

A Family of Clowns

A family of clowns moved into the house next door last spring, and that, I'm certain, marked the beginning of the end of my marriage – and, really, of life as I knew it. It's not often you can do that, look back at one seemingly minor event and say *Here. Yes, this is where it all began.* But I can do that: it was the day the clowns came, and then everything, like a big circus tent, came crashing down.

Here's how it happened. Mr. Kellison, our neighbor for as long as we'd lived in Lake Forest, decided to move to Phoenix to be near his daughter. Mr. Kellison was the perfect neighbor; we often forgot he was there at all. So when we saw the FOR SALE sign go up, Sarah and I felt what all homeowners in that situation feel: foreboding.

"Oh, Robert," she said. "Look." By the sound of her voice I imagined the worst. A wall of fire. An army of rabid dogs. *Teenagers.* But I never would have imagined this.

"They're *moving?*" I said. "But that, that means . . ."

"New neighbors."

We stood before the window in the gray light of that fall afternoon, our hands almost touching.

“It could be good, though, right?” she said half-heartedly. “We could get really wonderful new neighbors. Think of it. People our age, friends . . .”

But even she must have known what a long shot this was. Sarah and I didn’t have many friends. Most people our age – nearing forty – were busy raising a family now, but Sarah and I never wanted children. Well, maybe Sarah, a little. But speaking for both of us I’d say we had no regrets. Still, it was tough to make friends with breeders. There was nothing to talk about if you didn’t talk about little Jimmy on the soccer team or Brittany getting braces.

Sarah took my hand, then just as quickly let it go.

“Let’s try to keep an open mind,” she said.

So we did.

The house sold a couple of months later, and then one day soon thereafter a moving van backed into the drive. We were both home. Sarah was an artist and she worked at home. She did these huge orange and gold paintings that looked like the caves where Early Man might have lived, like those caves in France where they discovered the drawings of bison being hunted and such. She does that, except in the 21st century. They sold well.

I was home because I didn’t have a job, and a persistent lower back problem made it difficult for me to get out and find one. C’est la vie.

We watched them move in. As we feared, it was a family: a man, a woman, two children. Movers began moving, Mom and Dad went inside, and the kids played around in the yard in that really loud way kids have. Sarah and I sighed.

“Well,” I said. “There goes the neighborhood.”

She laughed and I laughed, and then we almost kissed.

And now that I think of it, that may have been the last time we almost kissed.

It was my own stupid fault for trying to be a nice guy. I started the whole thing when I said, jokingly, “We should bake them a cake.” Why did I say that? I don’t know. The last thing I wanted to do is bake someone a cake.

She said, “*You* bake them a cake. I’m working.”

“Hey, I’d be working too if I had a job,” I said, but she didn’t hear me.

Anyway, I baked them a cake. It wasn’t the best cake in the world but I baked it and I was about to take it over to them when Sarah came in and said, “I’ll take it over. I know how you hate to interact with other people.”

I said, “What?” But she was right. I did hate to interact with other people, which is another reason I didn’t have a job and we didn’t have friends.

How long was she gone? Maybe an hour. When she came back she was juggling. Three lemons. She was good at it, too.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” I said.

And then – I think she smiled. She usually didn't smile, so it was something I would notice.

"They're clowns," she said.

So this was their deal: Ma and Pa Clown had been traveling with the circus forever but once their kids got to a certain age they decided to settle down and open a clown school so they could have a more normal life and still do what they loved, which was being clowns.

They set up a whole mini-circus in their backyard. There was a tightrope, three small rings, a miniature train and a donkey, which didn't appear to do much at all. They always wore their clown outfits, complete with face paint, so I never got to see any of them as normal people. They juggled. They did pratfalls. Sarah could watch them for hours. Sometimes she'd go over and do stuff – try to walk on the tightrope, for instance – but I never did.

"Their real names are Jim and Debbie," she told me. "But their clown names are Snookie and Bong-Bong." She paused. "They're nice."

"Nice?" Wow, I thought. Wow! Because like most people I was raised to believe the worst of clowns, that behind their painted-on faces and smiles there was something infinitely more sinister than we could ever imagine. And now here they were, our neighbors. Wow.

"We should have them over," she said.

"We should have the *Clowns* over?" I laughed. "Really? And what about the clown kids? What about them?"

Sarah paused. Looked at me. "They're fun," she said.

I should have had them over. I know this now. Because if I had, what happened next – the end of life as I knew it – might have been avoided.

What happened is, Sarah stopped painting her cave paintings, and began spending a lot of time next door. She brought back balloon animals, big shoes, noise-making devices, orange hair. She *mimed*. I hated that most of all.

In her defense, she asked me on a number of occasions if I wanted to come with her and I told her I didn't. But it wasn't that I didn't want to come; it was that I didn't want her to *think* I wanted to come.

"You're all I need to be happy," I said, and I touched her knee. Kind of patted it.

"Happy?" she said. "You're happy?"

"Happy? Me? Happy? Sure. Of course. Aren't you?"

Her silence should have tipped me off.

The next day I woke up and she was gone.

The fact that she was gone wasn't odd, really. What was odd is that she didn't come back all day, and she didn't call, and when I tried to get her on her cell it rang – but it rang here, at home. She'd left it behind.

Finally, I did what I should have done weeks ago: I went over to the clown's house. I had no doubt I would find her there. I knocked, and a clown opened the door. It was the man, I think: the clothes he wore were so oversized

it was hard to tell. But his face was painted in a smile, so that made him seem friendly enough.

“Hi,” I said. “Jim? Snookie? I’m Robert, from next door. I’m looking for my wife.”

The clown shrugged. He pulled his pockets out of his trousers and looked at them. They were empty. He shrugged again.

But then I heard something – a laugh. It was Sarah’s laugh: I remembered it from a long time ago. So I pushed past the clown and went inside, and it was a regular wonderland in there, full of balloons and confetti and a carnivalesque music. And that donkey. But I could hear the laughter and I followed it to a backroom, my heart beating like a giant person’s heart. THUMP THUMP THUMP.

And there she was. At least, I think it was her. There were two big clowns and two little ones, all silently pretending to be a family. They pretended to cook, to eat, and then – I watched the whole thing – they all pretended to go to sleep. As they did the one I thought was Sarah looked at me for a moment before closing hers. But there was no real love in her eyes. Not even clown love. Whatever spark she had – and she had one, for sure – she kept all to herself.

About a month later, the clown family moved away, and a family from Seattle moved in. They were nice enough. They opened a coffee shop. They gave me a job in it. I’m a barista now.

I still keep to myself, but when the circus comes to town I always go. You know, just to see if she's there. I even think I saw her once. I was sitting in the front row and this one clown picks me out and walks over. This clown looks at me for a long time. Dressed like a hobo, with a kind of a melancholy expression. She looks at me and takes a finger and slowly draws a line down her cheek – a tear. She's pretending to cry. It's my wife and she's crying, she's sad, she wants her life back, and suddenly I am filled with the most unbelievable, explosive kind of hope.

Then she takes a pie out of her jacket and slams it into my face.

Everybody laughs. I almost do, too.

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