

Coulrophobia

By Michael Danese

The following is based on a true story.

Jennifer and Laurel were getting settled into their dorm room. The first week of the first year of college can certainly be a challenge, and this one fits the mold perfectly. Buying books, comparing notes on classes, meeting new people, the newness of it all is both exciting and a little bit scary.

Jennifer has her nose in her psych book. Laurel is hanging some posters. She has been trying to get to do that all week, but just couldn't find the time. The posters represent a piece of her to visitors to the room. Her favorite movies, bands and activities. As she is tacking a poster on the wall she says to Jennifer, "Hey, check this out! I love the splashy colors! Bobby bought this for me at the circus last summer."

The poster is lovely, a close up of a clown in full clown regalia. The top hat filled with orange hair, big red nose, wide, gregarious smile and a devil-make-care twinkle in his eyes.

Jennifer looks up from her book and is overcome by a chill. She quickly looks away.

"Could . . . could you please take it down? I'm sorry!"

"Why, don't you just love it?"

"Actually, Laurel, you have no way of knowing, but ever since I was a little girl I have been afraid of clowns."

"What!? That is silly! How can you be afraid of clowns?"

"I don't know, I can't explain it, they just terrify me!"

"Okay, honey, I'm sorry, I'll take it down."

"Thanks. I'm not sure how it started, but I remember when I was little, my parents had a birthday party for me, and they hired this clown named Bubbles to perform. Bubbles was huge, big shoes, big hair and a big painted-on smile that just terrified me. I remember that when no one was looking Bubbles shot me a look that burned a hole right through me.

Ever since then . . ."

As she was talking, the phone rang and Laurel jumps for it.

"I bet that is Bobby! Hello, . . . no, this is Laurel, but Jen is right here, hold on please."

Laurel covers the phone and whispers, "I think it is Professor Dobbs! Why would she be calling?"

She hands the phone to Jennifer and looks worried as she listens.

"Hello, yes this is Jen. Oh, hi Professor Dobbs . . . Friday night? . . . Sure, I will be around, sounds like fun! Eight o'clock, okay, see you then!"

"Is everything okay? Was it about our assignment?"

"Laurel, you are such a worrier! No, she wants me to baby sit for her three little kids."

"Thank God! We gotta do good in her class!"

"Well, babysitting for her couldn't hurt. I was talking to her after class yesterday. She was talking about the kids, so I mentioned that I would be happy to watch them sometime. I really didn't think she would actually call! But, then again, I can use the cash!

"Sounds like fun, and sorry about the poster . . ."

"Forget it. It is no big deal."

As Jennifer steps up to the door she can't help but feel excited. After a long first week of college, spending some time with little kids will certainly help her relax.

"Ding dong" she hears the bell reverberate inside the house.

An adorable little girl answers the door. She is about five years old, blonde, bare-foot and wearing her "Little Mermaid" jammies.

Jennifer smiles through saying, "Hello!"

It a flash the mother greets her. "Hello Jennifer. Come right in. Thanks so much for coming!"

"Thanks for asking! I've been looking forward to it for the past two days!"

"You – upstairs" Professor Dobbs says to the little girl.

The little girl runs up the stairs.

Jennifer looks up to see three heads poking through the railing.

"A Kodak moment if I ever saw one," she thinks to herself.

"Girls, this is Jennifer – she will be staying with you tonight while we go to Aunt Kristen's house. Jen go ahead up, and say hello, I just need to grab something in the kitchen."

Jennifer walks up the stairs to the girls. The girls take to right away, like they have always known her.

"What are your names? asks Jennifer.

The girl that answered the door chirps, "I'm Ally."

"How old are you, Ally?"

"I'm five. I like your hair."

"Thank you Ally, I like your hair too!" She turns to the middle girl, "And who are you?"

"She's shy," says Ally.

"I am not! I'm Nicole and I'm four!"

"Pleased to meet you, Nicole."

The mom joins them, picks up the littlest and says, "Helen is my baby, she is two. She is doing pretty well with the potty. Everyone is ready for bed, so you can tuck them in."

"Can you read us a story" says Nicole.

"I'd love to!" says Jen.

"Can you read us Circus Boy!" blurts Ally.

"I . . . I guess so" replies Jen.

"They have been obsessed with the circus since I came home from work," explains Professor Dobbs. She continues, "It's up there on the shelf. One story then off to bed!"

"We'll be fine," says Jen.

"Okay, we will be at my sister's house, only about 10 minutes away, I left her phone number and my cell phone number on the pad in the kitchen."

"Honey – are we going or what!" the dad's voice booms from downstairs.

"Go, its great, have fun."

"Okay, call if you need anything . . . anything at all!"

"Honey!"

"Coming"

"Bye Mommy!"

"Bye babies!"

Professor Dobbs heads down the stairs. The slamming of the front door punctuates the fact that Jennifer is finally alone with the little ladies.

Jennifer settles into the bed as the girls climb over her.

"Here it is! Here it is!" Ally says as she pushes the circus book at her.

Jennifer takes the book and thumbs through it. She thinks to herself, “Clowns. Why can’t they read *Beauty and the Beast* like normal kids? The usual fairy tales with killing and maiming, no. They want to hear about clowns!”

“What about that princess book?” Jennifer suggests.

“No, we want to hear about our clown! We have a clown,” says Ally.

“Okay, but then you need to go to sleep, its getting late. Promise?”

“We will. We will. Read about the clowns” says Nicole.

“Alright, I can do this. Clowns are so stupid, I’m a grown woman. If these little tykes can handle it, so could I.”

And she did. She read them the whole story. She even had to fight with herself to admit that she actually enjoyed it. If clowns are such an important part of the lives of these kids, she can handle it. A small price to pay to escape the craziness of her week.

She tucked them in and headed down the stairs.

She gave herself the quick tour. Nice kitchen. Pretty living room. Small dining room, but very elegant looking china.

She ends up in the family room and plops into the recliner. She reaches for the remote then starts flipping through the channels. Surely there must be something worth watching on a Friday night.

After running the gamut of channels she reaches over and turns on a light. Her eyes quickly dart to the corner where there is a strange statue of a clown! Suddenly the room is freezing cold. She looks away, then back again. She actually feels the eyes of the statue on her!

She catches her breath and thinks to herself, “This family must be clown crazy! I can handle this! Maybe Laurel told the professor about this and I am on candid camera,” she chuckles to herself then looks over again at the statue.

The statue is about four feet tall. Orange hair, huge shoes, big red nose, beady eyes, everything that has haunted her all her life. She tries to amuse herself by suggesting that she get therapy.

She is, after all, a psychology major!

She decides to take action. If she can’t see it, she won’t think about it. She goes into the kitchen and grabs the phone and quickly dials.

“Hello, this is Jennifer; can I please speak to Professor Dobbs?”

“Jennifer?” She hears as if someone has their hand over the phone.

“Jennifer – Is everything okay! What’s the matter?”

“No, no, everything is fine! I just wanted to ask you something.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I just get so rattles when I’m away from the kids.”

“No, it’s okay. Do you think it would be a problem to move the statue into the closet?”

“Move what?” the mom answered in a confused voice.

“It’s just that I have this deep fear of clowns.”

“Clowns, what is up with clowns!?! Since I came home all the kids could talk about was playing with a clown!”

“But, if it is okay with you, can I move the statue?”

“What do you mean?”

“The big clown statue . . . in the family room?”

“Clown statue, we don’t have a clown statue!” She becomes frantic, “Listen to me - -get the kids out of bed and get out of that house right now! I’m calling 911! Get out!”

Jennifer’s heart was now pumping like a hemi.

She ran up the stairs, scooped up the baby and almost dragged Ally and Nicole out of the house.

Within minutes the police converged on the house. There were sirens and blinking lights everywhere. The kids were crying and scared to death.

The professor and her husband were there is a flash. The scooped up their kids with a shower of hugs and kisses.

Moments later, the cops drug out the “statue” which was really a small man in a costume.

The next day, Jennifer’s picture was on the cover of the Daily News and the Inquirer. She was a hero. The night before, after giving her statement at the police station, she learned the real story.

The “clown” was a fugitive from the Norristown Mental Hospital. The deranged man was 32 years old. It seems that he spent the entire day before hiding in the Dobbs’ house. He played with the kids from time to time throughout the day and hid from their housekeeper the rest of the time. Without his medication, he tended to spend hours standing still and staring into space, which in the dark corner of the house, would make it easy to mistake him for a statue. He had been in the asylum for over twenty years. He was convicted of murdering his parents and his three little sisters, but was judged to be insane, so he could never stand for trial. His parents were life-long circus performers. When his life took a turn for the worse, he was in training to be a clown. In fact, he was still in his costume when he went on his murderous spree.

A local costume store near Jennifer’s campus reported a break-in the night before. The only thing stolen was a clown costume.

To this day, Jennifer still suffers from Coulrophobia, an abnormal and persistent fear of clowns. She still shies away from the circus. But she did manage to get an “A” in Professor Dobbs’ psyc class. And, she and the Dobbs Family, especially the three girls, have become great friends. She baby-sits them on a regular basis. But, as bedtime rolls around, the favorite books are ones like *Cinderella*, or some other fairy tale with witches, monsters and princesses. Never a story about a clown!

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