

MAKING MY ENTRANCE AGAIN WITH MY USUAL FLAIR

KEN SCHOLLES



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illustration by

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No one ever asks a clown at the end of his life what he *really* wanted to be when he grew up. It's fairly obvious. No one gets hijacked into the circus. We race to it, the smell of hotdogs leading us in, our fingers aching for the sticky pull of taffy, the electric shock of pink cotton on our tongue. Ask a lawyer and he'll say when he was a kid he wanted to be an astronaut. Ask an accountant; he'll say he wanted to be fireman.

I am a clown. I have always wanted to be a clown. And I will die a clown if I have my way.

My name is Merton D. Kamal.

The Kamal comes from my father. I never met the man so I have no idea how he came by it. Mom got the Merton bit from some monk she used to read who wrote something like this: We learn humility by being humiliated often. Given how easily (and how frequently) Kamal is pronounced Camel, and given how the D just stands for D, you can see that she wanted her only child to be absolutely filled to the brim with humility.

My Mom is a deeply spiritual woman.

But enough about her. This is my story.

“Merton,” the ringmaster and owner Rufus P. Stowell said, “it’s just not working out.”

I was pushing forty. I’d lost some weight and everyone knows kids love a chubby clown. I’d also taken up drinking which didn’t go over well right before a show. So suddenly, I found myself without prospects and I turned myself towards home, riding into Seattle by bus on a cold November night.

Mom met me at the bus stop. She had no business driving but she came out anyway. She was standing on the sidewalk next to the station wagon when she saw me. We hugged.

“I’m glad you’re home,” she said.

I lifted my bag into the back. “Thanks.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Not really.”

We went to Denny’s anyway. Whenever my Mom wanted to talk, we went to Denny’s. It’s where she took me to tell me about boys and girls, it’s where she took me to tell me that my dog had been hit by a car.

“So what are you going to do now?” She cut and speared a chunk of meatloaf, then dipped it into her mashed potatoes and gravy before raising it to her mouth.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I guess I’ll fatten up, quit drinking, get back into the business.” I watched her left eyebrow twitch—a sure sign of disapproval. I hefted my

double bacon cheeseburger, then paused. “Why? What do *you* think I should do?”

She leaned forward. She brought her wrinkled hand up and cupped my cheek with it. Then she smiled. “I think you’ve already tried the clown thing, Merton. Why don’t you try something different?”

I grinned. “I always wanted to be a sword-swallower but you wouldn’t let me.”

“What about . . . insurance?”

“Well, it gets steep. The swords are real, Mom.”

The eyebrow twitched again. “I’m being serious. Remember Nancy Keller?”

Of course I did. I’d lost my virginity with her back in eleventh grade. It was my second most defining moment that year. Three days later, Rufus P. Stowell’s Traveling Big Top rolled into town and my first most defining moment occurred. They said I was a natural, I had the look and the girth. Would I be interested in an internship? I left a note for Nancy in her mailbox thanking her for everything in great detail, hugged my Mom goodbye and dropped out of high school to join the circus.

Mom was still waiting for me to answer. “Yes, I remember her.”

“Well, she’s some big mucky-muck now at CARECO.”

“And?” I took a bite of the cheeseburger.

“And I told her you were coming home and asked her if she’d interview you.”

I nearly choked. “You did *what*?”

“I asked her if she’d interview you. For a job.”

I had no idea what to say.

So the next morning, Mom took me down to J.C. Penney’s and bought me my first suit in thirty years. That afternoon, she dropped me downtown in front of the CARECO building, waved goodbye and drove away.

The CARECO building was new. I’d visited a few times over the years, had watched buildings come and buildings go. But I had never seen anything like this. It looked like a glass Rubik’s Cube tilted precariously in a martini glass full of green jello. Inside, each floor took on the color coding of the various policies they offered. Life insurance was green. Auto, a deep blue. I can’t remember what color Long-Term Disability was. Each color had been painfully worked out, according to a plaque near the door, by a team of eminent European corporate psychologists. Supposedly, it would enhance productivity by reducing the depression inherent within the insurance industry.

While I was reading the plaque, a man stepped up to me. He was as tan as a Californian, wearing sunglasses and a Hawaiian shirt despite impending rain. I went back to reading. “Excuse me,” he said.

“Yes?”

“Have you seen a monkey around here?”

I shook my head, not really paying attention to the question. “Sorry.”

He smiled. “Thanks anyway.”

I went inside. I rode three escalators, two elevators and talked to seven receptionists. I sat in a chair that looked like plastic but was really made of foam. I filled out long and complicated application forms.

An hour later, someone took me up into an office at the top of the highest point of the inside of the glass Rubik’s Cube.

Nancy Keller looked up. She smiled until my escort closed the door on her way out.

“Merton D. *Camel*,” she said, stretching each syllable.

“Kamal. Hi Nancy.” The view from her office was spectacular. The walls were glass framed in steel and I could see the city spread out around me in a wide view that pulled at my stomach. The office had a modern-looking desk in the middle of it, a few chairs and some potted plants.

“I’m surprised to see you after so long. Back from clowning around?”

“I am.” I smiled. “You look good.” And she did. Her legs were still long but her hair was short and she’d traded her Van Halen tank top for a crisp blue suit.

She ignored my compliment and pointed to another of those foam chairs. "Let's get this over with."

I sat. She sat. I waited, trying to ignore the places where my wool suit created urgent itching.

She studied my application, then she studied me. I kept waiting. Finally, she spoke. "This interview," she said, "consists of two questions." She leaned forward and I realized the button on her suit coat had popped open to reveal more cleavage than I remembered her having. "First question. Do you remember the day you left for the circus, three days after our . . . *special* moment." She made little quote marks in the air when she said "special."

I nodded. "I do. I left you a note." I grinned. "I think I even said thank you. In some detail."

She nodded, too. "Second question. Did you ever stop to think that maybe . . . just maybe . . . my *father* would be the one getting the mail?" She stood and pushed a button on her desk. I stood, too. "Thank you for coming, Mr. Camel. Patrice will see you out." She extended her hand. I shook it and it was cold.

Later, I was working on my third bowl of ice cream and looking over the Twelve Steps when her assistant called with the offer.

* * *

“It’s easy,” Nancy Keller said again. I wasn’t sure I’d heard her right. “I want you to drive a monkey to our branch office in New Mexico.”

“That’s my job?”

She nodded. “If you don’t futz it up, there’ll be another.”

“Another monkey?”

“No,” she said. “Another job. This monkey’s one of a kind.”

“And you’re sure you don’t want me to just take him to the airport and put him on a plane?”

“I’m sure.”

I should’ve asked why but didn’t. “Okay. When do I leave?”

“As soon as you get your Mom’s car.” She noticed my open mouth. “This monkey,” she said, “needs as much anonymity as possible.”

“I’m traveling with an incognito monkey in a twenty-year-old station wagon?”

“Yes. You’d better get changed.”

“Changed?” I knew I’d worn the suit two days in a row but I figured the first day didn’t really count.

“You can’t be seen like that. What would a guy in a suit need with a monkey? I need a clown for this one.”

I was opening my mouth to question all of this when Patrice came in with a thick envelope. Nancy took

it, opened it, and started ruffling through the hundred-dollar bills.

“I’ll get changed, get the car, be back in an hour,” I said.

Nancy smiled. It was a sweet smile, one that reminded me of eighties music and her parents’ ratty couch. “Thanks, Merton.”

* * *

The monkey and I drove southeast, zigzagging highways across Washington, crossing over the Cascades into dryer, colder parts of the state. There was little snow on the pass and the miles went by quickly.

The monkey was in an aluminum crate with little round holes in it. They’d loaded him into the back in their underground parking garage. Two men in suits stood by the door, watching.

“You shouldn’t need anything else, Merton,” Nancy said. “He’s pretty heavily sedated. He ought to sleep all the way through.”

I looked at the map, tracing my finger along the route she’d marked in blue highlighter. “That’s . . . around seventeen hundred miles, Nancy.” I did some math in my head. “At least two days . . . and that’s if I really push it.”

“Just bring his crate into your hotel room. Discreetly, Merton.” She smiled again. “You’ll be fine. He’ll be fine, too.”

Naturally, I’d said okay, climbed into the car and set out for Roswell, New Mexico.

When we crossed into Oregon, the monkey woke up.

I knew this because he asked me for a cigarette.

I swerved onto the shoulder, mashing the brakes with one clown-shoed foot while hyperventilating.

“Just one,” he said. “Please?”

I couldn’t get out of the car fast enough. After a few minutes of pacing by the side of the road, convincing myself that it was the result of quitting the booze cold turkey, I poked my head back into the car.

“Did you say something?” I asked, holding my breath.

Silence.

Releasing my breath, I climbed back into the car. “I didn’t think so.” I started the car back up, eased it onto the road. I laughed at myself. “Talking monkeys,” I said, shaking my head.

“Monkeys can’t talk,” the monkey said. Then he yawned loudly.

I braked again.

He chuckled. “Look pal, I’m no monkey. I just play one on TV.”

I glanced up into the rearview mirror. A single dark eye blinked through one of the holes. “Really?”

He snorted. “No. I don’t. Where are we supposed to be going?”

“Roswell, New Mexico.”

“And what does *that* tell you?”

I shrugged. “You got me.”

“Let’s just say I’m not from around here.”

“Where *are* you from?” But it was sinking in. Of course, I didn’t believe it. I had laid aside the cold turkey alcohol withdrawal theory at this point and was wondering now if maybe I was tilting more towards a psychotic break theory.

“Unimportant. But I’m not a monkey.”

“Okay then. Why don’t you go back to sleep?”

“I’m not tired. I just woke up. Why don’t you let me out of this box and give me a cigarette?”

“I don’t smoke.”

“Let’s stop somewhere, then. A gas station.”

I looked back at him in the rearview mirror. “For someone that’s not from around here, you sure know an awful lot.” More suspicion followed. “And you speak English pretty good, too.”

“Well,” the monkey said. “I speak it *well*. And I may not be *from* here but I’ve certainly spent enough time on this little rock you call home.”

“Really?” Definitely a psychotic break. I needed medication. Maybe cognitive therapy, too. “What brings you out this way?”

“I’m a spy.”

“A monkey spy?”

“I thought we’d already established that I’m *not* a monkey.”

“So you just look like one?” I gradually gave the car some gas and we slipped back onto the highway.

“Exactly.”

“Why?”

“I have no idea. You’d have to ask my boss.”

I pushed the station wagon back up to seventy-five, watching for road signs and wondering if any of the little towns out here would have a psychiatrist.

“Where’s your boss?”

“Don’t know,” the monkey said. “I gave him the slip when I defected.”

“You defected?”

“Of course I defected.”

“Why?”

“Got a better offer.”

It went on like that. We made small talk and Oregon turned into Idaho. I never asked his name; he never offered. I found a Super Eight outside Boise and after paying, hauled his crate into the room.

“So are you going to let me out?”

“I don’t think that’d be such a good idea,” I told him.

“Well, can you at least get us a pizza? And some beer?”

“Pizza, yes,” I said. “Beer, no.” I called it in and channel-surfed until it arrived.

The holes presented a problem. And I couldn’t just eat in front of him. I went to open the crate.

It was locked. One of those high powered combination jobs.

“Odd, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said. “A bit.”

He sighed. “I’m sure it’s for my own protection.”

“Or mine,” I said.

He chuckled. “Yeah, I’m quite the badass as you can see.”

That’s when I picked up the phone and called Nancy. She’d given me her home number. “Hey,” I said.

“Merton. What’s up?”

“Well, I’m in Boise.”

“How’s the package?”

“Fine. But . . .” I wasn’t sure what to say.

“But what?”

“Well, I went to check on the monkey and the crate’s locked. What’s the combination?”

“Is the monkey awake?” Her voice sounded alarmed.

I looked at the crate, at the eye peeking out. “Uh. No. I don’t *think* so.”

“Has anything—” she paused, choosing her word carefully, “—*unusual* happened?”

I nearly said you mean like a talking space alien disguised as a monkey? Instead, I said, “No. Not at all. Not really.” I knew I needed more or she wouldn’t believe me. “Well, the guy at the front desk looked at me a bit funny.”

“What did he look like?”

“Old. Bored. Like he didn’t expect to see a clown in his lobby.”

“I’m sure he’s fine.”

I nodded, even though she couldn’t see me. “So, about that combination?”

“You don’t need it, Merton. Call me when you get to Roswell.” The phone clicked and she was gone.

* * *

In the morning, I loaded the monkey back into the car and we pointed ourselves towards Utah.

We picked up our earlier conversation.

“So you defected? To an insurance company?”
But I knew what he was going to say.

“That’s no insurance company.”

“Government?”

“You’d know better than I would,” he said. “I was asleep through most of that bit.”

“But you’re the one who defected.”

He laughed. “I didn’t defect to *them*.”

“You *didn’t*?”

“No. Of course not. Do you think I *want* to be locked in a metal box in the back of a station wagon on my way to Roswell, New Mexico, with an underweight clown who doesn’t smoke?”

I shrugged. “Then what?”

“There was a guy. He was supposed to meet me in Seattle before your wacky friends got me with the old tag and bag routine. He represents certain *other* interested parties. He’d worked up a bit of an incognito gig for me in exchange for some information on my previous employers.”

I felt my eyebrows furrow. “*Other* interested parties?”

“Let’s just say your little rock is pretty popular these days. Did you really think the cattle mutilations, abductions, anal probes and crop circles were all done by the same little green men?”

“I’d never thought about it before.”

“Space is pretty big. And everyone has their schtick.”

I nodded. “Okay. That makes sense, I guess.” Except for the part where I was still talking to a monkey

and he was talking back. It was quiet now. The car rolled easy on the highway.

“Sure could use a cigarette.”

“They’re bad for you. They’ll kill you.”

“Jury’s still out on that,” the monkey said. “I’m not exactly part of your collective gene pool.” He paused. “Besides, I’m pretty sure it doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t?”

“What do you really think they’re going to do to me in Roswell?”

The monkey had a point. The next truck stop, I pulled off and went inside. I came out with a pack of Marlboros and pushed one through the little hole. He reversed it, pointing an end out to me so I could light it. He took a long drag. “That’s nice,” he said. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Suddenly my shoulders felt heavy. As much as I knew that there was something dreadfully wrong with me, some wire that had to be burned out in my head, I felt sad. Something bad, something *experimental* was probably going to happen to this monkey. And whether or not he deserved it, I had a role in it. I didn’t like that at all.

“Have you seen a monkey around here?” the California Tan Man had asked me two days ago in front of the CARECO building.

I looked up. “Hey. I saw that guy. The one in Seattle. What was the gig he had for you? Witness protection type-thing?”

“Sort of. Lay low, stay under everyone’s radar.”

Where would a monkey lay low, I asked myself. “Like what?” I said. “A zoo?”

“Screw zoos. Concrete cage and a tire swing. Who wants that?”

“What then?”

Cigarette smoke trailed out of the holes in his crate. “It’s not important. Really.”

“Come on. Tell me.” But I knew now. Of course I knew. How could I not? But I waited for him to say it.

“Well,” the monkey said, “ever since I landed on this rock I’ve wanted to join the circus.”

Exactly, I thought, and I knew what I had to do.

“I’ll be back,” I said. I got out of the car and walked around the truck stop. It didn’t take long to find what I was looking for. The guy had a mullet and a pickup truck. In the back of the pickup truck’s window was a rifle rack. And in the rifle rack, a rifle. Hunting season or not, this was Idaho.

I pulled that wad of bills from my wallet and his eyes went wide. He’d probably never seen a clown with so much determination in his stride and cash in his fist. I bought that rifle from him, drove out into the middle of nowhere, and shot the lock off that crate.

When the door opened, a small, hairy hand reached out, followed by a slender, hairy arm, hairy torso, hairy face. He didn't quite look like a monkey but he was close enough. He smiled, his three black eyes shining like pools of oil. Then, the third eye puckered in on itself and disappeared. "I should at least try to fit in," he said.

"Do you want me to drop you anywhere?" I asked him.

"I think I'll walk. Stretch my legs a bit."

"Suit yourself."

We shook hands. I gave him the pack of the cigarettes, the lighter and all but one of the remaining hundred dollar bills.

"I'll see you around," I said.

* * *

I didn't call Nancy until I got back to Seattle. When I did, I told her what happened. Well, *my* version about what happened. And I didn't feel bad about it, either. She'd tried to use me in her plot against a fellow circus aficionado.

"I've never seen anything like it," I said. "We were just outside of Boise, early in the morning, and there was this light in the sky." I threw in a bit about

missing time and how I thought something invasive and wrong might've happened to me.

I told her they also took the monkey.

She insisted that I come over right away. She and her husband had a big house on the lake and when I got there, she was already pretty drunk. I'm a weak man. I joined her and we polished off a bottle of tequila. Her husband was out of town on business and somehow we ended up having sex on the leather couch in his den. It was better than the last time but still nothing compared to a high wire trapeze act or a lion tamer or an elephant that can dance.

Still, I didn't complain. At the time, it was nice.

Three days later, my phone rang.

"Merton D. Kamal?" a familiar voice asked.

"Yes?"

"I need a clown for my act."

"Does it involve talking monkeys?" I asked with a grin.

"Monkeys can't talk," the monkey said.

So I wrote Nancy a note, thanking her in great detail for the other night. After putting it in her mailbox, I took a leisurely stroll down to the Greyhound Station.

When the man at the ticket counter asked me where I was headed, I smiled.

"The greatest show on earth," I said. And I know he understood because he smiled back.



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