

The Pilo Family Circus

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Extract

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PART ONE

SEND IN THE CLOWNS

*A carnival for the human race
Cotton candy, happy face
A child talking with his mouth full
Girlfriend gets stuffed animal*

*A festive mood is all around
Another world is what we've found*

CAROUSEL

THE VELVET BAG

*There was not one among them that did not cast an eye behind
In the hope that the carny would return to his own kind.*

‘THE CARNY’, NICK CAVE

Jamie’s tyres squealed to a halt, and the first thought to pass through his head was *I almost killed it*, rather than, *I almost killed him*. Standing in the glare of his headlights was an apparition dressed in a puffy shirt with a garish flower pattern splashed violently across it. It wore oversized red shoes, striped pants and white face paint.

What immediately disturbed Jamie was the look in the clown’s eyes, a bewildered glaze which suggested the clown was completely new to the world, that Jamie’s car was the very first it had ever seen. It was as though it had just hatched out of a giant egg and wandered straight onto the road to stand as still as a store mannequin, its flower shirt tucked in at the waist, barely holding in a sagging belly, arms locked stiff at its sides, hands bunched into fat round fists stuffed into white gloves. Sweat patches spread out under both armpits. It stared at him through the windshield with ungodly boggling eyes, then it lost interest and turned away from the vehicle that had nearly killed it.

The dashboard clock ticked over the tenth second since Jamie’s car had stopped. He could smell burnt rubber. His time as a motorist had cost the world two cats, one pheasant, and now very nearly one absolute fool of a human being. Flashing through his mind was all that could have gone wrong had his foot hesitated *at all* on the brake: law suits, charges,

sleepless nights and guilt attacks for the rest of his life. Road rage came on fast and murderous. He rolled down the window and screamed, 'Hey! Get off the fucking *roooooad!*'

The clown stayed put – only its mouth moved, opening and shutting twice, though no words came out. Jamie's fury brought him to the verge of a seizure; did this guy think he was being *funny*? He gritted his teeth and slammed on the horn. His little old Nissan wheezed with all her might, a piercing sound in the 2am quiet.

At last he appeared to have made an impression. The clown's mouth flapped open and shut again, and it held its white-gloved hands to its ears as it turned to face Jamie again. Its gaze hit him like a cold touch and sent a shiver up his spine. *Don't beep that horn again, sport*, said its ungodly eyes. *A guy like me's got problems, wouldn't you say? You'd like me to keep my problems to myself, wouldn't you?*

Jamie's hand hesitated above the horn.

The clown turned back towards the footpath and took a few drunken steps before coming to a halt once more. If a car came the other way at speed, it would do what Jamie had almost done. Oh well, Mother Nature knew best – it was just the natural course of the stupid gene, streaming its way out of the species like the letting of poisoned blood. Jamie drove off, shaking his head and laughing nervously. 'What the hell was that about?' he whispered to his reflection in the rear-view mirror.

He would know all too soon – the next night, in fact.

'Where's me fuckin' UMBRELLA?'

Jamie groaned to himself. It was the fourth time the question had been roared at him, with each word now having had its turn at the emphasis. Standing before him was none other than Richard Peterson, sob sister from one of the national rags, *Voice of the Taxpayer*. He'd bustled through the doors of the Wentworth Gentlemen's Club in a storm of Armani

and shoe polish. As concierge, Jamie was getting eighteen bucks an hour to politely endure the tirade.

There was a pause in shouting. Peterson stared at him in baleful silence, moustache twitching.

‘I’m sorry, sir, I haven’t seen it. Could I offer you a complimentary—’

‘That umbrella was a fuckin’ HEIRLOOM!’

‘I understand, sir. Perhaps—’

‘WHERE’S me fuckin’ umbrella?’

Jamie grimaced as two attractive women walked past the doors, smiling in at the commotion. For the next two minutes he repeated ‘I understand sir, perhaps—’ as Peterson threatened to resign his membership, to sue, to get Jamie fired ... *Didn’t he know who he was dealing with?* Finally, one of Peterson’s associates wandered through the lobby and lured him up to the bar in the manner of someone luring a Doberman with a bloody steak. Peterson backed away growling. Jamie sighed, feeling not for the first time like he was the guest star on some British sitcom.

The 6pm rush came and went. Through the doors came a stampede of beer-gutted Brisbane Personalities, from law firm partners to television news readers, AFL head honchos, retired test cricketers, members of State Parliament, and suits of all descriptions, bar young and female. Quiet descended on the lobby; the only sounds to permeate the granite walls were the muffled honking of traffic, the quieting bustle of the city’s working day filing out, and its night life waking. The lobby was deserted, the peace sporadically interrupted by club members leaving drunker and happier than when they’d arrived. Once the last of them had staggered off, Jamie descended into his science fiction novel, stealing furtive glances over his shoulder occasionally in case his boss or a stray Brisbane Personality caught him at it. This, by contrast, wasn’t such a bad way to earn eighteen bucks an hour, either.

The clock struck two. Jamie started from a kind of trance

and wondered where the last six hours had gone. The club was silent; the rest of the staff had gone home, all members were tucked into bed, comfortably full of beer, with their hired escorts asleep beside them.

Jamie walked through the city to the Myer Centre, a tall redheaded young man taking long jerking strides with thin legs, polished shoes tapping crisply on the pavement, hands shoved into the pockets of his slacks, where his thumb and forefinger played with a dollar coin. A beggar had learned his shift times and for weeks had been making an effort to intercept him on his way to the car park. On cue, the old man met him outside the Myer Centre, smelling of cask wine and looking like Santa Claus gone to seed. He muttered something about the weather then acted surprised and delighted when Jamie handed him the dollar, as though it were the last thing in the world he'd expected, and so Jamie's shift ended in profuse thanks, which was gratifying in a small way.

Wondering not for the first time why the hell he'd done an arts degree, he started his little Nissan. Its engine rasped like an ailing lung. On the drive home he saw another clown.

His headlights swept past the closed shops in New Farm and there it was, standing out front of a grocery store. This clown was not the same as last night's; it had dark clumps of black hair sticking like bristles out of a head as round as a basketball. Its clothes were different too – it wore a plain red shirt that looked like old-fashioned cotton underwear, clinging tightly to its chest and belly, and pants of the same fashion, with a button-up seat. Its face paint, plastic nose and big red shoes were the only things 'clown' about it; otherwise it might have been any fifty-something booze hound lost on his way home, or in search of back-alley romance.

As Jamie's car passed, the clown looked to be in the throes of despair, throwing its arms up in exasperation and mouthing some complaint to the heavens. In his rear-view

mirror he saw it ducking between the grocer and a garden supply store, disappearing from view.

Jamie would have happily left it at that – there were psychos loose in the neighbourhood, no surprise in New Farm. He'd have driven home, crept up the back steps to shower, put out some cat food for the legion of local strays, slunk back to his room, masturbated to some internet porn then collapsed into bed, set to repeat it all tomorrow. But his car had other ideas. There was the grinding noise of a big metal belly with indigestion, then the smell of oil and smoke. Halfway down the street his little Nissan died.

He thumped his hand on the passenger seat, sending cassette tapes scuttling in all directions like plastic cockroaches. Home was four streets away and up a hill. He was stretching his calf muscles to begin pushing the mutinous wreck home when he heard a strange voice say, 'Goshy!'

Jamie's heart skipped a beat. The voice came from behind him again. 'Goshy?'

He'd forgotten about the clown. It was a clown's voice all right, a silly voice with exaggerated worry and a childish whine, from the throat of a middle-aged man. In Jamie's mind the tone conjured an image of the village idiot pounding his own foot with a hammer and asking why his foot hurt. The clown called out again, louder: 'Gosh-eeeeeeee?'

Goshy? Was that some kind of swearword? Jamie about-faced and headed back towards the grocery store car park. The streets were silent and his footsteps seemed very loud. Obeying some instinct that told him to stay hidden, he crept behind a hedge next to the car park and, through the leaves, he saw the clown standing outside the gardening shop, staring at the roof and going through the motions of a distressed parent, running a hand over its scalp, tossing its arms to the sky, now making an extravagant swooning gesture like a stage actress: hand to the forehead, a backward step, a moan. Jamie waited until its back was turned before darting

from the hedge and crouching behind an industrial garbage bin for a closer look. The clown called out that word again: ‘Gosh-eeeeeeeeeeee!’

A thought occurred: ‘*Goshy*’ is a name. Maybe the name of the clown I nearly ran over. Maybe this one is out looking for it, because *Goshy* is lost. It seemed to fit. And, as he watched, the clown found its friend. The clown from last night was standing on the roof of the plant shop, still as a chimney. The suddenness with which it caught Jamie’s eye almost made him cry out in alarm. On its face was the same look of naked bewilderment.

‘Goshy, it’s not *funny*!’ said the clown in the car park. ‘Come down from there. Come on, Goshy, you come down, you *just* gotta! Goshy, it’s not *funny*!’

Goshy stood motionless, up on the roof, his fists bunched at his sides like a petulant child, eyes wide, lips pursed, gut sagging like a bag of wet cement under his shirt. Goshy stared unblinking down at the other clown; he wasn’t coming down, that was for sure. He seemed to be throwing some kind of passive tantrum. He gave one mute flap of the lips then turned away.

‘Goshy, come down, *pleeeeeease*! Gonko’s comin’, he’s gonna be *soooo maaaaad ...*’

No reaction from the rooftop.

‘Goshy, come *onnnnnn* ...’

Goshy turned back to the other clown, gave another mute flap of the lips, and without warning took three stiff-legged paces towards the roof’s edge, then over it. The drop was about twelve feet. He plummeted to the concrete headfirst, with all the grace of a sack of dead kittens. There was a loud sickening *crack-thud* as he landed.

Jamie sucked in a sharp breath.

‘Goshy!’ The other clown rushed over. Goshy lay face down with his arms locked stiff at his sides. The clown patted Goshy on the back, as though Goshy were having a mere coughing spell. No good – Goshy would probably need

an ambulance. Jamie looked uneasily at the payphone across the street.

The other clown patted Goshy's back a little harder. Still lying face down, Goshy rolled from side to side like a felled ninepin; he looked to be having some kind of fit. The other clown grabbed his shoulders. Goshy began making a noise like a steel kettle boiling, a high-pitched squealing: '*Mmmmmmmmmmm! Mmmmmmmmmmm!*'

The other clown pulled Goshy upright. Once on his feet, still making that awful noise, he stared at the other clown with wide startled eyes. The clown held his shoulders, whispered 'Goshy!' and embraced him. The kettle kept squealing, over and over, but with each burst the volume lowered until the noise ceased altogether. When the other clown released him, Goshy turned to the plant shop, pointed a stiff arm at it and silently flapped his mouth. The other clown said, 'I know, but we gotta hafta go! Gonko's comin', and—' The clown patted Goshy's pants, then dug into his pockets and pulled something out. Jamie couldn't see what it was, but it sent the other clown into throes of distress again. 'Oh! Oh oh! Jeez, Goshy, what're you *thinking*? You're not meant to, not s'posed to have this here. Oh, oh oh, Gonko's gonna ... the boss'll be sooo ...'

The clown paused and looked around the empty car park before tossing the small bundle away. It landed with a sound like a wind chime striking a single note, and slid into the hedges by the footpath before Jamie could get a good look at it. 'Come *on* now, Goshy,' the clown said. 'We gotta hafta go.'

He grabbed Goshy by the collar and started to lead him away. Jamie stood up, unsure if he should follow the pair or run for the public phone – one of these idiots was going to get himself killed if they were left to their own devices. Then something caught his eye: a *third* clown. This one stood by the door of a copy centre two doors down from the plant shop, arms folded across its chest. Jamie shook his head in disbelief and crouched back down out of sight. He knew

immediately that whatever maladies affected the brains of the first two clowns did not affect this one; there was a sharp awareness in its face, staring with narrowed eyes at the other two as they shuffled across the car park. Goshy and his companion halted. Goshy's face didn't change, but the other looked at the new clown with something near terror. He stammered, 'Hi ... Gonko.'

The new clown didn't move or react. It was thin, dressed in a full uniform of oversized striped pants held by suspenders, a bow-tie, white face paint, a shirt decorated with pictures of kittens, and a huge puffy hat. It squinted at the other clowns like a gangster from a Mafia movie; if it had ever intended to make people laugh, it may well have done so at gunpoint. It glanced around the car park, as though for witnesses, and Jamie found himself crouching further behind the industrial bin, suddenly convinced it was a very good idea not to be seen. The sound of Goshy smacking into the concrete echoed in his ears, *crack-thud*, and he shuddered.

The new clown beckoned the others with a single finger. They stumbled over. 'I just gotta, had to find him, Gonko,' said the clown who wasn't Goshy. 'I just *had* to, he can't look after himself out here, he just can't ...'

The new clown answered in a harsh voice, 'Shut your fucking trap. Let's go.' Its gaze swept over the car park again, from the footpath right over to the industrial bin. Jamie ducked out of sight, holding his breath. He stayed down for a minute, worried his heart was beating loud enough for the clowns to hear – yet he couldn't pinpoint what it was exactly that he feared. Finally he risked a glance over the top of the bin. They were gone. He stepped gladly away from the stale reek of garbage. Over by the gardening shop there was a small white smear where Goshy the clown had fallen. Face paint. He touched it, rubbed it between his fingers to confirm the last ten minutes had actually happened.

The night-time city sounds hummed in the near distance, as though being switched on again after a short break. A dog

barked, a car alarm beeped somewhere far away. Jamie shivered with sudden cold and looked at his watch: 2.59am. It was going to be a long walk home.

As he passed the footpath something in the hedge caught his eye. He remembered the clown reaching into the other's pocket, pulling something out and throwing it away. He picked it up, a small velvet bag about half the size of his fist, tied at the top with white string. It felt like it was full of sand. Or, maybe, a different kind of powder. And judging by the way the clowns had acted, just maybe it was the kind of powder Wentworth Club members occasionally left little traces of on hand-held mirrors, in their rooms along with bloody tissues and straws. Interesting. He stuffed the velvet bag in his pocket, where it bumped against his thigh with each step.

Now for the fun part. He put his Nissan in neutral and started pushing it to the service station two streets away. A passing motorist informed him with a scream: 'That's what you get for driving Jap shit, mate.'

'Arigato, gozaimasu,' Jamie muttered.

Later, looking back on this night, Jamie would marvel that he'd believed his worst trouble was the car and the ache in his back from pushing it, that never for a moment did his mind turn in alarm to the little velvet bag in his pocket, which felt like it was full of sand.

DREAM STALKING

The share-house was a big old Queenslander on top of a hill, stubbornly refusing to crumble to the ground despite the neglect of its inhabitants. The paint was chipped, the back steps wobbled dangerously, rats as big as possums inhabited the space between the downstairs ceiling and upstairs floor, and it was possible the landlord had forgotten the place existed, for a property inspection would condemn them all to hang. Jamie's room, the only downstairs bedroom, was the cleanest outpost of this bachelor's wilderness, and when he walked in he'd sigh like someone returning to the safety of his own private bomb shelter.

Not in keeping with the bachelor spirit of his roommates, who seemed not to care for such things, Jamie's bedroom was decorated with one goal in mind: what Svetlana, the Russian girl who served drinks at Wentworths, would think if she walked in on some imagined evening after Jamie had summoned the nerve to ask her out. The plan: the computer was to give him an air of one who moves with the times. The posters of David Bowie and Trent Reznor in fishnets spoke of his openmindedness. The CD rack loaded with hundreds of discs, the cardboard box packed to the rim with old vinyls, expressed his broad tastes and cultural depth. The pot plants, his oneness with nature. The mountain-bike in the corner, his athletic prowess. The fake Persian rug, man of the world. The fish tank, his capacity for calm reflection, his kindness to animals. The dream-catcher hanging from the ceiling, his spiritual side. The small keyboard, a suggestion of creativity.

Each object was like a feather in a peacock's tail, to woo and bedazzle.

When he returned that night, as with every night, he anxiously examined each part of the display, making sure all was in order, that no roommates or roaming junkies had stolen any key articles. He peered at the keyboard uneasily, wondered whether to put it in a more visible place, and decided for the hundredth time to leave it where it was. He adjusted the rug so it ran parallel to the floorboards, turned a slow circle critically assessing his nest, then sighed, content all was in order.

He kicked off his pants, the velvet bag still in the pocket, and wondered how much he could sell it for, if indeed it was cocaine – there would be no shortage of buyers hanging around the house. For now he left the bag where it was and went upstairs for a shower. The house was a disgrace – the toilet looked like someone had thrown in a grenade and flushed. Someone had devoured twenty dollars worth of Jamie's groceries since he'd left for work, and not had the grace to throw away the empty wrappers. In the living room, a pale junkie lay comatose on the couch, presumably a friend of one of Jamie's roommates – probably Marshall. Jamie retreated down the back steps, feeling suddenly depressed. This was not the life American television had prepared him for. There were no romantic comedy weddings, no sorority houses filled with crazy pranks and girls in wet T-shirts. Just bills to be paid and dishes in the sink.

Back in his room, David Bowie gazed down from his poster like an androgynous father figure, bell-bottoms puffing around his ankles. Jamie threw himself onto the bed, set his alarm, then paused; he had to have a look at that velvet bag first, didn't he? He dug it out of his slacks. It felt a little too heavy for its size. He juggled it between his hands and could hear a very faint noise, like marbles clinking together. He undid the white string and held the bag beneath his lamp. Inside were lots of little beads glinting in the lamp-

light like powdered glass. He gave the bag a squeeze. Now that it was open the sound was loud, like a small wind chime. He touched the powder tentatively with his finger; it felt soft as ash.

He put the bag on his bedside table, turned off the lamp and lay back. The floorboards above him creaked as someone upstairs made their way to the kitchen to polish off what remained of his groceries. Jamie idly wondered what would happen on the day he snapped for good, and on that not atypical note, he slept.

The dream comes with such clarity that Jamie feels fully awake, still crouched behind the industrial bin in its cloud of stink. It seems to him that pushing his car to the service station was the dream out of which he has just snapped.

A voice is yelling: 'Where are you, fucker? Goddamn, this dream stalking is a con job. How many bags did that scag charge us for this? DOOPS! Step lively, you shit. We ain't on safari.'

'Sorry Gonko, I just, I ...' answers a whiny voice Jamie recognises. The first voice is Gonko's, the thin clown, and Jamie sees him as he pokes his head over the top of the industrial bin. Gonko prowls around the car park, somehow able to walk with an assassin's stealth despite his ridiculous large red shoes. His face seems split into vicious creases and hard as stone; it is a face that looks to have been used as sandpaper and soaked in whisky. His eyes disappear into thin slits, gleaming coldly and touching all they fall on like the point of an icy finger.

Behind the bin, Jamie understands Gonko is seeking two things: the little velvet bag of powder, and the person who stole it. And his belly sinks, for the bag is not safe at home, but here in his pocket. He considers tossing it across the car park and running, but one quick glance at Gonko kills that idea. Moving like a brightly dressed scarecrow, the stalking clown seems to say with his stride alone: Oh no. I'll catch

you, feller. Stay hidden. Doctor's orders. *There is no doubt that Gonko will kill him if he finds him.*

Crawling on his hands and knees to the other side of the bin, Jamie spots the other two clowns. He knows their names, too. The first, of course, is Goshy, and the one with black bristles for hair is Doopy. Jamie somehow knows the two are brothers. Gonko pauses in his stalking, turns to them and says: 'Don't just stand there, you ugly pair of tits. Find him. He's here.'

His head poking around the side of the bin, Jamie sees Goshy about-face and stare straight at him. The alien eyes lock onto his and the grip of that gaze holds him still. Goshy's mouth flaps twice without sound. The other clowns are facing away from Goshy at the moment, and it's a good thing, for Goshy raises a stiff arm and points right at the bin, right at Jamie. Goshy's mute mouth flaps again and a thrill of terror flashes up Jamie's spine.

'Come out, come out, wherever you are,' Gonko shouts in a singsong voice. 'Tag, you're it. Marco Polo, sweet cheeks. Red rover, I call over ...'

In frustration Gonko flays his boot at a parked BMW so hard the panel gives in and the driver side door falls off its hinges with a metal squeal. Goshy is still staring at Jamie, predatory coldness in one eye, bewilderment in the other; there is something obscene in the face's ability to pair these two attitudes, as though the clown's mind is shared equally between a moron and a reptile. Goshy takes some stiff-legged steps towards the industrial bin, and Jamie cowers behind it. Right above him Goshy's eyes light up, his hand stretches into the bin, and Jamie almost screams ... But all Goshy does is pull out an empty beer can and peer at it, as though it is a puzzle he means to solve. His mouth flaps again and Doopy looks over. 'Goshy, put that down. Down, Goshy, it's not funny!'

Goshy contemplates the can for a moment longer, then drops it to the ground next to Jamie's foot and wanders back

to the other two clowns. But he trips on something and falls hard into the concrete. ‘Goshy!’ Doopy cries, rushing over. Goshy rolls around on the concrete, arms locked stiff at his sides, making that noise like a squealing kettle: ‘HmMMMM! HmMMMM!’

And Jamie wakes, just as the kettle in the kitchen above reaches boiling point, its noise piercing the floorboards and finding its way down to him, squealing like a clown.

Jamie had the ominous feeling of being too well rested when he woke. The little alarm clock verified his fears: 3pm. Without sparing a thought for the night’s dream, he sprinted around the room on a mad hunt for work clothes, towels, socks, wallet, all of which had hidden themselves during the night. Up the back steps, through the back door, and of course someone else was already in the shower. He thumped on the door.

‘Fuck off,’ came the barked reply. It sounded like his roommate Steve, grocery thief extraordinaire.

‘C’mon, man, I’m late!’ Jamie yelled, thumping on the door again. Shower still running, it opened, spilling steam out the doorway. A round boyish face appeared, soaking wet and bearing a contemplative expression, one eyebrow raised ponderously. A big wet arm shot out and shoved Jamie hard in the chest, knocking him to the floor, then the door closed gently.

‘That’s assault,’ Jamie said to the ceiling. He got to his feet and stood staring at the door, mouth open, shaking his head. *Are you just going to take that?* part of him demanded. *Stand up for yourself! Jesus, for once in your life, stand up for yourself ...*

Not today. Instead he went to the kitchen for coffee and a sandwich. He yanked the fridge open and hissed through clenched teeth – his bread was gone, as was most of his milk. ‘God, am I asking for too much in life?’ he whispered. He looked around for food, a vain hope in the cluttered bachelor’s trough of a kitchen; he saw only instant noodle packets

spilling their remains over the counter like frozen maggots. 'Fuck!' he yelled and kicked the fridge door as a wave of white hot anger rippled through him. He ran back downstairs for his shoes, at a loss for how to evoke some kind, *any* kind, of respect in his roommates.

His eyes fell on the velvet bag on his bedside table. Hesitating only for a second, he grabbed it, causing it to tinkle like a tiny bell. If it were a drug, perhaps now was the time to find out its effects – better yet, side effects. Back up the steps into the kitchen, where he opened his near-empty bottle of milk and carefully tipped just a pinch of the powder into it, before shaking the bottle and replacing it in the fridge. If Steve was true to form, he'd be high as a kite before long, maybe psychotic by dinner time. Jamie splashed his armpits over the kitchen sink, patted himself dry with a tea towel, dressed, and left for work.

His shift passed without incident. Unbeknown to him, these were the last eight hours of peace he would have for quite some time.