

DEEP CLOWNING

By Jason Arias

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Two casualties of experience mash-mentor a gagging neophyte in this darkly underground kick-box plunge into a narcoluminescent screaming id. Subculture stalks as metaphor and meat grinder modernism lashes our sensibilities. The danse macabre is rare in fiction but you have it here—soooo Macabre good it needs a BIG not a little M. Plasmoid rich prose that's anything but vanilla throws 'art-curves' throughout transport Quote: 'If he wants to survive this gig, he's gotta let the job crawl into him and deposit its eggs, let the clowning ooze out his face.' And this jaw dropping line 'Jimmy's smile looks like it wants to eat everything.' Five stars.*

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Jimmy doesn't have a clue about how to walk duck-footed in his Combat Clownner 35 EEEs. He can't make a fall look right without actually hurting himself in the process. Plus, his red ball nose keeps slipping off during the Evaluation Drills and getting stuck under the crappy baseboard heaters.

Right now, Jimmy's on all fours saying, "Never lose your nose. Never lose your nose," on the faux hardwoods like the weakest probie-mantra ever.

"Jesus," Sarge says out of the side of his cherry-red lips.

It's all of the niacin we keep applying that makes our lips look almost bloody, our gums like internal organs, our earlobes like inflamed used rubbers.

The Sarge kicks a rat's carcass into the corner with a size 54-EEEE (big-boy) boot and a small plume of dust banks off the baseboards where the little body hits. This is a training apartment; it's supposed to be disgusting. We're supposed to be disgusting. It's all part of it.

I shake my head at Sarge while trying not to look at him. I hate looking at him anymore. Looking at Sarge is like looking into a carnival mirror that thins and stretches me out until I'm so contorted that it feels like I can see right through myself. And there's nothing on the other side. We're the same now, Sarge and me. Empty.

Thoughts like this and I'm not even drunk-ed yet.

Years ago we stayed drunk-ed for the authentic Clownner's nose—the bulbous raw knobs, vein-streaked, in the middle of our faces—and the horrid after-breath, but now we have other reasons.

Jimmy (the probie) doesn't know what we really look like underneath all this makeup and crap. He doesn't realize we don't look anything like him anymore. Don't think like him either.

Even when Sarge and I aren't working, we're still knife juggling in back alleys, or practicing the perfect flower lapel discharge at cardboard targets, or playing the Russian's roulette. We can quick-stab a knife between the gaps in our fingers, while on worlds of hallucinogens, without even thinking about it and Jimmy can't even walk right in his training-wheel size 35s? He's already got up off his knees and fallen again.

Jimmy's going to have to learn how to fall only on command, drunk-ed or not, and not split his neon permed head open. These Natural Clowns, these NCs will smell his humanness from backstreets away.

And here Jimmy is, proving just how far away Sarge and I have come from what we were: Sarge gunning for a promotion to Lieutenant, me looking for a way off the beat. Compared to Jimmy, Sarge and me look like two bloated, walking hospice patients. The whites of our eyes all piss-yellow jaundiced from gut-punching each other in the liver all night.

Now Jimmy's fumbling with his red foam nose on the sofa. God Damn it! He's pinching and pushing at that foam just so, trying to get it to stay put. He's acting all bashful and wide-eyed for sympathy.

I look at Jimmy and I hate him.

If I could stop smiling at him I would, but all the collagen won't let me. The diaphragm under my lungs feels tight from hyper-laughter training the other day. I can't remember the last time I was home. Don't even know where home would be right now.

I bet Jimmy thinks it's no big deal to infiltrate a Honey Pot of Natural Clowns; thinks that NC's are just brain-dead super zombies out of the comic books he reads. But he'll find out real quick that behind every face-painted façade lays a calculating killer. Every giant bowtie is a means for strangulation. Every other day they need fresh meat. We need fresh meat. Sarge and me; we crave the proteins now.

Jimmy doesn't get that it takes more than just some store-bought rainbow-afro-wig and squirting-flower-corsage to penetrate these tribes out here. The guys that make our team understand why Under-Clowners have a 98% divorce rate. And, really, that's before joining. Anybody that joins with a wife has a hundred percent chance of marital failure. Count on it. The suicide rate's not much better either. We marry *this* shit. We don't expect to come back from it. Sarge found out the hardest way.

It's been 18 months since a Carload of NC's abducted Sarge's kid, back when we still thought the clowning attacks were just a passing meme. It took us two days to find his boy. But by then he'd been bled out, all drained of life and made-up like some marionette hanging from the Fifth Street Bridge by a whole smattering of colorful bungees. There was a bouquet of balloons above the overpass as a landmark.

Jimmy, the rookie, wants to be a part of this but underneath his painted-on lips he's missing the point. He's sitting on the sofa complaining about the circumference of his ruffled sleeves; how they keep catching on the butts of his cigarettes. If he wants to survive this gig, he's gotta let the job crawl into him and deposit its eggs, let the clowning ooze out his face.

He's gotta learn to be less human than he is. I found that out after the NCs took my Jenny, years back, and transformed her into a Clownie-Queen-B. Put her in fishnets and baggy short-shorts and gave her to the worker ants to spawn her out.

Changed her.

Reproduced through her.

In the last photo I saw of my former wife she had tear-shaped warts growing on her cheeks, identifying her as part of the *Cry Now, Clan Later* tribe.

"Shut up about your shirt sleeves, Jimmy," growls Sarge from the side of me. He's had enough of this probie's shit, or maybe just too much to drink, or maybe not enough.

"Where are you at on your juggling, Jimmy?" I ask. I feel my heartrate quicken, my central arteries expand, and my limbs go cool. I feel like I need to run through something. Anything to get out of now. This training gig's burning through me. The saddest thing is that no

matter how much I hate this line of work, when I'm not doing it, I miss it even more. There's nothing human about that.

Jimmy picks up the three full-weight bowling pins off the shitty hardwood flooring in front of him. He sighs and tosses the first one too far to the left, the second too low. He nearly hits himself in the head as the third comes barreling down.

"You're done," I say.

"Did I pass?" he asks hopeful. His dumb painted smile.

"No," I say.

Jimmy'll be working back at whatever beat he came from by Monday. Back to his size 10 flats, or whatever the fuck reg-shoes he wears. This job isn't for him. Better he find out now than become some NC's appetizer.

Jimmy's white powdered face is becoming reconstituted with, what is that? Tears?

Jesus! Get a grip, kid.

Jimmy's getting streaked compound on his biggie-gloves where he tries to wipe at cheeks. Off-white on soft-white.

Sarge puts one gloved hand on Jimmy's shoulder, gives a little squeeze. "Truth is, you just dodged a bullet," he says. "Look at us, we're fucking mutants." Sarge pulls off his oversized fake nose, rolls it between his fingers. His real nose is a giant, red, pulsating blotch. There are rivers of green veins just below his transparent skin. He's almost see-through from hardly ever seeing daylight and all the anti-pigments we've had for breakfast.

“You don’t want this,” Sarge says pointing to the affliction on his own face, to behind his face, to inside his face.

Jimmy nods. And in the nod his red foam nose falls off. AGAIN!

He catches it, squeezes it tight between his thumb and forefinger. This is the bittersweet part for me: to see this kid’s disappointment, yet know I’ve also just saved his life.

I’m already getting nostalgic when Jimmy’s human nose, the nose underneath the fake nose, falls off and lands on the floor between his feet with a splat. Jimmy’s third nose, his real nose, is still partly taped down with tiny retention straps. It looks like a small cut of pork loin pushing against tight baking strings. Jimmy’s taped nose is as enflamed and grotesque and pulsating as Sarge’s and mine put together. It makes me think of proteins. A part of me is unnervingly hungry right now.

There’s a stray contact lens stuck to Jimmy’s right cheek from all his crying. Maybe he wasn’t crying. Maybe he was laughing. I can’t tell the difference anymore. The sclera of the eye sans the contact is as yellow as Sarge’s and my teeth. Jimmy’s smile is bigger than his face. Jimmy’s face isn’t human anymore, probably never has been. Probably born an NC. Jimmy’s smile looks like it wants to eat everything. That’s when I see the palm buzzer explosive in Jimmy’s puffy mitten-ed hand. How the hell did I miss that? And then I get it. We’ve become too sure of our own inhumanity. And this thing’s just taken us for a ride.

Figures he’d want to put on this show before just detonating us. Showmanship being an intricate part of the Clownner’s culture. Clowns being pieces of shit and all. I know this, because I am this. I can understand this, the urge to perform one last time.

I don't even make a move for anything as Jimmy closes his finger down on that silver button. I just stick my tongue out in the goofiest smile I can muster.

Hell, I'm almost thankful as everything goes white around us.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I originally wrote this piece a couple of years back for a coulrophobia anthology where it was promptly, yet respectfully, rejected. At that point in my work life I'd been in the EMS field for about fifteen years. I'd had the chance to work closely on multiple scenes with police and had more than a few good friends who were military vets. I started noticing how people with these kinds of backgrounds could say things around each other that we couldn't say around others. Because others would be like, "What?" and not in a good way. We saw things others, hopefully, never would. We had different (maybe darker) senses of humor. Our separation of home and work wasn't always the cleanest. We carried things we probably should have dealt with when they came up but didn't always know how. And even if we did have healthy outlets, there wasn't always time between calls. I was trying to find a creative way to simultaneously explore themes like: the specificity of workplace vernacular, the dangers of PTSD, and all the times some mother has told some kid "if you keep making that face, it's going to stick". I've always used writing as a cheap form of therapy. I've always loved the late Larry Brown's straight-forward, unadorned prose. So, with all that in mind, I borrowed something I once heard Chuck Palahniuk say about following an idea to its most extreme conclusion, and "Deep Clowning" was born. Something short and disturbing but not without humor, and humanness.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Jason Arias lives in Oregon. His debut short story collection *Momentary Illumination of Objects In Motion* was published in 2018 by Black Bomb Books. Jason's stories and essays have appeared in NAILED Magazine, The Nashville Review, Oregon Humanities Magazine, Clockhouse, Harpur Palate, Cascadia Magazine, Perceptions Magazine, Lidia Yuknavitch's TED Book *The Misfit's Manifesto*, and elsewhere. For links to more of Jason's work visit him at jasonariasauthor.com*