tightly tucked in and surrounded by strangers. His family's three seats were on the end of a row and he was next to the aisle.

"Before this night is over," the Ringmaster continued, "you shall see sights to amaze and astound you. I give you Sheba!" He turned and pointed as a woman appeared to his side wearing a long black coat over a red leotard.

Sheba cracked a black leather whip and two beautiful tigers emerged from the shadows behind her between two seating stands. The animals padded out slowly as their green eyes scanned the crowd. Richie could smell the animal's musk from where he was sitting and it was intoxicating.

Two assistants appeared by Sheba wheeling out large round platforms. They placed the boxes down and Sheba cracked the whip again. The tigers obeyed and hefted their front paws onto the boxes. The crowd applauded softly as though scared of making too much noise and spooking the jungle beasts.

Sheba stepped in front of the tigers and whispered to them softly. Both animals suddenly opened their huge jaws and roared. The audience murmured nervously amongst themselves at the display of savagery.

Richie could see the soft lighting glinting on the tiger's fangs and he realised that he was holding his breath. He could see the shimmering muscles under the animal's fur. Their power was undeniable and he could picture them racing through the jungle undergrowth tracking their prey. For the first time he suddenly realised that his attention had been diverted from his terror and he wondered if the night was not going to end in the worst possible way.

After the tigers came a procession of stunning white horses adorned with silver bells and tassels. The

horses trotted around the centre stage with riders standing on their backs. The performers leapt from horse to horse with amazing dexterity and grace to the ooo's and ahh's of the audience.

Richie was starting to enjoy the show and he also started to relax. He looked up to see his mother smiling at him gently and for the moment he forgot her betrayal. He started to wonder if he was being nothing but a baby after all.

The horses gave way to a stunning acrobatic display by the "Daring Dragons", a trapeze family who soared overhead without a safety net. Richie was fascinated by the acrobats as they flipped somersaults in the air before reaching out and grabbing handles with perfect timing.

His father bought cotton candy from a vender who mingled in the audience and Richie found his appetite return.

He was munching his way through the giant pink fluff when the speakers began to pipe out a merry tune. The music was fast and jaunty and he found his hand falling halfway to his mouth.

Several spotlights beamed down onto the centre stage as a small toy looking car emerged into the light. The doors fell open and a long leg stretched out wearing baggy floral trousers. Richie felt the sugary food roll over in his stomach as the clown emerged. People began to laugh around him as the clown stood on stilts beneath his trousers with impossibly long legs to have fit in the car. A second clown began to exit the small car, only this one was short and very round. He wore huge dungarees with rainbow suspenders and a bright yellow sunflower pinned to his chest. A third clown, this time female and a fourth soon exited from the car and people began to clap as the clowns started to circle the stage.

They began to tumble and roll, performing complex and difficult acrobatics considering their outfits. Two of the clowns started to juggle brightly colored bowling pins between them as they circled whilst a third managed to get himself stuck between them. The audience laughed as the stuck clown started to mime panic as the pins flew past his head. There were buckets of sloshing water that inexplicably turned into confetti as the clown stumbled forward and the front row prepared for a soaking that never came. There were balloon animals for some of the younger crowd and pratfalls and custard pies.

Richie sat glued to his seat and prayed for the act to be over. The clowns finally looked to be winding down he sighed heavily with relief. Their seats were several rows up and far away from the front where the clowns seemed to be choosing people to interact with. His relief however was short lived as the clowns suddenly broke into four different directions and headed into the audience.

Richie wanted to pray, to run, to beg his mother to take him out, but he could do nothing. He felt the inevitability as the fat clown came up their aisle. His father was sitting on the outside of the row and Richie was between his parents. The fat clown drew closer and was exaggeratedly staring into the crowd looking for a volunteer. Richie could see several other children and a few parents looking a little nervous and for once he didn't feel alone.

The clown's face was bright, white and clean shaven. A red painted smile ran all the way up to the man's ears and he wore a sparkling yellow wig under a round bowler hat. He had squirted several people with his sunflower on the way up the aisle to squeals of laughter. Richie sat terrified as the

clown reached him. He could see across the seating stand to the one next to theirs that the clowns were selecting children and bringing them to the stage. He knew that he was going to be chosen; he just knew that the clown was going to pick him - there was no other possible outcome. He closed his eyes and waited for the padded glove to grab his shoulder, but it never came.

The clown walked past his row and moved behind him, squirting smiling faces as he went. Richie couldn't believe his luck, there seemed to be no other possible outcome than the clown choosing him. why else was he here?

He started to feel the tension shift from around his throat and his breathing began to slow. His heart beat normally again and was no longer pounding hard against his chest. He wanted to laugh, he wanted to cry with relief, and he wanted to embrace his narrow escape. He was starting to feel pretty foolish when his father shattered his world.

"Here, over here!" His father called after the clown. "I've got an eager volunteer right here," he said standing up and shouting.

Richie wanted to scream as the clown turned and smiled. He knew that the man's makeup was painted in a warm and friendly smile, but the expression looked carnivorous and hungry to Richie's eye. The clown wore some kind of contact lenses as his eyes were tinged with red.

The clown laughed without a sound and he threw his head back and his fat body rippled with the silent laughter. The padded white glove clamped down on Richie's arm and pulled him forward. Richie wanted to fight and tried to pull away, but he felt his father's hands pushing him forward. He was only a small skinny boy and the large clown had pulled him halfway down the aisle before he had even realised what was happening. His heart was in his mouth as he was dragged into the centre stage and beneath a scalding spotlight.

Everything ran in a strange hazy slow motion as the clowns frolicked around him. They danced with exaggerated motions and wild hand gestures. The other three children laughed riotously as one of the clowns brought out a giant ring. The man dragged the hoop through the air and huge bubbles lifted into the air. A small girl on stage ran forward and the clown dropped the hoop over her head and she was suddenly encased in a giant bubble. The audience clapped wildly as the girl lifted a few feet into the air as she pressed her palms against the transparent shimmering bubble. The tall clown on stilts brought out a miniature high wire that was suspended about a foot off of the ground and he led a small boy along it amid wild whoops and hollers from the audience. The boy looked younger than Richie and he seemed to lap up the attention taking a pronounced bow at the end of the wire.

All the while the fat clown held Richie's hand in a vice like grip and Richie felt that he couldn't have run even if he'd been able to. His legs were like jelly and the lights were blinding. The faces in the audience were mocking laughter all directed at him; a coliseum gathered to watch his glorified end.

Richie looked up at the clown who held his arm. It was tough to tell where the man's costume and makeup ended and where the real man beneath began.

The third child, a boisterous girl with swinging pigtails and a bright emerald hair band was throwing rubber chickens into a juggling mix that including a bowling pin, a melon, and an egg. The female clown was showing incredible concentration as the items span through the air and one of the clowns

pretended to tickle her. Eventually she caught the items one after the other and handed the rubber chicken to the girl, but as she took the novelty toy it suddenly became a real chicken and began squawking and clucking. The girl dropped the bird and it waddled away drunkenly.

Suddenly all four clowns turned his way. Their painted eyes bore into his and every expression looked evil and hungry. Their red slashed mouths and slanted eyebrows looked like they were ready to eat him whole while the audience cheered on. He desperately tried to hold onto his bladder control and his reedy body trembled as they approached. He could no longer hear the crowd, only his own thudding heart.

The tall clown reached behind him and grinned manically. The other two clowns joined their tall companion and they all reached their hands around behind their backs. They walked forward with an elongated slow stride, one foot after the other closing the distance. Richie found what little courage he owned and started to squirm under the fat clown's tight grip. He shot his foot backwards and dragged his heel down the clown's shin just as the other three reached him.

"Oww! Jesus kid," the fat clown exclaimed as the other three suddenly threw custard pies with expert precision.

The sound of the man's perfectly normal, if a little wheezy voice startled Richie and all of a sudden the spell was broken. He heard the audience laugh as the pies flew over his head and splattered against the fat clown's now pained expression.

Richie looked around at the fat man wearing baggy dungarees and white makeup. He was starting to wonder if his father had been right after all. His fear was palpable, but the clowns up this close were just performers with sweat stains and body odour. The fat man was now looking at him with ill-disguised anger as he limped away.

Richie allowed himself to be rounded up with the other children as they took their bow centre stage. His arms were laden with balloon animals, candy, a poster and other souvenirs before he was led back to his seat.

He found his parents waiting for him. His mother's face was crinkled with worry but his father's was alive with smug satisfaction. Richie hated the idea that his father's plan might have worked. The clowns were nothing to fear, just people in costumes who presumably put their giant pants on one leg at a time after all. Or at least these ones were, but was every clown the same?

"I told you it would be fine," he heard his father say to his mother.

"Yes dear," his mother replied demurely.

The rest of the show passed off with many thrills. There were elephants and a fire breather, as well as a contortionist that his father seemed particularly interested in and a further variety of acrobats. Richie found himself enjoying the show and even managed a smile when the clown troupe made another appearance during a knife throwing act. But soon enough it was over and they stood with the crowd and applauded wildly. Finally after the lights came up they began to file their way out through the throng of happy parents and tiring children.

"So have we finally got that nonsense out of your system?" His father asked leaning over.

"I'm sure that everything is fine now," his mother interjected in an appeasing tone.

Richie nodded as his father ignored his mother's comment. "Yes sir," he said dutifully, if not completely honestly.

"Good," his father added curtly.

They rode the wave of people back out into the cold night air. The temperature had dropped considerably and Richie wished that he had worn a thicker coat.

"Michael?" A voice called out from the darkness.

Richie turned to see a balding man striding across the grass.

"Dammit, it's my supervisor," his father whispered to his mother irritably. "Put a smile on your face for Christ's sake," he snapped. "Richie go and play some games for a while," he said thrusting a few crisp notes into Richie's hand.

"Mr. Belding," Richie heard his father greet the man as he headed into the small carnival.

It was weird to hear his father speaking in warm almost subservient tones. He had only ever known him to be a man of rules and discipline.

He wandered off into the dwindling crowd as most were making their way back to the parking area and home. He tried some of the games but even at his tender age he knew that they were a waste of money. Bright stuffed animals hung on hooks close enough to touch but forever out of reach.

He wandered through the carnival and found himself towards the brightly decorated train carriages that the circus travelled in. The cars were red and gold and emblazoned with the "Haley's Comet" name. He noticed the sudden strong aroma of hay and animals. The tigers in the circus had caught his eye with their magnificent colours and sleek power.

He headed towards the smell and found a carriage with gold bars and a tiger inside. Up this close he felt hypnotized by the creature. It paced back and forth before it settled down on a pile of clean looking hay with a huge yawn. Richie looked on in astonishment as the tiger's massive jaws gaped open. The tiger's pink tongue lolled around its vicious looking fangs. He found himself walking forward to the cage transfixed by the animal.

Suddenly the tiger sensed his alien presence and sprang forward. It crashed against the bars and let out a monstrous roar. With the permanent guilty conscience of a 12 year old Richie ran away as the sound of rushing footsteps approached. He ran towards the back of the parked carriages and away from public eyes.

When he stopped he found himself amongst simpler abodes. These carriages were less garishly painted and not meant for display. They were camper vans and caravans for the performers presumably and many had seen better days.

When he stopped running he found himself outside of an old Winnebago set behind the rest of the vehicles. He leant against the side and tried to get his bearings. He felt the camper move suddenly as someone inside lurched to one side. His feelings of guilt were soon overtaken by his inquisitiveness.

He crept to the window and stood on tiptoes to peer in through.

The inside was dark and ratty curtains were drawn against the outside. There was a small gap between the netting and he could just make out a silhouette. The face turned and Richie saw the fat clown from earlier still in full makeup. For some reason the man looked angry at his intrusion. He thought that he had caught sight of a flash of something familiar in the corner of his eye. For a split second he was reminded of the girl with the pigtails plucked from the audience earlier. She had been wearing a bright emerald green hair band and he thought that the clown had snatched something green up off of the counter. The man's face might have still been painted with heavy makeup, but his expression bubbled with anger and perhaps just a little fear.

Richie turned to run again but the female clown suddenly stepped into his path.

"Easy there sonny," she said softly. "Don't you know that it's rude to go peeking into other people's windows?"

"I'm s-s-s-sorry," Richie stammered eager to get away, something felt very, very wrong here. "I think that I got turned around and lost."

"I should say so," the female clown whispered.

Richie could see that the female clown was also still wearing her full makeup despite the show being over some time ago. In the open air and away from the spotlights her makeup seemed somehow less false and more natural.

The door to the Winnebago suddenly flew open and the fat clown stood there with a towel robe barely covering his modesty. The big man was out of uniform but still fully made up; even his red nose was still in place and he held a tumbler of alcohol in his fat paw.

"What the hell's going on out here?" The fat clown slurred as he spilt some of his drink.

"This kid was snooping," the female clown answered.

"Don't I know you?" The fat clown asked Richie. "Wait a minute aren't you the little puke that kicked me during the show? Sure you are," he said smiling cruelly.

Richie stood there, held by the female clown unable to get away. He really didn't like the way that the fat clown was slowly looking him over up and down. "I'd better find my parents, they'll be worried about me," he said quietly.

"Well I'm not sure that anyone is going to find you," the fat clown laughed. "Bring him inside," he ordered as he turned away.

"Is that such a good idea," the female clown asked nervously.

The fat clown turned around and withered her with a look that froze Richie's blood. He found himself bundled into the Winnebago and the door closed behind him sealing him from the outside world. The female clown had stayed outside and left him to his fate.

"What did you see?" the fat clown demanded as he settled his bulk into a creaking armchair, all the

while never taking his eyes off of Richie.

"I don't know what you mean," Richie answered as he backed into a chair facing the clown.

"Yes you do you little snot, you were spying through my window and you saw something, it's written all over your face."

Richie noticed a strange and pungent odour in the camper and his nose wrinkled in displeasure. There was a choking sweet smell of artificial air fresheners that barely masked something rotten underneath. He thought of the emerald green hair band that he thought he'd seen through the window, and the girl that it had belonged to.

The fat clown sat opposite Richie and his girth spilled over his pants. He wore a ratty looking white vest that had seen better days and came complete with various stains of indeterminate origin. The clown's eyes were heavy with either tiredness or the booze that he was continually sloshing into his glass held in a still gloved hand. "You look at me funny," he slurred. "Up on stage, you kept looking at me weird like you were really seeing me."

"I don't like clowns," Richie mumbled as his eyes darted towards the door.

"Coulrophobia," the fat clown replied through a glassy stare. "It's called Coulrophobia, the fear of clowns," he explained. "And it's not altogether unreasonable," he grinned drunkenly. "Did you know that clowns have been around since the 5th Dynasty in Egypt around 2400 BC? We held important positions and played pivotal roles in shaping kingdoms and ruling worlds. But now we are figures of ridicule and derision, reduced to parlor tricks and dancing for the public."

"What are you saying?" Richie asked, intrigued despite his concerns.

"I'm saying that my people have been forced to degrade themselves for the pity of a few silver coins. Where once we ruled, now we serve and wallow in the mud. Entertaining children?" He spat angrily. "We find ourselves forced to dance on the strings of puppet masters instead of sitting at the right hands of kings and emperors."

Richie eased himself towards the edge of his seat as the fat clown's attention seemed to drift. He wanted desperately to make a break for the door and away from the rambling clown.

"Sit down boy," the clown commanded. "You're not going anywhere, not ever again."

Richie found tears pricking at the corners of his eyes as he stared into the round white moon face of the fat clown. "What do you want with me?" He asked quietly.

"There is always a price to be paid for everything boy, didn't your father ever teach you that? When you have been around as long as I have, you learn to pay your bills on time. I remember standing at the Pharaoh's side and influencing his decisions," the fat clown said sadly. "I remember the Mayans and their worshiping of us like Gods. I remember when you shaved apes fell from the trees and started walking upright for the first time. I remember when the world was ours."

Richie stared at the fat clown sitting in a dirty robe spilling whisky from his glass. "Am I supposed to believe that you are some kind of God?" Richie laughed despite the clown's lack of evident humor.

"Are you supposed to be some kind of immortal being sitting there in your slippers?"

The fat clown moved faster than Richie could even see. One second he was ensconced in his armchair and the next his three fingered spongy gloved hand was wrapped around Richie's throat.

"Insolent whelp!" The clown roared. "I should spill your blood for your arrogance; this world has no manners and no respect."

Richie responded by coughing and spluttering. Behind the Mickey Mouse glove the fat man's hand was all power. "What do you want with me?" Richie whispered hoarsely.

"I told you, there's always a price to pay for our existence. We may live forever, but we must feed and the blood of the innocent is so much more nourishing we have found."

Richie stared into the clown's eyes, they were red pools of age and cruelty. His mouth was twisted into a ravenous gaping hole that stank of the grave. The clown pulled him in close as his feet kicked helplessly above the ground.

"I have already fed tonight boy, but when you're as old as I am you are always hungry," the clown hissed.

"Ok, Ok, I think that's enough now," a voice startled Richie from behind.

The clown grinned and lowered him to the floor. Richie turned to face his father whilst his mother stood nervously behind. "I didn't want you to actually hurt him, that's not what I was paying you for," his father snapped.

"Sorry pal, guess I just got carried away," the fat clown shrugged as he waddled away.

"Well that's as may be," his father blustered.

"Wait a minute you paid him? What for?" Richie demanded as he rubbed his sore neck.

"To make you grow up a little Richie. I mean you're 12 years old for heaven's sake and running around scared of clowns, it's downright ridiculous," his father answered.

"And how was this going to stop that?" Richie said incredulously.

"Immortal Gods, living through the ages feeding on children, can you think of anything more preposterous? Could you come up with a tale as bizarre? And now how do you feel?" His father asked.

"Stupid," Richie freely admitted. He watched as the fat clown shambled back to the kitchenette counter to refill his glass. All of his nightmares about painted faces and the monsters that lurked beneath now seemed absurd. This was a clown in front of him and he was nothing but a sad old fat guy in a dirty vest. In spite of the receding fear that had wormed its way through his guts he had to admit that his father's trick had done the job. "You paid him to pick me out of the audience didn't you?"

"Of course," his father answered.

"We only wanted to help dear," his mother said with clasped hands and hopeful eyes.

"I wasn't sure that dragging you up on the stage would have done the trick, so I wanted to make absolutely sure," his father said.

"You could have just had the guy talk to me," Richie said sulkily.

"You are a strange child Richie," his father replied. "The rules of logic don't quite seem to apply to you now do they? Analyzing the problem I decided that a more, shall we say unorthodox solution was required. I don't know where you get this strange behavior from Richie but it certainly isn't from my side of the family."

"Well it's high time that we got you home and to bed," his mother added in her most appeasing voice. "It is a school night after all."

"Quite right," his father interjected. "Here you are as agreed," he said offering a fistful of notes to the fat clown.

The clown took the money and grunted.

"What about the hair band? The green one that I saw through the window earlier. The girl on stage was wearing it, the one with the pigtails," Richie said suddenly remembering.

"Hair band?" His father enquired.

"Ah, so you did see it then," the fat clown answered looking straight at Richie and ignoring his father. "I could try and tell you that you didn't really see it, or that maybe she dropped it on stage and I picked it up. But somehow I don't think that you would believe me would you?" He said quizzically.

"Well we really must be going," his father suddenly said as though picking up on a bad vibe, or smell.

Richie moved slowly towards the door that his parents were standing in front of. The fat clown now stood in the kitchenette off to the side of the exit. He still held a glass of whisky in his three fingered glove and Richie suddenly wondered why he hadn't taken the padded gloves off. The clown's eyes were full of suspicion and Richie wanted nothing more than to get outside and away. He slipped and stumbled in his haste and fell against a kitchen cabinet. A whisky bottle fell from the shelf and shattered on the counter spraying the clown in the face with golden liquid.

Richie's mother was well trained in the domestic arts and stepped forward automatically. She deftly snatched up a cloth hanging on a rail. "Richie!" She scalded. "I'm so sorry," she said addressing the clown as she mopped up the mess.

"Not to worry," the fat clown answered as he took a paper towel and wiped his face. "Accidents will happen."

Richie's eyes locked with the clown and he couldn't break away as his parents turned for the door. He stood there transfixed as the clown wiped his face and placed the damp towel on the counter. Richie knew that he shouldn't look, he didn't want to look, but he couldn't help it. He looked down at the towel and up again at the clown's face. There was no white paint on the towel and the clown's makeup hadn't smudged.

"You're sharp boy, maybe a little too sharp for your own good," the clown smiled with a mouthful of sharp teeth.

"Why is this door locked?" Richie heard his father demand as though from some great distance away.

His own eyes were locked again with the clown. Whatever this thing was, it wore no makeup on its face, the round white surface and slashed red lipstick were its true visage. The clown slowly and deliberately pulled off its padded gloves and unfurled three long scaly claw tipped fingers. There was no time for Richie to ask any questions about the clown's tale of immortality and how much was true before he was set upon with claws and fangs.

The Winnebago's suspension was tested to the limit as the home rocked violently and the screams were mercifully short. The female clown stood guard outside and rued her partner's appetite and temper. Normally they would only feed intermittently, and only when they were about to be on the move. The pigtailed girl should have been enough for a while, but she knew that wouldn't hold him for long. After all these years she should have known him better than to expect him to be disciplined.

Eventually when she heard the sound of bones being gnawed she headed inside for a feed, after all if he wasn't worried about his figure, why should she worry about hers.