

THE MIDNIGHT CLOWNS

Note for readers: this story is set at the end of the twentieth century, at a time when children didn't have mobile phones and video recording was done on tapes.

CHAPTER ONE SOMETHING STRANGE AT THE SCHOOL GATES

Stop reading! Look up! Quickly!

Well? Did you see anything unusual? A winged pig flapping gracefully along outside the window? Or a piece of furniture shuffling slyly across the carpet to get nearer to the warmth of the fire?

No? You're lucky. You can carry on believing in your nice, comfortable, safe world, where such things don't happen. But you never know what's around the next corner...

"That's *so* pathetic, Ben! You just can't think for yourself, can you?"

"Yes I can. It's you who has such stupid ideas that they're not worth thinking *about*."

Meet Claire and Ben Swift. Loving sister and brother. Their world was just as normal as yours that Friday morning, as they walked towards school. But in fifty yards they would turn the corner into Beech Road, where the school gates were. What they would see there would be the first crack in their safe existence, a crack that would soon open up into a chasm and send them tumbling into an abyss of nightmares.

Meanwhile though, they were squabbling. As normal. For Claire, it was important always to impress upon Ben that nine-year-old boys were stupid and insignificant, a low form of life somewhere just between worms and slugs. Ben's mission, on the other hand, was to make sure that twelve-year-old girls who fancied themselves to be sixteen were brought back to earth as often as possible. Since he wasn't too good with words, this was best done by means of a flying rugby tackle around the legs at unexpected moments.

Claire was amusing herself, as she often did, by testing out a new theory on him, to challenge his little brain. He was getting mildly agitated, which was good.

"It was *not* a woman who first walked on the moon! That's complete rubbish, Claire! How could someone wander around on the moon in a dress, carrying a handbag?"

"Oh don't be so stupid, Ben! She wore a space suit of course."

"Well how come everyone else thinks that Neil Armstrong was the first person on the moon?"

"*Everyone* doesn't think that. That's what you think."

"Right. We'll ask Mrs Morris."

"Your teacher doesn't know everything in the world, Ben, even though you seem to think so."

Ben was trying to think of a good reply as they turned the corner into Beech Road and became aware of a kind of tooting noise up ahead. Goodbye normal world.

Children and parents, instead of parting hurriedly at the school gates, were standing and gawping. They were looking at something rectangular and brightly coloured, bobbing about on the pavement.

"What on earth's that?" Claire said.

"No idea," Ben replied.

As they got closer, they could both see that the rectangular coloured object was in fact an advertising board. Against a red background, bright yellow jaggy letters screamed out 'CIRCUS OF THE CLOWNS!' Beneath the lettering was a picture of a huge clown's face grinning wildly, all white and blue and green, with great staring eyes. Perhaps it was supposed to be jolly. The face of the person carrying the advertisement was not particularly jolly either, and belonged to a very small man indeed. His hair was dyed bright orange, and stood up in porcupine quills above his head, bringing his height up to about four feet. His yellowy eyes were glazed, like fried eggs that have been in the pan too long.

The tiny man was not just waking up and down with the board. He was bouncing along in great kangaroo hops, and playing a sort of tuneless tune on a kazoo, which he gripped between his clenched teeth. His hands were occupied with bundles of silvery helium-filled balloons, which floated like clouds of bothersome flies behind him. When he turned around, Claire and Ben saw another advertising board on his back. This one yelled, in purple and yellow letters: 'TONIGHT! AND SATURDAY NIGHT! 8.30P.M. AT SHAGGYMOSS PARK!'

As Claire and Ben made their way through the gradually thinning crowd at the school gates, they could hear one or two remarks from the mothers' brigade.

"It's so blatant, targeting children like that!"

"You'd think the headmaster might come out and put a stop to it."

"So old-fashioned as well, in this day and age – using a sandwich-board to advertise!"

Claire could well imagine their own mother adding to this disapproving chorus. But fortunately she didn't accompany them to school now, since they lived in a house only half a mile away, and they could walk there without crossing any busy roads.

Ben hung back at the gate, reluctant to leave the spectacle of the bouncing manikin. He grabbed Claire's arm as she turned to go into the school.

"This circus looks great! Do you think Mum and Dad would take us?"

Claire shrugged. She wasn't sure she wanted to go. The little puppet-man looked so miserable in spite of his antics. On the other hand, she'd never been to a circus. There might be animals! She had a weakness for animals. And handsome muscular young men swinging about on the trapeze. They might be interesting to see.

"Shall we ask?" Ben went on eagerly. As usual, his feelings were transparent. Claire decided it would be more fun to disguise her own.

"I'm not sure. Circuses are for little kids really. Childish."

"Oh... Claire!" He looked at her in disappointment. She dropped him a dainty morsel of hope before turning towards the route to her classroom.

"Well - perhaps we *could* ask. I'll think about it."

That night, Claire was going to her friend Katy's birthday party. So, in the kitchen before she went, she and Ben asked about going to the circus the next night.

"Is there an afternoon show?" their mum said.

"It didn't say so. 8.30 is all it said."

Their mum made her deeply-sorry-but-nothing-to-be-done face.

"That's a pity, because I'm afraid Dad and I are out tomorrow night. We're going to have dinner round at Andrew and Megan's parents."

"Well - what about Louise taking us?" Claire suggested. Louise was their usual baby-sitter. She was seventeen, and pretty cool about letting them stay up late and eat crisps and stuff. She would be fun to the circus with.

Their mum opened a cupboard and fiddled guiltily inside it. "I couldn't get Louise this time..."

Ben and Claire looked at each other. They knew what was coming next, and it was one thing about which they were in complete agreement.

"You don't mean..."

"It's not going to be..."

Their Mum came reluctantly out of the cupboard and busied herself suddenly with sorting the laundry, which had been lying unsorted in a basket for the last two days.

"Mrs Wilkinson will be coming round."

"Oh *no!*"

"You *promised!*"

"I did *not* promise," Mum explained to a handful of socks. "I just said that we wouldn't use Mrs Wilkinson if it was possible to get anyone else. Well, it wasn't possible this time."

Mrs Wilkinson was a half deaf old woman from further along the street. You had to shout to get her to hear you, because she wouldn't wear a hearing aid. And she shouted back at you, because she didn't know how loud her voice was. But it wasn't the deafness that was the real problem. It was her Victorian attitude to child discipline. She was a strict believer in the principle of children being seen but not heard. The not hearing bit was quite easy, for her. But she also liked to keep them in sight. "I want to know what you're up to!" she always said, looking suspiciously at them from under tangled white eyebrows. So they couldn't lounge about the different parts of the house as they would do usually, playing computer games or listening to music in their bedrooms. They had to sit in the living room watching her choice of

television programmes or trying to read a book or a comic over the battering noise of the television volume set at maximum. The fact that she insisted on a strict early bedtime was actually a relief.

Mum and Dad had seen the justice of their complaints, but teenage baby-sitters were not easy to get hold of on Saturday nights, and Mrs Wilkinson was always happy to oblige.

There was no point in asking if Mrs Wilkinson would take them to the circus. Circuses were almost certainly too much fun for her to approve of them. Anyway, it would be embarrassing to be seen out and about with Mrs Wilkinson. She always turned up at the door in a blobby pink coat and a yellow hat, like a spot appearing on your nose. Imagine people thinking she was your granny!

Ben and Claire consulted further over the problem later on, while Claire was getting ready to go to Katy's party. In the circumstances, Ben was allowed the unusual privilege of sitting on the bed in her room.

"What about trying to get Dad to let us go on our own?" he suggested, holding a hand over his mouth to protect his lungs from aerosol spray fall-out.

"Speak clearly, can't you? You sound like you're underground."

"It's your horrible deodorant! I *said* why don't we ask Dad if we can go on our own?" He clamped his hand quickly over his mouth again and made gasping noises.

Claire considered the proposal over a good long burst of deodorant. Dad was usually more easy-going than Mum, but he wouldn't fall for obvious attempts to side-line her.

"Mum would have to agree as well though."

"But if we ask Dad tomorrow morning, at the zoo, and then get him to speak to Mum..."

"Worth a try, I suppose. You know, I shouldn't become a teenager without even *ever* going to a circus, should I? It's like a missing piece in the jigsaw of my childhood."

"*What?*" came a muffled voice from behind the gas mask.

"Oh, never mind. If you can't understand me all the time, that's only to be expected. I have a more complex brain than you."

"Pig-face!"

Claire addressed her reflection in the wardrobe mirror. "Of course, I *could* try to get permission to go with one of my friends. I'd have more chance that way, because we're older than you. You could enjoy a quiet evening's television with Mrs Wilkinson. Nice and cosy, just the two of you."

"*Claire!* It was me who first thought of going to the circus, not you! You only got interested after I did!"

Claire glanced in the mirror at his aggrieved expression. An excellent reaction. She gave one more twist to the knife.

"But I could tell you all about it afterwards. *And* bring you a ticket stub for your ticket stub collection."

Ben looked around for something to destroy. He grabbed a small chain and locket lying on the duvet. He could snap the chain. Easily. Claire turned round and smiled pityingly.

"I'm only teasing you, stupid! We'll go together, or not at all. All right?"

Ben put the chain and locket down again uncertainly.

"Deal?" she said.

"All right," he nodded, "that's a deal."

The next morning, their dad had a completely unexpected angle on the whole thing, as usual. That was the thing about Dad. You could always expect the unexpected. He glanced up from the protesting penguin that he had been examining, and put it back at the edge of the pool.

"Animals!" he said. "The people who train animals to do tricks in circuses are no better than animals!" This rather circular logic seemed to dissatisfy him. "What I mean is, I don't approve of supporting places like that. They don't keep their animals in the right conditions."

Dad was a zoo vet, so this was a subject close to his heart. He often went into work for a couple of hours early on Saturday mornings, to give Claire and Ben a chance to accompany him. Hence this conversation was taking place in the penguin enclosure. It had a strong fishy smell, and their voices sounded small in the cold air. At only half past eight there were no visitors yet.

"But we don't know for certain that there *are* any animals at this circus. It's called the *Circus of the Clowns*," Claire pointed out, moving to get out of the way of the penguin, who was backing nervously away from the water's edge, and not looking where he was going.

"Yes, and clowns don't do any harm to animals, do they?" Ben added.

There was no answer to this. Their dad was clearly preoccupied with the penguin, which was still backing away from the pool.

"Dad - what's actually *wrong* with this penguin?" Claire asked.

"Well, look at how he seems scared of the water. The little fellow has lost his confidence somehow. The keeper says he hasn't seen him swimming at all for several weeks."

"Well," Claire said, "that's no big deal is it?"

Her father shook his head. "Not especially, but he might be happier and healthier if he swam around a bit. I'm going to try something..."

He went after the penguin, which waddled away from him as fast as it could. He grabbed it, and held its beak closed with one hand.

"Right, let's see how you get on."

He flung the penguin into the pool. It made a little yelping noise before hitting the water and going under. Then there was a brief flurry of bubbles and they saw it heading for the shore like a sleek fat bullet. It popped out of the water like a cork from a champagne bottle and started hurrying off. Their dad grabbed it again and repeated the treatment.

After it had been thrown in six times, the penguin tried a new tactic. It swam into the middle of the pool and clambered out onto a little rocky island where it was safely out of reach. Their dad seemed well satisfied.

“Good. He’ll have to go into the water again now to get his fish at feeding time. Once he’s gone in of his own accord, perhaps he’ll get over this silly phobia. Come on, let’s go and say hello to Ronald and Rosie. I want to see if Ronald’s sore foot is getting better.”

Ronald and Rosie were chimps, and the children’s favourite animals. On the way to their enclosure, Claire returned to the subject of the circus.

“Dad... I don’t think there can be any animals at this circus. I mean, it wouldn’t be called *Circus of the Clowns* would it, if it had animals?”

Ben chipped in helpfully. “It definitely wasn’t animals. There would have been a picture of animals on the advert!”

Their dad stroked his beard as they walked along. This was a sure sign that he was thinking. His fingers always looked for the answers to difficult questions somewhere among the roots of his beard.

Unfortunately, the answer they came out with was not the right one.

“Let’s see what your mother thinks, shall we?” he suggested brightly after a few moments. Ben and Claire exchanged a look, which he saw, but chose not to.

They arrived at the low slate-roofed building that housed the indoor areas for the chimps. Behind it was the huge domed outdoor cage that contained Chimp Country, a zone of trees, tumbled rocks, and various rope bridges, poles and climbing frames for the chimps to play on. Their dad fumbled with his big bunch of keys and unlocked the main door of the building.

Inside, the chimps were behind a barrier of glass. A narrow corridor ran between the glass and the bars of their cages. At the backs of their enclosures were the small lockable hatches that led out to Chimp Country. At this time of day, before feeding time, the chimps were all indoors.

The chimps, as Claire and Ben well knew, were not entirely the lovable creatures of popular imagination, always to be relied upon for a jolly tea party. On the contrary, what they could be relied upon for was general delinquency: pelting the long-suffering keeper with rotten fruit, or worse; stealing anything portable such as a pen tucked in a breast pocket or a pair of spectacles; and occasional brawls amongst themselves. Their dad then had to tend the wounds of the defeated, and administer antibiotics.

However, they were not all tarred with the same brush, and Ronald and Rosie, the oldest chimps at the zoo, were a quiet, sensible couple with their own indoor sleeping quarters, which allowed them a break from the rough and tumble of the rest of the colony – largely their own children and grandchildren.

Ronald and Rosie had similar backgrounds, both having been reared by human beings as pets before being acquired by the zoo. They had always behaved gently and predictably, and for this reason Dad allowed Ben and Claire to accompany him into their private enclosure.

"Now then, Ronald!" he said, as Ronald limped amiably over to check his hair and beard for fleas. Rosie gave the children's hair the same attentions, after patting their cheeks softly in greeting.

"You know, I don't think they believe we wash our hair properly!" Claire laughed.

Dad tickled Ronald's tummy gently. The chimp rolled over onto his back, and stuck his feet up in the air. There was a cut on one of them, but it had formed a scab and didn't look swollen.

"Looks like he's healing up all right. Sore foot a bit better is it, Ronald? A bit better?"

Dad spoke to the chimps as if they were babies. To Ben they seemed more like an elderly couple, and he always felt Dad should show a little more respect.

"Come on then." Dad stood up. "It's time we headed home."

When they got back, Mum, predictably enough, felt that she did not want the children going out on their own at night. Dad searched his beard afresh and found the same opinion was lurking in there after all. He nodded sagely. Mum did ring a few of the children's friends' parents to see if anyone else was going and could take Ben and Claire as well, but no one was going.

They had to go on a walk along the canal that afternoon. Claire and Ben trailed along a hundred yards in the rear, feeling disgruntled.

"I bet *they'd* been to *lots* of circuses before they were teenagers! Claire grumbled. Somehow this had become quite an important issue for her. In her mind, circuses belonged with building sandcastles on the beach, dolls' houses, picnics in bluebell woods, flying kites from hilltops on a blustery day. They belonged with all the things that you could enjoy doing when you were a child. Picture-book activities. Surely, everyone had a right to these experiences, by the age of twelve? You couldn't leave childhood until you'd completed it properly. She felt robbed.

Ben was equally fed up. He'd had a boring night last night when Claire was out at her party. On Friday nights she would often play his computer car-racing game against him, and he usually won. It wasn't the same on his own. Now they were being forced on this route march along a boring old canal. And to cap it all, there was an evening with Mrs Wilkinson looming ahead of them. He felt as if he were under a dark cloud.

"There's no justice, in my opinion," he announced. This was a favourite phrase of his dad's, normally used when reading the newspaper. Ben liked the sound of it. It seemed to sum up the unsatisfactory nature of life and the world in general.

Claire scuffed her feet along angrily in the mud to make her shoes dirty. Mum cleaned the shoes. She looked at the distant backs of the two villains of the piece, chattering and laughing away in complete lack of concern for the feelings of their children. No doubt looking forward to their pleasant evening with Andrew and Megan's mum and dad. As she turned over the situation in her thoughts, a seed of an idea sprouted

a little green shoot in her brain. She was taken by surprise. What sort of a plant was this? She liked the look of it. It had a secretive, cunning, clever kind of appearance. It was a plant to be watered and tended to in secret. The name of the plant popped into her consciousness. It was *Rebellion*. She spoke in an unnecessarily quiet voice to Ben.

“Ben - I’ve got an idea for going to the circus tonight, without Mum and Dad knowing!”

CHAPTER TWO THE FORBIDDEN CIRCUS

Mrs Wilkinson was enjoying herself. She always did when she was baby-sitting. At her elbow was a half empty glass of Guinness, with a new bottle beside it. The gas fire was turned up high, even though it was a pleasantly mild October evening. She was nestled comfortably amongst the plumpest cushions in the best armchair. And she was giving orders, the most pleasant aspect of the whole situation.

“Come along now, you two!” she bellowed. “It’s half past eight! I want you up those stairs and into bed in fifteen minutes, and don’t forget to brush your teeth or you’ll end up like me!”

At his point she removed her false teeth and brandished them in the air as an awful warning. Then she dipped them in her glass of Guinness and replaced them, sucking noisily. Mum and Dad never believed half the things Claire and Ben told them about Mrs Wilkinson, but they were all true.

The children lost no time in leaving the room. They stopped briefly at the door.

“Goodnight, Mrs Wilkinson!”

She waved indulgently, like a queen from a passing carriage.

“Goodnight! Lights straight out now!”

Then she devoted her attention again to the television. How time flew when you were enjoying yourself!

Claire and Ben made a lot of noise going up the stairs, and then descended again very quietly. Their caution was not really necessary, but occasionally Mrs Wilkinson surprised you by hearing something unexpectedly. She had once glared very suspiciously at Ben when he whispered to Claire that she was a beastly old bag. But they had been correct in thinking that she would be deceived by the simple ploy of altering the hands of the clock on the mantelpiece. The real time was eight o’clock, but she thought it was half past. They would just have time to get to Shaggymoss Park for the start of the show.

They slipped on their coats and went quietly out of the back door into the garden, re-locking it behind them with the spare key from the hook in the kitchen. They had stuffed their beds with pillows and towels to make suitable sleeping shapes in the unlikely event that Mrs Wilkinson heaved herself up the stairs to check on them. She’d never done it before, stairs not being a favourite of hers.

They hurried through the dark garden to the back wall. There was a faint smell of burning leaves in the air, an early autumn smell.

"Lucky the old bat didn't have a watch!" Ben chuckled.

"I told you she didn't. I thought she might realise the TV programmes were coming on at the wrong time though."

"What if she realises later?"

"Doesn't matter then, does it?"

They got to the apple tree that grew against the mossy old brick wall at the end of the garden. It was only a short climb on a couple of boughs to bring them level with the top of the wall. From there they jumped down into Mr Evans's vegetable garden and slipped along the passageway beside his house to the street.

They felt conspicuous as they walked quickly towards the park. There were not many people about, but they were all adults, and Claire had the impression that everyone glanced at them and muttered something about the unsuitability of children wandering the streets after dark. She half expected a policeman to loom out of the shadows, a gigantic pale policeman with a notebook at the ready, asking them what they were up to. She imagined his deep growling voice: *Do you know it's against the law to be out without your parents' permission? You'll have to come along to the police station with me!*

"All right?" she said to Ben after a few minutes, just to break the silence.

Ben jumped guiltily. He must have been feeling as nervous as her.

"What? What is it?"

"Nothing," she replied. "It's weird though, isn't it? Being out on your own at night."

"You're not on your own. I'm here."

"I mean without grown-ups, stupid!"

"Oh. Yes. But we're nearly there, aren't we?"

"Yes - there's the park now."

Up ahead, Shaggymoss Park was fringed with dark trees, rattling their leathery leaves in a breeze that seemed to spring up from nowhere. Spidery tall iron gates stood open at the park's entrance, and beyond, through the thin trees, you could see lights and a big tent. Churning music drifted towards them, now louder, now softer, according to the wind. It was a mixture of accordions and violins and cracked trumpets, and sounded unaccountably sad, as if the musicians were playing dance tunes at a funeral.

By the gates was a huddle of small shapes that Claire and Ben at first thought were children. But as they approached, they could see that they had old faces. All of them wore bright gaudy clothes, and held balloons. As Ben and Claire joined the thin trickle of people going in through the gates the diminutive figures called out to them.

"Hello! Hello! Welcome to the Circus of the Clowns! Welcome!"

The thin little voices sounded like seagulls on the wind. Their smiles of welcome looked as if they had been stuck on temporarily with Sellotape, and would soon peel off. The true expressions of their faces

were etched in deep lines of exhaustion and worry, and their eyes were dead and empty.

Ben and Claire pushed on through the scattered trees, following the other people making towards the big top. There were a few children with their parents, but most of the customers appeared to be adults, or courting couples, or little gaggles of teenage girls in short skirts, smoking, or groups of swaggering boys making a lot of noise. But everyone grew silent as they drew close to the tent, which glowed eerily from the inside. The canvas billowed gently in and out, as if the big top was a living creature, breathing softly. Ben felt nervous.

The entrance to the tent was along a tunnel of canvas, with a ticket booth at the opening. Behind the counter was another very tiny person. She had raven black hair and a face that was neither old nor young, a face that might have been beautiful but for the weight of careworn sadness that hung on every feature. She dealt out tickets to the short line of people in front of the children in a mechanical way, not bothering to look at her customers. But when Ben put their money on the counter and said "Two children's tickets please!" her eyes lifted and scanned both their faces with a look both intense and alarming.

"No adults?" she queried. Her voice was like a sigh of wind on the edge of a cliff. Ben and Claire felt a moment of alarm. Were they not going to be allowed in on their own?

Ben shook his head, almost feeling it would be a relief to be turned away. But the raven-haired little woman merely nodded, took his money and slid two tickets towards him across the counter. She kept her hand on them just long enough for there to be a momentary touch of fingers as Ben picked them up. Her fingers were icy cold.

"Enjoy the show!" she said, catching Ben's eye, and then leaned forward and spoke in a lower voice: "*Don't take anything from the clowns!*"

She sat back again and called out "Next!" before Ben could respond.

Claire took hold of his elbow as they walked into the gloom of the tunnel.

"What did she say to you?"

Ben shrugged. "I couldn't tell for sure. It sounded like 'don't take anything from the clowns', but that doesn't make much sense, does it?"

Claire shrugged too. It was certainly an odd thing to say. Perhaps Ben hadn't heard it right. They emerged from the tunnel into the big top.

It was bigger on the inside than appeared possible from the outside. Great tiers of seating reared up around the sawdust-covered ring, which was bathed in a dim green light from a spotlight up near the roof. The seats were less than half filled, so there was plenty of choice of places to sit. Claire and Ben were just looking for a suitable spot when a loud shout came from behind them. Swinging around quickly, they saw a clown hurtling towards them with a bucket. His great white face was a mask of panic, and his huge feet were out of control.

"*Look out! Look out!*"

But it was too late to get out of his way. The clown tripped over his own feet and the contents of the bucket were launched towards the children. They hunched down instinctively to lessen the impact. For a moment Claire thought she had been drenched with water, but then she realised it was nothing more than streamers of blue paper that had flown out of the bucket. A ripple of laughter ran around the big top.

The clown picked himself up and dusted himself down. There was something bothering him about his ear. His face was puzzled. He reached into his ear and pulled out a paper carnation. There was something wrong with his other ear too. He found another paper carnation in there. With a low bow, he presented the flowers to Ben and Claire.

They had them in their hands before they had time to think. *Don't take anything from the clowns!* Well, there couldn't be any harm in paper flowers, could there?

The rest of the audience were clapping the clown's antics. Claire and Ben felt uncomfortably exposed.

The clown's face expressed the most abject apology. His voice came out like a squeak of rusty machinery.

"Most humble sorries to both your majestitudes. How can I ever, ever, obtain your pardon?"

Then he was struck by a thought. Apparently a thought of compelling genius and brilliance. His whole face was illuminated with joy and relief. He gestured them to follow him, and led them to two red velvet armchairs in the front row of seats, right by the ringside.

"Go on! Go on, your majestitudes! The best seats in the house, for you! His wide staring eyes seemed to compel them to obey.

The armchairs were huge, with high backs that reared up behind the children, making them feel separated from the rest of the audience. As the lights went dim and the ring in front of them began to glow with red and green light, they felt as if they were on their own in the circus, watching a private show just for them.

The ringmaster made his appearance, to a scattering of applause. He was not much over four feet high, with a ludicrously tall top hat and a sharply pointed moustache. His voice was high and cracked.

"Good evening, ladies, gentlemen, and especially children! Welcome to our circus, which will amaze, astonish, and dazzle you! Let the show begin!"

With a crack of his whip, which sounded like a bullet shot snapping through the air of the tent, he pivoted around on the toes of his shiny black boots and vanished in a puff of smoke. Taking his place came a tiny man and an even smaller woman in leopard skins. The man's face was covered in freckles. They carried torches with orange and blue flames, which they threw high into the air and caught in their teeth. They juggled with the torches, throwing them to each other across increasing distances until they were standing on opposite sides of the ring on the raised barrier that marked its edge. Finally a Tom Thumb figure ran on with a bucket of water and with extraordinary accuracy the

flame jugglers threw their brands into the bucket, where they spluttered out in a gush of steam. They bowed to the applause of the audience.

"Wow!" Ben said to Claire, clapping hard. "How can they hit a little bucket from so far away?"

Claire didn't want to seem too impressed by the first act of the show. "Oh, I expect they practise a lot." She wondered, just the same, how much practice it would take to achieve such a feat.

There was a piercing whistle from the freckle-faced man, and with a scurry of trotters, four strange little animals ran into the ring. She thought guiltily of her father's objections to circuses.

"What are *they*?" Ben said, leaning forward on the edge of his seat to get a good look. He would have said that they were piglets, from their faces and their trotters and their grunting noises. But they had the spotted coats of leopards, and the whiskers of cats. They formed a line in front of the man. His female companion had somehow vanished in the flurry of the leopard-pigs' arrival.

Freckle-Face eyed the animals sternly. "*Atten-shun!*" he barked suddenly, like a drill sergeant on an army parade ground. The little leopard-pigs straightened up their legs and pointed their ears towards the roof of the tent.

"*Qu-ick march!*" the man bellowed, and the animals smartly turned to their left and set off in line around the ring, their trotters moving stiffly in synchronisation.

"One! Two! One! Two!" Freckle-Face yelled, keeping them in step. When they'd completed a circuit of the ring they came back to a halt in front of him.

"What *are* they, Claire?" Ben asked again, over his shoulder. He was still sitting right on the front edge of his seat.

"They're just little pigs, of course," Claire said with a certainty she didn't really feel. "Pigs painted to look like leopards." But that didn't explain the whiskers, or the fact that they had what looked like real fur, or their pointed teeth.

Just then, four tiny men dressed as Russian Cossacks in bright red cavalry uniforms came bounding and somersaulting into the ring. With blood-curdling yells they mounted the leopard-pigs and galloped bare-backed around the perimeter, kicking up clouds of sawdust that made the children cough. The strange cavalry troupe made pretend swooping attacks on Freckle-Face, whisking out sabres from nowhere and driving him into a corner with every appearance of intending to cut him down savagely. The leopard-pigs snarled and snapped at his heels, and in the end he had to climb a dangling rope to get away. The Cossacks dismounted and swarmed up the rope after him. The leopard-pigs galloped off.

Ben and Claire craned their heads to follow the chase, which moved into the high ropes in the top of the tent.

"That's really dangerous up there, isn't it, Claire!" Ben exclaimed, twisting his head this way and that to get the best view of the action. The little Cossacks were closing in on Freckle-Face from all sides.

Claire felt sick. She didn't like heights, and seeing the figures up there above her, swinging from rope to rope over great chasms of air, she imagined with vivid horror what a fall would look and sound like: a shape plummeting downwards with a shriek of despair. She shut her eyes and almost immediately in the darkness she heard the sound she feared. With a trailing scream, someone was falling! She sensed the collective gasp of the audience, and Ben suddenly grabbed her knee, bringing her eyes open again in alarm.

Freckle-Face was bouncing unharmed on a huge trampoline, which had been wheeled into the centre of the ring while everyone's attention was on the action above. He bounded off and out of the ring, to relieved laughter and applause, and one by one, like little bombs, the Cossacks dived down from their perches onto the trampoline and somersaulted off and away.

Ben's face was shining with excitement. "This is great, isn't it Claire! Aren't you glad we came!"

Claire nodded. "Yes, great." She still felt queasy.

There were tumblers and trapeze artistes and a conjuror and a snake charmer. It was all very well done, but most of the performers were pocket-sized, and Claire was beginning to feel that 'Circus of the Clowns' was a misleading title for the show.

Ben felt the same way. At the end of each act, he turned to Claire and said "I bet it'll be the clowns now!" And then it would be something else.

Finally however, there was a pause. The lights went lower, and lower, and lower. A violin played on its own, somewhere unseen. It played a haunting tune that spoke of night in foreign lands; of ghosts that glided in and out of empty palaces under tropical moonlight; of mystery and suspense. Now the ring was completely dark. Claire stared hard into the darkness, sensing movement, but seeing nothing.

Then a green spotlight created a pool of light. Standing in the centre of the ring were six figures. They were tall, or perhaps they just looked tall because the previous performers had all been so small. They were statues of clowns: fixed, motionless figures caught in the midst of a variety of actions. One bent forward to tie the shoelace on his enormous boot, while behind him another stood ready to tip a bucket of water over his head. Two more were frozen in a wrestling match for possession of a watering can. The last two held a mirror frame between them. One smiled broadly at his apparent reflection, which grimaced back at him with its tongue out.

Slowly, the light grew. The violin's tune tailed away, and a drumbeat began, slow and quiet at first, but growing in pace and volume. With infinite slowness, the clowns began to move, as if waking from a deep trance.

Claire watched them in the way that you might watch a snake slithering slowly towards you. They were compelling, strange, fascinating, but they made you want to run away. Their long, shiny

boots were like leathery crocodiles and their white painted faces were repellent. As they began to come to life, she felt she would have preferred them to remain as statues, harmless and mute.

CHAPTER THREE THE BLUE POTION

The clowns were fully alive now. The green spotlight had been replaced by bright white lights that picked out the colours of their outfits like poisonous toadstools on the woodland floor. One of them had red trousers with white spots. These kept falling down to reveal white shorts with red spots. Another had a bright yellow jacket with a gigantic red rose in the buttonhole. It squirted water at anyone who leaned too close to smell it.

The clowns were busy. The drumbeat that had brought them to life was replaced by a noisy dance tune with trumpets and accordion. They scurried hither and thither bringing objects into the ring.

First came a big table. Four of them staggered in holding it aloft. Reclining gracefully on the top was the clown with the spotted trousers, until they noticed him and angrily tipped him off in a heap.

Then there was a tablecloth to be laid on the table. A very thin clown with thick strands of grey hair like the business end of a mop got himself completely wrapped up in his attempts to spread the cloth. He had to be unrolled by the others, but unfortunately each time they got him out, another clown was found to have got wrapped up instead.

Ben was giggling, and turned around to share his pleasure with Claire. To his surprise, she was pale and unsmiling.

"What's the matter, Claire? Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Don't you like the clowns?"

It was too complicated to explain why she didn't like them. She didn't know if she could find words for the deep feeling of unease that they created in her. She gave up.

"Of course. Yes. They're very funny."

Ben turned around again. Now the clowns had got the cloth on the table, but Red Spot and GreyMop were underneath it in a tangle of limbs, with only their great crocodile feet sticking out.

The clowns were talking and shouting to each other all the time, but you could only understand odd bits of it.

"Tabulo clotho! Off it! Off it, Spotto!"

"Why, why not sleep? Good blanky-blanky!"

"Argle it left! No! Right! Argle!"

It sounded like baby talk, or perhaps some foreign language mixed up with English.

When the table was finally laid with the cloth, it was time for the crockery to be brought in. It seemed that there were acceptable and unacceptable ways to do this. Plates, for example, had to be carried in great piles on the head, or skimmed from one clown to another like

Frisbees. One rather fat clown with a very big red nose kept trying to carry them in sensibly, but he was pulled up by the others each time.

“No! Bad Tubbo! Como qui! Como qui!”

And poor Tubbo would attempt to carry them on his head or throw them like frisbees, with disastrous results. GreyMop followed him around with a brush and a bucket, sweeping up the fragments.

Cutlery had to be brought in by juggling, three or four pieces at a time. Again Tubbo tried his best, but each time a knife or a fork went up in the air, it would land point downwards on his fingers and he'd drop it with a yelp. Finally the others rolled him under the table and told him to stay there out of the way. His big red nose kept poking out to see what was happening.

Eventually the table was set, and it was time for the food. Now great care and sensible behaviour were required. Several very large custard pies with lashings of cream were brought in with great ceremony and laid in a row on the table. Tubbo was keen to get at them, sneaking out from under the table whenever they were left unguarded, but he was always caught at the last moment with his fingers inches away from a pie.

Now the spotlights went dim, and a great candelabra with a dozen burning candles was carried in to light the feast. The tallest of the clowns, whose face was painted in a smile so wide that it stretched from ear to ear, disappeared into the darkness and returned with a tray. On it was a large glass jug filled with some blue liquid, and some glass tumblers. The blue liquid sparkled in the candlelight, and seemed to give off a faint smoky vapour. All the clowns were excited by the arrival of the drink, and Tubbo was allowed out from under the table to sit with the rest of them.

A silence fell. Something was wrong. There were six of them, but seven places were set. An empty place? They peered around, looked under the table, up at the roof, inside the glass tumblers. Who would fill the empty space?

Now a thin white spotlight appeared, lighting the ground beside the table. All of the clowns stood up and looked at the plate-sized area it illuminated, shaking their heads. The light wandered off towards the edge of the ring, and they followed it, nudging each other, tripping over each other's feet, muttering. Claire watched in horror as the light came zig-zagging across the ring, closer and closer.

Now the light hesitated on the top of the low barrier. Then it sprang, like a cat onto a mouse, and shone on Ben's face beside her.

Ben blinked in the bright illumination. The clowns' faces crowded around him, on the edge of the darkness beyond the light. One of them spoke, the one who had played the trick on them with the bucket of paper streamers earlier on, the tallest one with the enormous smile.

“Be our guest, please good mister, sir, my lord! Be guest at our feasting!”

“Well, I...” Ben started to mutter.

“You *must*! Oh, yes! Pies for you!”

Ben scrambled out of his seat. He didn't really want to go, but he felt the pressure of all the clowns' eyes looking at him out of the darkness. He couldn't spoil the show. They helped him over the barrier and led him by the elbow to his place at the table. The spotlight went out, and the scene was illuminated only by the candelabra. Claire looked at her brother sitting among the clowns as if she were watching a frightening television programme. She was safe in her comfortable seat, but out there on the screen, someone else was in danger. What sort of danger, she couldn't have said. It was just a feeling.

Ben sat at the table with quite a different feeling. He felt very exposed, just like the sensation he'd had in the last school play when he'd had a speaking part for the first time. You could sense everyone's eyes watching you. Your skin felt like it fitted too tightly, and your mouth was dry. But at least at the school play he had known what was expected of him. Now he just felt helpless. Was he going to end up with his face in a custard pie? The words of the sad, beautiful, tiny woman at the ticket booth came back to him. *Don't take anything from the clowns!* Would they give him something?

There seemed to be six custard pies. GreyMop picked up the one in front of Tubbo, and placed it in front of Ben with a great show of polite generosity.

"My pie!" Tubbo objected.

Red Spot intervened. Big Smiley tried to help. Tubbo thrust his pie into Red Spot's face.

Red Spot picked up his own pie. He took aim at Tubbo, but Tubbo dodged and the pie went into Big Smiley's face. In an instant the other clowns were hurling their pies at each other in a flurry of angry recriminations. Somehow, everyone ended up with a pie in the face, except Ben, who was unscathed.

Big Smiley apologised profusely. "Nothing left, all gone. Shim, sham, shame." He shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of despair. Then his eyes alighted on the jug and tumblers.

"Drink! Special blue brew drink. For guests only. Special, special!"

Ben watched as Big Smiley poured a tumbler of the blue drink. It bubbled and winked in the candlelight. A vapour arose from its surface, like a departing ghost dissolving away into the air. The clowns' faces, encrusted with custard pie, leaned in around him as he was handed the tumbler. It felt very, very cold to his fingers, as if it had just come out of a freezer. It almost hurt.

"Drink!" said Big Smiley.

"Drink!" repeated all the other clowns, almost in a whisper. Ben felt surrounded by them, by their big eyes willing him to drink. There were invisible eyes out there in the audience too, waiting, willing him to drink the blue liquid in the cold tumbler. He brought it slowly towards his mouth. It would just be some sweet fizzy drink, quite harmless. *Don't take anything from the clowns!* It had a smell. Not a nice smell. A smell of rotteness, sickly. He hesitated.

"Drink *now!*" Big Smiley hissed, like a snake in his ear.

"Drink *now!*" the other clowns repeated, like a nest of vipers. Their eyes were on him, compelling him. His lips touched the rim of the tumbler.

"No!" A yell came out of the darkness, beyond the clowns' faces.

"Don't drink it Ben!"

It was Claire, shouting with a desperate urgency. There was a slight murmuring out there, as the rest of the audience wondered what was going on. Ben thumped the tumbler back onto the table. Some of the liquid sloshed out. He jumped up and blundered blindly into the blackness beyond the reach of the candlelight. He felt hands clutching at him, and heard the protests of the clowns.

"No, no! Please!"

"Nice drink, lovely for you!"

"Shim, sham, shame!"

Then he was stumbling into Claire, who had left her seat and entered the dark ring. She pointed him towards the exit, and they ran as fast as they could towards it. There was a mixture of exclamations and cheering from the audience.

When they got to the canvas tunnel leading out of the big top, they found several of the manikins in their way, staring intently at them. Claire thought they were going to stop them, but they simply parted to let them through.

Once outside, they ran until they reached the park gates, where they stopped to look back, gulping the cold air into their lungs. The big top glowed eerily through the trees. Accordion music had started up, and a small ripple of applause came to them on the breeze. So - the show still went on. Their breathing slowed down gradually.

"Why did we run away?" Ben said. It seemed a stupid question, since he had been running at least as hard as Claire.

"I don't know," Claire replied. "I just didn't want you to drink the blue stuff. It seemed all wrong, like a nightmare." She ran her fingers through her hair. "We must have looked pretty silly, dashing off like that!"

Ben nodded. "Definitely. But I'm glad we did. It was horrible, sitting at the table with them all. And that drink had a funny smell."

"Come on, let's walk quickly."

They set off towards home.

"Those clowns were really creepy. I hated them," Claire said, glancing back over her shoulder.

"I thought they were funny at first, when they were setting the table. But they were frightening when they came and got me."

"Let's get back quickly anyway. I don't like it out here."

The streets were more deserted than they had been earlier. They didn't pass anyone on foot, and Claire was glad, because she felt more than ever that it was an odd time for children to be out on their own. A few cars went by, and one slowed down a little. They both felt anxious to get back indoors. Ben thought he heard footsteps behind them once, and stopped to look back.

"What is it?" Claire asked anxiously.

"I thought I heard someone behind us."

They looked back along the empty street. It was just an ordinary street of houses with small gardens at the front. The wind whispered in the hedges and shrubbery of the gardens, which were dark as pools of ink. The street lights hummed a yellow song. There was nothing there.

"Come on!" Claire said, setting off again at a fast walk.

When they'd turned down the passageway beside Mr Evans's house, they began to feel safe. They picked their way carefully through his beautifully cared for vegetable patch and reached the wall. It was then that they heard the unmistakable patter of feet in the passageway behind them. Ben felt his skin crawl with invisible insects. Claire spoke urgently.

"Quick, Ben! Get up!"

Ben got his hands on the wall. But in his panic, he couldn't get a good hold. His fingers were like spaghetti.

"I can't!" he hissed.

They turned around, their backs to the wall, and saw a shape emerging from the passageway.

In the darkness it looked like a child. But somehow they knew it wouldn't be. Slowly the little figure advanced towards them, between the rows of cabbages and sprouts. At least it was on its own. Claire called out, trying to sound confident and brave.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

The tiny figure held up its hands palms outwards in a gesture of reassurance, and walked closer. About three yards away it stopped, and they could make out the dark raven hair and the once beautiful face of the girl - or woman - who had sold them their tickets. She wore a long dark skirt and had a shawl around her shoulders.

"I'm Stella," she said, in a voice like rustling leaves. "I mean you no harm. I want to help you."

"How can you help us? We don't need any help," Claire replied.

Stella shook her head. "You are badly in need of help. You have come to the notice of the clowns."

"The clowns? We don't want anything to do with the clowns."

"Ah, but *they* want something to do with you. They want your childhood!"

Ben and Claire looked at each other. Stella's words didn't make sense to them, but they were nonetheless chilling. Ben spoke first.

"It's something to do with that blue drink, isn't it? You warned me not to take anything from them."

Stella nodded. "The blue potion, yes. If you had drunk that, all would have been lost. You have had a lucky escape, thanks to your sister. But the clowns do not give up a victim so easily."

"A *victim*?" Ben croaked out the word. "What do you mean?"

Stella drew a little nearer. She was just slightly shorter than Ben. Her eyes fixed his own. "How old do you think I am?"

Ben looked at her. Close up, you could see that her black hair had odd strands of white. Her face was lined with care; her eyes red and dull. But somehow there was beauty there too, beauty with a veil drawn over it. You couldn't guess her age.

"I don't know," he muttered. "Are you about fifty?"

"I'm thirteen. I was nine when I drank the clowns' blue potion. Four years ago." She looked at each of them in turn. "Do you believe me?"

Claire's head was spinning. The little woman's words didn't make sense. But her manner and voice were profoundly sincere.

"I... I don't know what to think," she replied.

Stella went on. "There is a lot to explain to you, and very little time. Shall I tell you my story?"

Ben glanced at Claire. She nodded.

"All right," Claire said. "But we have to get back into our house before our parents come back."

"Ah - they didn't know you were going to the circus?"

"No. They didn't want us to go."

Stella shook her head ruefully. "Well, what's done is done. Let's sit down. What are your names?"

"Ben."

"Claire."

The children sat with their backs against the garden wall. On the other side of it, behind them, was their house; their familiar childhood world; the safety of times past. In front of them were darkness and the unknown, and the small figure of Stella sitting on Mr Evans's upturned wheelbarrow. Her sad voice told them a tale so strange and terrifying that they felt they were being dragged unwillingly into a nightmare that they couldn't stop.