

FOOL

by

Ryan Harbert

Cosmo streaked like a technicolor comet through the trauma ward of St. Agatha's Medical Center. Behind him trailed handkerchief chains and playing cards strung together for maximum hilarity. His polka-dot tie fluttered over his shoulder, waving goodbye to the cold white hallways that repeated endlessly, floor after floor, wing after wing. He skidded into an elevator with a celebratory squeak from his pontoons for shoes. His red nose barely squeezed through the doors before they closed. Two surgeons and a radiologist backed away from the clown that was pretending to wipe sweat from his forehead with an oversized mitt of a glove. The numbers above the doors climbed their digital ladder into the double digits. Cosmo felt a tug on his hula-hoop pants and realized his handkerchief chain had gotten stuck between the doors. Twenty feet of red, yellow, blue, and green cloth unraveled into the elevator shaft, taking a pair of boxer shorts along with them. It was an unplanned gaff, but Cosmo never missed a chance for a joke.

After finally reaching the pediatric ward, Cosmo thumbed his elastic suspenders and disembarked. The surgeons and radiologist breathed sighs of relief. The pediatric ward suited the

clown better with its murals of stick figures, ponies, and smiling suns. Cosmo went whistling toward the nurses' station. He found Dolores, the head nurse, seated in front of a computer screen. She glanced up just in time for a plastic bouquet to bloom in her face.

"Cosmo, I swear to God..."

"Penny for your thoughts," Cosmo said, pulling a saucer of a coin out from behind her ear. "Where am I today?"

"Twenty-nine B," Dolores said. "This one's terminal but his parents haven't told him yet. If he asks, deflect."

"Which do you think would make a better deflector shield," Cosmo said, "the whoopee cushion or the spinning bow tie?"

"Go. And leave the serious stuff to the grown-ups."

The boy in twenty-nine B was tethered to the living world by a network of tubes and wires that wove in and out of his body like the roots of a plucked dandelion. His chest swelled and deflated in rhythmic motions. He cracked an eye open at the sound of Cosmo's squeaking shoes. The room looked empty, so he drifted back into a medicated drowse. The squeaking returned. Both eyes opened this time—still no one in sight. It took longer for the now-skeptical boy to feign the attitude of sleep. As soon as he did, a rubber chicken landed in his lap. The boy's head whipped around. He spotted Cosmo's glove waving from behind the curtain next to the bed. A smile spread across the boy's face, showing two or three missing baby teeth. Cosmo side-stepped out from behind the curtain.

He gave the boy his hand buzzer and pretended to be electrocuted. He juggled bowling pins that somehow turned into rubber trout. The boy giggled as he caught the fish that were tossed to him. He giggled harder when Cosmo lost track of the windshield-sized sunglasses towering on his forehead. He giggled a little less when the show drew to a close, and Cosmo performed a sweeping bow. The boy's spongy hands came together for a soft clap or two. He looked at Cosmo with a face that traded its sunshine for rain clouds. It took a few practice breaths before he gathered the strength to speak.

"When can I go home?" he asked.

Cosmo hesitated. The boy pleaded with his tired brown eyes and their matted lashes. A fluid line beeped. His breathing tubes fogged with the air circulating through his lungs. Cosmo looked at the legions of Teddy bears and get-well cards that surrounded the bed. He marked the weak sunlight casting a blue gloom through the curtains. He smelled the ointments, medicines, and plastics that reminded the boy, a million times a day, that he wasn't at home, and might never be home again.

Cosmo thought of a few things he could say. Wooden stage, curtain backdrop, spotlight beating down on him. *Life is complicated, kid. But you should never lose hope.* Boos from the imaginary crowd. Tomatoes thrown at him. *What I mean is, it's not always easy to understand why things happen to us, but you should never let go of the things that make you laugh. Laughs will help you when times are tough.* A few murmurs from the audience. Going better this time. *I don't know when you'll go home, but I look at all the cards and stuffed animals in here and I know you mean a lot to people. Everyone's doing their hardest to make you better, even me, in*

my own, clumsy way... Sparse applause. Someone throws a rose. Nice going, Cosmo. You made the kid feel better.

But there wasn't a stage, or an audience, or a spotlight burning Cosmo's bald forehead. And Cosmo didn't say anything to the boy who had a million questions and only time and strength enough for one. As the boy looked at him with a hope that withered like month-old posies, Cosmo took a red nose out of his sleeve, put it on the boy's face, and honked it.

#

The hospital cafeteria resembled a watering hole for green-scrubbed, white-coated herd animals. Doctors carried trays of unremarkable food to unremarkable tables and chatted about cases made unremarkable by routine. Another triple bypass by Dr. Reddy, another malignant tumor found by a technician in the oncology department, about five or six car accidents processed, treated, and discharged from the emergency room. Here in the cafeteria, there were no grieving families suffering through the worst days of their lives, no construction workers with bleeding scalps filling out workers' comp forms, or ten-year-old girls in tap shoes who couldn't stop vomiting. Here doctors picked up their trays, fell into a single-file lines, selected food from a boilerplate menu, paid their tab, searched for not-too-crowded places to sit, and blended into each other: white coats, green scrubs, tennis shoes, name tags, stethoscopes—all repeating, all part of the same herd. Then there was Cosmo.

Cosmo sat by himself in the center of a table, eating a corndog and making chocolate milk disappear. Coupled with his too-big clown costume, his lunch made him look like a ten-year-old drowning inside a grown-up uniform. No one approached him or gave a second thought to the hospital clown who never took off his costume. They never suspected that there might be an empty void under that costume, and Cosmo would simply evaporate if his wig fell off. He had become another extraordinary thing made ordinary by routine.

When his day was wrapped and sealed, Cosmo returned to the nurses' station and found Dolores in her usual spot behind the computer monitor. A set of chattering dentures crawled across her desk and tipped over beside her keyboard. Dolores grabbed them and lifted her eyes to Cosmo.

"Do you ever run out of gags?" she asked.

"If I do, shoot me," Cosmo said. He pulled a revolver out of his hula-hoop pants and pulled the trigger. A flag with the word "Bang!" fluttered out of its barrel.

Dolores arched her eyebrow. "Goodnight, Cosmo."

Cosmo gave a mock salute and turned on his heels. A stack of pamphlets on the desk interrupted his dramatic exit. They were yellow and blue with looping, fantastical letters advertising the Universe Spectacular Circus. Cosmo snatched one.

"Someone dropped those off earlier," Dolores said. She smirked at the look of awe on Cosmo's already-exaggerated face. "See anyone you know?"

Cosmo beheld the graphic on the front of the pamphlet. There stood a ringmaster cracking a whip above her head. A lion bared his four-inch fangs in a ferocious roar. Cosmo felt

his heart thud as his eyes roved over the stunt driver seated atop his dirt bike, the twin acrobats swinging arm-in-arm, and finally, squeezed into the corner of the graphic, a female clown.

#

Her name was Dot. She wore geisha-style makeup with neon stars stamped on her cheekbones. Her mouth was painted into a permanent smile. A small red circle formed a button on the tip of her nose. The Universe Spectacular Circus left her off of most of its advertisements. It favored the buxom ringmaster and her knee-high black boots, or the skull-capped strongmen heaving dumbbells into the azure. Dot was given only a narrow timeslot between the baton-twirling elephants and the twenty-foot high dive. She opened with Julius Fucik's "Entry of the Gladiators," twirling hoops around her wrists and balancing on a unicycle. Cosmo watched her from the bleachers with pure rapture. She wore bright pastels with a ribbon in her hair: a picture of childhood merriment playing tumbler, or firefighter, or balloon-animal snake charmer. She pitched buckets of confetti into the crowd, and went rolling backwards when a mallet popped out of a Jack-in-the-box. Cosmo's ribs ached with laughter. The rest of the audience only chuckled politely. One little girl begged her mother to make the "creepy clown" go away. Cosmo gave a standing ovation when Dot's act concluded. She spotted him among the indifferent crowd and lit up like a sparkler.

They met after the show. Dot was touching up her face paint before an antique vanity lined with bulbs. The animal cages slumbered behind drop cloths nearby. Every now and then a

lion roared. Dot smiled when she saw Cosmo approaching in the mirror. Her real mouth curved to match the painted one.

“I’ve never seen a unicycle act like that before,” Cosmo said. “Who trained you?”

“No one,” Dot said. “I’m self-taught.”

“You’re kidding,” Cosmo said. “You must be some kind of savant.”

“I’m not, but thank you.” Dot turned to meet Cosmo’s eyes. “I’m Dot.”

“Cosmo.”

They shook hands and zapped each other with hand buzzers. Dot let loose a warm, indulgent giggle. She sat with her knees pulled to her chest. Her movements drew her inward, shrinking her world into a soft, mammalian thing that she could curl inside. Cosmo noticed the satin choker looped around her throat.

“Hiding horrible neck scars?” he asked. “Botched suicide attempt? Blood everywhere? Had to load you into an ambulance stuffed with fifty clowns?”

Dot’s smile faltered. “Not *neck* scars.”

Cosmo studied her indrawn posture. He had been around children long enough to recognize signs of abuse. His hand reached automatically for a water-squirting carnation pinned to his lapel, but he stopped himself.

“The nice thing about being a clown,” he said after some thought, “is that you can always paint over your scars.”

“You’re right,” Dot said. “I like making ugly things pretty.”

“That’s the point of being a clown, isn’t it? Humor is just medicine mixed with sugar.”

Dot beamed. Her joy was immediately extinguished by an ugly cough coming from the darkness over Cosmo’s shoulder. A floor light cast a towering, black shadow on a knife-throwing board. The shadow grew more gargantuan as it approached, until it extended all the way to the ceiling. A saggy-faced bulldog of a manager hobbled over on a wooden cane. His true form contrasted so dramatically with his shadow that Cosmo almost laughed. Dot, on the other hand, spun around in her seat and glued her attention to the mirror. The manager approached slowly, sizing Cosmo up with a nearsighted squint.

“What’s this?” he asked. “We aren’t looking for another clown. I’m trying to get rid of the one I have.”

Cosmo glanced at Dot, whose skeleton seemed to cave in on itself. Her shoulders rose and fell with the rapid breaths that cycled through her body.

“You’re not going to find a better clown than her,” Cosmo said.

The manager waved Cosmo off. “Don’t hang around here all night. People will start calling this a clown circus.” He broke into a coughing fit and dragged himself back into the darkness. Once he was gone, Cosmo drew his revolver and let loose the “Bang!” flag.

“Why does he want to get rid of you?” he asked.

“I’m no good,” Dot said. Cosmo heard the tears in her voice before he saw them on her face. They turned her eye makeup into multicolored runoff that flowed into her permanent, painted smile.

“That’s quite the reaction,” Cosmo said. “Care to talk about it?”

“I’m fine,” Dot said. She blotted away her tears with a handkerchief chain that was identical to the one Cosmo lost in the elevator. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You say that, but you make it hard not to worry. Who was that guy?”

“Just my manager. He’s going to cancel my show.”

“He can’t. It’s the best part of the circus.”

“Thank you for saying that, but I know it’s not. Nobody likes clowns anymore.” Dot glanced at Cosmo’s enormous, checkered pants. “No offense.”

“So that’s it? You’re just giving up?”

“What else can I do? C’est la vie.”

“Yeah, Sailor V, ar-vrar, and bone apple teeth. Come on, you don’t need this place. If they don’t appreciate you, they’re trash.”

Cosmo grabbed Dot by the hand and pulled her out of her seat. Dot blinked away her surprise and, in another minute, was giggling and making herself small. Her every move was an implosion, like a star at the end of its life. Cosmo touched her shoulder while gesturing upward at the Big Top throwing its red-and-white rays over their heads.

“You know what that is?” he asked. “That’s our sky. Nobody sees that sky but us. And you know why?”

“Because we’re isolated from the rest of the world inside a tented microcosm of broken egos that crave attention but lack the talent to find more successful ways of obtaining it?”

“Well, yeah, but no. It’s because clowns see the world differently. We have to. If we looked up and saw the same Big Dipper and moon that everyone else saw, we’d go crazy.”

“Bold of you to assume I’m not crazy,” Dot said.

“No clown is crazy,” Cosmo said. “We’re the sanest people on Earth. Would a crazy person dress like this?”

Cosmo flashed his best lunatic grin. Dot twisted herself up with another giggle.

“Hear that?” Cosmo said. “Laughter is our universal constant, the one thing that every person shares.”

“What about crying?” Dot asked. “Or pain, disappointment, death...”

“Those things happen on their own. Laughter can only come from clowns. That’s what makes it unique.”

“I guess standup comedians and drunk uncles are clowns now.”

“They are,” Cosmo said seriously. “You think all clowns wear makeup and bright colors?”

“Then why waste our time getting dressed up?”

“Armor.”

“Armor,” Dot repeated, mulling the word around in her head. “I think I like you, Cosmo.”

“Don’t think too hard or you’ll change your mind.”

“You should probably go now. I need to clean up after the animals. You don’t want to see that.”

“You clean up after the animals?” Cosmo asked. “But you’re a clown.”

“I have to make myself useful somehow.”

“You’re already useful. Who keeps telling you you’re not?”

“Goodnight, Cosmo. Come by and see me again?”

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” Cosmo said. “Your show was fantastic, by the way. Ten out of ten. Chef’s kiss.”

“Chef’s kiss,” Dot said. She kissed her fingers and touched them to Cosmo’s red nose.

#

Cosmo met up with Dot the following night in the same place. This time she took him to the animal cages and pulled away a drop cloth with dramatic flourish. Behind it paced a male lion, equal parts muscle and silence, carrying his bulk on paws that practically moved in zero gravity. His yellow eyes housed the primordial wild in their amber. Cosmo had seen the lion jumping through hoops not an hour before, obediently minding the crack of the ringmaster’s

whip. The creature had been oblivious of his power to end the entire circus with a well-timed bite.

“This is Harry,” Dot announced.

“Houdini or Potter?” Cosmo asked.

“Probably Truman. The other two could escape a cage.”

Harry’s shoulders swelled under his skin. He vibrated the air with a growl that carried the deep resonance of magma churning beneath the Earth’s crust. The veins in his forearms surged with blood that obeyed the law of Kill or Be Killed. Cosmo placed his hands on the bars and received a sharp reproof from Dot.

“No touching. Harry goes berserk if you touch his bars.”

“Is he dangerous?”

“Of course he’s dangerous. He’s a lion. I feed him all my enemies.”

“What enemies?”

“Exactly.”

Dot grinned and stood beside Cosmo. Her gloved hand nuzzled its way into his own. No hand buzzers shocked them this time. They stood together and watched the lion flood the confines of his cage with African nights full of glowing eyes and darting prey—all the things he used to thrive on before he learned to fear the ringmaster’s whip. His presence was so commanding that, for a moment, Cosmo forgot about Dot’s hand and the cotton-candy perfume lingering on her clothes.

“I think Harry is a clown,” Cosmo said after a while.

“I’m not laughing.”

Another ugly cough shot through the tent. Dot’s hand fled from Cosmo’s like a panicked rabbit. The manager’s shadow passed in front of a floor light. Its shape swallowed Dot the way movie monsters swallow golden-haired damsels. It moved on momentarily, leaving Dot reduced to a quivering, collapsed thing trying to hug itself back to baseline. Cosmo attempted to touch her shoulder. She shrank from him.

“I need a minute,” she said.

“You need more than that,” Cosmo said.

Dot threw the drop cloth back over Harry’s cage. She pulled a raw steak from a bucket, passed it through one of the last uncovered bars, and left the lion to his digestion. The primeval, animal power dissipated from the area, hidden by the drop cloth.

Cosmo watched Dot dam up the waters that flooded from her eyes. He pictured himself on an imaginary stage again, staring out at a fantasy audience. He felt an irresistible call to perform. Straw hat, piano tinkling, strutting around the stage and singing a ditty about summer boardwalks with ring toss and elephant ears. He could see Dot’s face lighting up—the only distinct one in the crowd. Her features were so much like his own, yet lovelier and more vulnerable. He extended his hand and brought Dot onstage with him. She forgot her tears and sang a few bars in honor of the Big Top. She met Cosmo’s eyes and everything became a sappy, sugary mess of sentimentality. They were two clowns, the only clowns, colliding in the frozen

infinity of outer space. Cosmo had never known anyone like Dot before. He might never know anyone like her again.

The stage lights flickered out. The wooden planks disappeared beneath Cosmo's feet. Dot went back to fighting a nervous breakdown. The imaginary crowd drifted away like paint in running water. Cosmo didn't want to perform anymore. For the first time in his life, he wished he weren't dressed as a clown.

His hand made its way to Dot's shoulder. She started but allowed him to rest it there this time.

"Tell me," Cosmo said. "What did your manager do to you?"

"I can't," Dot said.

"Yes, you can. I'm here to listen."

"It's too hard."

"Nothing is too hard. Dot, for once in my life, let me talk about something real."

Dot inspected Cosmo and found anguish imprisoned behind his grinning clown face. She walked over to a wooden chest near her vanity. Out came two hand puppets: one male and one female. She inserted a hand into each.

"We put on shows for really young kids sometimes. You know Punch and Judy?"

Cosmo nodded.

Dot carried the puppets to the floor light that had previously morphed the manager's shadow into something diabolic. This time it transformed the puppets into two silhouettes bobbing up and down.

"This is what happened," she said.

#

(Curtain. Judy picking flowers in a field. Punch enters, stalks forward, grows larger as he approaches. Judy drops her flowers.)

PUNCH: I'm in a bind here, Judy. You've got me in a real bind.

JUDY: I'm sorry.

PUNCH: Don't be sorry. Be better. Who wants to see clowns, Judy? No one!

(Judy suffers a slap to the head. She nails her gaze to the floor.)

JUDY: I'm sorry.

PUNCH: What did I tell you about being sorry?

(Judy absorbs another blow without protest.)

PUNCH: Why do I keep you around, Judy? You're not giving me much of a reason.

JUDY: I clean up.

PUNCH: Clean up? We're a traveling circus! We could leave this town looking like a bombed-out whore house and I wouldn't care!

JUDY: I try. (crying) I do.

PUNCH: Here we go, the great crying act. Where's all this acting when you're on stage?

JUDY: I'm not acting!

PUNCH: You are! If you were really sorry, you wouldn't put me in such a difficult position here.

JUDY: I'm sor—I mean, I'm doing my best.

(Another slap. Punch spits.)

PUNCH: Your "best." Figure out how to draw a crowd or you'll be selling yourself on the street. I'm not doing this anymore, Judy. I'm done!

(Punch walks to the other side of the stage as Judy shrivels. He turns for one last shot of venom.)

PUNCH: Done!

(The lights dim. Judy recedes into darkness. The curtain closes with the sound of Harry savoring his bloody steak, unseen.)

Cosmo sat still for a while. Dot dabbed at the corners of her eyes. The puppets lay lifeless and empty beside her. Cosmo stared at them. Without warning, he sprang to his feet, kicked off his squeaking pontoons for shoes, and ripped the drop cloth from Harry's cage. The lion's gaze was waiting for him, smoldering through the bars. Dot's breath caught in her throat.

"Harry," Cosmo said. "We'll use Harry."

"For what?"

"Revenge!"

"Cosmo, what are you saying?"

"I'm not talking about killing the guy. I just want to give him a scare. Harry can't maul anyone from a cage, right? And didn't you say he goes crazy if someone touches his bars?"

Dot shook her head. "I don't want to do this."

"He walks all over you, Dot! Aren't you sick of it?"

"He's right. I can't draw a crowd."

"He doesn't even market you! Besides, that's no excuse. He can't treat you like that."

Dot kept hugging herself. She looked at anything but Cosmo gesticulating at the caged lion.

"If he's really hitting you," Cosmo said, "you should report him."

"Nobody will believe me."

"I believe you. Let me help."

“I don’t see how scaring him will help.”

“It’ll teach him not to mess with you anymore. If the authorities won’t show him who’s boss, we will.”

“I can’t,” Dot said. “What if he fires me?”

“You can come with me,” Cosmo said. “I work in a hospital. We could cook up an act together, better than Punch and Judy, better than anything!”

Dot raised her eyes. The tension crept out of her shoulders. One by one, her muscles relaxed; her breathing slowed.

“You really want me to go with you?” she asked.

“Of course. You make me feel like I belong somewhere.”

Dot glanced from Cosmo to the lion’s cage. Her expression went blank. The manager coughed somewhere on the far side of the tent. It was a distant husk of a noise. Dot watched the lion’s eyes staring at her—through her. Her shoulders squared.

“All right,” she said.

#

Curtain. Applause. Happy families poured out of the Big Top. The twin strongmen congratulated one another on a successful performance. The stunt driver chucked his helmet into

the grass and announced his intentions to get drunk in his trailer. The buxom ringmaster said she might join him. Someone shut off the lights. The tent darkened and an old man with a push broom emerged to sweep striped popcorn bags and soda cups into neat piles. The performers said their goodnights and plunged into the crickets and fireflies outside. Dot wasn't with them.

She and Cosmo hid in a dark corner near Harry's cage. The raw-steak bucket sat a few yards away, tucked behind a wooden stool. A faint shimmer, like spider silk, cut a path from the bucket to Cosmo's hand. It was fishing line. One end was tied around the bucket's handle; the other was clenched in Cosmo's fist. Cosmo turned to Dot and spoke in a low whisper.

"Remember, point this at him," he said, handing her the revolver with the "Bang!" flag in its barrel. "Once you have his attention, just say whatever's on your mind."

"I don't know if I can do this," Dot said.

Cosmo could sense her trembling in the darkness. He suddenly thought of the boy in twenty-nine B, kept alive by tubes.

"You're strong, Dot," he said. "I've seen strength before. You have it. Just trust yourself."

Dot drew in a shuddering breath. The manager's shadow passed by. The manager himself followed, probing the dark with his cane. He called for Dot. Cosmo tightened his grip on the fishing line. He heard Dot's breathing turn into panting. Then he heard the hammer cock on the toy revolver.

"Dot, where are you?" the manager said.

His foot neared the bucket. Cosmo gave the fishing line a yank. The bucket zoomed out from behind the wooden stool. The manager stepped in it. Cosmo tugged harder. The manager's foot flew out from under him. Dot gasped as though she were drowning. The manager staggered backwards with a comic wave of his arms, like a silent film star slipping on a banana peel. His shoulders smacked the lion's cage and let out a dull ring. Cosmo jumped up. He expected to see a flash of lion eyes and teeth that threatened to snap through the bars. He envisioned the manager squealing in terror as meat-hook claws swiped at him. Then Dot could seize the moment to strike. Her toy gun would send the manager down on his knees in blubbery appeal. He'd beg for his life. Dot would vent every ugly word that had been festering inside her for years. She would fling his sins back in his bulldog face. Meanwhile the lion would grope for him with a ravenous hunger that reminded the manager of why his ancestors were afraid of the dark.

But Harry never so much as batted an eye when the manager hit his cage. He crossed his paws like a sleepy housecat and yawned. Cosmo felt his heart plunge into his shoes. The lion's mouth was lined with tacky, pink gums. They had pulled out his teeth when they captured him. He was harmless.

The manager pried the bucket off his foot. A moment later, a coughing fit doubled him over. He wobbled on his cane and hacked until his eyes watered. A comb-over flopped pitifully on his scalp, exposing liver spots beneath. His wrists were thin and bony, his neck sagging with wrinkles. Cosmo felt like the biggest idiot in history. The manager was so *old*. He couldn't have hit Dot. He belonged in the hospital where Cosmo worked.

The revolver clicked again. This time it was Dot uncocking the hammer. She lowered the gun and her head in the same motion.

The manager recovered from his coughing fit. He jabbed his cane at Cosmo and demanded to know what was going on.

Cosmo looked at Dot. She was a shrunken little girl afraid of the bogeyman. Her ribbons and pastels made the gun look obscene in her hands, like carving swear words into a teeter-totter.

“Well?” the manager demanded. “What’s the big idea?”

Cosmo reached up to make sure his wig was in place. He checked his red nose, his water-squirting carnation, his baseball-mit gloves. He could feel Dot watching him out of the corner of her eye. It was all so absurd—a broken clown, a toothless lion, a string tied to a bucket, “Bang!” What could Cosmo do when everything, everywhere, was just so absurd?

“Sorry, sir,” he said at last. “We’re just working on our act.”

##