

FEARS OF A CLOWN

He thought the most accomplished part of his delivery was closing cadence. He couldn't get there soon enough. The nervous, acid stomach had kept him up most of the night and sloshed stale bagel bites and thin workroom coffee through his entire talk.

“As we see by the show of hands,” Kelly gestured broadly across the lecture hall from left side to right, “our limited sample size mirrors the broader population of these studies.” Attentive students began gathering their things. “Although fear of heights and public speaking seem to be a tie for this group.” He began shuffling his notes into the binder. “For next class, come prepared to discuss the five universal fears developed by the authors in chapter seven.”

“Doctor Kelly,” the wispy hand waved above Stevenson. She always came early to take the end seat of the second row. After his nod, she called out over the shuffle of her exiting classmates. “Can you speak to some of the lesser known phobias? Such as your research into coulrophobia?” Just like that the terror flashed back, unexpected, but every bit as intense as his first time. There was a sudden, stinging sweat under his shirt collar, the early low ripples of nausea, and the gnash of molars involuntarily raking across each other. He gripped the podium with both hands to regain his composure.

“Oh alas,” his words came out with a trembling sigh, “the limitations of a survey course. “That may lie beyond the scope of our present study.” He produced a cursory wave, exited stage right, and found himself alone with the loud, ridiculous flapping of his shoes resounding down the empty corridor.

So then, it was all out in the open. With graduate assistants rotating each semester, research projects were hard to keep confidential. Tenure required publication of significant new

research every five years. A committee determined ‘significant.’ For him, the window closed in four months. A prodigious body of work published by his peers established the court where he’d be judged. He was petrified by a vision of himself unmasked, a wannabe nobleman exposed as the court jester.

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He was three years deep in his study into the fear of clowns. The dearth of research on the topic signaled a way for him to establish fresh new ground, along with bolstering his own reputation. It was a somewhat bold step, but bold seemed to be necessary. He embarked upon the journey aware of possible outcomes, knowing reverence and ridicule were two sides of the same coin. Research on other esoteric fears; gnomophobia, nomophobia, even fear of the Pope, paralleled and corroborated parts of his work. His personal terror had begun while he was on the road developing background.

His yearlong sabbatical took him to the Florida gulf coast, home to the circus museum and family who portrayed a national clown icon for generations. ‘Hapless,’ the Harried Hobo was the alter ego of the entertainer who gained prominence after the Great Depression as star of stage and screen. Hap’s act, a perennial success, portrayed a member of the unsavory underclass with enough insight to caricature the daily existence of the privileged. Dr. Kelly’s research and writing would develop these points. Tragic misfortune and miscalculation in Hap’s personal affairs, according to quotes attributed to family and friends, began after the character confiscated control of his life.

His son took up the mantle as Hap the Second, appearing on commercial television spots and the carnival circuit. In interviews, his wife concluded that his demise, deteriorating into

drug and alcohol abuse, happened after total absorption into the persona of the same droopy eyed, frowning clown his father had portrayed.

“At first, the only time you would see Hap in character at the house was in his dressing closet. You might catch a glimpse of him as he went out to the garage. Then, he was Hap, more and more, until all he was,” each time he listened to the recording, the solitude in her voice touched him, “was Hap.”

Dr. Kelly was granted visitation with Hapless the third, during his last days in a cell before being transferred to the prison HIV ward. In police reports, he openly admitted to the murder-suicide plot in which he sawed two legs off a love triangle. The suicide leg was unsuccessful. He also ratted out a certain sad eyed clown as the only accomplice. During the conversation with the man lying on the cot, Kelly’s vision seemed to play tricks. In the subdued light of that narrow space, dark suggestions of painted tear drop shapes slowly appeared then dissipated beneath the prisoner’s eyes. Softly spoken syllables floated like smoke rings from the skewed, inverted crescent formed by his slack lips. As Kelly leaned in to hear, he could swear a whiff of greasepaint wafted his way.

“When I’m gone,” the dying man whispered in breath like cotton candy, “Hap won’t have a place to be.”

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Dr. Kelly returned to campus to find his manifesto on coulrophobia circling the proverbial drain. The assistant he had recruited to develop related research was charged with sexual harassment, packed up and left town that same night, clearing the computer and taking his flash drives with him. Because Kelly wasn’t present to bid on upcoming classes, he was stuck

with teaching the lame prerequisites no one else wanted. Meanwhile, while he was gone, University Press published a kitschy, Zen based book on overcoming phobias called “Fears of a Clown,” by some self-help psychology professor in the Midwest. The author had appeared on two morning talk shows, discussing his research into the more exotic manifestations of personal anxiety.

Kelly’s research, indeed his entire career, now appeared to him in dreams as twirling, fragile plates balanced on the end of flexible sticks. He trembled himself awake with the terrifying urgency of keeping them spinning. Trying not to disturb Beth, he slipped from under the covers for the bathroom. Being considerate, he went all the way in and quietly closed the door before turning on the light. Staring at the switch, he noticed a strange orange hue reflected off the white tile walls. Turning slowly to the sink, he lifted his face to the mirror. With both hands, his frenzied clutch pulled at the carrot-colored fright wig his own head of hair had become. The deflated pale oval of his drooping lips flew open in a silent scream. A shiny red ball on his nose cast sheen of its own. The damp bath mat, slippery as a banana peel, shifted under his feet and his flailing arms sent hair-care products and assorted plastic containers skittering across the floor.

“Everett, for God’s sake!” his wife called from the other room. “Nobody’s going to get any sleep. Whatever it is will wait till the morning. Come back to bed.”
