

## Quit Clowning Around

Please tell me we all have that distinctive childhood memory of a day so traumatizing that the world never looked the same again. Anyone? Just me? I know it seems a bit dramatic, but my fourth birthday party really rattled something within me that has never sat still since. I never really expected to be such a seasoned soul just past my toddler stage, but for the sake of this story, we have Norman to thank for that.

His bulbous nose had dulled from its previous years of shine, and I distinctively saw pores poking through the worn, red colour when his face flashed close to mine. His breath was hot and smelled of coffee, and his icy blue eyes pierced my soul with a single glance. It was in that moment that I knew I was going to die – and I mean ... I didn't, not yet. But when I felt my small body seize and my mind go blank with fear, I knew I would always feel these sensations for the rest of my life. I shook and shook; I cried and hid. Still, Norman wouldn't leave. What kind of clown name is 'Norman' anyways? Did he just show up to clown school like "Hey, I'm Norman," and then impress the cool clown dudes by slyly pulling two full minutes worth of handkerchiefs from his pocket? He probably did, which takes a lot of guts in front of a crowd.

I guessed that must have been how he made the name work for him. I really believed he was far from a normal man. He could have been an alien out to get me, perhaps. Or maybe he was just an ancient jester creature from Egypt, who hopped on a plane and came out here specifically to feast on my innocent soul. Whatever he was, I needed away from him and his yellow puffs of hair immediately. I found it impossible to escape him or the feeling.

Everyone laughed as he began crafting giraffes, dogs, and flamingos from multi-coloured balloons. I just watched intensively as he twisted the life out of that poor giraffe's neck. With every squeak of the plastic, I felt like he was gripping at my throat, choking the life out of me. Ironically, my red and pink shirt that read "Happy" in a cute font on the front proved I was anything but. I was scared and wanted to hide, even though I knew I was safe overall. I didn't notice any of my friends feeling this way, as I watched their starry-eyed faces gasping at his every movement. My abrasive dad also just laughed his hearty laugh and called me a wimp as I cried on his lap, while still holding me tight. It seemed they all knew the clown was there for something genuinely happy, so I was confused why I wasn't happy too. Why wasn't I laughing? (Why so ... serious?)

When I grew up, I recounted the worst day with my grandmother. She laughed with a sparkle of kindness in her eyes.

"Oh Miss Muffet," she looked straight at me, "Norman is a nice man. He's a retired firefighter with a real nice family. He's a friend of your grandfather's."

My grandfather? I remember the wheels turning in my brain when she told me that. Grandpa Leo was the best man I had ever known, so he wouldn't have been friends with a monster, would he? My mind quickly shifted back to the thought of Norman's painted smile. That sick bastard had a family the whole time he was out here traumatizing little birthday girls for fun!? I'm joking, of course ... he was paid to traumatize me by my *own* parents. This was the real turning point for me. If I couldn't trust my parents, and I obviously couldn't trust Norman, then who could I trust? Ever since then, my family has been putting me in these types of situations, allowing my inner stress jester to peep out from a dark corner of my mind and freeze me in place. I don't know why clowns had to be the manifestation of this feeling for me, but if

you were to ask me now, I'd say anxiety really does feel like the same thing. Creeping into the room like a Stephen King creation, you barely notice it there. Then, when you finally notice it there, it's coming at you full force with terrifyingly big squeaky clown shoes. All this, just to keep you lively and on your toes.

It wasn't until the end of middle school that I began to understand this funny feeling brewing inside of me. Our classrooms were bright and full of laughter, friendship, and authentic happiness, and I wanted so desperately to be a part of all of it. I joined every after-school club I could to better my social skills so I could get somewhere substantial with a group of friends before we had to part ways to high school. It was when I finally started squeezing my way into these clubs that I realized the weirdest thing: good clowns *do* exist. It had to be true, because I was looking straight at them, and they were 12-year-old boys.

“Boys! Quit clowning around!”

I couldn't help but giggle when our teacher flew around the corner to scold the three boys goofing around behind me. The trio ended up becoming some of my lifelong friends, but at the time I would have never known that. All of them were funny and outgoing class clown types, completely opposite of me. They were the boys that would never wind down or stop cracking jokes at the back of the room. I, of course, was front and centre with my eyes forward every day. Once I made it my mission to spend more time with the boys at the back of class, I noticed the shifting eyes of our other classmates, and I felt inside me that they wished they could sit with us too.

The revelation that my peers also felt stuck sometimes really hit me hard. Mark Hamill's iconic Joker reflects “All it takes is one bad day”, and though I wouldn't want to take after the

words of a homicidal, maniacal clown, at the end of the day he does have a point. We all have the ability to feel as lost and defeated as the Joker sometimes. He is a representation of self-doubt and failure. He lashes out in hopes to feel something. Like him, many of us are just one bad day away from losing a piece of ourselves and our sanity that we may never get back, much like the day I first faced my deep fear and much like the boys in my class grasping at any attention they could get, good or bad, it didn't matter as long as they were acknowledged. Since then, I have spent a lot of time trying to understand what anxiety is and what it is not. I desperately try to reassure myself that time isn't lost. I'm figuring out the stages of myself; one day, I may even recognize who I see in the mirror – unmasked and free.

I often wonder if Norman has ever felt that way. Does he wipe off that lipstick grin at the end of the day and still smile at his bare face? A big part of me thinks his true smile sits lower and duller than that. Ultimately though, I do hope he is happy. It's only right that even clowns in ugly bowler hats deserve to feel at ease with themselves, just like the rest of us. And now that I'm older and realize that these monstrosities are just humans like you and I, dressed up in colourful sacks, it all makes sense.

Three years ago, I made my first big leap towards independence, just to prove to myself I could. I travelled on my own to California, chasing nothing but my deep desire to finally be free. Once I got there, I indulged in fresh churros on the Santa Monica Pier, admiring the sunset falling over the soft ocean waves. Later that night at a comedy show with new friends, my heart skipped a beat and it worried me. The laughter felt loud and intimidating, engulfing me with each new pitch. I closed my eyes and remembered that day.

“What was your favourite part of your party?” My grandma asked innocently.

I paused. “When the clown left.”

All the family around me proceeded to burst into laughter, but my face stayed dead serious. I meant it. When that God-awful clown left the room, I felt lighter. Like my chest was finally beating at its normal pace.

This time, the abundance of laughter around me made me feel different – included. Though I still felt my smile shake at points, the rumbling of laughter at the comic on stage reminded me that our pain can be shared just like our time. Sometimes, life is a joke; sometimes, it’s scary – but we can’t hide under the table forever, so we might as well laugh about it.