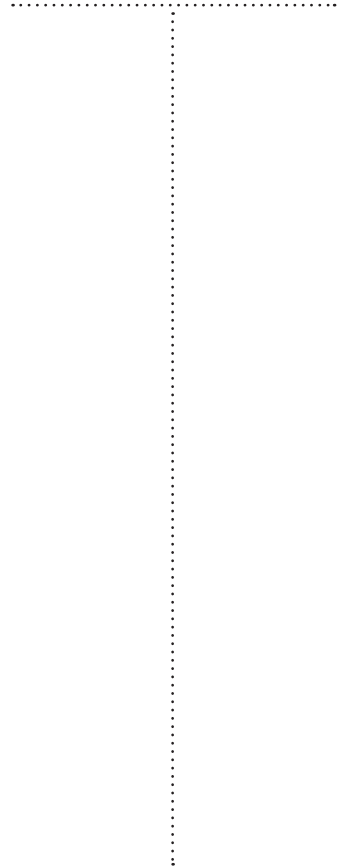


The
PILO
FAMILY
CIRCUS

by **WILL ELLIOTT**

PART 1



**SEND IN THE
CLOWNS**

CHAPTER 1

THE VELVET BAG

*There was not one among them that did not cast an eye behind
In the hope that the carny would return to his own kind.*

‘THE CARNY’, NICK CAVE

JAMIE’S tyres squealed to a halt, and the first thought to pass through his head was *I almost killed it*, rather than, *I almost killed him*. Standing in the glare of his headlights was an apparition dressed in a puffy shirt with a garish flower pattern splashed violently across it. It wore oversized red shoes, striped pants and white face paint.

What immediately disturbed Jamie was the look in the clown’s eyes, a bewildered glaze which suggested the clown was completely new to the world, that Jamie’s car was the very first it had ever seen. It was as though it had just hatched out of a giant egg and wandered straight onto the road to stand as still as a store mannequin, its flower shirt tucked in at the waist, barely holding in a sagging belly, arms locked stiff at its sides,

hands bunched into fat round fists stuffed into white gloves. Sweat patches spread out under both armpits. It stared at him through the windshield with ungodly boggling eyes, then it lost interest and turned away from the vehicle that had nearly killed it.

The dashboard clock ticked over the tenth second since Jamie's car had stopped. He could smell burnt rubber. His time as a motorist had cost the world two cats, one pheasant, and now very nearly one absolute fool of a human being. Flashing through his mind was all that could have gone wrong had his foot hesitated *at all* on the brake: lawsuits, charges, sleepless nights and guilt attacks for the rest of his life. Road rage came on fast and murderous. He rolled down the window and screamed, 'Hey! Get off the fucking *rooooad!*'

The clown stayed put—only its mouth moved, opening and shutting twice, though no words came out. Jamie's fury brought him to the verge of a seizure; did this guy think he was being *funny*? He gritted his teeth and slammed on the horn. His little old Nissan wheezed with all her might, a piercing sound in the 2AM quiet.

At last he appeared to have made an impression. The clown's mouth flapped open and shut again, and it held its white-gloved hands to its ears as it turned to face Jamie again. Its gaze hit him like a cold touch and sent a shiver up his spine. *Don't beep that horn again, sport*, said its ungodly eyes. *A guy like me's got problems, wouldn't you say? You'd like me to keep my problems to myself, wouldn't you?*

Jamie's hand hesitated above the horn.

The clown turned back towards the footpath and took a few drunken steps before coming to a halt once more. If a car came the other way at speed, it would do what Jamie had almost done. Oh well, Mother Nature knew best—it was just the natural course of the stupid gene, streaming its way out of the species like the letting of poisoned blood. Jamie drove off, shaking his head and laughing nervously. 'What the hell was that about?' he whispered to his reflection in the rear-view mirror.

He would know all too soon—the next night, in fact.

.....

‘Where’s me fuckin’ UMBRELLA?’

Jamie groaned to himself. It was the fourth time the question had been roared at him, with each word now having had its turn at the emphasis. Standing before him was none other than Richard Peterson, sob sister from one of the national rags, *Voice of the Taxpayer*. He’d hustled through the doors of the Wentworth Gentlemen’s Club in a storm of Armani and shoe polish. As concierge, Jamie was getting eighteen bucks an hour to politely endure the tirade.

There was a pause in shouting. Peterson stared at him in baleful silence, moustache twitching.

‘I’m sorry, sir, I haven’t seen it. Could I offer you a complimentary—’

‘That umbrella was a fuckin’ HEIRLOOM!’

‘I understand, sir. Perhaps—’

‘WHERE’S me fuckin’ umbrella?’

Jamie grimaced as two attractive women walked past the doors, smiling in at the commotion. For the next two minutes he repeated ‘I understand sir, perhaps—’ as Peterson threatened to resign his membership, to sue, to get Jamie fired . . . *Didn’t he know who he was dealing with?* Finally, one of Peterson’s associates wandered through the lobby and lured him up to the bar in the manner of someone luring a Doberman with a bloody steak. Peterson backed away growling. Jamie sighed, feeling not for the first time like he was the guest star on some British sitcom.

The 6pm rush came and went. Through the doors came a stampede of beer-gutted Brisbane Personalities, from law firm partners to television news readers, AFL head honchos, retired test cricketers, members of State Parliament, and suits of all descriptions, bar young and female. Quiet descended on the lobby; the only sounds to permeate the granite walls were the muffled honking of traffic, the quieting bustle of the city’s working day filing out, and its night life waking. The lobby was deserted, the peace sporadically interrupted by club members leaving drunker and happier than when they’d arrived. Once the

last of them had staggered off, Jamie descended into his science fiction novel, stealing furtive glances over his shoulder occasionally in case his boss or a stray Brisbane Personality caught him at it. This, by contrast, wasn't such a bad way to earn eighteen bucks an hour.

The clock struck two. Jamie started from a kind of trance and wondered where the last six hours had gone. The club was silent; the rest of the staff had gone home, all members were tucked into bed, comfortably full of beer, with their hired escorts asleep beside them.

Jamie walked through the city to the Myer Centre, a tall redheaded young man taking long jerking strides with thin legs, polished shoes tapping crisply on the pavement, hands shoved into the pockets of his slacks, where his thumb and forefinger played with a dollar coin. A beggar had learned his shift times and for weeks had been making an effort to intercept him on his way to the car park. On cue, the old man met him outside the Myer Centre, smelling of cask wine and looking like Santa Claus gone to seed. He muttered something about the weather then acted surprised and delighted when Jamie handed him the dollar, as though it were the last thing in the world he'd expected, and so Jamie's shift ended in profuse thanks, which was gratifying in a small way.

Wondering not for the first time why the hell he'd done an arts degree, he started his little Nissan. Its engine rasped like an ailing lung. On the drive home he saw another clown.

His headlights swept past the closed shops in New Farm and there it was, standing out front of a grocery store. This clown was not the same as last night's; it had dark clumps of black hair sticking like bristles out of a head as round as a basketball. Its clothes were different too—it wore a plain red shirt that looked like old-fashioned cotton underwear, clinging tightly to its chest and belly, and pants of the same fashion, with a button-up seat. Its face paint, plastic nose and big red shoes were the only things 'clown' about it; otherwise it might have been any fifty-something booze hound lost on his way home, or in search of back-alley romance.

As Jamie's car passed, the clown looked to be in the throes of despair, throwing its arms up in exasperation and mouthing some complaint to the heavens. In his rear-view mirror he saw it ducking between the grocer and a garden supply store, disappearing from view.

Jamie would have happily left it at that—there were psychos loose in the neighbourhood, no surprise in New Farm. He'd have driven home, crept up the back steps to shower, put out some cat food for the legion of local strays, slunk back to his room, masturbated to some internet porn then collapsed into bed, set to repeat it all tomorrow. But his car had other ideas. There was the grinding noise of a big metal belly with indigestion, then the smell of oil and smoke. Halfway down the street his little Nissan died.

He thumped his hand on the passenger seat, sending cassette tapes scuttling in all directions like plastic cockroaches. Home was four streets away and up a hill. He was stretching his calf muscles to begin pushing the mutinous wreck home when he heard a strange voice say, 'Goshy!'

Jamie's heart skipped a beat. The voice came from behind him again. 'Goshy?'

He'd forgotten about the clown. It was a clown's voice all right, a silly voice with exaggerated worry and a childish whine, from the throat of a middle-aged man. In Jamie's mind the tone conjured an image of the village idiot pounding his own foot with a hammer and asking why his foot hurt. The clown called out again, louder: 'Gosh-eeeeeeee?'

Goshy? Was that some kind of swearword? Jamie about-faced and headed back towards the grocery store car park. The streets were silent and his footsteps seemed very loud. Obeying some instinct that told him to stay hidden, he crept behind a hedge next to the car park and, through the leaves, he saw the clown standing outside the gardening shop, staring at the roof and going through the motions of a distressed parent, running a hand over its scalp, tossing its arms to the sky, now making an extravagant swooning gesture like a stage actress: hand to the forehead, a backward step, a moan. Jamie waited until its back was turned before darting from the hedge and crouching behind an

industrial garbage bin for a closer look. The clown called out that word again: ‘Gosh-eeeeeeeeeee!’

A thought occurred: ‘Goshy’ is a name. Maybe the name of the clown I nearly ran over. Maybe this one is out looking for it, because Goshy is lost. It seemed to fit. And, as he watched, the clown found its friend. The clown from last night was standing on the roof of the plant shop, still as a chimney. The suddenness with which it caught Jamie’s eye almost made him cry out in alarm. On its face was the same look of naked bewilderment.

‘Goshy, it’s not *funny*!’ said the clown in the car park. ‘Come down from there. Come on, Goshy, you come down, you *just* gotta! Goshy, it’s not *funny*!’

Goshy stood motionless, up on the roof, his fists bunched at his sides like a petulant child, eyes wide, lips pursed, gut sagging like a bag of wet cement under his shirt. Goshy stared unblinking down at the other clown; he wasn’t coming down, that was for sure. He seemed to be throwing some kind of passive tantrum. He gave one mute flap of the lips then turned away.

‘Goshy, come down, *pleeeeeease!* Gonko’s comin’, he’s gonna be *soooo maaaad . . .*’

No reaction from the rooftop.

‘Goshy, come *onnnnnn . . .*’

Goshy turned back to the other clown, gave another mute flap of the lips, and without warning took three stiff-legged paces towards the roof’s edge, then over it. The drop was about twelve feet. He plummeted to the concrete headfirst, with all the grace of a sack of dead kittens. There was a loud sickening *crack-thud* as he landed.

Jamie sucked in a sharp breath.

‘Goshy!’ The other clown rushed over. Goshy lay face down with his arms locked stiff at his sides. The clown patted Goshy on the back, as though Goshy were having a mere coughing spell. No good—Goshy would probably need an ambulance. Jamie looked uneasily at the payphone across the street.

The other clown patted Goshy's back a little harder. Still lying face down, Goshy rolled from side to side like a felled ninepin; he looked to be having some kind of fit. The other clown grabbed his shoulders. Goshy began making a noise like a steel kettle boiling, a high-pitched squealing: 'Mmmmmmmmmmm! Mmmmmmmmmmm!'

The other clown pulled Goshy upright. Once on his feet, still making that awful noise, he stared at the other clown with wide startled eyes. The clown held his shoulders, whispered 'Goshy!' and embraced him. The kettle kept squealing, over and over, but with each burst the volume lowered until the noise ceased altogether. When the other clown released him, Goshy turned to the plant shop, pointed a stiff arm at it and silently flapped his mouth. The other clown said, 'I know, but we gotta hafta go! Gonko's comin', and—' The clown patted Goshy's pants, then dug into his pockets and pulled something out. Jamie couldn't see what it was, but it sent the other clown into throes of distress again. 'Oh! Oh oh! Jeez, Goshy, what're you *thinking*? You're not meant to, not s'posed to have this here. Oh, oh oh, Gonko's gonna . . . the boss'll be *sooo* . . .'

The clown paused and looked around the empty car park before tossing the small bundle away. It landed with a sound like a wind chime striking a single note, and slid into the hedges by the footpath before Jamie could get a good look at it. 'Come *on* now, Goshy,' the clown said. 'We gotta hafta go.'

He grabbed Goshy by the collar and started to lead him away. Jamie stood up, unsure if he should follow the pair or run for the public phone—one of these idiots was going to get himself killed if they were left to their own devices. Then something caught his eye: a *third* clown. This one stood by the door of a copy centre two doors down from the plant shop, arms folded across its chest. Jamie shook his head in disbelief and crouched back down out of sight. He knew immediately that whatever maladies affected the brains of the first two clowns did not affect this one; there was a sharp awareness in its face, staring with narrowed eyes at the other two as they shuffled across the car park. Goshy and his companion halted. Goshy's face didn't change, but the other

looked at the new clown with something near terror. He stammered, 'Hi . . . Gonko.'

The new clown didn't move or react. It was thin, dressed in a full uniform of oversized striped pants held by suspenders, a bow-tie, white face paint, a shirt decorated with pictures of kittens, and a huge puffy hat. It squinted at the other clowns like a gangster from a Mafia movie; if it had ever intended to make people laugh, it may well have done so at gunpoint. It glanced around the car park, as though for witnesses, and Jamie found himself crouching further behind the industrial bin, suddenly convinced it was a very good idea not to be seen. The sound of Goshy smacking into the concrete echoed in his ears, *crack-thud*, and he shuddered.

The new clown beckoned the others with a single finger. They stumbled over. 'I just gotta, had to find him, Gonko,' said the clown who wasn't Goshy. 'I just *had* to, he can't look after himself out here, he just can't . . .'

The new clown answered in a harsh voice, 'Shut your fucking trap. Let's go.' Its gaze swept over the car park again, from the footpath right over to the industrial bin. Jamie ducked out of sight, holding his breath. He stayed down for a minute, worried his heart was beating loud enough for the clowns to hear—yet he couldn't pinpoint what it was exactly that he feared. Finally he risked a glance over the top of the bin. They were gone. He stepped gladly away from the stale reek of garbage. Over by the gardening shop there was a small white smear where Goshy the clown had fallen. Face paint. He touched it, rubbed it between his fingers to confirm the last ten minutes had actually happened.

The night-time city sounds hummed in the near distance, as though being switched on again after a short break. A dog barked, a car alarm beeped somewhere far away. Jamie shivered with sudden cold and looked at his watch: 2.59AM. It was going to be a long walk home.

As he passed the footpath something in the hedge caught his eye. He remembered the clown reaching into the other's pocket, pulling something out and throwing it away. He picked it up, a small velvet bag about half the size of his fist, tied at the top with white string. It felt like it was full of sand. Or, maybe, a different kind of powder. And judging

by the way the clowns had acted, just maybe it was the kind of powder Wentworth Club members occasionally left little traces of on hand-held mirrors, in their rooms along with bloody tissues and straws. Interesting. He stuffed the velvet bag in his pocket, where it bumped against his thigh with each step.

Now for the fun part. He put his Nissan in neutral and started pushing it to the service station two streets away. A passing motorist informed him with a scream: "That's what you get for driving Jap shit, mate."

'Arigato, gozaimasu,' Jamie muttered.

Later, looking back on this night, Jamie would marvel that he'd believed his worst trouble was the car and the ache in his back from pushing it, that never for a moment did his mind turn in alarm to the little velvet bag in his pocket, which felt like it was full of sand.



CHAPTER 3

AWAKE STALKING

HE sensed something amiss when he stepped out of the cab. It was twenty past midnight. The street was silent and there was no visible evidence to support his feeling, but it was there: *Something's going down here . . . Something's wrong.*

As he watched, the curtain in Steve's bedroom shifted slightly as though someone had just withdrawn from the window. The light went out.

At his own bedroom door, Jamie paused for just a moment with his finger on the light switch, listening for he knew not what. Everything suddenly seemed too quiet.

He flicked the switch, then dropped his bag to the ground and made a noise like he was being choked; it looked like a cyclone had been through his room. His television had been smashed, with a fissure in the screen roughly the shape of a boot's sole. His computer monitor was similarly wounded, and had been toppled to the floor like a severed head. The window was broken, and through the jagged hole he could see pairs of his underwear hanging on the neighbour's fence. His fish were floating dead,

and the letters RIP had been drawn on the tank in crayon, along with a hieroglyph of a penis. His keyboards, \$1400 worth, were scattered over the floor in small pieces. On his pillow was what looked to be a giant pile of human shit, curled up like a fat dead snake. His bedside table drawer lay on the floor, its contents spread far and wide. The little velvet bag was nowhere in sight.

But what did it all mean? This had been *done* by someone. At that dizzy moment it seemed the most absurd thing of all, as though an earthquake were a more rational explanation. *Why*, for God's sake? Who would *do* this?

Backing out of his room, he hoped he could just repeat his entrance, and the whole scene would blink away like a mirage. Shoulders slumped, head shaking, he staggered up the back steps and into the kitchen. He turned on the kettle, then the smell of puke hit him; bright red vomit clogged the sink and was sprayed over the floor. His shoes were in a drying puddle of it. He stared at the puke in a trance until the kettle squealed, waking him with a start.

Goshy. The thought passed across his mind like background noise. He dazedly poured the water into his cup, pulled the milk from the fridge, and noted that someone had put a dead bat on the middle shelf, next to a container of potato salad. Its white fangs were locked in a scowl. Jamie stared at it blankly, sipped his coffee, and let the door swing shut.

Out of the kitchen, into the living room. His eyes roamed across more carnage and settled on the wall, where someone had written the words POLITICAL PIGGIES in chocolate ice cream. The words rang a bell, and after a moment he recalled it was the message written by the Manson family in their victims' blood after the massacre. Dangling from the ceiling fan was a thin rope tied in a hangman's noose, from which a small teddy bear hung by the neck. There was a scrap of paper stuffed into a ripped hole in its backside. Jamie took it out and read the block crayon message: GOOB BYE CRULE WORLD. On the floor were pieces of plastic and wire arranged in the shapes of letters, and he recognised the smashed pieces as the remains of the telephone. The letters spelled the words HES NOT

HOME. Jamie somewhat abstractly noted that this piece of vandalism took a degree of patience and care, as though intended to contrast with the random violence around it; there was an almost artistic attention paid to each attack.

He sipped his coffee with a slow steady hand. Next to the smashed television a small red object caught his eye. He leaned over to pick it up, thinking at first it was a rubber ball. It was attached to a white plastic band—a fake nose. He dangled it by its string on his forefinger for a moment, then dropped it back onto the rubble.

Around then he became aware of the sound of sobbing from one of the bedrooms. Slowly he walked towards it, the scattered debris in the hallway breaking and crunching under his shoes. Past Marshall's door, he who befriended junkies. Past Nathaniel's door, he who embezzled bill money. Silence from both bedrooms—the crying came from Steve's. The door was open, the light switched off. Jamie stood waiting in the doorway, sipping his coffee. The sobbing stopped. He could hear Steve breathing in huffing gulps, his nose loud and runny. Finally he whispered, 'Jamie?'

'Steve,' Jamie said in a voice from far away, 'what's going on? Why is the house . . . Why is the house fucking *ruined*, Steve?'

Somewhere outside a police siren wailed then faded into the distance. Jamie could see Steve's dark silhouette shifting on the bed. 'I don't know,' Steve answered eventually. 'These guys came around . . . and I don't remember exactly . . . some of it . . . I did some of it, because if I didn't . . .'

Jamie blinked. '*Some guys* came around, huh, Steve? You're sure, now? Which *guys*, exactly?' In the back of Jamie's mind, he knew—the clown nose had not been a subtle clue. It was almost a deliberate game to clutch at a saner reason: that Steve had done it.

Steve broke down again. Jamie supposed he'd sensed some of the menace rapidly growing in his doorway . . . Political piggies all fucking right, only it wasn't meant to be written in ice cream. Jamie took a step into the dark bedroom. Steve writhed around on the mattress, the bed springs creaking. Jamie reached out to turn on the light. 'No, don't—' Steve began.

The room lit up. Steve's round face was smeared in a greasy rainbow of face paint. Around his lips a huge red smile was plastered on in lipstick. His head and hair were completely coated in oily white. Tears ran through the ghoulish mask, digging rivulets in his cheeks. Around his neck hung a red plastic clown nose, and he wore a shirt with frilly white cuffs and a loud garish flower pattern. The bedroom had copped the treatment along with the rest of the house. Steve's lava lamp was no more. His stereo was disemboweled. Half the floor had black scorch marks, like scars from a whip.

Jamie dropped his cup. It broke and splashed his shoes with hot coffee. 'Steve?' he whispered.

'Those guys,' Steve said between sobs. 'They came in and just . . . held me down here, and put this . . . stuff on me. I think they must be Marshall's friends, druggies. Maybe he owes them money or something, and they came here to get even. They were dressed like . . . clowns.'

Of course they were. Jamie crouched down on his haunches with a sudden headache. 'How many?' he said.

'Three, I think. They started downstairs. I heard all this banging, glass breaking . . . I thought it was you, so I went down there to tell you to shut up, you know? The skinny one grabbed me, and . . .' Steve made a fluttering gesture at his face. 'There were two others. One of them kept saying, *It's not funny, it's not funny*. The other one just kept making some . . . some *weird* noise . . .'

'Like a kettle boiling,' Jamie murmured.

Steve didn't seem to hear. 'The skinny one had a knife. He told me if I didn't help them trash the place, he'd slice me up. So I helped them.'

'You helped them,' Jamie echoed.

Steve gave him a look of reproach. 'What was I meant to do? It was three to one. The guy was gonna cut me, you should've seen him. He *wanted* to do it, he really did. I had to do what they said. They broke the TV. . . '

'That writing on the wall, in ice cream. Who did that?'

'The skinny clown,' Steve said. 'I don't know why. I don't even know what it means.'

‘And the puke in the kitchen?’

‘Mine,’ Steve whispered, wiping his nose with his sleeve. ‘But that was before they got here. Had a drink, came straight back up. Been happening all day.’

A drink. Jamie’s eyes settled on a cold half-empty cup of coffee on Steve’s bedside table. Then he looked to the broken mug at his feet, where cooling coffee was spreading out over the floor. A nasty memory surfaced: he saw himself tipping a little of that mystery powder into the milk, revenge for Steve being in the shower, revenge for the stolen food. Jamie had just enough time to smile mirthlessly before it hit. Nausea clutched his belly as though he’d been punched. It hit the back of his throat and gushed into his cheeks. He sprinted through the hallway, tripping over smashed bits and pieces, and made it to the kitchen sink with barely a second to spare.

When it was over, he scooped tap water into his mouth with two shaking palms and tried to rinse the taste out. Little white lights were dancing behind his eyes. He stared at his reflection in the kitchen window. *Now what?* he wondered.

Now the clowns were coming. It made no sense at all, but somehow he knew it: they were on their way.

Which, as it turned out, wasn’t entirely true. They were already there.

Jamie was in the bathroom rinsing his mouth with toothpaste when he heard a faint noise from his bedroom below. He paused and cocked his head, hoping he’d imagined it. Half a minute of silence passed, then the clowns announced themselves. Bump, scrape, mumble, kettle sound, SMASH.

It came from his bedroom below. He groaned and sprinted from the bathroom, into the kitchen, slipped on the puke and crashed to the floor. It hurt and it was noisy. Below, the sounds of demolition ceased and a watchful silence followed, to be broken by a muffled voice crying out, ‘Gonko, it’s not *funny!*’, then the sound of wood being ripped apart.

Jamie got to his feet and dug around in the drawer for a nice big knife, but the best he could find was a rolling pin. That in hand, he barrelled out the back door, feeling ridiculous; it was probably not a weapon Genghis Khan ever used to take care of business. Once down the steps he stopped and listened. ‘Gonko, please!’ said the whiny clown in an impassioned voice, right before a huge crash, then a quieter and more ominous *woof*, the noise of something bursting into flame.

Jamie gave a panicked whimper then ran for his bedroom. An orange glow flickered through his bedroom door. The three clowns had their backs to him. The whiny one with black bristling hair was carefully lifting the pillow from Jamie’s bed; he seemed to be rescuing the mound of shit from the flames spreading over the blanket, as though he held a sleeping infant. Next to him was Goshy, who turned to give Jamie a view of his profile. That surprised look was still on his face, still seeing it all for the first time. He shuffled around further, spotted Jamie, and his gaze narrowed into something utterly calculating. His mouth gave a mute flap.

The thin clown turned too, squinting at him with a face of sharp creases and lines, demonically lit in the dancing shadows of the fire. ‘Ah, hello sport,’ he said with false cheer. ‘We were just talking about you.’

All three rushed him; Goshy with his arms out like a three-year-old in need of a hug, the thin one like a British soccer thug, the whiny one stumbling and tripping as he came. Behind them the fire spread out over Jamie’s bed; planks had been torn from the wall and tossed onto the mattress to feed the flames.

Jamie took a step backwards and raised his hands for combat, but he knew he was doomed. He had never been in a fight with anyone—the closest he’d ever come was an exchange of death threats in a traffic jam. His knees buckled in fright and he hurled the rolling pin as hard as he could. Surprisingly, his throw was on target; the rolling pin spun end on end, straight at Goshy. The rolling pin hit his sagging belly then, rather more surprisingly, rebounded and flew straight back at Jamie—a flash of wood rocketing at his eyes. He turned to protect his face and the rolling

pin belted him on the side of his head. He fell to the floor and blacked out, completely at the mercy of the clowns.

As consciousness returned, Jamie remembered only that the waking world was an unpleasant place, and he willed himself back into the blackout. It worked for a minute or two, but it was hard to stay there when someone was pounding a tent peg into the side of his head at a steady 4/4 rhythm. He clutched at his head and moaned pitifully, then felt there was something wrong below the waist, too. Something was lodged in his rectum—God help him, there was. With a shaking hand he patted his backside and felt something stiff jutting out. He pulled it free, grunting at the nasty scraping pain. It was a rolled-up paper note.

Bam, bam, bam. The spike being hammered into his head beat faster as he sat up. Next to hit him was the smell, an utterly putrid reek of old beer and garbage. He peeled his eyes open and saw his room had been redecorated. The wall had gaping holes of torn wood; it looked as though the clowns had been working at ripping some kind of pattern—there was the beginning of what may have been a smiley face—but the job must have proved beyond them. The bed was now a pile of ash with a few springs and wires sticking out. Someone had dragged the recycle bin in from outside and spread its month-old contents of smashed bottles over the floor.

He stood up, swayed on his feet and sank back to his haunches. His eyes fell on the light switch; nails had been hammered into the wall around it from the other side, so their tips would jab any hands fumbling in the dark. He almost admired the effort the clowns had gone to.

Over on his desk was something that made no sense: a vase of daisies, undamaged and as pretty as a picture in the middle of the carnage. And there, on the charred mess that was once his bed, was what looked to be a greeting card. He staggered over, shoes crunching broken glass, and picked it up. It was in the shape of a red heart and said ‘For a Special Guy’. A kiss had been smudged on it with lipstick.

Like a failing engine, his mind's gears ground and squealed. Why these niceties amidst the ruin?

He looked at his wardrobe, which was now empty. On top of it was a neatly folded pair of work clothes, ironed and pressed ready for his next shift at the club. On the rear panel of the wardrobe, someone had nailed a dead possum in a parody of crucifixion.

Something wet dripped from the ceiling and splashed on his head. He brushed at the damp spot, headache thumping in time with his pulse. On the floor his outline was engraved in the broken glass and garbage. Next to it was the paper he'd pulled from his rectum. He unfolded the note and read the neat handwriting in gold ink.

I dig the rolling pin gag. We could use that. We could use YOU, too. You have two days to pass your audition. You better pass it, feller. You're joining the circus. Ain't that the best news you ever got? The fuck it ain't. You're just lucky the new apprentice ain't working out. I will kill that sonofabitch, you see if I don't.

*Gonko, on behalf of Doopy, Goshy, Winston and Rufshod
Clown division, Pilo Family Circus*

PS Steal from me again and I will cut your balls off.

Jamie crumpled the note in his fist and dropped it to the floor, wondering what kind of sense it was supposed to make.

According to the clock—which, somehow, was still working—he had an hour to get ready for his shift. Passing the downstairs toilet he saw the rest of his clothes had been stuffed into the bowl. Another wet drop slid through the floorboards above and landed on his head. Again he wiped it away, almost without thinking, but it had brought a new smell which caught his attention. On the back of his hand was a brown streak across the knuckles. Baffled, he stared at the ceiling. Through the gaps in the floorboards above, sewage was trickling like melting snow.

Jamie managed to walk calmly outside and run his head under the laundry tap before he keeled over and was silently sick.

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Upstairs, the house was the stuff of nightmares. It seemed the clowns had somehow rigged the plumbing to reverse and expunge everything that had been put down the tubes in recent memory. The mess had spread over the floor in the kitchen, bathroom and hallway, and was creeping gradually towards the bedrooms like a slowly rising tide.

With the resilience of a postman, he made it to work. When he got to the club, other staff and a couple of the members asked him if he was all right. He told them he was fine as he stared 1,000 yards into the distance. After the 6PM rush of suits, he took two phone calls. The first was from Marshall, calling from a public phone, demanding an explanation. Jamie hung up on him. The second call was also from Marshall, only his tone had changed to hysterical panic. He begged for an explanation. Jamie hung up on him again, then unplugged the phone.

He was barely able to respond to anyone he came across. Gradually the thumping pain in his head dimmed down to something tolerable. When the clock struck two, marking the end of his shift, he grabbed the master keys and made for one of the spare rooms, hung a 'do not disturb' sign on the door, and fell onto the bed.

Moonlight poured through the window. Jamie savoured the quiet as the thick granite walls kept the city noises out. Metres away the streets were teeming with the last round of nightclubbers looking for more booze and a mate, just a normal summer Saturday night in Brisbane. The women, dressed up like glazed hams and glistening in the heat, were trying to look like they belonged on the set of *Sex and the City*. Watch them closely and you could see the mannerisms of the American starlets they idolised; the gestures, the nuances of speech, grabs at being *sassy*. Meanwhile the menfolk, oblivious to it all, were squeezed tight into denim and sweat-soaked collared shirts, each one primed for a rodeo, staggering around in horny packs. The curse of the working class was in full swing. It was a comforting thought for Jamie as he lay there, just to know things were

in order. There are times when even the most insipid environments can be a comfort—knowing they'd never change meant at least there was *something* you could count on.

He had not expected sleep tonight, but he found himself drifting close to it, and gladly closed his eyes to take the hour or two of respite that came his way.

Something was digging at the back of his neck. The room was still dark. He woke like someone coming up from under water, gulping for air and clawing at the blanket. His dreams had been unkind again—more clowns, this time interrogating him for his whereabouts. *See you soon*, the thin one had promised.

It was half past four. Jamie reached behind his head and grabbed at something that felt like plastic. He fumbled about for the bedside light. As he'd guessed, there was a red clown nose in his hand. He had to fight back an urge to burst into tears, because this felt like the last straw. But he knew it wasn't. They weren't done yet. *The clowns could still be here, you know*, he thought.

He jumped to his feet, suddenly wide awake as it hit him: the clown nose was not just a natural extension of his nightmare. *They had been in here*. They were almost certainly still in the building. Maybe still in this bedroom.

He stared about wildly, under the bed, in the wardrobe, in the ensuite. All clear. He straightened the covers, but as he turned to leave saw something on the inside of the door. Another dead bat, of course—what else? It had been stuck in place with a nail through its skull, its vicious little face locked in a snarl. A piece of paper was lodged in its mouth like a cigarette. Jamie winced as he took the paper out, unrolled it, and read:

Sleep tight? Thirty hours to pass your audition. Make us laugh, feller. That's the assignment. We don't care how. We don't care who gets hurt or killed. Make

with the chuckles, you pass. Ditto for your friend. He has twenty-two hours to pass his audition.

Gonko, on behalf of the Pilo Family Circus

Jamie stuffed the note in his pocket and opened the door, grimacing at the dead bat which grimaced right back. Out in the hall all was quiet, with the faintest of dawn light trickling in through the high rafters. There was no trace of movement in the gloom. He could faintly hear the sound of vacuuming coming from one of the bedrooms. He ran to the elevator, pressed the button, and as the doors slid open he heard a distant voice yelling: 'It's not *funny!*'

He froze and made a choked sound, but after a second or two passed in silence, he supposed the voice had been in his mind alone; the thought was not comforting. The lift took him down to the lobby, where the front doors were shut and locked just as he'd left them. There was no sign of life in the arcade outside, its gates locked at either end. How did the clowns get in here if not through the front doors? He thought of the door by the kitchen, which opened out to a small alley used for garbage pickups. They could have scaled the fence and somehow broken through the door, but a street full of people would have seen them. The only other way he could think of was to scale the side of the building, like Spiderman, and climb through a high window.

At the front desk he sat for a moment and listened. All he could hear was the somehow peaceful sound of muffled traffic outside as a fleet of taxis carried drunk night-clubbers home. He switched on the two security monitors beside him, the little screens casting a thin greyish light in the dark lobby. The camera showed a black and white view of the kitchen, which was deserted. After a few seconds the view shifted to one of the hallways, also empty. Next, the back alley, the rows of black bins. All quiet out there. Next, the basement.

And there they were.

It took a few seconds for the scene to truly chill him. Goshy the clown was staring up into the camera, right at Jamie, and the sense of eye contact

was quite real. Goshy's arm was extended and in his hand was a cigarette lighter, its little flame dancing around like an extension of his thumb, flaring in the grey screen, distorting the picture around it. Behind Goshy were . . . one, two, *three* other clowns—they'd brought a friend along. Those three were busying themselves in the background. Jamie saw the thin clown swing an axe before the monitor's image shifted to show another empty hallway, then the kitchen again.

Why the basement? Jamie thought. A lighter. Fire. Why? What are they . . . ?

Then the chill set in. Built into the basement walls were three giant wooden vats, attached to pipes that led up through the club walls like veins, into the kitchen, bar and utility rooms. Sloshing around in those vats were many, many litres of cleaning products, isopropyl alcohol, turps and ethers. All of it highly flammable; all of it set to blow.

A moan escaped Jamie's lips and he clutched the front desk with both hands. The fire would spread up through the tubes, igniting the walls from within on each floor. Before any fire crew could get here, the club would become a spectacular blazing death trap. They would be too late to save the Brisbane Personalities charred in their beds.

Jamie grabbed the phone. His hand was shaking. The monitor did its rounds again, showing no sign of other people. He dialled for an outside line and called emergency services. It rang three, four times. The monitor switched views to the kitchen. Finally a female voice answered: 'Police, fire or ambulance?'

The monitor shifted to the hallway. 'Police,' Jamie whispered hoarsely.

'Police,' said another female voice.

'Hi. I got a problem with some clown— some guys. I think they're going to . . .' He trailed off as the monitor switched back to the basement. There were no clowns. In the background, the wooden vats sat embedded in the walls as normal.

'Yes?' said the voice in the earpiece.

Jamie stared at the monitor until the picture shifted back to the kitchen, where one of the chefs was ambling over to fire up the ovens, yawning.

'Yes? What is your location?'

He hung up. He sat staring at the monitors as they did their circuit twice more: no clowns in the basement. Maybe there never were.

Out the door he went, through the arcade, unlocking the gate and striding away in quick steps. Ringing in his ears was the question, *Where were you on the night of Saturday, February tenth?* He checked back over his shoulder twice to make sure the place was still standing, then jogged to a taxi rank on Edward Street, eyes peeled for puffy flower shirts, striped pants and painted faces.

He waited in line for a cab with the last wave of drunks to be rounded up and sent home to their hangovers and rude awakenings. A few could be seen staggering determinedly to the casino, the only place in Brisbane selling cocktails at breakfast time. Jamie felt as bleary-eyed as the drunkest of them.

It was a while since he'd been here in communion with the tribe, waiting for a cab as the sun came up, liver struggling with the backlog. With the sounds and smells about him now, he wondered what appeal it had ever held. It was just the done thing in this town . . . A person's twenties were the drunk years—or the drug years, if you swung that way. A year ago he'd been up to ten beers a day on weekdays, the top shelf for weekends. No one noticed a problem—people made approving noises, *praised* him for Christ's sake. Looking back, it almost defied belief. Every home he visited was adorned with collections of empty bottles, posters that read *Tequila: have you hugged your toilet today?*, pub humour, pub knick-knacks, bottle caps glued to the walls, entire shrines to binge drinking. It was everywhere you looked, so no one noticed.

In the taxi rank the drunks jostled around him, a danger to themselves and others, playing out their slurred melodramas. No flower-printed shirts, striped pants, red plastic noses. Out here, the clowns did not even seem possible.

A cab pulled up in front of him. A drunk couple jostled with him for it. Jamie shoved past them with a rare show of backbone and closed

the door before the male could try to butt antlers. He told the driver New Farm, patted his pocket for money and found the note he'd pulled from the dead bat's mouth—material proof in his hands that the clowns existed.

Thirty hours to pass your audition. Make us laugh, feller . . .

The cab headed down Brunswick Street, through quiet traffic made entirely of other cabs. The breaking dawn pulled the night away like a blanket from an unmade bed, showing the last of the clubbers and street girls slowly wandering home.

They pulled up beside the house, a big wooden Queenslander atop a hilly street. Jamie paid the cabbie and tried to muster enough energy to be curious. Marshall was standing on the back steps with a hose in his hand. This was a first: the boys were cleaning up. Marshall's face was frozen in shell-shocked bewilderment—and who could blame him? Water ran down the back steps, leaving nasty streaks of crap down the side of the house.

Jamie shook his head in disgust and went around to the front door. Water trickled slowly past him down to the gutter. There was an awful stink in the air. At the doorway he caught sight of the neighbours staring at him through their window, heads shaking. There was not much he could say. He waved apologetically, shrugged and went inside.

Most of the debris had been cleared from the living room and hall. Someone had broken out the air freshener in a futile attempt to cover the smell. POLITICAL PIGGIES had been washed from the wall. From Steve's room came a muffled cry of alarm as Jamie passed. The door opened and out popped Steve's head, eyes wide and panicky. 'Jamie? Thank God.' For a moment he thought Steve was going to hug him; there was a strange light in his eyes. 'Jamie, they were back.'

Jamie watched him in a tired way and waited for the rest.

'The *clowns* were back,' said Steve by way of elaboration. 'You know?'

'I didn't think you meant Jehovah's Witnesses. What happened?'

Steve grabbed his arm and pulled him into the bedroom. Steve sat on the bed, Jamie on a chair, the only two objects spared from damage. Steve's

round pink face looked to have been thoroughly scrubbed, but a faint tinge of colour remained from the face paint.

‘They came back when I was sleeping,’ Steve said, leaning forward and talking in a whisper. ‘They want me—both of us, I think—to pass some kind of test. If we don’t, they’re going to keep coming back. I don’t know what they are, but they’re serious. I think maybe they’re part of a—what do you call ’em? Religious . . .’

‘Cult.’

‘Yeah. You know, like that serial pest guy who’s always on the news, interrupting grand finals? Maybe there’s a *hundred* guys like that, all organised, you know?’

Jamie shrugged. ‘I don’t think so, but it’s better than anything I can come up with. What happened?’

‘I woke up and the thin one was sitting on my chest with his legs crossed. The others were standing behind him, just staring at me. It was fucking *creepy*, man. I screamed and the thin one pulls out this kind of spray can and fills my mouth with shaving cream. I almost choked. He said something like, *You have twenty-two hours to pass the test*. I asked ’em what the hell I’m supposed to do, and he said: *Make us laugh*. That was it. Then they left.’

Jamie nodded. ‘They were at the club too. Threatened to blow the place up.’

Steve reached forward and pawed Jamie’s leg. ‘What are they? Where did they come from?’

Jamie shrugged. ‘Your guess is as good as mine. What did you tell the others? About the mess, I mean.’

‘Told them what I told you. Some guys came around. But I told them it was bikers, looking for one of Marshall’s junkie friends who owes them money. Marshall was kind of spooked.’

‘That’s not a bad story. He believed it, huh?’

‘Yeah. He’s shitting himself. Nathaniel believed it too. He drove off somewhere. Said he won’t be back until it blows over.’

Jamie stood to go. The reek of sewage was getting weaker, but it was still there like a stain in the air, and he didn’t want to know how Steve

had managed to sleep in it. ‘The clowns didn’t tell you anything else?’ he said at the doorway.

‘I dunno, they said all kinds of weird stuff. That thin one—he’s a fucking *psycho*, man. I think his name’s Gonka.’

‘Gonko.’

‘Yeah. Hey, Jamie . . .’

He’s going to tell me he’s scared, Jamie thought. This is great, now we’re comrades in arms. Me and him against the world. Just great.

‘I’m scared, Jamie.’

Steve made as though to hug him. Jamie walked quickly away. Down the hall, a shaken Marshall was scrubbing and hosing and sweeping with almost superhuman vigour. It looked like he’d broken out some crystal meth for the job, his preference to coffee. As Jamie passed him he blurted out some rapid-fire talk: ‘Listen Jamie, I’m sorry about the mess. Look, don’t worry, the bikers won’t be back, I guarantee it, I made some calls, got the whole thing sorted out, just a misunderstanding I think, I’m really sor—’

Jamie slammed the back door on him in pretend anger. Down in his room the floor was still carpeted with broken glass. The only change was a light sprinkling of crap over the mess which had leaked through the floorboards above. The vase of daisies and the valentine card were where he’d left them. He made the first tentative moves towards cleaning up the nest. It took him a couple of hours to remove every last trace of the sewage and soak the place in disinfectant. He swept up the ash and wires that had been his bed and put some seat cushions in their place.

Lying back amidst the wreckage, his eyes fell on the card, and suddenly all he could do was laugh. For minutes he lay there, in the light grip of a hysteria which threatened to clutch him tighter and never let go.

