

Frostproof Suite: Clown Car

by Steven Gowin

I drove the clown car... used to anyway... before I quit the shows.

To be clear, I ain't talkin' about ass clown drivin'... monkey car racing like these young no class fools do do on the freeways.

No. What I say is that KiKi LeBlanc worked the circus. Never mind white face, never mind Bull Clown. My job was take the falls, act the dope, finish at the wrong end of the slap stick for the blow off. I was Auguste, the fool.

I know you gotta find out about that car now. Can't wait. OK. First, clowns don't come up no trap door and flood out. Think about it. You can't count on a trap door every venue, and we used a tent most of the time. Anyway, them roustabouts dig no tunnels.

My car was the real deal. Kept a little bitty Chevy. Had to have a American brand... We painted it red white and blue with big white stars... patriotic clown shit, understand? And we blacked out the windows so no fool sees in; we beefed up the suspension so it rode like normal.

Inside, you strip everything. Ev-er-y-thing... seats, door panels, consoles. We got the dash out, tore out that firewall and engine too, rigged us up a Go Kart motor. Backfired like a son of a bitch, but that was a good thing. Smoke's good too. What you leave inside though, gotta be sure won't rip holes in a clown.

Hot as hell in there, no air. I drive into the ring crazy; my horn blows *La Cucaracha*. I stop fast, and a dozen clowns piles out... white faces first, the Augustes, then the Hobos. The boys run amok squirtin' seltzer around, sweepin' each others' toes, belly dancin, until Ring Master shouts, "You crazy clowns... I'll see the boss tonight. You're done for this time!" Then out I crawl, unhinging myself up to my six foot seven, unfolding my bones; the Orchestra works the bamboo ratchet.

This all kills, but it ain't over because now Little Jimmy busts out and runs between my legs. He's four foot tall, but he's Sheriff and wants to chill them bastards. His six guns blaze; he's crazy mad. We rigged steam to blow out his ears. But then he's flat on his back... coronary. Nurse clowns rushes out with a stretcher; clowns pile back in the Chevy... off to the hospital. And I'm left, confounded, alone, in a cool blue spot.

Back then, the Bermudez Brothers Circus and Combined Shows wintered down in Frostproof Florida, near the big boys in Sarasota... That Sarasota bunch, no matter what you hear, are a low bunch... grumbling and bitchin'... lazy, shiftless drunk off at the dog tracks most of the time. Majority packs heat, and one bad word about their outfit, they'll fight, only comin' together if somebody down mouths 'em or questions their boss's authority.

I told Jimmy we oughta steer clear of south Sarasota where they hung, but he wanted to drink at the Venice Lanes all the time. He had a pretty good meth business down there and always kept a eyeball out for one of them roustabout wives. Something about them roustie girls... they couldn't keep their hands off'n him... just wanted to take care of him like a little baby Jesus, love him up and all. It ain't natural, but I seen so much of it over the years.

Them days is long past. One night after a pint of rock n rye and a pack of Chesterfields, I wish I could say Jimmy bought it out on stage, or that one of them Sarasotas shivved him over a gal. But fact is, he just couldn't get out of bed that day. He called for me and Ring Master and the Bull Clown, Pinky Ganenko. We hauled him to hospital, the real one, and last he says is, "I am a asshole, but I tell you what, KiKi, no clowns can talk to me anymore."

Now here's what all that's got to do with KiKi LeBlanc, and why I gave up the shows and all. See, I know it, he knew it, and now you know; even though Jimmy was a little son of a bitch, most of Sarasota and Venice and Frostproof, the damned Tampa Bay turned out for his "vigil." That's a cleaned up, no booze version of a "wake."

If you'd asked one of 'em, one like most of 'em who turned up in flip flops and shorts and some kind of wife beater already done up with a picture of Jimmy bought off'n fella in a tent over the Citgo Station, why'd they showed up, they'd say family solidarity or some such bullshit. Well, hell, they weren't family. Jim's own brother, Primo, didn't even show from Boca Raton, which means the Rat's Mouth.

No it wasn't for any damned thing like a true and decent sentiment. They turned up to wallow in it all, maybe show up on the *Ten News at Ten*. Look, a child disappears or Grandpa goes drowned, or Travis or Trevor or Trent blows up from a IED somewhere in Afghanistan, and it's always the same in a place like this, a place where the circus lives.

They paint up a sign and drink a six before they leave the house and stick a candle through a paper plate so as not to suffer hot wax and come out fat and sloppy to mourn... every proud and stupid simple cheap cretin from Central Florida shows up to pass around a bucket of greasy KFC and light a candle and weep and writhe and proclaim, he was a good clown. But he was not.

That's the circus crowd, the show folk, and the rubes, all of 'em; that's who they are, who we are, and what we're about, and I see no good in it, no grace, and that's why I am done with the Clown Car and the Bermudez Brothers and shows.

It's why I'm tryin' to keep to myself now. It's why no clowns can talk to me again.

