

Twisted Imaginings: Vol 2

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The Greatest Show on Earth originally seen in Estronomicon

The Tunnel is now available as a screenplay entitled "The Faceless"

THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

Nathaniel first wanted to join the circus when he was only four years old.

It was his parents fault really and if they'd known back then how things would turn out I very much doubt that a trip to the big top would have been his birthday present that year.

His father had seen the poster glued, at an odd angle, to the window of the bus station as he waited for the number forty three to arrive and transport him to work.

It was a gaudy notice that attempted to shout out the arrival of the circus, but not any old circus mind you. Oh, no.

CAPTAIN MONOTONE'S

ALL SINGIN'

ALL DANCIN'

HALLOWEEN CIRCUS

The letters were every colour of the rainbow and highlighted with what could have been powdered diamonds or, as John rightly thought, glitter.

Under the emblazoned title there was an equally colourful picture that showed a bright yellow and red big top, the canvas doors pulled back to allow the procession of Clowns, animals and all matter of entertainers to flow out into the foreground.

John slowly let his gaze travel over the figures that filled the poster, positive that he could hear the faint fanfare of a circus band in the distance.

He smiled to himself at the memory of his first circus, remembering the sights and sounds that had amazed him as a youngster. He knew immediately that Nathaniel would love it. In fact it couldn't have come at a better time. Due to work they hadn't even managed a summer holiday and now it was pushing on towards Christmas. John needed to treat the family to at least an evening out and this could be perfect.

He scanned the lower quarter of the poster and his smile widened as he read.

CAPTAIN MONOTONE INVITES YOU TO HIS CIRCUS

BETWEEN 29-31 OCT

Nathaniel's birthday was on the 31. It would be the perfect gift for his little boy and a way to get the family out of the house for a few hours.

That's if it wasn't too expensive.

He let his eyes drop even further and leant forward so that he could read the small print at the base.

Ringside: Adult £10 Child £5

Other seats: adult £7 Child £4

John quickly did the math on ringside seats. There would be Nathaniel and Susan, his sister. It went without saying that John would be going and Cath would go under pressure. After all it was their son's birthday present.

"Thirty quid," he spoke out loud to himself, the smile still etched on his face.

Before the bus pulled up and the doors hissed open he had jotted down the number for pre-ordering tickets and decided to ring from work and before Cath could talk him out of it.

John returned home that night to a mixed reception. He was used to coming in on an evening and having Nathaniel run along the hallway and into his arms.

What he didn't expect was Cath, stood at the base of the stairs with a face like thunder.

"Hi." He tried to sound light hearted, but faced with the Medusa that was his wife he felt his soul shrivel a little more than it had the day before.

"What do you call these?" In her hand she held four, fanned out colourful pieces of card.

"Tickets." He could see the name 'Captain Monotone' across the front one. "I didn't think they'd have arrived yet." He'd only rung the booking office an hour before leaving work.

"Oh, they arrived alright." She glared at him. "Hand delivered by a freaky looking clown and a bloody monkey." It appeared that Cath wasn't seeing the fun side of things.

"Daddy, it was a real clown." Nathaniel's head peeped around the wall at the top of the stairs, a happy grin nearly splitting his face in half. "You should have seen the car..."

"Bed young man," Cath snapped.

"The clown said we're going to the circus." Nathaniel was far too excited to take any heed of his mother.

"That's right Nate." John couldn't hold his smile inside any longer.

Cath threw the tickets at him and stormed away to the kitchen, mumbling under her breath and cursing her husband's actions. Nathaniel crept down the stairs and stopped halfway as he watched his father remove his coat and shoes.

"I love you daddy," he whispered.

"You too, Nate." In fact he loved both the kids, the best thing to have come out of the marriage. "Now back to bed." The boy waved and ran back up the stairs.

John stood in the hallway for a few minutes thinking about where to start when he followed Cath into the kitchen.

He hoped that once she heard about the bonus and the promotion, she wouldn't be so hard to convince that the circus was a good idea.

Nathaniel lay in bed without a worry or a care in the world. He was going to the circus, a Halloween circus and he was sure it would be better than anything else ever, cartoons even.

His heart had jumped in his chest earlier in the day when he'd looked out the window and seen the spooky car pull up outside his house. He'd laughed out loud as it shuddered to a halt and the door had fallen off with a clang. The car had sat sputtering for a while before there was a resounding bang and a black cloud filled with orange sparks had erupted from the rear.

He'd still been laughing when the monkey had jumped out the back of the car, jumping from one leg to other impatiently as it waved the pink envelope in its hand and waited for the driver to join it.

“Wow!” The laughing stopped as from the far side of the funny looking car appeared the clown.

Nathaniel had been filled with awe at such a sight and felt his breath leave his body when he realised that the clown was waving at him. He waved back.

He giggled to himself as he drifted off to sleep still thinking about the surprise visitor, his eyelids falling heavily as thinking became dreaming. And in the dream version events were different.

Very different.

He began to toss around under the covers as memory was distorted by nightmare.

The clown waves at him and he waves back as the monkey makes what he doesn't realise is a vulgar hand gesture. He laughs at this, but he feels that all is not right. The sky is somehow wrong and the heat in the room has grown oddly chilly.

The thick, red painted lips of the clown part in an obscene smile that reveals teeth of dirty yellow with hints of green and in the gaps writhe white coloured creatures, bloated and blind.

The monkey scurries down the path, jumps over the boarder of freshly planted flowers that no longer seem quite as fresh and leaps up onto the window ledge.

The clown follows, doing cart wheels and back flips towards the front door. Its oversized shoes make a sickening slapping noise each time they hit the paving slabs, like

raw meat being thrown on a marble slab. It comes to an abrupt halt level with the window and for the first time Nathaniel sees how unclean the funny man truly is.

Its make up is no longer the white of drifting snow. Now it's dried grey and filled with cracks. Around the eyes the cracks are filled with a creamy substance that hints at disease and rot. The orange hair is patchy and matted. The scalp is scabby and flaking as the clown wobbles its head.

The monkey starts banging its head on the window and Nathaniel turns to find it gyrating its hips against the glass, a wet pink thing sticking up between its legs and leaving smears on the pane.

The clown moves on tiptoes to the front door and knocks three times, leaning back and raising a finger to its lips in a signal to remain quiet. The red paint around its mouth is now running from its chin and dripping down onto its ill fitting top. The drops hit the off white fabric and spread into large, rust coloured spots.

Nathaniel hears his mothers footsteps in the hallway and he wants to scream at her to stop, but it's too late.

Nathaniel woke with a start the next morning and, for the tiniest fraction of a second, he was scared. Then it was gone, along with the bad dream. If he'd remembered it then maybe he could have changed things but, as it happens, he didn't.

For John the night before had been better than good. He didn't see Cath smile much anymore so her reaction to his good news had knocked him sideways.

"You should've said before." She didn't bother to add '*I went off on one*'.

"I was going to." John also chose to leave the sentence hanging, she was smiling and that was all that mattered.

"I do love you John." That was the bit that had knocked him sideways.

He couldn't remember the last time she'd shown him any true affection. Yes, they still had sex on a regular basis, but it was always mechanical and done for necessity, not loving or mutual.

“It’s just that I hardly see you anymore.” She had tears in her eyes. “You work late through the week and you’re gone most weekends.” She really did love him, but married life hadn’t turned out how she’d dreamed it would.

“I know love.” He walked over to her and wrapped his arms around her. “No more weekends, I promise.” She shook in his embrace. “This is a new start.” And he meant it.

At breakfast Nathaniel noticed the difference in his parents, but he was still too young to comprehend what it meant. His mum had done a full fried breakfast and she was sat eating it with a smile that, in his small thoughts, made her the most beautiful mummy in the world.

Even Susan seemed to be happier than usual, as if the magic that had been worked on his parents had somehow rubbed off on her over night. Before he’d finished eating the same thing had begun to infect Nathaniel and he couldn’t stop smiling.

Things were good.

The week up to Nathaniel’s birthday and the all important circus trip was probably the best week of his young life.

His mum and dad’s good mood of that first morning proved to be anything but a fluke. His dad was home early every evening and the family had started doing the unheard of and sitting down together for dinner. His mum was like a different person altogether and had begun wearing dresses that showed off her still trim figure and her face had taken on the glow of a teenager in love for the first time.

Susan stopped being her usual teenager type self and even went as far as helping out around the house and astounded everyone by using the dishwasher and even the vacuum cleaner.

Everything was great except for the dreams that plagued Nathaniel’s night time hours. He would awake every morning and suffer intense panic, but could never remember why.

His shout comes too late and his mum opens the door on the clown that is not quite right. The monkey scurries between her legs, pausing for a brief look up the knee length

skirt and then runs into the living room. It stops at Nathaniel's feet and looks up at the boy with a smile of viciously sharp incisors.

"Hello my dear." The clown speaks with a voice too high pitched to be real. "Nice day for the circus." He pushes passed her and kicks the door shut with an over sized boot.

"Mum." Nathaniel is scared, his bottom lip trembling as the monkey tugs at his trouser leg and holds out the creased, finger marked envelope.

"Hi Nate," the clown screeches as it looms around the door frame and Nathaniel freezes under the gaze of the black voids that should be its eyes. "What's wrong boy? Cat got ya tongue?" The clown licks the blood red paint from around its mouth, smearing the colour to a greyish pink.

"Mum." Nathaniel tries to move, but the monkey grasps his ankle and squeezes painfully.

"Jesus, woman, you're raising the boy to be a fucking girl," laughs the clown.

Nathaniel knows the bad word, he's heard daddy use it before.

"Nate." His mum tries to reach him, but the clown pulls her close to him and sniffs her neck.

"Don't worry about the boy." He drags her towards the stairs. "He'll be fine." It looks at Nathaniel one last time, cocks it head and winks.

Nathaniel watches as his mum and the clown disappear up the stairs and he wants to cry. The monkey sits and stares at him with unblinking eyes, not once loosening its grip on the his leg.

Nathaniel hears a yelp of pain. He knows it's his mum and he attempts to pull free, but the monkey sinks its claws into tender flesh. Anger flares in the boy's head and without thinking he acts.

Before he has realised what he has done the poker is in his hand and swings through the air, connecting hard with the monkey's forehead. The skull, in real life would crack, but this is the world of nightmares and it pops like an over inflated balloon, showering Nathaniel in a thick fluid that smells like a battery placed on his tongue.

The grip on his ankle spasms twice and then relaxes. With the poker in hand Nathaniel makes his way to the base of the stairs. From above he can hear his mum

sobbing and a constant 'HONK, HONK' noise that reminds him of the horn on his bicycle out in the garden.

'HONK, HONK'

Poker raised, he steels himself and takes the first step.

'HONK, HONK'

He rushes the next three steps and then pauses as a tremor of terror nearly brings forth vomit.

'HONK, HONK'

His mum's sobbing increases in volume and tempo.

'HONK, HONK'

He charges the last half of the stairway and hits the bed room door running.

'HONK, HONK'

The door swings open and the clown smiles.

'HONK, HONK'

The night before his birthday was, however, a peaceful one. Nathaniel didn't manage to sleep deep enough to dream, the thought of his trip always keeping him with one foot in the world of the waking. More than twice his mum visited his room and pulled the covers back up around his neck, telling him softly to settle down.

"If you stay awake all night you'll fall asleep at the circus," she said and tickled him under the chin. He responded with the innocent laugh that only a child can give.

"I won't sleep at the circus." He paused, lifting an arm above the covers and making a cross with his finger above his chest. "I promise."

"OK, just try and sleep." His mum leaned over and kissed his forehead, pushing his fringe away with her finger as she did so.

"Goodnight Nate."

"Goodnight mum." Even then he still only managed a half dozing nod.

From the moment he woke up on his fourth birthday Nathaniel was ready and eager to head off for the circus, ready for the thrills and chills the haunted treat would have to offer his young mind.

“Mum, dad, wake up.” He jumped up and down on the bed, already dressed and with his hair brushed.

“Nate.” His mum sat up slowly, not ready to open her eyes and greet the early morning.

“Happy birthday, son.” His dad grinned at him and held out his arms for a hug and Nathaniel fell into them, giggling wildly as John feigned having the wind knocked out of his lungs. “You’re getting too big for this.” He rubbed his side. “I think you broke a rib.”

“I’m ready for the circus.” Nathaniel jumped back up and for the first time his parents noticed that he already had on his coat and shoes.

“That’s not until tonight.” His mum pulled him close and he wriggled impatiently. “But there’s other stuff downstairs that needs opening.”

“Yay.” He leapt from the bed. “It’s my birthday.” His parents looked at each other and smiled at the thumping of his shoes descending the stairs and the shouted Happy Birthday that came from Susan’s room.

“I can’t believe she didn’t moan about having to come with us tonight,” Cath stated. “I’m sure she’d prefer to go out with her friends.”

“Things are looking good.” John smiled, leaned over and kissed his wife firmly on the lips.

For Nathaniel the day was a blur of happiness and before he realised it the morning and afternoon had flown by and it was time to go to the circus. He was the first at the door and hopped from one foot to the other as he urged his family to hurry.

“Come on dad.” The grin on his face was huge, splitting his young face with a joy that John could not remember having ever seen before.

“I’m going as fast as I can.” He fumbled with his coat and his son began laughing at his dad’s silliness.

“You’re like a clown.” Nathaniel had never been happier.

He walked the whole way, taking his Sister’s hand until they reached the end of the street, at which point he ran forward, grabbing hold of mum and dad’s hands and began swinging between them, throwing his legs as high as he could on the forward swing.

Everyone seemed to have fallen into the holiday spirit and they passed houses with pumpkin lights in the windows and plastic tombstones in the gardens. It all added to the anticipation of the main event.

The excitement building in Nathaniel's stomach was unbearable for a four year old and his head was swimming with images of what the circus was really going to be like.

He had, from his bedroom window, seen the big top every morning. As soon as the sun had begun to filter through his curtains he had been up and out of bed, climbing onto his toy box just to get a look at the billowing canvas of red, yellow and green. His eyes had widened at the sight of the oversized skulls, cauldrons and witches that covered the day glow fabric. But tonight was special because he was finally going to see it from the inside and the secrets of the circus would be revealed to him.

As they drew nearer the music grew louder, brass band instruments that filled his ears with more images and increased his need to be within the big top and see everything that it promised. Other parents and children filled the path and they were all headed in the same direction and they all had the same look of expectation on their faces, but Nathaniel didn't notice them, his eyes focused on the towering tent that loomed above the trees.

"Roll up, roll up," The voice was loud yet friendly, a deep baritone that sounded like a drum made of candy-floss and toffee apples. "Welcome one and all to Captain Monotone's Halloween Circus." As children passed by he leaned down and ruffled their hair with a hand the size of a shovel. "You've heard of the Greatest Show on Earth." He paused for effect. "Well this show goes one better." The parents laughed and so did the children even though they didn't understand the joke.

The giant - and Nathaniel was sure he was a giant - stepped out in front of them and crouched down next to him. Nathaniel still had to look up to look the giant in the eye and smiled at the moon like face that beamed down at him.

"How old's the birthday boy then?" He scooped Nathaniel up and placed him on his shoulder, much to the boy's delight.

"I'm Four today," he said between squeals of joy, not once doubting how the giant even knew it was his birthday.

“Four years old and already nearly a man.” He started walking towards the tent and Nathaniel’s parents followed happily, even Susan had trouble keeping the smile of excitement off her face.

“What’s your name?” Nathaniel tried to sound grown up, but the wind still snatched as his tiny voice.

“They call me Goliath.” The giant then dropped his voice and whispered. “But you can call me Matthew.”

“My name’s Nathaniel.”

“A pleasure to meet you, my little friend.” He carried Nathaniel passed the queue of parents and children. John, Cath and Susan followed.

Nathaniel craned his neck to take in as much as he could of the entertainment on show. His grin grew huge at the sight of the merry-go-round, the horses painted to look like skeletons and their legs twitching as they spun around. There was other rides, all decorated in a scary fashion, but Nathaniel’s attention was quickly grabbed by the towering castle at the far side of the circus grounds.

“It’s a haunted house,” he squealed. “Can we go round later?” He looked over his shoulder at his dad.

“No problems,” John shouted back with a matching smile.

They had reached the tented stadium and Goliath pulled open the door and shouted for attention.

“What is it now you big oaf?” In contrast to Goliath the man that replied was tiny, smaller even than Nathaniel.

“We have a birthday boy in the audience.” He lifted Nathaniel down. “Make sure he gets the best seat in the house.” He winked at the boy and turned to leave and Nathaniel and his family followed the little man towards the seats that surrounded the arena that would show them so many wonders.

The music fell silent and the lights dimmed to almost darkness and a hushed silence flowed over the excited crowd. From inside the ring there came a grinding of metal on metal, a screech that set the parent’s teeth on edge, but filled the children with the thrill of anticipation.

“Ladies and Gentleman, Boys and Girls.” The voice boomed throughout the enclosure, the beat of each word pulsing across the audience. “Welcome to Captain Monotone’s all singin’, all dancin’ Halloween circus.” Everyone began to clap, but were shocked into silence as the lights came on to an explosion of fireworks and the deafening roar of revving engines.

In the centre of the ring stood a spherical framework of black steel and barbed wire. Surrounding it were six motorbikes of deepest red. The riders were dressed like knights of old, their bodies covered in thick armour plating. Their heads were hidden behind demonesque masks, pointed ears and mouths filled with fangs. They looked around the audience and then howled into the night like wild wolves. A hatch in the huge steel ball was opened by a midget dressed as a rotting jester and the first of the bikes revved hard and drove into the tight space.

“Please enjoy The Devil Riders.” The voice boomed out over the sound of the bike engine as it began to rock up and down in the base of the orb.

And then it was off in a blur of sound and colour. The rider and the bike became one mass as it spun around the interior. Nathaniel watched in awe as it rose up the sides and then before his eyes it did the impossible and was upside down, speeding in a maddening circle from top to bottom. The crowd roared with amazement as the rider pulled in the speed, slowing down and coming to rest in the base.

The midget scooted across the ring and opened the door and two more of the devil faced riders joined the first and the door was once again fastened shut. Nathaniel stood and craned over the railing to get a better look at what he knew was about to happen. One bike had been more than he could believe, but three was something he didn’t want to miss.

The crowd cheered. Parents and children both overpowered by the skill of the three riders as they flew around the inside of the ball, criss-crossing each other with only millimetres separating them.

The midget had remained at the door and with the bikes still in motion he swung the door open once more and without pausing the remaining three bikes drove into the craziness. The scene within the sphere became a whirlwind as the six bikes seemed to

increase in speed. Nathaniel realised he was holding his breath and let it out in a long sigh, his knees shaking at what he saw as a miracle.

Again the midget swung the door open and one at a time the riders left the ball, skidding to a halt around the outer edge of the ring to mass applause.

“Thank you,” the voice said and the lights dropped to nothing. “I only hope that the rest of the show is as enthralling.” A spot light snapped into life and the middle of the halo of yellow light was the man himself. “Welcome to my circus.” Captain Monotone took a bow and the crowd continued to clap.

He was tall; not as tall as the giant named Matthew, but still taller than most normal humans. His skin was the colour of old parchment and not a single area had escaped the ruin of wrinkles. Nathaniel had watched enough Cowboy films with his father to know that the Captain was indeed dressed as a Captain. The suit, unlike the man looked as new as the day it had been made, crisp blue fabric with gold piping along the seams. And at his waist hung a sword that reached almost to his ankles, the handle shining brightly with faceted gems.

The lights gradually glowed back into life to reveal the ring empty, no sign at all that the ball or the Devil Riders had ever been there. Nathaniel frowned as he tried to figure out where it had gone and Captain Monotone spoke as if he had read the young boy’s mind.

“The magic of the circus.” He looked straight at Nathaniel, tipped his hat and winked. “The secret that is Halloween.” Nathaniel smiled, the simple answer more than enough to ease his curiosity.

The next hour and a half more than lived up to the opening act and Nathaniel spent the entire evening stood up so as not to miss a single second of the circus magic.

He watched in trepidation as the knife thrower tied the blindfold around his eyes and progressed to throw hunting knives at a beautiful woman tied to a spinning wheel. He felt his stomach lurch as he watched the trapeze artists as they spun and twirled high above his head, dressed in long, black gowns that covered their faces.

He didn’t, however, laugh at the clowns like the other children did. As soon as the coffin shaped car drove into the ring he felt strangely on edge and the feeling intensified

when the clown and its pet monkey climbed out and started falling over. When the monkey ran over to the hand rail and the other kids stroked it Nathaniel backed away into his mothers arms and shivered.

“What’s wrong darling.” She stroked his hair with loving concern.

“I just don’t like it.” With the monkey moving on he pulled away from his mum and returned to his viewing post, noticing the monkey pausing to look back at him with a huge grin on its face.

He screamed in delight at the lion tamer and jumped up and down at the fire eater; thrilled at the sight of long strips of spewing flame bursting from the bearded man's mouth and nose.

As the night drew on he fought the tiredness in his eyes, unwilling to give in before the show was over. So, as the music died and Captain Monotone came out to say goodnight he was thankful it was nearly over.

How wrong he was.

“Tonight, my friends, is a special night.” The lights had once again dimmed and the Captain stood tall within the safety of the spotlight’s illumination. “As you know it is our last night here, but what you may not realise is that it is the last date of the current tour.” The audience mumbled its sadness at the news.

Nathaniel, tired and a little bored with the speech let his eyes wander the darkness of the shadows and he was sure he could see shapes moving around in the corners of his vision.

“Do not be sad, my friends, because you are all to play an important roll in our hibernation.” Nathaniel was half listening. He didn’t understand what was being said, but he couldn’t ignore the agitated mumblings that coursed through the parents in the crowd.

“Please quiet yourselves.” The Captain held up his hands and looked around at the audience. “Ladies and Gentlemen.” Nathaniel felt his father take his hand, but he refused to be moved. “Boys and Girls.”

Something big was about to happen.

“It’s dying time!” The final words were screamed as the lights suddenly burst into life and Nathaniel got to see what had been lurking in the shadows.

The inner framework of the big top was crawling with performers and, as the lights blinded the audience, they fell down into the panicked crowd with a purpose.

John heard the screams from the other parents and saw their eyes widen in terror as they stared at the ceiling. He tried to erase the confusion from his mind and looked up just as the first of them dropped down towards his family.

Without thinking he grabbed Nathaniel and flung him under the seat and hopefully out of dangers way. He didn't have time to do the same for his daughter. The Devil Rider smashed into his shoulder and knocked him to the floor, placing a well aimed kick between his legs as he tried to curl into a protective ball. As he sucked in breath and attempted to blink the tears from his eyes he saw his little girl taken.

The Devil Rider swung back a fist and slammed into her face with a nose shattering impact that took the life out of her. As she fell limp the Rider scooped her up in its arms and tossed her into the air. John could only lie uselessly as the trapeze artist snatched her flying body and fed.

The cloak wearing performer swung upside down and held her with one arm as with his free hand he shredded the flesh from her neck and shoved it into the blackness of the sagging hood. Finished, thick red blood dripping from the tattered material, he tossed the body head over heels only for it to be caught by his female partner who tore chunks from the deceased girl's arm.

Having seen her daughter slaughtered and thinking her husband dead Cath ran blindly to escape, colliding with others all intent on leaving the tent before they fell foul of the blood thirsty circus madmen. She clawed and kicked at anyone in her way as tears of fear streamed over her face, smearing her make up in a sick parody of the clowns they had watched earlier.

"Fuck off." The stranger shoved her away as she tried to push passed him and she stumbled backwards, hit the hand rail and flipped over into the sawdust filled ring.

The back of her head hit the ground hard and the scene above her was filled with dancing stars of every imaginable colour. The fall had jarred her neck and she flinched as hot pain shot along her shoulders when she attempted to push herself upright.

“Not so fast my dear.” Captain Monotone towered over her and placed a boot against her chest. “You can’t leave yet.” He pushed her back to the floor and withdrew the sword from its sheath. “And I’m sorry to say that we don’t give refunds.” He smiled at her like the gracious host that he was and then sank the blade into her abdomen with such force that it came out her back.

“Feed, my children, feed,” he screamed up at the rafters as they fell on the dying body and began to strip her bare.

John cradled his smashed scrotum and looked across at Nathaniel who was curled tightly under the chair with his head in his hands. Fighting against the pain in his lower body he forced himself upright and surveyed the carnage of the big top.

“Holy Jesus.” They were his last words before the knife thrower’s weapon ripped into his throat.

He fell back into his seat with a thud and grasped the handle of the knife, attempting weakly to pull it free. The pain almost blinded him and he let his hands fall into his lap as the last of his life soaked into his coat.

Even after the big top had fallen silent Nathaniel made no attempt to move. He didn’t want to see what had made so many people sound so scared. Instead he decided to wait where it was safe until his father came and found him.

Though the screaming had ceased the noise that had replaced it was worse, a crunching and slurping that sent ripples of shivers up and down Nathaniel’s spine. He felt warm and wet, covered in whatever had been raining down on the seats since the screaming began, but he had no wish to open his eyes and see what it was.

“What do we have here?” The hand on his shoulder made him jump and the tiniest of yelps escaped between his lips.

Another hand grasped him, but he remained in a ball as he was pulled out into the open.

“Dessert.” The voice was familiar and as he was turned around in the uncaring grip he opened his eyes and looked into the face of the clown. “Hello Nate.” The clown remembered his name and Nathaniel wanted to scream.

“Give him to me.” The second voice was also familiar and Nathaniel peered over the shoulder of the clown and saw the lumbering form of the giant.

“Get stuffed Lofty,” the clown snapped. “Finders, keepers.” He held the boy prize close to his chest.

“Give him to me, now.” The giant grabbed the clown by the scruff of the neck and lifted it up until he could look it in the face. “I’m hungrier than you.”

“OK, he’s yours.” The clown handed the boy over. “Greedy bastard.”

Goliath dropped the clown and looked at the terrified boy. “Let’s get you out of here,” he whispered softly in Nathaniel’s ear.

“No, you’re going to eat me,” Nathaniel yelled and kicked and punched, but the giant ignored him as he carried him out of the big top.

Once outside the air was crisp and clear, the cloudless sky full of stars that flickered in and out of existence and reigning over them all was the moon, bathing everything in its cool blue light.

Nathaniel was still fighting against the giant’s hold as he was lowered to the ground, soft and wet underfoot. Matthew released him and stared down at the tiny boy at his feet.

“Run home now,” he said in the softness of voices.

“I want my mum, dad and sister.” He was scared of going home on his own.

“They’re going to join the circus.” The giant sounded sad and Nathaniel was sure he saw a tear in the behemoth’s eye.

“Then I’ll join too.” He stood defiant and stared back at the giant.

“You’re too young, now go before it’s too late,” he barked.

“What if I don’t?” Nathaniel was close to tears himself.

“Then I’ll have to eat you.” He leaned down and growled at the boy who turned and ran.

They found him the next morning sat on the doorstep of his parent’s house, his face streaked with tears, dirt and dried blood. They tried to question him, but all they could get out of him was that his family had joined the circus.

Nathaniel spent the next fourteen years in and out of foster homes. No one could find it in their hearts to give him the love he deserved. When not in care he lived at the orphanage, but in all that time he never made friends. All he ever told people was that when he was old enough he was going to join the circus.

The disappearance of his parents and all the other families was never solved. The circus had gone by the next morning and nothing had been left to say it'd ever been there. Eighty nine people went missing without a trace that night and the police found no record of a travelling circus owned by Captain Monotone. It was relegated to a file and forgotten as quickly as possible, a secret to be hidden from the children of the town.

Nathaniel is thirty years old now and still he holds onto the dream that one day he will join the circus. He still wakes every night screaming and the nurse always rushes to unlock his door and soothe him back to sleep. He tells them he has no memory of that fateful night, but he remembers the giant telling him that his family had joined the circus and that he was too young to be with them.

Well, it's almost his birthday and the circus is back in town. He's seen the posters on his daily walk into town with his carer. It's going under the name of Blackbeard's Circus now, but he recognises the clown on the gaudy advert. And he's no longer too younger; he's a man now and tonight is the last performance. He has to be there or he may never get another chance to be with his mum, dad and sister.

With this in mind he grips the handle of the steak knife he stole at dinner under the sheets and begins to scream, smiling when he hears the running footsteps of the nurse.

THE TUNNEL

I can't remember how long the train was in the tunnel, but I can tell you this.

I thought I'd never leave.

*

I left the house at six that morning to attend the convention, kissing my wife softly on the cheek so as not to disturb her sleep.

“Bye darling.” I failed and she rolled over to smile up at me, wrapping her arms around my neck and drawing me in for a kiss that said how much we would miss each other.

Our lips met and we lingered, tongues gently touching each other with heart felt emotion. Goodbye kisses are never lustful, well not in my case. They’re always meaningful because you can never be sure if it will be your last kiss.

Who knows what will happen when you walk out the door. Everything you love about each other should be embodied in that single meeting of the lips. And in our case it always did.

“I love you Mr Smales.” Our mouths parted and my reflection filled her eyes.

“I love you too.” I leaned down and kissed her nose. “But I’ve got to go, say goodbye to the kids for me.” I pushed upright, never taking my eyes off the beauty that is my wife.

“I’ll call you later.”

“You’d better.” She blew me a kiss and I mimed being knocked backwards. “Enjoy yourself.” She was still laughing as I left the room.

*

I didn’t want to wake the older two kids, but I couldn’t resist a peek in on the youngsters.

“Is it sunshine?” My little girl looked over at me, asking in her own sweet way if it was time to get up.

“Not yet darling.”

“Where you going?” She sat up frowning. “Work?”

“No, Daddies got to meet some people.” I kept my voice low as not to wake her brother.

“Can I come?” She started to climb out of the bed. “I’ll get dressed quick.”

“Not today darling.” She stuck out her bottom lip in sulkiness. “But you go get in the big bed with mummy.” The lip retracted and she ran along the landing with a smile.

“Is it sunshine?” As I descended the stairs I heard her mother laugh.

*

For Mid October it was warm and the walk to the train station, though dark, was pleasant. I've always liked that moment before dawn. It's peaceful in an indescribable way. To wake up whilst the rest of the world is asleep is truly inspiring. The silence of that moment usually spurs me on to some of my best writing, fingers stabbing away at the keyboard until the first rays of sun begin to probe their fingers around the curtains and into the sanctuary of the room.

The tunnel was dark, but not in the good way. Not in the way that inspires. The tunnel was a darkness that only wanted to absorb life, not give.

The journey to the station didn't take long, my thoughts only interrupted by one other pre-dawn traveller. He was old and as he neared he stopped and looked at me imploringly.

"Have you seen my Marjorie?" He was dressed in a coat over pyjamas and on his feet were a battered pair of slippers. "She's been gone so long." Tears welled in his eyes and I was filled with a sadness at his loneliness.

A loneliness that could only be matched by the darkness that surrounded us in the tunnel.

I tried my best to assist the old man, taking his elbow in the hope of leading him home. I'd left the house early and I had plenty of time for a slight detour.

"Get your hands off me." His attack was unexpected and I nearly fell over my own feet as I stumbled back into the road. "I want my Marjorie. What have you done to her?" The blows weakened as the tears took over and ran down his craggy face.

Though more tears would be shed in the tunnel.

Re-shouldering my bag I left him hunched and crying in the otherwise empty street, one foot slipperless and a urine stain spreading across the front of the pyjama bottoms.

"Bring her back to me," he pleaded for something not in my power to give.

"I'm sorry." I looked back, but he was already shuffling away, semi barefooted in an unsympathetic world.

I know now that there are things worse than an unsympathetic world.

The train station was empty, only a clerk sat behind the glass partition set just inside the entrance. She was the only sign that the place was open for business, a lone person in a ghost station.

“What platform for Swindon?” I gave her a polite smile.

“Number two,” She glanced up at me only briefly and the look on her face was one of having just discovered that she’d stepped in dog shit.

“Thanks.” For nothing.

“Uh, uh.” Her attention was already back to the page of whatever magazine she was using to occupy her time.

Unsympathetic, indifferent. Maybe I would have been better off staying in the tunnel.

No, I can't say that. I have a family. A wife and children that push away the darkness with their love.

No, I wasn't meant to stay. I was meant to come home.

*

The train arrived on time, hissing to a stop at the, by then, busy platform. People boarded, hurrying against each other to get a table seat like they were at the first day of the January sales.

I stood back and waited, watching the stampede of human cattle; the morning wasn't painting the human race in the best light.

After the mad rush had subsided I boarded and, surprisingly, still managed to find a totally empty table and I claimed it as my own, happy to have no company.

The rabble of passengers, once settled, fell silent. Like me they had no wish to get to know their travelling companions.

In the tunnel they got to know each other. Not for long mind you. Then they came for us.

As the train began its steady acceleration out of the station I sent a text to Alexandra, the host and organiser of the convention. I just wanted to let her know that I was on my way. She'd been kind enough to invite me and the least I could do was keep her updated on my progress.

Within seconds I got a message back saying that she would meet me at the station and to let her know when we were pulling in. A nice gesture, but unnecessary. The venue, according to the brochure, was in the shadow of the station and I was hoping it would be easy to locate.

And unnecessary because I was never destined to make it to Swindon, none of us were.

The tunnel was waiting.

I drank three coffees between home and Grantham, saying *yes* to the steward each time he passed with the trolley. I tried writing, but nerves brought on by the reading I was scheduled to do kept my mind in a state of constant upheaval. Instead I settled back in the seat and read ‘Ancestor’ by Scott Sigler as I sipped at my lukewarm coffee.

*

It was the second, well maybe the third tunnel we passed through when the train stopped. Not a slow stop, but a juddering halt of squealing wheels against rail. My latest coffee was thrown over onto its side and the muddy brown liquid ran to the edge of the table and rained down onto the blue-grey carpet.

For the first time since the train had departed people began to talk. Not straight away mind you, but after quarter of an hour with no announcement on the tannoy they started to grow restless, conferring amongst themselves in ever increasing voices.

“Why hasn’t the driver made a statement?”

Where’s the man with the coffee?”

“Don’t worry dear, I’ll find someone.” He was middle aged, balding and clearly controlled by his over weight wife. “I’ll be back in a mo.” He left her sat and moved through to the next carriage.

“It’s not safe to stop in a tunnel.” A female voice.

“That can’t have been a standard stop.” A male; nervous and trembling.

“Maybe it’s broken down.”

“Don’t talk so fucking stupid, woman.”

I sat in silence and waited, listening as people continued to put forward theories they knew nothing about.

And as I listened I stared into the blackness of the tunnel. A blackness so deep that it turned the windows into dark mirrors.

Mirrors that they used to get to us.

*

The scream was high pitched and ladylike. Its unexpectedness silenced everyone in the carriage. It had come from the next car up and my fellow passengers all turned to stare at the interconnecting door. The same door that the controlled, balding husband had walked through only moments before.

“Was that my Richie?” The fat woman stood, her torso a slab of flesh that pulled her dress to the limit. “Richie?” she shouted, her chins wobbling with a mixture of fear and anger at his lack of response.

“Go and see if he’s alright.” The order was given to anyone willing to follow it.

“Fuck off you crazy twat.” The swear spoke up for the rest of them. “Did you hear him scream?” Not really a question. “It didn’t sound good.”

“But it’s my Richie.” The chins set off on a fresh wave with her flow of tears. “He might be hurt.” Controlling she may have been, but deep down she loved her husband. “Someone, please.” She collapsed back into her seat.

Don’t ask me why, because I couldn’t answer you, but I stood up and offered my services.

“Thank you, young man.” She dabbed at her eyes as I passed and I managed the tightest of smiles.

“No problem.” For the second time in one day I attempted to be the Good Samaritan.

Sometimes I never learn.

*

The door slid open at my approach, a snake like hiss of pneumatics accompanying the fluid motion. Nobody offered to assist me with the search and rescue and not even poor Richie’s wife gave me a parting ‘good luck’ as I stepped through to the vestibule. As the door slid shut behind me I was swallowed by silence.

I suddenly felt stupid. Stupid at the fear that was knotting itself around my gut, constricting harder with each step I took towards the next carriage. I berated myself for the foolish feeling.

Why should I be scared? Trains always made unexpected stops. Yes, but usually the steward or the driver would make a statement, an apology for the delay. It was no good, no matter how logical I tried to be I couldn't convince myself that everything was safe and as the second door jumped open I felt the need to turn and run back. I had no wish to cross the threshold, beyond was the unknown and it filled me with irrational dread.

On first inspection I thought the carriage was deserted, but all too soon I realised that I'd been mistaken.

It was quiet, the only sound was the pumping of blood as my quickening heart surged it through my veins.

I glanced around quickly, but saw nothing untoward. I did, however notice a strange staleness in the air, an offness that hit me in soft waves that tweaked the hairs of my nostrils. Even now I can't put the smell into words; all I can say is that it was bad.

Very bad.

From the corner of my eye I caught movement off to my left. It was only a flicker, a reflection on the glass or possibly something outside moving in the tunnel. I turned quickly, but whatever had been there moved quicker than me and it was gone before I locked on it.

It was then that I saw the hand; pale, limp and unmoving on the hand rest of the seat.

I didn't, as the hero usually would, run to the aid of the victim. Instead I stood frozen in place, my eyes locked on the almost white digits of each finger. With a sinking dread I allowed my head to turn and search the rest of the carriage.

Death; that is all I saw. Every occupied seat the coffin for a corpse and the tunnel was our tomb.

Death; that was the smell, an old, musty house aroma and I gagged on bile with the realisation of what I was inhaling. I spewed forth my stomach contents until my throat

was dry wrenching. Yesterday's dinner and supper splashed up my shoes and trousers, the acid stench refuelling the spasms that tore at my throat.

“Oh, my God.”

If there is a God he wouldn't have allowed it to happen. There was nothing Heavenly about that God forsaken tunnel.

*

Slowly I pulled myself together, wiped the cooling vomit from my beard and tried to make a decision. I could have gone back and told the others; filled them with panic and maybe started a small riot. Instead I decided to venture onwards. Morbid curiosity had taken hold and I needed to see them. I needed to know what had happened. Only then would I return to the survivors.

Survivors, that's a laugh. After the tunnel none of us are survivors. Sometimes I think it was those who died that got off lightly. No; I can't let the depression get to me. I must fight it. To give in is a concept I can't bear to contemplate.

The hand led to an arm, but I can't possibly describe the rest of the body as a person. It was no more than a husk. A dried out, papier-mâché shell of grey and flaky skin that hung lifelessly to the bones below the surface.

The face would have been impossible to identify. It was a skull of leather, wrinkled and cracked beyond recognition, but the clothing was untouched by whatever had affected the poor soul and was clearly those of Richie.

The scream we'd all heard was still locked on his cracked and peeling lips, the dead skin of his lower jaw pulled so tight it had torn open in more than one place. The sockets that had once held his eyes were now black, empty abysses to his soul and they stared blindly at the reflecting glass of the window.

I followed his deathly gaze and, just for a second, I caught sight of movement for a second time; a billowing shape that defied possibility. It was blacker than the blackness of the tunnel, darker than the unnatural night that had swallowed us whole. I almost managed to catch the movement and follow it, but a single blink and it was lost.

“Shit,” I spoke out loud, if only to rid the carriage of the empty silence that filled it. “What's happening?” No one replied.

I moved down the narrow aisle, surveying the death to my left and right. Using the clothing and size of the withered corpses as a guide I made out women, men, young and old. I didn't bother to stop, not wanting, or willing, to dwell on any one scene for longer than was necessary. But then, at the second to last row of seats I stopped. My heart was unsure whether it should skip a beat, stop altogether or increase in speed like a runaway train. (Excuse the choice of description)

The woman, and believe me, it was a woman, had suffered the same fate as the other passengers that lined the graveyard carriage. Her hair had turned brittle and clumps fell away from her scalp as the husk shook gently. I waited, stuck to the spot in fear, breathing deeply as I tried to find the courage to step forward. And when I finally moved I sighed with relief.

Like everyone else she was dead, the movement was caused by the baby that lay healthy and alive on her lap.

*

Upon seeing me the baby gurgled, trying its best to tell me something in its unique baby way. I leaned over and carefully, with a hand under each arm, lifted the tiny child from its mothers lap. In that instant the smell of death was over powered by that of a soiled nappy.

"Fucking marvellous." I knew that my situation wasn't the best. We had entered the unexplainable, but regardless of that I had to do something about the smell.

Crouching down I searched for a bag, anything the child's mother may have had with her that I could use. I found what I was looking for sat between her desiccated legs, a pink holdall that held a line of pre-made up bottles along one side.

"Here goes." The idea of touching the corpse wasn't a welcome one and just the thought of it made me cringe, but the warm feeling of the nappy against my arm gave me the strength I needed.

As I leaned in I was suddenly reminded of a game I used to play with my brothers as a child. You had to remove bones and body parts from a patient without touching the sides and setting off a buzzer. The only difference now was that the patient was beyond help.

Still, I didn't want to touch the sides.

My arm moved slowly, arching around her ankles as I hooked my fingers around the strap of the bag.

“Gotcha.” I pulled faster than I should have and the fragile tissue of the shell that had once been a loving mother fell in on itself in a cloud of misty grey.

With the baby in one arm and the bag in the other I fell back, the little one starting to cry for the first time.

“Shhhh.” Moving to an empty seat, I laid her down. “Shhhh.” Having rescued the equipment I needed for the clean up operation I made a start.

I dropped the used nappy to the floor and the continued to hush the baby. The crying began to settle down to a tiny muttering grumble.

I had experience with babies of my own and after a quick wipe with a scented cloth and a dusting of talc the baby (a little girl; Catherine according to the bib I found in the bag) was ready for redressing.

*

It was then I felt rather than saw it again. A shadow that flickered behind me. The hairs on the back of my neck were electrified by an invisible touch and I turned quickly.

And I saw it.

The robe, if you can call it a robe, shimmered with a life of its own around the creature’s torso. Fat hands rested against the glass and from inside the hood a featureless face of white stared back at me. It had no eyes, but I swear it could see me.

The fingers bunched up, the glass distorting around the fists like water and, with horror, I realised that it wasn’t outside the carriage. It was inside the glass and it wanted me.

I scooped up the bag and Catherine, her bottom half clad only in an ill fitting nappy and ran for the end of the carriage. If I could make it to the vestibule I would be safe. The survivors were waiting and I believed in security in numbers.

The creature followed, flowing from one window to the next as it kept pace with me. Its white dome of a face never left my side.

I reached the door, forced to stop as it hissed open slowly. The thing took its chance and attacked my reflection.

I felt its icy grip squeeze around my neck as it grabbed my image in one of those fat hands and lifted it off the floor.

The door was open, but I couldn't move, held in place by something that couldn't be real.

*

Catherine saved me, not that she meant to, but I thank her anyway. She began to cry, but not the standard crying of a baby. This was an all out screaming wail and as it reached its peak the grip on my throat loosened.

I staggered back as it released my reflection, its hands beating at its head in answer to the noise emanating from Catherine.

The glass began to vibrate, shaking in the frame as the creature went berserk in what I think was pain.

I jumped into the vestibule just as the window imploded into the carriage, shredding the desiccated corpses on impact. Wind whistled in through the jagged hole left in the glass and whipped the dust of the dead into a tornado that the closing door saved us from.

The vestibule only had one window and I made a point of not checking my reflection as I hurried passed. I saw no point in tempting fate.

Catherine was still crying and the sound of her warbling brought me back down to earth with the realisation that I had been pinching her thigh. I was filled with guilt and held her to my chest, pulling the romper suit back over her legs.

"Can't have you catching a cold." I looked in the bag and found a dummy which she was eager to take.

She stopped the crying.

I waited in the vestibule for long minutes, unready to face the onslaught of questions that would be thrown at me upon my return. More than that I felt safe in the vestibule. It was almost windowless and standing in the right position kept us out of sight of the nightmare creature.

I only decided to move when the banshee cry behind me made me turn.

*

The tornado had grown arms and legs, the dust like remains of the passengers churning with the fragmented glass of the window. And in the glass was the creature, embodied in the swirling mass of debris.

It pointed at me with a misshapen arm and the howl rose from its non-existent mouth.

“Oh fuck.” I could only hope that it was trapped as I rejoined the survivors.

*

“Where’s Richie?” She was up before the door had closed behind me. “Where’s my husband?”

“He’s dead.” I kept it simple, after what I’d seen it was all I could manage.

“Liar.” She came at me and started throwing her arms at me in feeble punches, oblivious to the child in my arms.

I backed off and the swearer leaned over the back of the seat and grabbed her by the shoulders,

“Sit down you crazy cunt, can’t you see the kid.” Language of a job, yet he showed genuine concern for the child. Proof that you should never judge a book and all that.

“Thanks.” I stopped shuffling backwards.

“Julian.” He didn’t bother to shake my hand, still busy holding tight to the crazy cunt.

“Liar, liar, liar.” She finally lost the fight and slumped down, wobbling from head to foot as fresh tears sprang forth.

“What happened?” Julian asked.

I didn’t know where to start and as it happens I never had to.

*

At first no one else saw what I did, all eyes being fixed on yours truly as they waited for an explanation. I wish I hadn’t seen it, but I did.

The reflective surface of the windows suddenly filled with the creatures, a hundred pale faces within robes that formed a giant blanket of pure blackness.

“So?” Julian was waiting.

They attacked en masse, faceless demons converging on the reflections of the survivors.

“Run!” I pushed Julian forwards as everyone went rigid, eyes full of shock as the creatures fed on their mirror images.

“Fucking hell.” Julian saw them and, getting my message, he ran. “What are they?” He screamed over his shoulder as I urged him towards the next vestibule.

“Who cares?” As the door ahead of us slid open the one behind blew into the carriage and the tornado of death joined the feeding frenzy.

“Fucking hell.” Julian watched as the door hissed shut behind us.

“Can’t stop.” I looked into the next carriage, the passengers there already dead. “Got to get off the train.” I didn’t know how, but we had to keep moving.

*

Pulling Julian away from the scene of carnage we entered the next carriage and didn’t stop. We ran passed the dead without looking at the windows, hoping that the creatures were still busy with the survivors.

I breathed a sigh when the next door opened smoothly and we fell into the vestibule. The relief was quickly replaced with panic as I realised we’d reached the end of the road. Ahead there was no more carriages and we were faced with a solid door.

“Now what?” Julian sat on the floor and held his head in his hands.

“Hello.” I beat on the door with a fist that still held the babies bag. In the other arm, Catherine slept soundly.

“Go away.” The reply was whispered, but it was a reply none the less.

“Let us in you twat.” Julian was back on his feet and at my side at the hint of escape.

“No, they’ll get me.” Whoever was on the other side was scared. “I’ve seen what they can do.”

“If you don’t open this fucking door.” Behind us the screams of the dying intensified. “I’ll break the fucker down.” Julian’s threat was empty.

“Please, I have a child.” I interrupted. “Those things aren’t here yet,” I begged.

I heard the slide of locks and very slowly the door was pulled open just as the tornado caught our scent and came surging through the last carriage.

“You lied.” The female steward screamed and tried to shut the door, but Julian acted swiftly.

“Don’t you fucking dare.” He threw his weight against the door and forced his way in, holding it open and waving me in.

Together we slammed it shut, an instant before the vestibule became a hurricane of screaming destruction.

“They’re going to get us.” She crouched against the wall of the storage carriage and cried.

“More to the point.” Julian was shaking. “What the fuck are they?” It was a good question, but I doubted that any of us would ever know the answer.

Catherine was still sleeping and I pulled out a thick blanket from the bag and laid it out on the floor. I placed her carefully in the centre before looking around.

“We should be safe here.” They both looked at me questioningly. “There’s no windows that I can see.” All the walls were solid steel. “So they can’t get to us.” In answer the door thudded in its frame.

“Tell that to the fucker out there.” Julian moved to the far end of the carriage and Catherine stirred with a cry.

“We’re going to die.” The stewardess rocked back and forth on her heels.

BANG, the door rattled in its frame again. BANG, BANG, BANG. The creature wasn’t going to give in until it had us.

*

Catherine was awake again, arms and legs kicking as the low cry grew in volume.

“It’s OK darling.” I picked her up and took a bottle from the bag, joining Julian at the rear.

“What a way to go.” He’d lost the will to swear, his head lolling against his chest.

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

The door buckled, losing against the onslaught from outside. The stewardess screamed as light flooded the carriage and I cradled the baby in my arms.

*

From what I was told later the train had derailed because of a bad section of track in the tunnel. I pieced most of it together from images on the TV mounted across from the bed. The rest was told to me by regular visitors to my room.

Only four survivors, all the others died in the crash. No one can figure out how we made it to the rear of the train and I doubt they'll ever find out.

Julian and I agreed to claim amnesia and Sylvia (the stewardess) was classed as suffering from post traumatic stress syndrome. She won't be believed any time soon.

Catherine's the lucky one, she'll have no memory of the events in the tunnel and they say she is doing well with her aunt. They came to see me in the hospital and thanked me for what I'd done. I told them to forget about it. I have (ha ha).

Well, I hope she'll be fine. I hope she's doing better than me.

I still see them all the time. The creatures, that is.

I've banned all mirrors in the house to stop them taunting me, but I can't escape. I see them in the corner of my vision where ever I go, waiting for their time.

Shop windows, the reflection on the TV screen, the curved face of a spoon, waiting over my shoulder to claim me.

*

The tunnel waits patiently, but as long as I don't look at them straight on I think I'm safe. They won't get me. I won't go the same way Julian did.