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Crosstown Clown

Abstract

He is the biggest clown I ever saw. He must be close to seven feet. And built. This guy is built. He could take out a football player if he wanted to.

Keywords

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May 3, 2013

Crosstown Clown

Fiction by Steve Romagnoli

He is the biggest clown I ever saw. He must be close to seven feet. And built. This guy is built. He could take out a football player if he wanted to.

It starts to rain, and all the people crowd under the overhang and wait for the bus. Everybody tries not to make their staring obvious. But the clown knows. And we know. And everybody pretends they're minding their own business until the little girl and her Daddy walk up.

“A clown! A clown! Daddy, it's a clown!”

Everybody smiles and figures they've got carte blanche now to stare at the clown and the little girl.

The clown doesn't crack a smile. He doesn't check his watch that has no face. And he doesn't even work the leash with a bunch of fur on the end of it.

“What's in that bag, Daddy?”

“That's where he must keep his tricks, Honey.”

“His tricks?”

The clown lights a cigarette. He looks bored to hell. Everybody is now disappointed. He isn't doing anything but waiting for the bus. He shifts and stares down the street—looking, waiting—as if he were a businessman or something.

“What's his name, Daddy?”

“I don't know. Why don't you ask him?”

The little girl has two pigtails and is infinitely cute. Her father has a big grin on that would make him look simple in any other circumstance.

“Hi, Mr. Clown! I'm Emily.”

The clown looks down at the girl named Emily and takes another drag on his cigarette. He gives her a pained smile and looks away.

“What's your name?” says Emily.

The clown pretends not to hear her. As the rain continues to fall, people look at their feet or at things far away.

“Excuse me, Mr. Clown . . . But won't you tell me your name? I told you mine.”

“Roger. Now go away, kid, I have gas.”

Emily goes back to her Daddy, smiling like crazy. Everyone else is confused, not knowing whether to be upset or happy.

The bus pulls up. We all get on. The clown sits near the back. Of course, all the people on the bus are secretly staring at him.

“You'll have to put out that cigarette, Bozo,” says the bus driver.

The clown puts the cigarette out on the palm of his hand and sits down.

“Are his feet really that big, Daddy?”

“I don’t think so, Emily.”

“Sure they are,” says an old man carrying a club of cheese.

“Harry, quiet,” says his wife.

Harry and his wife are sitting next to the clown and across from Emily and her Daddy. The cheese must be at least a yard long judging by the size of the bag.

“Is that a provolone in your bag?”

“Why yes. Yes, it is.”

Harry’s wife smiles. “Our son gave it to us this morning as a present.”

Harry and his wife seem like a nice old couple. They are well-dressed, and they do not smell. The only problem is that Harry has a hole in the crotch of his pants. And no one seems to notice this but me. Perhaps everyone is too busy looking at the clown. It also seems that Harry doesn’t believe in underwear and the horse is about to run out of the barn.

The clown has closed his eyes and everyone is wondering if it’s the beginning of a trick.

“The clown is sleeping, Daddy.”

“He’s not asleep, Emily. He hears everything you say. Will you just look at those ears!”

“Clowns never, ever sleep,” says Harry.

“Shush, Harold,” says his wife.

Harry’s little friend is completely out now and growing. But still, no one takes notice but me. I pray that he shifts the provolone to cover himself.

“Clowns don’t sleep, little girl,” says Harry. “They don’t have to. Their whole life is just one big, long dream.”

“Bullshit,” says the clown.

“What, er . . . ” Harry is confused now. He starts to cough and fall out of his seat. His wife yanks him back in place but his coughing does not stop.

“Now look what you’ve done to yourself,” says his wife. And she beats him on the back, apparently in order to make him stop coughing. “It happens all the time,” she says. “Whenever he gets excited. A good bang on the back is the only thing that stops it.”

Meanwhile, Harry’s horse is running up alongside the provolone.

The bus driver takes a quick glance in his mirror. Just an old man coughing his guts out. The driver drives on.

“Daddy, what did the clown just say?”

“Nothing, Emily. He’s sleeping now.”

“But I heard him say something, Daddy.”

The clown still has his eyes shut. Harry is coughing and gagging.

Emily runs up to the clown before her Daddy can stop her. She pulls on his orange, baggy pants.

“Mr. Clown! Mr. Clown!”

“Emily! Come back here right now! Leave the man alone!”

“He’s not a man, Daddy. He’s a clown!”

“Bullshit,” says the clown.

“You are awake!” says Emily.

Emily’s Daddy pulls Emily back to her seat.

“That’s not a nice example to set for a child,” says Emily’s Daddy. “What kind of a clown are you?”

The clown opens his eyes. He bares his teeth. “Look Mister, I am not a clown. Especially not right now. OK? I may look like one, but I’m not. So leave me the hell alone!”

“Watch your language, pal. I’ve got a little girl here, in case you didn’t notice.”

“The clown looks mad, Daddy.”

“Clowns never get mad,” says Harry in-between another cough.

The bus pulls to the next stop. The clown gets up and heads down the aisle.

“Goodbye, Mr. Clown,” says Emily.

“Goodbye, kid,” says the clown.

“Don’t talk to that man, Emily. He’s not a real clown.”

“He’s not?”

“No, Honey. Real clowns are funny.”

The clown stops and turns back around. He looks at Harry, who’s still clutching his provolone and choking and being beaten by his wife’s bony hand.

“You want funny?” says the clown. “Well then look at that!” The clown points to Harry’s penis sticking out of the hole in his pants.

Harry’s wife screams while Emily’s Daddy rises and heads for the clown. “You son of a bitch!” says Emily’s Daddy.

Emily’s Daddy goes to throw a right but the clown grabs hold of Harry’s cheese, pulling it clean from the bag, and whacks Emily’s Daddy smack across the forehead.

“Hey there!” says the bus driver.

“Fuck you,” says the clown.

The driver stops the bus. People rush for the doors. Emily’s Daddy makes a second

lunge for the clown, but he is knocked back down with the provolone. The bus driver is making his way down the aisle. He is big, but not as big as the clown. Whack goes the cheese across the driver's face. Down goes the bus driver, and out of the bus goes the clown.

The bus driver yells, "Police! Help! Stop that clown!" And the policeman on the corner springs into duty and tackles the clown. But the clown is crafty, and he is able to struggle free, his back to the wall.

"Put down that cheese!" says the policeman.

The clown swings the provolone at the policeman, who makes a tactical block with his nightstick and knees the clown in the groin. The clown crumples in a heap. The rain lets up. The cop goes over to handcuff the clown, who springs to new life with a one-two punch into the policeman's jaw. The policeman is down, and the clown is gone.

I grab the clown's bag of tricks and take a cab back home with the treasure. I lock the door and draw the shades. I sit at my table with the clown's bag. Inside, I find the remains of a chicken dinner with a plump drumstick miraculously untouched! As I slowly take one bite after another, a smoldering laughter rises strong from my throat. The laughter soon wracks my body and I laugh and I laugh until the laughing is not funny anymore. I panic with the thought of never stopping. Staring into the black yawn of the empty clown's bag, I laugh helplessly at the nothingness inside. I pray for the trick to end.

Steve Romagnoli's short stories have appeared in various literary journals and magazines including *The Mid-American Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, *The Rusty Nail*, and *real fiction*. "Wasps" appeared in the short story collection, *Fiction '86*. Steve has had four plays produced in New York City, including, "Stealing Heaven," running off-Broadway at the Samuel Beckett Theater. He is currently working on a novel that takes place in the East Village and Moscow during the time of the Tompkins Square Riot of 1988.

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