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by Marshall Payne

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Clowns

Marshall Payne

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to let both of you go," Garston Ford, the circus owner, said after the last night's show in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Jojo stood in front of the owner in the makeshift management tent, his head downcast, his eyes welling up. He knew that this had been coming, but it still didn't make it any easier. "Isn't there something we can work out so we can stay on?" Jojo asked.

"I'm afraid not," the owner said. "I realize that your wife is with clownchild, but I hired you as a duo." He was sitting behind a folding table that served as his desk, trying not to make eye contact with his employee, or rather, former employee. Ford cleared his throat. "I know you've been doing your damndest to cover for her, but I'm a business man..." His words trailed off.

Jojo searched through his fatigue-rattled brain for something to say that might change the man's mind but came up empty. "Then what should we do?" he asked. "Where can we go?"

After a moment, Ford finally looked up. "Listen, we're not the only circus on tour right now. I know it's near the end of the season, but there are a few shows still on the road. Maybe you can find something before winter sets in." Ford reached in his pocket and pulled out a fat roll of bills and peeled off six twenties, the pay Jojo had coming. After deliberation, he tossed an extra twenty in the pile. Severance pay. "Truly, Jojo, I am sorry." The only thing Garston Ford was ever sorry for was poor gate receipts.

Jojo mumbled something resembling thanks as he scooped up the seven bills. He wasn't really angry with Ford; the man had a business to run. But still, what was he going to do? As he lifted up the tent flap to let himself out, the owner said, "Best of luck to you and yours." The empty words disappeared as Jojo stepped out into the misty, damp evening.

As Jojo left the fairgrounds, he heard a whoosh and turned to see the big top collapsing. Breaking circus, they called it. Then roustabouts converged to pack it all away to be reassembled in the next city on the tour. A city that Jojo and Karabeth would never see. At least not with this circus anyway. All this caused an emotional upheaval inside him. He felt like a complete failure. He wasn't concerned so much about himself as he was for Karabeth and his child she was carrying. How could he face her and give her the dreadful news?

As he crossed the highway to the motel, his greatly oversized paddle-like shoes flapping on the pavement, striding in the clumsy way that was his trademark, the rain began to fall in earnest. He crammed his undersized top hat in the huge right pocket of his multicolored jacket, then pulled his ill-fitting jacket over his head (his pate was bald and shiny paper-white) which was already soaked. *Yes, he thought, when it rains, it pours.*

As he trudged up the graveled, potholed driveway of the Treetop motel, he heard the sound of horse hooves behind him. He turned to see Layna, the equestrian, trotting up behind him on her white stallion, Lightning. After coming to a halt, she said, "Jojo, I've been looking all over for you. Vera sent me to find you. Karabeth's water broke."

"She's about to give birth?" It wasn't so much a question acknowledging the event as a query as to *why now?* It couldn't have come at a more awkward time.

Layna nodded and pushed her long blond hair from her eyes, hair that was usually flowing but was now a wet, tangled mop. The stallion whinnied. He didn't like being out in the rain either. "Just thought I'd let you know," she said. "Listen, I've got to get Lightning back to his stall. If Ford knew I was riding him off the fairgrounds, he'd really be pissed."

"I understand," Jojo said. "And thanks for looking for me." Layna turned and galloped off, Lightning's hooves adeptly avoiding every rain-filled pothole.

When he got to room #17 of the Treetop motel (a dilapidated affair, but the only thing they could afford) a few of his fellow performers were standing out front. In the olden days circus performers were provided trailers to stay in, but with the rising cost of motor fuel that had been done away with. Nowadays, they all stayed in the cheapest motel they could find in whatever town they were performing.

Bruce the strongman spoke first, his biceps still bulging from the usual workout under the big top. He was dressed in shorts and muscle shirt, dark hair and thin mustache delineating his Slavic origins. "Jojo, I'm glad you're here. We sent Layna to find you. It's time. Karabeth's water broke a little while ago." He swallowed the beer he'd just opened, crushed the can with one hand, and threw it in the trash receptacle by the stairwell. Just beyond the overhang, rain splattered the pavement and the clouds rumbled.

"Yes," Jojo said, "I just ran into her in the parking lot. Is Karabeth okay?"

"Vera is still with her," Rolanda said. "We sent Carmen to fetch a doctor." Rolanda was the teenage daughter of Buzz and Holly Trazenda. The three of them, along with her uncle Buck, comprised the aerialist team *The Flying Trazendas*. Their real last name was Pyle, but somehow that name

didn't pose the sense of acrobatic danger that Trazenda did. "Unfortunately, at this late hour..." She shrugged, letting him know that finding one was unlikely.

"I've got to see her," Jojo said.

"She's been calling for you," Long Barney said. Long Barney was perched on three milk crates stacked on top of one another. Though sitting, he still towered over Jojo. He was nine foot seven, while Jojo was five foot four.

"Go to her, Jojo," Rolanda said. "She needs you."

Bruce cracked open another beer. "We'll wait here for the doctor," he said. "If Carmen can find one." Carmen was Bruce's wife. Though she didn't work for the circus, she was known for her ability to get things done. Jojo hoped that this time she would come through.

Jojo opened the door to the room and went inside. Vera, Bruce's sister, was coming out of the bathroom with a cold compress. "Jojo, I'm glad you're here." She went to the bed where Karabeth was lying and put the compress on her forehead. Her clown face glistened with sweat.

"Hi, honey," Karabeth said weakly, forcing a smile.

Jojo went and sat on the bed beside her and held her hand. Though he knew very little about childbirth, he could tell that she was in labor—the bulge in her belly that was their little clown was lower, down near her groin now. "How are you doing?" he asked.

With a sigh she said, "As well as can be—" She let out a little yelp, gripped his hand tightly.

"Another labor pain?" Vera said, looking at her watch.

The expectant mother nodded.

"It won't be long now," Vera said from the other side of the bed. She looked toward the door nervously. He could tell that she desperately wanted, if not needed, expert assistance.

Jojo sat there for a few moments holding Karabeth's sweaty hand. Then there was a knock at the door, and Vera opened it. Bruce, poking his round head in, said, "Carmen couldn't find a doctor, but she brought back the next best thing—a midwife." His eyes were bright, his voice enthusiastic.

The door opened wider, and a thin elderly woman with a tight face walked in. "Hello," she said, "I'm Mrs. Warner." She said it in an imperious tone as though she had announced that she were the Queen of England. She scanned the room, her eyes shifting from Karabeth to Jojo. Raising her head but not her gimlet stare, she said, "Clowns." She sighed. "Well, I've delivered all types."

Mrs. Warner shooed Jojo out of her way, sat down next to Karabeth, and began asking her questions. Jojo went around to the foot of the bed and watched. "Is she going to be okay?" he asked, fidgeting. But Mrs. Warner ignored him. He began to hyperventilate slightly and paced the room to work off his anxiety, paddle shoes flapping against the worn carpeting.

Mrs. Warner turned and glared at him. "Would you mind sitting down, *sir*." It wasn't a question. And she used the word "sir" as if it were a title of which he was unworthy.

Jojo sat down in the dilapidated chair under the TV that hung from the ceiling. The cushions had seen better days, and he felt as though they were swallowing him alive. He crossed and uncrossed his legs several times, shifting his weight in the chair. Sitting felt so uncomfortable—he felt like he

was going to explode from worry—that he had to stand up, finally did so, and began pacing again in his clownish gait. "Is there anything I can do?" he asked frantically, his heart pounding in his chest.

Exasperated with him, Mrs. Warner stood. "Yes, there is. Your wife is going to be fine, Mr... ."

"Just Jojo," he replied.

"Okay, Jojo. But I need your help. Would you please go outside and wait. You're not helping in here at all." She took him by the arm and led him toward the door.

Quickly Jojo found himself outside with Bruce, Rolanda, and Long Barney. Jojo felt suddenly detached from everything. A naked light bulb glared above them, giving the tableau a stark, eerie quality.

"What's the word?" Long Barney said from his perch on the milk crates.

"She wants me to wait out here," Jojo said, still trying to catch his breath.

"It's probably for the best," Bruce said. "Besides, out here you have your buddies to talk to. To help you keep your mind off things. You'll know soon enough if it's a boy or a girl." Bruce reached in his ice chest at his feet and pulled out a beer. "Here, drink this. It'll relax you."

Jojo took the beer, opened it, and took a big gulp. "Thanks," he said after swallowing a third of the ice cold beer. It had a sour taste that was not unpleasant.

Rolanda asked, "So, do you want a boy or a girl?"

Jojo, staring off into the rain and the Nebraska darkness, heard the question but the exact meaning of the words escaped him. "I'm sorry."

"Do you want a boy or a girl clown?" Rolanda repeated.

"I haven't really thought about it," Jojo said absently. He went back to staring into the darkness. He *had* thought about a lot of other things, however. About how he and Karabeth would manage to support an infant. True, in a few years their child would be able to join their act, but what were they suppose to do until then? Sitters were expensive, and what kind of life would it be for an infant on the road? From birth to the age of seven, Jojo had stayed with his retired paternal grandparents in Florida while his parents toured. But Jojo and Karabeth were both the youngest children of their respective families, and both sets of parents had passed on a few years back, so that ruled out that possibility of child care. Their child would have to travel with them, assuming that it was born healthy enough to do so.

This was the second baby they'd tried to have. The first one had been a miscarriage a couple of years ago in Beaumont, Texas. Jojo remembered the night Karabeth awoke him to give him the news. Not knowing what to do with the four-month-old fetus, she had wrapped it in a motel towel and left it in the bathroom. It would have made Garston Ford happy if they would have given him the inchoate child (it was a girl) for display in his freak show. "Step right up folks and see the preserved clown fetus with your very own eyes!" he could hear the talker roar to coax the crowd. Jojo wouldn't have been able to deal with that, so he placed the fetus in a cigar box and buried her in back of the motel. That had been the worst night of Jojo's life. Could that be happening now? he wondered. Could Karabeth be inside giving birth to another stillborn clownchild?

And even if the child were normal, Jojo had his reservations to the validity of bringing a clownchild into the world today. Although he enjoyed what he did (it was more than a living, it was a calling), the business wasn't what it used to be. With the advent of the Internet, interactive games, and

the like, though it had not killed the circus, it had limited it severely. The entertainment business had become very competitive. Jojo often wondered if the fault wasn't his own. Even though he worked constantly to develop his act and refine his skills, he had never been to any of the prestigious clown colleges in Florida. There was a time when he had been accepted to the Orlando University of Buffoonery, but he'd lacked the funds to go. If he and Karabeth did have a child, it would be imperative that the child have the opportunity to attend. But that cost money. Big money. How would they raise the tuition?

Little Bit walked up and broke Jojo out of his nightmarish reverie. "Hey, gang," he said in his high-pitched voice. He turned to the expectant father. "Jojo, the grapevine tells me that tonight is the big night." Little Bit was dressed in full military regalia of some make-believe munchkin army that he pretended to command. Under three feet tall, he was Long Barney's partner and sidekick.

Jojo nodded. He had always been a clown of few words, preferring the art of pantomime as his stock in trade. A good clown could say as much with his face as any polished orator could with his voice. Jojo felt that those who talked the most often had the least to say.

Rolanda, still in her acrobatic tights that were covered by a clear plastic raincoat, said, "I know that these first few months of traveling with a baby will be difficult, Jojo. If there is anything at all I can do, please don't hesitate to ask."

Jojo sighed and scratched his orange hair. "I guess now is as good of time as any to tell you all," he said. "Garston Ford paid me off tonight and let us go."

"That's terrible," Rolanda said.

"The man has no conscience," said Long Barney.

"Bastard!" This from Bruce the strongman as he crushed another beer can that wasn't quite empty. Cheap ale spewed on his arm and chest.

After a moment Rolanda said, "What are you going to do, Jojo?"

"I don't know," he said. "Ford just told me. I haven't had a chance to tell Karabeth."

"Best that she not know until later," Long Barney said. "She's got enough to deal with right now."

Everyone turned toward the room as they heard screaming from inside. It was Karabeth. "Relax, Jojo," Rolanda said. "This is exactly how it should be happening."

"And how many times have you given birth?" Bruce asked.

"Well, none."

"Then you've been there when it's happened before," Little Bit said.

"Well, no... ."

"It'll be okay," said Long Barney.

Little Bit looked up at his elongated partner. "How can you be so sure?"

Everyone had become so excited and anxious that they went on like this for a few moments until Vera stuck her head out the door and said, "Jojo, would you come in here now. Please."

Walking inside, he knew something was wrong. The baby should be crying. *There should be a baby crying!* he thought. The room was dark, darker than it had been before—someone had turned down the lights. He looked around in the darkness, trying to focus his eyes. After standing under the 100 watt bulb, he couldn't see anything. And he should be hearing a baby crying!

"Jojo," a voice said. It was Karabeth's. His eyes were focusing now. She sat in the bed clutching a small bundle. "Do you want to see your son?"

"Why isn't he crying?" Jojo asked.

"He's the strong silent type like his father," she said.

He sat down on the bed next to her and she turned the newborn toward him. Yes, it was definitely their child. He had Karabeth's big crimson eye markings and Jojo's goofy purple grin. And though his hair was very thin, it was orange like Jojo's. Except for his colorful markings, his face was clown-white and he had a red bulbous nose. A perfect little clown.



It was still drizzling three days later when they decided it was time to move on. It had been relatively quiet for the last two days since their friends had left. For the eighteen hours between the time that Jojo, Jr. (Karabeth's choice for a name) had been born and the circus had left, everyone had hovered around room #17 to get just one more look at the "cute little guy." It was like they had never seen a baby clown before. In any event, the circus was gone and now it was time to hit the road. Bruce had told them that there was a carnival in Bismarck, North Dakota that was always hiring clowns. So that was where they were headed. They still had \$120 of the \$140 that they had been paid (Long Barney had taken up a collection among their friends and paid their motel for an additional two nights) which was enough to live on for a week or so when they got to Bismarck.

They walked to the highway, Karabeth carrying their newborn and Jojo carrying their two suitcases, which were all the possessions they had in the world. As Jojo looked at Jojo, Jr., he knew that it was enough for now. And even though it was misting, the air smelled fresh, clean, and it invigorated

him. Being a father had changed his outlook completely. He knew that anything in the world was possible, even for a clown. It was all a matter of attitude. The right attitude. Jojo, Jr. would go to clown college. Jojo would make sure of it.

When they got to Highway 77 which, ran north out of Lincoln—Jojo figured that hitchhiking would be easier and safer here than on the interstate—he sat both suitcases down for Karabeth to sit on. She had Jojo, Jr. wrapped in a wool baby blanket that Vera had given her. Jojo went out as close to the road as he could and held out his thumb. Yes, their luck was improving; within ten minutes a pickup truck pulled over. "Do you clowns need a ride?" the farmer asked. Jojo nodded at the man and his wife and two kids who were piled in the front. "You'll have to ride in the bed," the farmer said as he got out.

Jojo held his son while the farmer helped Karabeth into the back of the truck. After handing Jojo, Jr. to her, he put the two suitcases in and hopped in himself. The rain was beginning to fall even harder now. The farmer had a tarp that he tied to the front of the truck bed and then draped the rest of it over the three clowns so they wouldn't get too wet. The farmer climbed back into the cab and then pulled back onto the highway. Karabeth undid her multicolored blouse and let Jojo, Jr. suckle on her orange teat that for the last two days had been turning a bright crimson. The bed of the truck rumbled beneath them. Rain pattered on the tarp above. This was the first leg of the journey for their new family.



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Born in 1957, Marshall Payne has led a colorful life. He has worked as a touring musician, music producer, sound technician, a salesman, and a waiter. In 1999 he committed himself to speculative fiction and has never looked back. Since then he has written over two dozen short stories and seven novels, the last three he's looking to publish. (The first four were merely for practice.) When not writing, he likes to watch Spurs basketball with his cat C.C. and eat popcorn.

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Cover: "Butterfly Angel"

Copyright 2006, *Kelley Pounds*

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