

## *SAVE IT FOR CENTER RING*

“Save it for Center Ring,” Zapata the clown prepped me outside the billowing big top. “That’s where you come alive.”

He stuck his trademark apple core makeup on my nose and playfully kicked my giant six-toed shoes. “Got all the trappings, Jimmy Olsen, but you ain’t a clown ‘til you feel it inside. I can’t teach you that.”

I rummaged in my motley colored trousers for a pad and pencil and jotted down the quote for my story. Zapata sighed.

A shrill blast from an antique calliope rent the air and we shuffled to take our places for the grand entry. We gave a wide berth to the dancing bears and ducked as a flying Lantony flicked in and out of his trailer, dangling by a chin-up bar. A petite bareback rider nimbly straddled two white horses. A small herd of elephants lumbered past us and took their place in the rear,

I scanned my reporter’s notes one last time and slid stiffly into a pratfall I had spent the past week trying in vain to master. Zapata laughed as he hefted me to my feet.

“It’s not how you fall as long as you land a laugh, but watch where you fall. Steer clear of the elephants.” The clown patted his chest. “And just remember, this is where it counts. Make ‘em laugh ‘til you feel it here.”

My diamond painted smile crinkled as I mimicked the gesture triggering my lapel flower to spit in my clown tutor’s eye. Zapata’s expressive face melted in a kaleidoscope of emotions. Even a passing cotton candy vendor, who had seen Zapata shoo away his nervous butterflies countless times before, couldn’t help but smile.

“That clown don’t hold nothing back. He ain’t afraid to let go. That’s why he’s so good.”

I tried to cup Zapata’s invisible butterflies in my white gloved hands.

“It’s okay to be nervous,” Zapata wrapped a sinewy arm around my shoulders. “It’s okay to sweat.”

“And ruin all this gunk it took us an hour to put on?” I joked though my heart stayed sober.

Inside the Big Top, the stentorian ringmaster intoned the night’s upcoming magic until a groundswell of excitement shook the tent. The thick flaps parted and we gushed through.

Bathed in brilliant lights, the clown troupe and I cavorted around the Hippodrome track like titans of tomfoolery. Zapata preened and pranced. He aped the ringmaster, swiped a band member’s tuba and pretended to get his head stuck in its mouth, leapt onto the shoulders of another acrobatic zany, Habebe, sending the pair tumbling to the ground, anything to snare a laugh.

Detached, taking copious mental notes, I hobbled around the dirt track as fast as my clodhoppers could scurry. I flinched as hordes of kids spilled from their seats and craned to touch me. Occasionally, I’d squirt some urchin to his utter delight. More color for my story.

“If the desk could see me now,” I mused probing the rafters for a fellow reporter or editor. I invited them all, but I knew none would show, not even Mimi who assigned me this feature probably out of spite to see if I could cover something besides a murder.

“If she could only see what I was doing to the circus. Your one chance to see the ‘slab man’ let his hair hang down or up as the case may be,” I thought as I shook my fright wig.

A tug on my suspenders pricked my reverie. I peered down to find a freckled faced moppet had hitched a ride on my oversized shoes. I started to teeter and the crowd roared.

Desperate, I hosed the freeloader but he clinged for dear life. I blew up a thin balloon and sculpted it into a pretzel and offered the prize to him. No deal.

“Want me to fall and crush you like a pancake?” I sneered under my breath. The boy’s eyes brightened.

“Clowns don’t talk,” he piped.

I glanced at my watch as the zanies in the audience guffawed.

“I’ll count to three then I’m kicking you up to the high wire. One..two...”

Siren blaring, a trio of Keystone Cops arrested me in the nick of time and hauled me away in their clown car. They escorted me out of the tent where Zapata bid me adieu.

“If you thought about quitting your reporter job and running away with the circus, Man –“

“They couldn’t pay me enough.”

Zapata frowned. “Yeah, I figured. Too serious for this gig, but I’m serious, too. Gotta get back to Center Ring,” he beamed. “Enjoy the show. I’ll drive you home afterwards, and we’ll talk some more. I know you still got questions.”

But Zapata couldn’t answer them. He wasn’t the one I had to ask

Outside the Big Top I sniffed the balmy night air, redolent with the thick smell of hay and the menagerie. A panther eyed me with suspicion, padding silently to and fro in his cage as I strolled aimlessly among the motor homes of the circus nomads. Tonight they pitched their tent in a shopping mall parking lot near San Diego. Tomorrow, they’ll trek north, next week, Vegas, 100 cities a year, more than 300 days on the road, coming to life only in Center Ring.

“Sort of like jaded middle-aged reporters,” I reflected. “Coming to life between the lines of stories that nobody ever reads.”

With that sentiment I tossed my notebook in the panther’s cage. He pounced on my words but quickly spit them out. Before I could feed him a gibe, the youngster I had confronted in the parade turned the corner with his mother.

“Why would that clown wanna stomp me, Mama? I thought clowns like kids,” I heard the boy ask as I skulked like a coward in the shadows.

“He wasn’t a real clown, Honey. You could tell. He had no heart.”

“Yes, if old Mimi could see me now,” I shrugged then suddenly pivoted on a whim. “And why not? If the city desk won’t go to clown alley then clown alley will just have to go to the desk. She deserves this.”

Instead of waiting for Zapata, I started jogging along the shoulder of the Coast Highway the long mile to the Tribune under the spotlight of a full moon. As might be expected, my road show caused quite a stir with passing motorists. One elderly driver momentarily careened out of control after doing a double take but managed to stay on the road.

“Pervert!” a trucker yelled. I responded with an appropriate gesture after he had traversed a safe distance.

“Oh, Mimi, are you in for a treat,” I conjured my revenge on the gruff city editor who assigned me this feature knowing I had no rapport with kids or any other human being for that matter save a morbid fascination with the murderous dregs of society. I imagined myself sitting at my desk across the aisle from Mimi and filing my story business as usual only I’d be wearing my clown getup. Perhaps I’d crouch by Mimi’s side and catch her by surprise. I could just hear her say -- ”

“Hey, Clownie, wanna party?!”

A gang banger’s taunt jarred me back to reality as a carload of joy riders grazed past, angry rap music trailing them like a bullwhip. When I saw the headlights spin around about fifty yards ahead, I dove down the bluff, rolled onto the beach and fled to a lonely lifeguard roost.

After a few minutes I decided to brave the beach route to the office but my oversized clown shoes quickly filled with sand. I was about to shed them when I sensed a stalker.

“S’okay, I ain’t gonna hurt you,” the gaunt, barefoot transient assured me. He dropped his sack and started edging towards me. Anchored in the deep sand, I felt like a punching bag waiting for a knockout. I flicked my eyes up to the highway and heard rap music wafting back to the beach. Ahead, the heavy surf, likewise, afforded no escape unless I could float in my costume.

“Don’t be afraid,” the stranger distilled my thoughts. He took a step closer. In the half-light I discerned a clean-shaven but weathered face that reminded me of a suitcase that had been banged around baggage claim too many times. The man could have been in his twenties though he looked much older.

“Look,” I said yanking out my baggy trouser pockets, empty save for a handful of slender balloons. “I don’t have any money, no drugs, booze, cigarettes or food.”

“I can see you already ate your apple,” the would-be mugger touched his sunburned nose. “Don’t run into many real clowns on the beach. You running away from the circus or something?”

“Or something,” I spit dismissively.

“I see,” the stranger extended a deeply calloused hand. “Bill Travers.”

Rejecting the gesture, I tried a new tack.

“Okay, hobo. I’m going to let you go peacefully. Just keep walking and don’t look back. Last warning. I’m not what I appear to be. Don’t mess with me!” I flung all the bravado I could muster. Didn’t faze Bill. He couldn’t take a hint so I gave him a shot of flower power in the eye. He crumpled to the sand and howled in pain.

“I didn’t do nuthin’ to you, Mister. Why’d you have to mace me? I just wanted to ask you something, that’s all.”

“It’s just water, fool,” I sneered while shucking my shoes and pocketing my balloons. Bill blinked a few times then laughed in relief.

“I been sprayed before. It hurts like hell.”

“For good reason, I’m sure I mumbled but the bum overheard.

“No reason at all,” Bill glared at me. “Once I was fishing for food in a dumpster behind a supper club when the bouncer maced me. Not like the restaurant was gonna re-serve the scraps, but I had a hungry family to feed.”

Bill picked up his sack and started foraging in a yellow trash can by the lifeguard station. I tempered my words.

“Look, if you’re hungry Bill, there’s a Salvation Army mission downtown about three miles,” I offered warily, still poised to sprint.

“Who says I’m looking for a handout?” Bill bristled then quickly softened. “But if you know of any jobs...I did construction in Michigan before my kid and I moved here hoping for something better. Maybe I can help strike the tent?”

I laughed. “I’m not a real clown; I’m a reporter.”

Bill ran his tired eyes over me and smiled.

“It’s true. I work for a small daily just a ways up the coast. They asked me to do a story when the circus came to town.”

Bill pulled a stub of a cigarette from his pocket, lit it and took a deep drag then blew his thoughts at me.

“Something magical about the circus. I borrowed some posters from a construction site and plastered my windows. For my son,” he said softly. “I thought he might like them. We live just up the bluff by the park.”

I flicked my skeptical eyes up to a crop of expensive homes clustered above the highway.

“You own a home in the Heights?”

Bill laughed. “I didn’t say own.”

“Then you’re a squatter?”

Bill swung his sack over his shoulder. “Maybe you are a reporter. Sure got a way with words...hobo, fool, squatter -- ”

“Jerk. I saved that one for me, Bill.”

Bill shot me a gap-toothed grin. I offered my hand and he gripped it firmly.

“Sorry I mistook you for something you aren’t,” I apologized, self-consciously pinching my harlequin costume. “Guess you can’t always tell, huh? Good luck, Bill. I hope you find work. Now I got to get back to mine.”

I started to walk away, but Bill blocked me with his words.

“Hey, reporter, you need a ride? I reckon it ain’t safe hanging out at midnight in those duds. You might meet a real clown.”



For a beat I considered the offer as I listened for strains of rap music but the cruisers had left. I shook my head and took another step. “Thanks anyway.”

“I wanted to take Adam to see you perform,” the tramp persisted. “I thought...” Bill stuttered and started to cry. “See my kid don’t talk. He don’t laugh or cry. He just stares inside his head. Maybe you could stop off and see him, huh? It’s on your way. There’re stairs just a Frisbee throw from here.”

“I’m under deadline,” I lied, the detached reporter always leery of a sob story, but seeing the tide wash out hope on Bill’s face, I softened. “Tell you what, I’ll leave some tickets in an envelope with your name and tape it on the park bulletin board, okay?”

Bill nodded. “That’s mighty kind of you, Mister?”

“Big Foot,” I waved my clown shoes but didn’t snare a laugh.

I started jogging along the hard sand carefully skirting the waves lathering the shore. Peering over my shoulder I saw Bill clamber up the stairs. Curious about his digs, I made a loop to follow him at a safe distance.

His story checked out. Bill did live on the bluff – in a sagging station wagon stuffed with tools, clothes, canned goods, bedding and broken toys. Circus flyers covered the dirty windshield beckoning Bill and his boy to escape if only for a night. At the top of the stairs, I donned my shoes and waddled over to Bill’s house. He greeted me at the tailgate.

“Who says ya can’t tell?!” Bill grinned. “Reporter my ass. Wait ‘til Adam sees this.”

In a flash, Bill fished inside his makeshift home and woke the troubled child, who I reckoned could be seven or eight years-old though he wore the thin frame of a younger boy. Gingerly cradling Adam in his broad hands, Bill carried the little boy and set him down in a round grassy clearing in the park.

Bill sat on a wet park bench and clapped his hands in anticipation. Adam just gazed distantly at the dark sea smothering the beach below.

Show time. I began my “act” by circling Adam, waving as I moseyed past but drew only a blank stare. Suddenly, I slipped on a beer bottle, a perfect pratfall, only it wasn’t intended. Not a peep. Instead of rising, I scooted close, pressing my apple core against Adam’s tiny nose. He sneezed. A start. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Adam track my finger to my lapel flower. I fired. Direct hit. A beat of silence and then Adam shuddered and cried to wake the dead.

“Holy Moley!” I knew you could get a rise out of him!” Bill bounded towards us.

“We’ll all get arrested, Sshh,” I tried to put a lid on the commotion. I blew into a balloon so fast it burst. Adam laughed. I dangled the remnants in his face but by now he had discovered my shoes. He started to reach for them. Slowly, painfully, I hefted a foot to Adam’s face and let him touch.

“Big Foot,” I touched my chest. “That’s me.”

And then I hugged little Adam so hard my flower splashed us both, and I kept hugging until I could feel the tingling inside and knew I had finally come alive.

**THE END**

