

PIED!

(a dark comedy short for grown-ups)

Adrian Baldwin

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A dark comedy short story inspired by Stephen King's best-selling novels: *Misery* and *It* - but mostly *Misery*.

'You're weird,' points the short man just arrived at the other side of the table.

'Says you,' smiles Rex, 'dressed as ... *mutant crab-guy*?'

'Got it in one,' laughs the man.

Indie author Rex Stevens had been eyeing the folk wandering around the hotel's convention room all day; the book fair slash comic convention always had a large turnout and the extent to which some cosplay enthusiasts went never ceased to amaze him: superheroes, monsters, aliens, animé characters; some people take their fun very seriously.

Of course only a tiny percentage of those attending will be followers of *his* work (most are here for the comic book side of things, to be fair) but Rex, forever optimistic, always likes to try and spot his next buyer amongst the crowd. Readers come in all shapes and sizes, from eighteen to eighty, with diverse backgrounds and lifestyles, from locations far and wide, but sometimes he just got a feeling.

Rex has several novels on his table, the most popular of which are: *Mr Twitchy*, the story of a serial-killing ventriloquist dummy (whose new 'owners' always take the rap); *Brains of the Dead*, a disturbing post-apocalyptic tale about so-called 'smart' zombies; and *Pied!* - featuring Pennywhistle, an evil clown who delights in surprising his prey with cream-pies made with corrosive foam.

‘You wrote that one about the pregnant hooker who was really an alien,’ continues mutant crab-guy.

‘*Blown*,’ nods Rex.

‘She targeted truckers, sucked them all so hard there was nothing left but bones and whatever clothes they died in,’ chuckles the man, ‘drove their eighteen-wheelers to the next truck-stop, parked up then scouted for her next victim.’

‘I remember,’ smiles Rex; he doesn’t mind readers reminding him about one of his plots, revels in it.

‘Cops kept finding their sun-bleached skeletons dumped along the Florida highway,’ chortles crab-guy. ‘I loved that one. Especially each time she spewed up a load of pukey mess and her stomach went flat.’

Yes, that’s right, fans of Horror and Sci-Fi can be a strange bunch. But that’s okay with Rex, if it wasn’t for them, he wouldn’t have enjoyed the sales he’s had (various titles frequently in the top hundred on Amazon for both genres).

‘But don’t get me wrong,’ adds crab-guy, ‘I’m *glad* you’re weird. Thank God, I say. Your sick and twisted imagination has kept me entertained for hours.’

‘Sick and twisted,’ echoes Rex, ‘I’ll take that.’

‘Or maybe it’s us, the readers who are warped and weird,’ laughs the man.

‘Well, either way, I’m glad to have you on board.’

‘Yeah, love your work, just brilliant, I’ve got all your books.’

‘Oh, that’s a shame.’

Crab-guy looks a little affronted, then confused.

‘I was hoping you were here to buy my latest,’ grins Rex.

‘Yeah, no, I’ve already got it; in fact, I brought it with me.’ He dips a claw into his man-bag and rummages. ‘I was hoping you’d sign it. Best yet, I reckon.’

‘Happy to; and thanks, glad you enjoyed it.’

‘Where do you get your ideas, though, that’s what I want to know.’

‘Who knows,’ shrugs Rex. He’s been asked this countless times; it’s the question *everyone* asks. Either that or they talk about some mundane event that happened to them then say, ‘Hey, you can use that in one of your stories if you like.’ Writers usually push out a smile at this point but say nothing; never piss off a punter – readers are a precious commodity.

‘You want it dedicated or just signed?’ smiles Rex.

‘Can you make it to Gordon?’

‘Of course.’

‘This keeps up my run,’ grins Gordon. ‘Got ’em all signed. Be worth a fortune one day.’

‘Wouldn’t that be nice?’

‘Yeah, I go to a lot of book and comic things but I make sure never to miss your first appearance after a new title.’

‘Well, I’m flattered.’ Rex slides the book over. ‘There you go, and thanks again.’

‘No, thank *you* for being a great writer.’ Gordon picks up his signed copy of *Pied 2 (Pennywhistle’s Revenge)*. ‘I think I told you that last time.’

Rex adopts a puzzled expression. Silence for a beat.

‘I don’t expect you remember me. I was dressed as the Lizard from Spider-Man ... but that’s fine, you must meet a lot of people.’

‘No, I think I *do* remember you – *Gordon*, right?’

Gordon laughs, shakes Rex’s hand, tucks the book into his bag then jokingly walks off sideways, only to stop at the next author’s table.

As Gordon studies the back of Ruth Stone’s Paranormal Fantasy, *Something in our Blood* (one of several copies of the only novel on her table) Rex takes a moment to needlessly rearrange his books. *Shame Bizarro Betty isn’t back*, he muses. Bizarro Betty, as he’d named her, had Ruth’s table last year; wrote dark fantasies: creepy dolls, fucked-up fairytales and other weird stuff; strikingly attractive woman; had a prosthetic hand— *Oh, heads up*.

A couple, he with a receding hairline, she with hair in a tight bun, wander over at a leisurely pace, the pair dressed in matching salmon-coloured cardigans and sludge-brown slacks; frumpy but also *very* familiar.

‘Oh, nice one,’ laughs Rex.

‘Excuse me?’

‘You two,’ explains Rex, ‘coming as the Grays.’

The couple appear baffled.

‘*Milton and Marsha Gray*, the unwittingly insipid couple from my first book.’

They look to each other then back at the author.

‘You’re kidding, right?’ smiles Rex. ‘The knitted cardigans, the pressed slacks ...’

‘Milton’ shakes his head. ‘No,’ he states straight-faced.

‘Okay,’ laughs the author. ‘Right, well, that’s just a freaky coincidence then.’

But the couple aren’t laughing. ‘Marsha’ sneers: ‘You wrote about an “insipid” couple who look like *us*?’

‘Yes, in a way,’ admits Rex. ‘But *they’re* insipid, not *you*. You’re just ... smartly dressed.’ *Never piss off a punter; readers are a precious commodity!* ‘Anyway, that’s unimportant,’ grins Rex. ‘What is important is you’re here and it’s great to see you. I see you’ve already bought a few books. Do you attend many conventions?’

‘Not really,’ drones Milton. ‘But we come to this one every year.’

‘Unlike some it’s reasonably close,’ adds Marsha.

‘Only a six hour drive,’ he explains.

‘We have an RV,’ she sniffs.

These two are like a double-act, thinks Rex. ‘Well, it’s lovely to meet you,’ he beams. ‘Have you read any of mine?’ he asks sliding smoothly into sales mode.

‘We’re not into Sci-Fi.’

‘Or Horror.’

‘Especially ones with clowns.’

‘Yeah, they can be a bit scary for some people,’ concedes Rex.

‘No, it’s not that.’

‘We love them.’

‘Just don’t like to see them portrayed in a negative way.’

‘Writers always turn them into serial murderers.’

‘Or creepy sex pests.’

‘And child killers.’

‘That kind of thing.’

‘Well, Pennywhistle may be a loathsome serial killer,’ acknowledges Rex, ‘but he only ever killed a handful of kids; a dozen, tops,’ he quips. ‘And they were all those annoying bratty kids so ...’

Milton sighs and shakes his head.

‘And as Truman Capote said,’ adds Rex: ‘You can’t blame a writer for what the characters—’

‘Are you staying in the hotel?’ interrupts Marsha.

‘Er, yes.’ *Bit personal*, thinks Rex. ‘Head back in the morning. Got to get cracking on my next novel,’ he smiles.

‘Bit expensive, isn’t it?’ sneers Milton looking around.

‘It’s not too bad; I get a special rate because of the convention.’ *Not that that’s any of your business*. ‘You staying here?’ asks Rex.

‘No,’ is Milton’s answer.

‘We couldn’t afford it,’ sniffs Marsha. ‘Besides, we have the RV.’

‘Oh, yes, the RV,’ smiles Rex.

A long silence follows, she staring blankly at Rex, Milton reading the back cover of the author’s latest book.

Timewasters; if they don’t like Horror or Sci-Fi why don’t they just piss off? Might be deterring those who are interested. Rex looks around but it seems quiet for the moment.

‘Is this the book with us in it?’ asks Milton flicking through the pages.

‘No, this one.’ Rex taps a copy of *Pied!* ‘And like I said: they’re probably nothing like you; it was really just the cardies and that.’

‘Go on, then,’ decides Milton.

‘Excellent. Thirteen ninety-nine normally but just for today: only *twelve* ninety-nine. Or, special offer,’ Rex glides a hand over his other titles, ‘*any two for twenty-five.*’

‘Thanks but one will do.’

‘Especially at that price,’ mutters Marsha.

‘Okay, great,’ grins Rex. ‘Would you like it signed?’

Marsha shrugs. ‘Might as well.’

‘Alrighty – who to?’

‘Joshua and Hannah,’ states the cardigan on the left.

As the author signs the other asks: ‘So, where do you get your ideas?’

Rex stifles a sigh. ‘Most is just made up, obviously, but I merge it with real life sometimes; stuff that actually happened, events and the people I meet. I’ve always got time for my readers. I like to find out interesting facts, learn things about them. I’m always asking questions. Like where did you two meet?’

‘Brother and sister.’

‘Oh right, I thought you looked alike. Sometimes you get that in couples, though. They say opposites attract but quite often—’ Rex has been distracted: two pretty girls, late teens/early twenties, have appeared at his table; they squeeze together tightly at one side (Hannah and Joshua not surrendering an inch of space in front of the author’s table) and peruse the book covers. One’s dressed as Vampirella, in a costume so skimpy it leaves hardly anything to the imagination, the other, Harley Quinn, is a little less revealing but not much.

‘Anyway, nice meeting you,’ concludes Rex, quickly switching his attention to the newcomers: ‘Hello girls, looking for a good read?’

‘Always up for a good read,’ giggles Harley Quinn. Vampirella picks up a novel and they study the back.

‘Okay, well I have to warn you that you need to be eighteen or over to read this kind of Horror.’

‘Oh, we’re big fans already,’ smiles Vampirella. ‘We loved Pennywhistle; scariest clown *ever*.’

‘Yeah, he scared the pants off us in *Pied!*’ agrees Harley Quinn.

‘Did he, indeed? Good to know.’

‘We’re still gonna buy *Pied 2!* though,’ advises Vampirella.

‘Excellent, that’s what I like to hear.’

‘He’s in this one again, right?’ checks Harley Quinn.

‘Certainly is.’

‘Well, duh, it’s called *Pied 2! Pennywhistle’s Revenge*,’ teases Vampirella. ‘Sorry, she can be a bit blonde sometimes.’

‘Says you,’ laughs Harley Quinn.

‘Would you mind signing it to Katie and Gemma?’ asks Vampirella. ‘I’m Katie, by the way.’

‘Beautiful names,’ froths Rex.

Only now, as the author signs, do Hannah and Joshua finally edge away (at what Rex senses is a deliberate, almost resentful, snail’s pace) to the adjoining writer’s table.

‘Can I ask you something?’ smiles Vampirella. ‘Sorry, we don’t want to take up too much of your time.’

‘Nonsense – take as long as you like.’

‘Where do you get your ideas?’

‘Oh, I’m always full of interesting ideas,’ grins Rex with a wink. The girls titter in unison.

‘By the way, sorry about the camel-toe,’ states Vampirella matter-of-factly. ‘It’s this costume, it’s so freaking tight.’

‘Really, I hadn’t noticed,’ replies Rex playfully. *Could these two be Wroupies?* he wonders. (Believe it or not, writer groupies is a real thing.)

‘Why haven’t I got a camel-toe?’ grumbles Harley Quinn. ‘These shorts are as tight as fuck.’

Young women these days, notes Rex, *so brazen. Why weren’t they like that when I was their age?* Rex is forty-seven but has no qualms about chasing girls half his age; especially if they’ve shown him any kind of attention. Always had an eye for the ladies, and now he’s divorced, doesn’t even have to feel guilty about it. Not that he ever did. He writes his mobile number on a business card.

‘Here, take this as a bookmark,’ he smiles. ‘You can text me if you think of anything else you’d like to know later.’

Vampirella accepts the card. ‘We might just do that,’ she smirks.

‘... So, are you two staying in the hotel?’ asks the author.

From Ruth Stone’s table the cardigans look over, disappointingly.

* * * * *

‘Er, nine, I think,’ sighs Ruth Stone.

‘Not bad,’ smiles Rex.

‘You?’

‘About thirty all told,’ lies Rex. More like eight but ego being what it is.

‘Good for you,’ grunts Ruth heaving boxes (unsold copies of *Something in our Blood*) into the back of her old jalopy.

Rather than offer assistance, Rex takes the opportunity to check out Ruth as she reloads her stock. Bit plain, he decides, but reasonable body; out of three, he’d give her one.

‘Anyway, what are you doing down here?’ asks Ruth. ‘I thought you were staying in the hotel.’

‘Oh, I am; just came down for my phone – left it in the car.’

‘Right, well, nice chatting,’ puffs Ruth. *And thanks for offering to help with my books, by the way, asshole.* ‘But if you’ll excuse me I need to collect the kids from Mother’s.’

Rex tells himself it’s the kids that turn him off Ruth but in truth it’s only because she hasn’t shown the slightest interest in him; indeed, can’t wait to get away it seems. Rex puts it down to writer envy; he’s clearly the more successful of the two.

‘Oh, and thanks again for the tips on storyline plotting,’ she adds, *and if that sounds a tad sarcastic, so be it.* Ruth’s pet hate is Mansplaining; which, for you girls who don’t know, is a man explaining to someone, typically a woman, in a manner regarded as condescending or patronising.

‘Yep, nice meeting you,’ replies Rex without enthusiasm. ‘Maybe I’ll see you at the next one.’

‘Oh, you will,’ affirms Ruth. ‘I’ve still got all these fuckers to sell.’ And with that she climbs into her battered car, backs out noisily then putters away.

The hotel’s parking lot has plenty of empty spaces but it’s a squeeze for Rex to reach his driver door; someone has thoughtlessly parked their RV tight to the side of his sedan.

Irritating. Thoughtless. Infuriating!

Finally in, Rex fishes his phone from the centre console and checks for texts. ‘Pfft, nine,’ he scoffs referring to Ruth’s sales, ‘I’m sorry but anything less than double figures.’

Rex doesn’t say anything else; he can’t – the person who’d been hiding behind his seat has swiftly and silently injected the contents of a small syringe into his neck. The author catches a glimpse of silhouetted head in the mirror but then everything turns really black, really fast.

* * * * *

Climbing out of the dark into the light takes considerably longer than the fall. Those of you who have been injected in the neck with a strong sedative, or injected others in the neck with a strong sedative, will know this to be true.

‘Welcome to Cockadoodie Farm,’ are the first words Rex hears; a familiar, female voice – the greeting delivered without a trace of irony.

‘This will be your room until you’re better,’ remarks the man as he helps Rex sit up, props him with pillows.

Rex blinks, takes in his unfamiliar surroundings and realises he’s in bed; a single bed with an old fashioned brass headboard. Although blurry, he recognises his hosts immediately; the hair, the bird-like eyes, the drab clothes – and even at this early stage, senses he should not get their names wrong. Not Milton and Marsha. Damn, what did they call themselves? Jesus, he signed a book to them only—when was it—yesterday? But then he’s signed so many. (Not as many as he thinks but still.) *Jonah*, maybe; Jonah and ... Harriet? Heather? Fuck, it’s gone! Unsurprising; Rex’s head feels like a cannonball. *Bollocks, it’ll come*. In the meantime, questions: *Why do my legs feel weird; where am I; why am I with the two nut-jobs?*

‘Isn’t the view just to die for?’ froths Hannah.

‘Living in the middle of nowhere does have its compensations,’ adds Joshua.

Rex aims his groggy head at countless tall fir trees and the roof of a big red barn beyond the window, but they are nothing compared to what’s *in* the room. Eyes twitching in and out of focus he scans the circus paraphernalia, fairground junk, and carnival stuff; a Test-Your-Strength device, candy-floss machine, a fortune-telling automaton in a glass cabinet ... then there’s the clown crap! A *lot* of clown crap: soft toy clowns, a large Ronald McDonald figure, clown-themed snow-shakers and several portrait paintings of clowns. Rex is no art critic but he’d classify them all as hideous.

His eyes continue to roam: a bedside lamp, its conical shade a Pierrot hat; a hot air balloon hanging from the ceiling, its basket full of tiny plastic clowns peering down; clownish curtains – everything garish and overly colourful against the bleached wood-panelled walls and wooden floor. Perhaps weirdest of all, though: row after row of clown ornaments, literally hundreds of them; shelf upon shelf, full of the freaky little bozos – some smiling, some sad, many frozen in gesture (thumbs up, waving, pointing), others playing musical instruments.

‘Would you like slippers?’ asks Joshua.

Rex comes to notice his bare feet sticking out from under the blankets but has a more pressing concern: ‘What’s the huge mallet for?’ he asks of the huge mallet leaning against the foot of the bed.

‘Oops, this belongs over there,’ remarks Hannah, dragging the long-handled mallet, its large head scraping across the wooden floor, to the Strength-Test machine. ‘Everything in its right place.’

‘How did I get here?’

‘You had an accident,’ explains Joshua.

‘Really? I feel fine, just a little sleepy.’

Hannah, returned, throws back the bedclothes.

Below the thin hospital gown, Rex’s legs are severely bruised and blotchy, all purple, yellow and black; swollen, bloated, as if the limbs of a body washed up by a river and landed on an autopsy table; butchered, mutilated, chaotic lines of stitches zigzagging from thigh to ankle – horrific.

On the upside, his feet are fine. Nails could do with a trim but other than that—

‘Argh!’ screams Rex. ‘*What the fuck!*’

‘Yeah, you got run over,’ explains Joshua.

‘How many fucking times?!’

‘Now, now,’ admonishes Hannah, ‘they’ll heal.’

‘Ya think?’

‘Maybe we could put splints on them,’ suggests Joshua.

‘Yeah, I’m sure that’s all they need. No, what am I talking about; it looks like they’ve been claw-hammered then stitched up by Frankenstein!’

‘Give it time.’

‘Time? Are you mad?!’ Seriously, are you two fucking mental?!

‘And with the painkilling injections ...’

‘Hannah used to be a vet.’

‘And in the meantime,’ Hannah re-covers the author’s legs, re-tucks the bedclothes, ‘you must consider yourself our guest.’

‘*Guest?* You’re having a laugh.’

Hannah passes Rex a pen and notepad. ‘And what better way to pass the time than doing what you love – writing.’

‘... You want me to write a story?’

‘We do.’

‘... For us.’

Rex looks from one to the other. ‘For *you?*’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘And ... I’m guessing you want something with clowns in it?’

‘Yes, but not Horror.’

‘So no clowns as evil killers.’

‘Or alcoholic children’s entertainers.’

‘Not whilst you’re under our roof,’ advises Hannah.

‘Now, you have a think,’ urges Joshua, ‘and we’ll check in on you later.’

And with that the door closes. Rex is alone – in the freaky clown room.

So what the fuck is he supposed to do now? How’s he meant to get out of this – on legs like monstrous pepperoni sausages? Actually, maybe it isn’t as bad as he thought; sometimes his writer’s imagination plays tricks. He pulls back the covers ...

Yeah, no, that is bad. Then he passes out.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

‘Morning, sleepyhead,’ intones Hannah.

Joshua opens the curtains.

Rex, blinking awake, spots a young lad in the doorway stroking a teddy bear.

‘Who’s that?’

‘Oh, don’t mind him,’ advises Hannah. Joshua shoos the boy away and closes the door.

‘But who is he?’

‘Our son.’

‘Your *son*? Didn’t you say you were brother and sister?’

‘He’s, er, adopted,’ explains Joshua.

Hannah nods, offers a thumbs up. ‘Anyway, forget him, he’s not important, you’ve got other things to think about.’

‘Like how do I get out of here?’

‘No, silly billy, like have you had any ideas for your story?’

‘One, but I’m not sure you’ll like it.’

Joshua takes the notepad, studies the page, blank apart from a few lines.

Hannah sighs. ‘Is it about a *serial killer* who happens to be a clown?’

‘It would seem so,’ sighs Joshua.

‘Why, when the vast majority of them clearly aren’t, do you writers *always* turn clowns into murderers?’ Hannah grows red in the face. ‘Into monsters!’

Okay, this woman is clearly mental. Best keep her sweet. Don’t say anything that might upset her further.

‘Well, I’m a horror writer; it’s what I do. And, y’know, clowns *are* sort of evil.’

‘No!’ snaps Hannah. ‘They’re definitely not. Most are nice; fun – they bring laughter and joy.’

‘But see to me, they just don’t.’ Rex shrugs. ‘Sorry.’

Hannah seethes: ‘Right, wait there.’

‘Like I have a choice,’ quips Rex to Joshua as Hannah hurries from the room.

Joshua gestures that it'll be fine.

After several awkward, silent beats, Joshua just standing beside the bed, Hannah returns in full clown make-up, silly costume and floppy shoes. A tape-recorder is placed on the bed, Play pressed, and the room instantly fills with archetypal Big Top circus music; then Hannah the Clown is dancing bizarrely – in what can only be described as a sailor's hornpipe jig – whilst frantically honking a bulb horn; breaking every so often to throw in a saucy move: rubbing the inner thighs of her baggy trousers and thrusting her hips; bending over and winking across a shoulder whilst wiggling her padded, over-sized arse; that kind of thing.

Joshua nudges Rex. 'Hot, huh?'

Rex says nothing.

Eventually, the music ends. 'So,' pants Hannah, 'has that inspired you, mister writer?'

'Yes, definitely,' lies Rex.

'Great!' cheers Hannah. 'Now remember, nothing horrid.'

'So keep the murders to a minimum?' asks the author.

'You got that fucking straight,' replies Hannah, which surprises Rex. *Maybe her inner demons come out when she's in costume*, he thinks. *See, clowns are evil.*

'But you can make him a bad-boy if you want,' she grins.

'Well, that's actually helpful,' responds Rex, 'because there aren't any *good* clowns.'

'There is, too, good clowns,' fumes Hannah. 'Lots of them!'

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Thanks for reading the sample.
'PIED!' is available on Amazon in print and eBook.