

Fiction by Peggy Newland

Clowns

When Mama couldn't have another baby, I knew I could find her one.

"Going out," I told Mama that first time, but she said nothing as usual, only staring out the kitchen window at the empty field in the back lot. And Daddy, he was never home back then. He knew to stay away until early evening. And then he'd sit in the garage with the radio turned low until Mama screamed for him.

I filled my pockets with stones from the river, just in case, and then I took one of the burlap sacks from the shed because that's what I'd seen on television shows when you didn't want the person knowing where he or she was going. I even got my room ready. My bed shoved away from the window so

nobody would jump out, chairs piled into a corner, and some stolen jars of peanut butter, jelly, and crackers in my closet. Because you'd never know what the kid would want. And I always wanted peanut butter and jelly. But not on crackers. Bread gets black gunk on it once it gets old so the kid would have to do with crackers until he was ready to be introduced to the family.

Those stones in my pockets, that sack under my tee shirt. And soon you'll be happy, I wanted to say to Mama as I watched her from the shed. But I didn't. I just went.

"One, two, three..." I whispered in the park.

"Four, five, six." In the supermarket where Mrs. Johnston told me to go home, stop hanging around by the shopping carts.

"Seven, eight, nine," I yelled through an abandoned junkyard where the stream ran yellow and purple from the paper company.

And I picked up one of the dead birds. And I brought it back and put it in that closet with the peanut butter and jelly, but then Mama found it a week later and told me no more dead things in the house. Ever. And she stayed in bed for the next two days so I didn't even go

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to school at all. I watched more of the crime shows, twisting the antenna my way so the fuzz would disappear and I'd see a clear picture.

But then Daddy made me go back.

And Jimmy Richards smeared some dog shit in my hair at recess and nobody did nothing about that. They're just used to me smelling.

My first sister stayed alive for one day and twelve hours. I saw her once on Mama's bed and she had pink lips and black hair and tiny fingers that looked like tiny bicycle spokes. Mama whispered to her chest Liza, Liza, Liza, when they took my sister away, because they'd named her after my grandmother Elizabeth. And Daddy drank a full bottle of whiskey and pulled the refrigerator door off of its hinges.

The second and fourth babies died right in Mama's belly.

And the third was deformed so they had to throw her away.

They only had me.

And that wasn't a family, my Mama told me.

I had to look harder. The circus, I thought, all kids love circuses, especially the Tallahassee Shriners Circus, all those clowns on race cars and miniature trucks. All those animals in line. The popcorn, the peanuts.

I saw one easily. Followed him for a while. Grabbed him just when the mother had had enough, turning away to get herself a Coke at the stand. She wanted to hit him I could tell. Because she'd balled her hands into fists just like Daddy.

That kid and I scootched under the circus tent and I covered his ears when his Mama screamed for him.

He was an ugly kid, real snotty and blowing bubbles out of his mouth until

I gave him one of my stones from the river to suck on. Then his eyes got real big and blue, and he stared at me like he knew what I was up to.

"You don't know," I whispered to those eyes of his as I watched the clown feet flipping past us in their large painted shoes. "Red, blue, yellow," I told that kid as I tried to get him into my burlap sack. But he was strong, that one, pushing at me with his arms, kicking me with his fat boy legs. So I finally just held him tight against my stomach behind those bleachers as the clowns got their unicyles ready and the elephants were taken outside. This shut him up.

The worst thing about Mama losing all those babies was that we had to go to church a lot. I never liked kneeling on the wood floors or having to wear socks with my shoes. And Mama's face always scared me when she bit through the flesh of Christ at communion: it'd go all waxy and peaceful, and she'd look dead like my sisters. Mama didn't want me to pinch her, but I couldn't help it, I'd pinch her over and over again. And some father, usually a man behind us, would run his hands down my spine to calm me and say come on now, son. Which I didn't like.

I only have one daddy.

That kid squirmed in my lap so I rolled back and forth behind those bleachers until he lay limp again in my arms. The elephants still paraded past, and the dust rose in that flesh-colored light, so I held that baby's nose closed for a minute so he wouldn't breathe up the dirt.

"There's nobody coming in here today," one clown said. His painted red smile couldn't hide his frown as he clicked his teeth and propped his hat on his head.

“Fuck ‘em,” another said. “We’re still getting paid.”

“But I like having lots of people,” a girl clown said, and she was just in front of us so I gave that baby another stone to suck on because I didn’t want him making any noises.

“Yeah, you do,” two of those clowns laughed, and they elbowed each other and stomped their flapping feet, making even more dust than the elephants. But I didn’t hold the kid’s nose closed this time. I didn’t want him to make those buggy eyes again.

“Shut up, you,” that girl clown said, and she swished her polka dot skirt around and around until I could see her red lace bloomers through the slats of those bleachers; and one of those clowns grabbed her right on the ass, holding his hand there while she giggled, the others hooting and shouting at them with their white faces and orange wigs and open red mouths.

I covered that kid’s eyes because he shouldn’t be seeing stuff like that.

“You want to be my baby brother?” I asked real quiet.

He chewed on those rocks and didn’t answer me. So I told him about Mama and how lonely she was for another baby and how our house was real nice, with a backyard and everything but no swing set just yet, and how Mama could make good cookies in the oven when she was feeling up to it. Which wasn’t often now. If ever. “But maybe that’d change if she had you,” I whispered because two of those clowns were getting closer. I held my hand over the kid’s mouth.

“How about it, Lucy?” the boy clown asked, that girl clown still twirling and then the boy clown coming closer to her, pressing her against the squashed bleachers. His black eyebrows arched up and down as that kid and I stared up at them.

“Yeah,” the girl clown said. “But just do it fast.” And he pulled off his big white gloves and got his hand down her shirt, and she let him, and then they were on the ground, her bloomers down past her knees; and I had to use the burlap sack this time, put it right over the kid’s head, because I’d only seen this in the magazines my daddy kept behind the workbench in the garage, girls doing all sort of things with carrots and others girls – never anything like this, that boy clown holding her down and both of them with their smeared smiles. “Shhh . . .” I said to that kid, and when I tried to put another stone from the river into his mouth, he bit me. It hurt so bad. And I couldn’t hold it in any longer.

Mama used to let me sleep with her, but now she sleeps with her doll that the pink ladies at the hospital gave to her two months ago. That doll is called a Cupie Doll, and it’s naked and has a dimpled face and a plastic curl on her forehead, and when you turn her upside down, she giggles at you. Almost like she’s alive but she’s not. They say it helps with her memory, makes her quiet in the late afternoons when I go out for my walks. But sometimes nothing helps.

My thumb was bloody when that kid got done with me, and he looked all proud of himself in the bottom of that burlap sack so I tied it up with my rubber band. I also kept those around, too, rubber bands, because they are so useful in a pinch. But then that kid started wailing, real high and screeching, and there was no way to shut him up so I screeched right along with him.

And then those dirty clowns found us.

“Jesus Christ,” the boy clown said, and his teeth were crooked and wrong-looking as he swatted at me. “What the

hell . . .” His gloved hand got me, twisted my neck around, and I rolled into a tight ball like I do with Daddy.

“Stop it, Ray,” that girl clown said, and she jumped right on his head, which he didn’t like, because he shrugged her off and she fell in the dirt, her legs all akimbo, and there was a rip in her striped pantyhose things but no blood. Ray the clown just humping himself up and out of there. Which I was glad at. He left his gloves though, and I couldn’t stop staring at them even with that kid in the bag rolling around by my feet. “What are you doing back here?” the girl clown said, and she had kindly eyes although you couldn’t see them so good through all the black eyelash stuff.

I couldn’t say too much because I was still crying from that kid biting my thumb so hard.

“It’s okay, honey,” that girl clown said as she came close, and when she bent over, I could see down her clown dress; and she had brown nipples like Mama so I knew she was probably nice. But also a little bit sad. The girls in Daddy’s magazines all have pink ones and they’re smiling, so I guess if you’ve got pink, you’re happy, and if you’re brown, you just get sad.

I showed her my thumb.

“Where’s your family?” she asked. And her hands were smooth when she held my hand.

“I’m looking,” I said, but I was having trouble with my lips as usual. And then that kid kicked his leg out, and the girl clown touched the bag so I pushed the bag toward her, smiling. “Here,” I said. And she opened the bag. And that kid looked up at us and spit the last of the stones from the river out of his mouth.

“Holy . . .” And that girl clown lifted that kid into her arms. And I thought of how happy my Mama would be holding another baby, how maybe she’d smile

and her face would light up; and then, because she was feeling so good, she might make some chocolate chip bars in celebration, and then Daddy would come home because he’d smell that sugar and cream from the kitchen, and his stomach would rumble right along with mine. We’d eat all those chocolate chip bars in one sitting because we would finally be a whole family. And then we’d get that swing set.

But that kid ruined it. He shit himself, and it came out the side of his little sailor suit onto that girl clown’s polka dot skirt, but she didn’t care, her face all puckered up with her smudged eyes as she smelled his head. Her not caring that his yellow shit was sliding down her clown outfit, and him with his mouth wide open like that dead bird’s.

“You can have him,” I told that girl clown.

But she wasn’t listening to me. She wasn’t even noticing me. She stood in that dust and sighed over and over again as that kid kicked and swatted; and even when I pulled at her orange clown sleeves, even when I kicked my boot at her clown foot, she just stayed in the broken light of that empty tent and rocked that kid like they were the only things left in the world.

Maybe our family didn’t really need a baby.

Maybe someone a little bit older.

So instead of bringing home a baby for Mama that day, I stole that boy clown’s gloves. And kept them underneath my bed with the bird nests and fishing lures and a couple of Daddy’s magazines.

Our house sits at the end of a dirt road next to the old fairgrounds. Sometimes I run around the track where they used to have horse races, but usually it’s too much for me now because I lose my breath and I always have to get back to

Mama because you never know what she'll get into next, turning on the stove, trying to push her hand through the plate glass. There used to be so many cars and trucks and animals coming our way, up our road, during Kinstown Days, but now it's just brambles and ivy over the oaks and brush mostly hiding our little pink house. That's why I like it. Because we're hidden now, Mama and I. No one coming around anymore.

I grabbed a two-year-old from the Kinstown Days Fair once and kept him in our basement for three days. But he wouldn't eat the peanut-butter-and-jelly crackers, and he cried so much Mama thought she was hearing ghosts of her dead babies so I had to take him back. Because Daddy didn't like it when Mama got that way, scratching at her face and tearing through the kitchen in just her underwear. I gave him a fishing lure, one without a sharp hook and left him in the oxen barn, sleeping in a pile of hay like baby Jesus in the manger. Only older. And the next day, it was all in the news. A miracle had occurred at Kinstown Days, and that boy was given a parade and everything. But I didn't care because Mama kept her clothes on and just got back to staring out the window. And Daddy came back to his shed again.

Then I met Sherry. And she was real pretty. Three years younger and new to our school, and no one liked her because she had half a burned face and had to wear an eye patch. But she had a nice voice, and she'd tell me her secrets and so I'd tell her mine, about Mama and all those dead babies and how we didn't have a full family yet, and she told me that her uncle had three wives and she might get to be the fourth if she stayed quiet and followed the rules of doctrine. I nodded my head along with her, and

she patted my back about the dead babies, and she liked peanut-butter-and-jelly crackers just as much as me.

I invited her home one day and Mama tried not to scream, but a little bit came out anyway.

"It's okay," Sherry said, and I was real proud of her because Mama settled just hearing Sherry's nice voice and poured her some juice in the Sleeping Beauty cup she kept for just this purpose. But Mama wouldn't look her in the face.

Sherry stayed for dinner and Daddy even came in from the shed, and it was like we were a normal family, the table set for four instead of three.

"Sherry's from Utah," I told Daddy, but he was handing Sherry a napkin, telling her to put it on her lap and smiling real big. Mama was still at the table, which was good because usually after Daddy came in, she left for her bedroom.

"Where you from?" Daddy asked Sherry even though I just told him.

And she explained that they'd moved to be closer to family and that they liked it here in Florida except for all the trees. "There's too many here," Sherry said, her words so soft that Mama looked up and touched her elbow to go on. "They almost swallow you up."

And Daddy laughed at that one, bending down to the ground when Sherry dropped her napkin on the floor.

Mama likes me to cream her beef and stew her prunes, and so I do both with the clown gloves on. It keeps the heat away and also gives her a little laugh because I can act the part so well. Being that I've had a lot of practice. I take extra special care of them, putting them in my locked cabinet in Daddy's old shed.

"Now you see it, now you don't," I tell her, hiding a dripping prune inside one glove, and she throws her head back be-

cause she likes it when I make things disappear.

“Where’d you put it?” Mama asks.

But sometimes I don’t show her, like today, because I’m a little tired of Mama’s games, and I have to have my secrets too.

“I don’t have nothing,” I tell her. And I wave those gloves in her face, and she tries to grab one off of me and so I tell her no, Mama, no.

“Don’t you do that,” Mama says. And our kitchen clock ticks, and the siren sounds at the mill, and her face is wrapped up tight in her bright red lipstick and pink blush. Then she throws her plate of beef on the floor so I have to get the mop out.

“Why you’d go on and do that?” I ask.

But Mama’s back staring into her hands, and it’s almost time for my walk to school where I help clean on carnival days.

Sherry let me kiss her on the cheek. She let me touch her kneecap. But she wouldn’t let me peel back her eye patch.

“No,” she said in that voice of hers. So I pressed my face to hers, and she opened her mouth, and I could feel her tongue on my teeth in tiny circles, and it made me have goose bumps down my arms and up my legs. “No,” she said when my hand went down the backside of her pants, and it ricocheted in echoes down my throat, no, no, no, until it was like I had part of her inside me.

“I love you,” I told her, and she kept nodding her head as I walked her home, trying to hold her hand. But she wouldn’t let me. I hugged her tight just before we got to her yard but she whispered that her daddy would see us so I stopped and watched her walk away.

There is one picture of me in the house. It used to sit on Mama’s bureau, Mama,

me, and the sister I found us, but not Daddy. Then one day she threw it at me and I don’t know where the picture went. Mama won’t tell me. Even though I’ve asked her many times.

And this makes me mad.

I don’t like it when I get mad because then I do naughty things.

Daddy always wanted to be around Sherry whenever Sherry came over, and he’d drape his arm over her shoulder and push her in a new tire swing he’d just put up, and he’d take her out for ice cream some nights. Even after Mama made her chocolate chip layer bars and her macaroon cookies, Daddy would take Sherry out for that ice cream. And he’d never bring any of it home for Mama and I.

“Mama, when they coming back you think?” But Mama just stared off past the littered fields to the highway and shrugged her shoulders. “When you think?”

“Hush,” she told me. And she left the porch. To throw the cookies away.

One afternoon, I hid in the back of his truck, covering myself up with a blanket that smelled of hay and dirt and old milk, and I heard Sherry singing her songs. Her voice like some angel’s even with the wind howling and Daddy’s muffler belching out its exhaust as he drove off down the highway. Her voice coming over me so much that I felt raised up in the sky with the clouds and the sun and trees swishing past, almost like I was in heaven. And then, when I sat up to sing along with her, I saw Daddy kissing on Sherry, and Daddy saw me and pulled over and said for me to get out, get out of his truck, and Sherry didn’t do anything except stare back at me from the rearview as they drove off down the road. For their ice creams together.

They picked me up fifteen minutes later, this time with ice cream cones for Mama and me. But Mama wouldn't come out of her room. Even with Daddy pleading with her. Banging on her door. And finally stomping around the kitchen. Mama's ice cream melted on the kitchen table until I licked it up like a dog just to make Sherry laugh.

"What the hells wrong with you," Daddy yelled when Sherry couldn't stop laughing at my face covered with chocolate and fudge ripple. "Fucking reject..." And he banged the kitchen door off its hinges, and that's when Sherry started crying. Tears soaking that patch.

I chased after her when she ran home but she was faster.

Mama says the babies are screaming at her again. And that they're spitting. And taking her food away. And that their faces are dirty and that their breath stinks. I tell her that I'm not seeing any of them, and I hand her that Cupie doll but that's not working anymore. Just last night, she tore its head off and there was that doll baby head in my closet and Mama in the corner, and I tried to comfort her the best I could. But she told me to go away, just get away. And that made me cry.

"I'm trying, Mama," I tell her.

And she turns her back on me because it's been so many years and nothing has changed. We're still not a family.

They came and got Daddy. Three policemen and a sheriff, and they locked his hands together and pushed his head down when they got him into the flashing cruiser and they drove away.

"Sherry told on him," Mama whispered.

"Where're they taking him?" I asked, but Mama just kept saying she told, she

told, as she turned around the mirrors and piled Daddy's clothes on the porch and got her Bible out. I cried for two hours straight, from 6:00 p.m. until 8:00 p.m., and didn't even eat the supper Mama set out on the floor of my room.

"Eat your biscuits," Mama said when she came in to kiss me goodnight, and her face was raw and pink, her nose especially. She pulled my covers back, and we huddled underneath Nana's quilt. Just the two of us.

"Too old," she whispered directly into my ear.

And that made sense to me.

We had to find one just right. Not too old, not too young. Just right.

And then they'd let Daddy come home.

Some days, I walk right past Sherry's old house and I see the bush I waited in for her. Mulberry, and it's dying now, the leaves just falling off on the ground around my boots. But I don't kick at them. I watch them settle on the grass and think about how her face felt in my hands and that she loved my magic tricks, the one with the Queen of Hearts the most. The windows to her house boarded over now, and I'm still sorry I did that back then. With the rock. Smashing that glass so it fell in bright colors around my feet and then running off because Sherry wasn't there and wasn't ever coming back again.

I scrubbed the toilet and threw the old plates in the backwoods. I hid the newspapers under the bed and banged on the couch cushions. I combed back my hair and took down the fly traps from the kitchen ceiling. Because Mama said a social worker was coming and that social worker was going to take me away if we didn't watch ourselves. That I'd have to

live with the Fosters family if I said one word about anything bad.

"She's here," Mama whispered in her good red dress with her shoes laced up, but I didn't want to go answer it.

"I'm scared," I told her, but she pushed me to the door anyway.

The social worker was real pretty with a yellow skirt and brown shoes and her hair in a bun just like Mama's when she goes to church. I told her that I liked her hair, and when I reached over to touch her bun she backed away.

"I love my Mama," I said.

"Of course you do," the social worker said, but she wasn't smiling any longer, and she wasn't drinking the juice Mama gave her in the Cinderella cup, and she wasn't sitting down on the couch I just dusted off.

"I miss my Daddy."

"I'm sure you do," she said, but then the cats started crying in the basement, two of them in heat, and I was afraid she'd look down in there so I clapped my hands over my head and pointed out the window at a starling chasing a band of crows around.

"Watch," I told her. And soon those oily crows circled around and attacked that tiny starling, and she disappeared from sight. I threw Mama's leftover toast out the door, and we all watched the crows fight over the scraps.

"It might be better..." the social worker started to say, but Mama told her to get the hell out of her house this instant, that she would smack the shit out of her if she didn't leave this very instant. And that social worker did. Even with the cats screaming real loud in that basement and with the crows biting at each other over the bread and with Mama pulling at my hand, she left, and the house was quiet and gentle again, Mama even getting back into her bathrobe and slippers.

"Here comes that starling again," I told Mama after I'd changed out of my church pants.

And she took that as a sign.

They let me volunteer on carnival days at the school because I have my clown outfit and I wear my gloves, which all the kids like. Especially when I do magic tricks on the edge of the playground and the kids line up, but they're not patient, no, they scream about being first, and hurry up, and they push, they push the ones in front.

"Okay, kids," I say to them, but the one on my lap pokes his finger into my makeup, and I don't like it at all. "Stop that." And I stare into his face and frown, which makes him cry. His mother pulls him off my lap, and she's got that look I don't like, her eyebrows all knitted together, her lips sucked inside her mouth.

"No, I don't want to go..." that kid screeches, and I cover my ears, which makes the other kids laugh. I scoop another one into my lap and show him the quarter trick.

"Look, it's been here the whole time," I mumble, and he doesn't care what I say, he just wants my quarter. "Here." The kid grabs it and runs. When he gets far enough away, he sticks his tongue out at me, but I know enough to look away from him.

"I'm next," a little girl says, as she stands in front of me with her hand open.

"Here," I say as I pat my knee.

"Just the quarter." Her eyes are the color of an abandoned garden, weedy and yellow, and she balances first on one foot, then the other.

She reminds me of my sister.

"What's your name?" I ask her, as the other mothers pull their kids away, too, because a Jesus band is singing on the

main stage and there's soon to be a raffle for a homemade quilt and a free rototilling.

But she just keeps her hand out.

"Sherry?"

"No, it's not Sherry."

"Becky?"

"Give me the fucking quarter, Clown Man."

"How old are you?" I pull out a dollar. And smile at her. Then I pull out another.

And she looks sideways toward the crowd before she snatches my money.

"Let's go to Disney World," Mama said that night, and she was already dressed and holding a suitcase and a big plastic garbage bag.

"But ..." I was confused. The house was dark and my clock said 3:25 a.m., and that was too early to be getting out of pajamas and heading out the door.

"Now." And Mama's face meant business so I got up and gave Mama some underwear and some socks and two shirts and my white gloves, and she stuffed them into her garbage bag.

There were no stars in the sky and the trees shook their branches when we left in Daddy's truck. Mama's mouth stayed closed the whole time, and she didn't once look back to the house. Even when I told her I'd left my turkey feather and my fishing lures in the closet.

Her name is Nita and she hates Florida.

"Give me another dollar," she says so I hand her another. She sticks it down her pants.

"It's sunny here today," I tell her, but she laughs in my face.

"You're a retard."

"I know," I say as I look down at my flippy shoes, the ones the school donated to me last year because my sneakers

wore out. The Jesus band is gone and the stage is empty. Garbage is everywhere, and I know I have a long night ahead of me because the school likes the field neat for the next day. And I don't mind picking up. Because you never know what you'll find left. You never know what people throw away.

"You like Disney World?" I ask.

"Loser World?"

"Mickey Mouse is not a loser," I tell her.

"You're a loser." And when she laughs this time, her face cracks wide open and her braces shine in the late-day sun.

"You're pretty," I say, and this stops her from laughing, which makes me sad. I like it when everyone is smiling and having a fun time.

"No, I'm not." And she rubs her elbows with her hands.

Everything was so bright and colorful, and there was music coming out from the plastic trees and garbage cans and streetlights and even the teacup ride that went around and around and around. Mama didn't want to go on rides anymore and just wanted to sit on a bench with her Sleeping Beauty cup full of soda.

"Please," I asked her, but she waved her hand at me and covered her eyes. The princesses scared her, Tigger made her scream, and there were too many people in bright tee shirts. Ants, she called them, ants. Mama wasn't doing so well, and we hadn't even gotten to Fantasyland yet.

"Go." And Mama lay herself down on the bench, her drink balanced on her belly.

I drank Coke after Coke and went on ride after ride, especially Space Mountain, which whizzed you around in the dark and shot you through holes in the universe. But soon, I had to pee, and I

didn't want to but knew it was a good idea.

Nita follows me into the field even when I tell her no again and again. But she thinks she's so funny, skipping right along with me.

"So you live with your mother?" she asks. But I've already answered her.

Many times. "How old are you?"

"You should go home."

"My parents suck."

"That's not very nice to say." And I rub my eyes until there are spots of white behind my eyelids.

"I'm not very nice." She throws a can toward my garbage bag, but it misses so she throws another. This one goes in, and I make the mistake of looking up at her to congratulate her basketball shot. Her eyes make my knees tremble.

"You haven't been on Space Mountain yet?" I asked that boy, but he was still pulling at his sister's hand as she screamed and hollered about getting an ice cream and wanting to see Snow White.

"Snow White will kill you," he said to his sister, and she glared back at him.

"Shut up, Nate."

"Quit being a fucking bitch," the boy said. A father coming into the bathroom with his son scowled at me like I'd just cussed.

"Control that kid," he said to me as he pulled his son outside.

"Don't cuss or else I'm telling Dad," Nate's sister said.

"He's not here now, is he?"

But his sister just ignored him and asked me, "Snow White's nice, isn't she?"

And of course I said yes. Everyone loves Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, and everyone loves Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty and Ariel

and all of those princesses in their castles. "She's beautiful," I told her and she nodded right along with me.

"Come on," her brother said. "Go pee."

"I don't want to."

"Go or else I'm gonna..."

Two men flushed and left, and the bathroom was silent. Except for Aladdin's "A Whole New World" coming out over the speakers.

"Gonna what?"

"Gonna..."

"When you go on Space Mountain, try to sit in the front because that's the fastest seat," I said, standing between him and his sister because Nate had just balled his fists up and he had yellow eyes that reminded me of a wolf.

"I don't want to go to Space Mountain. Mom said I didn't have to and I'm not doing it," his sister said, banging her sneaker down on the floor.

"Yes, you are, Becky."

"No."

"Yes."

"Dad said he wasn't going on with you, he told me..." And she smiled a pockmarked smile, her eyes swelling up bright blue. "So tough luck."

And Nate kicked her in the shin.

"Screw you," he said, running out the door. And Becky and I just stood there waiting for him to come back. But he never did.

And so I helped her.

"I have to go home now," I say.

"Back to your Mommy?" She jerks her neck around.

I nod my head yes.

"Back to your Daddy?"

I shake my head no. And I give her the last of my money.

"Are you a pervert?" she asks. And that's when I take my hands out of my pockets and hold them to my chest.

Becky drank all my milk. She ate all the cereal. She started calling me names and running in circles, hitting me with her wooden spoon, and Mama didn't do anything. Mama clapped her hands and pounded her feet on the floor and urged Becky to run faster and faster around me, and Becky did.

"She's perfect," Mama said, and Mama would comb her hair and line the stuffed animals up for her in our trailer and they'd have tea parties until all hours of the night. She didn't need sleep, my sister, and she never tried to run away. She sat in Mama's lap and twirled her ponytail into circles, and Mama made her chocolate layer bars and vanilla cream pies, and she'd let my sister eat whatever she wanted.

When Mama bought Becky a swing set, I started looking for Daddy. Every day I'd sit at the window just waiting for him to round the corner, but he never did.

"We're finally a family," Mama said one night.

"But Daddy's not here." And she looked at me as if I was gray and rotten. Something to be thrown away.

"He's not coming back." And she rocked Becky back and forth. "Not coming back, not coming back..."

"But Mama," I said.

"Don't 'but Mama' me," she said, and Becky nodded her head and sucked on her blanket. "Go." And she pointed to the screened-in porch. Where the Florida beetles waited and the crickets chirped and the heat came at me all night even with the breeze. There wasn't room in her bed no more. She wanted to sleep just with Becky. Because I was too big.

And when I heard Mama snoring, I got the burlap bag out and some Florida seashells. And I took Becky away on a bus. I used my clown gloves.

When I get home, there's the nurse and she's got a policeman with her, and they're standing on the porch, and Mama is howling out my name but she knows I'm not home. She knows I don't come back until late because I always go for the fireworks this time of year. They've started up Kinston Days again, and I know the place to sit. I told Nita all about it, how the colors just explode right in front of your eyes and flutter down around you, but still she ran off. They all run off, don't they, if you let them. It's just a matter of knowing when. And how they'll do it. But other times, it's just being resourceful enough to keep them. For a while.

I walk right past the house and into the bright lights.

And traffic is lined up both sides of the highway.

Clowns