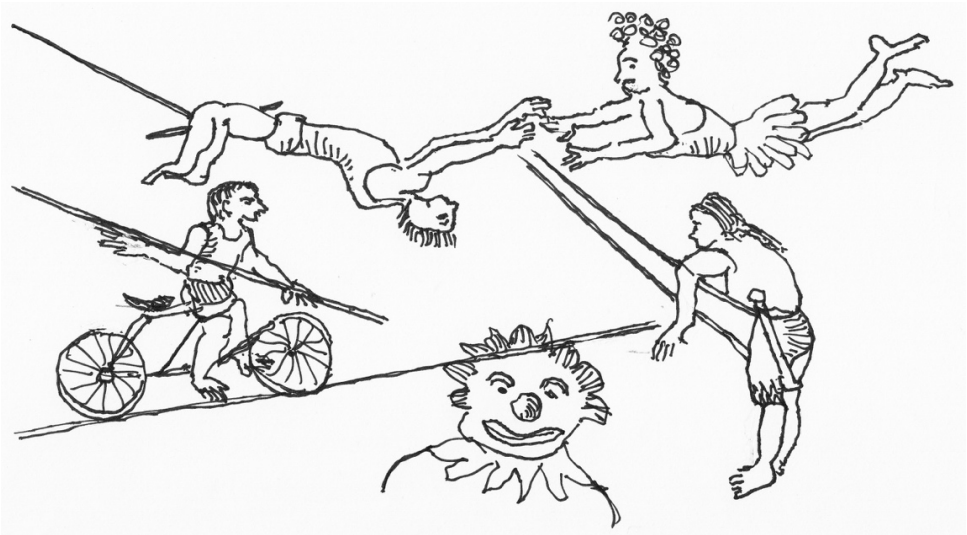
**Geoffrey Gibbs**

# Covid Clowning

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It had to have been during the fall of 1948 or perhaps 49 that my parents took my foster brother Eugene and me to the great Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus which was performing at the huge old Madison Square Garden in NYC (the one before it was transferred to the washtub structure above Penn. Station where it still resides). Performances of the circus would only last for another ten years. T.V. and movie entertainments replaced the interest Americans had in circuses. And now our whole lives (thanks to multi-media and smart phones) are a circus with all of us as the clowns doing outrageous thing to ourselves and others to share on various digital platforms. The only problem is that we don't find it all that funny anymore—and instead vulnerable people fill themselves with addictive drugs to try to numb the outrages they face every day. It is a corollary to global warming—a heating up and frying of the human brain. Those of us who are still sane, watch the strange pathetic events happening in our communities across the country. Talking heads outline necessary strategies to bring everything back to normalcy, but it doesn't seem to happen because our Congress is madly illogical too and remains in permanent stalemate. But I don't wish to dwell on the current human comedy. Instead I am drawn to that afternoon in the late 40s when I saw Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey at its zenith. Once the Olympic Games were televised and various athletic competitions by both men and women took over many of the skillsets which had before been the province of the circus, the relevance of the Big Top evaporated into nostalgia. Also, gamblers had not been active in circus performance while the competitive sports of the Olympics were perfect for betting—a big business for jaundiced Americans who valued only those activities which brought them money.

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Unfortunately our seats were not ideal, but were what my parents could afford for the four of us. We were situated behind a giant support column which made it impossible to see any of the entertainments in the center ring. But there was still plenty to enjoy, because there were three rings with events always going on in each of them. One must remember that the circus was patterned on the entertainments in the Roman Colosseum 1900 years earlier. The only difference was that our circus did not have gladiators killing each other. I am sure there must have been some Romans who found the violence in the Colosseum revolting and immoral. But they were not in the majority or in power. And we still have a tremendous lust for violence (particularly murder) which is satisfied each night by our crime dramas which substitute fake horrors for the real thing. The problem for the Romans was that their stage effects just weren't good enough.

There was a strong smell of sawdust, hay, and animal droppings permeating the Garden that afternoon. As a young child I found the overwhelming circus activities bewildering. My eyes would flit from one ring to another, missing many of the moments which would illicit great shouts and gasps of astonishment or surges of laughter from the audience. But with a memory which is like a stuffed vault of experience, I can recall most of what I saw. Between the major acts there were the clown shows. Little cars would drive erratically around the ring and then clowns would begin to come out of the vehicles. One-two-three-four etc. How many clowns could fit into those little sedans?—an incredible number. The first time I found it funny, but they kept doing it and the entertainment of it became stale—while the audience just kept laughing and laughing. I have never understood or really enjoyed clown humor which is rather redundant in that clowns are always hitting each other over the head or in the backside with colorful big baseball bats. They love to push plates of meringue into faces. They trip over their gigantic shoes. Interaction between clowns is rather sadistic. But audiences, at least then, seemed to crave it. I think American society was a bit more primitive psychologically in the 1940s as reflected in the grossness of the pantomimes and slapstick.

There was of course the great clown Emmett Kelly who differed from the crass colorful Punchinellos with their exaggerated smiles and white bald heads surrounded by bushy red trim; in that he was instead a hobo with a frown drawn on his face and dressed in black ragged clothes and a beaten old hat. He was a mirror of the ten-year Depression Americans had lived through only to be followed by W.W. II. His famous gag was sweeping up the spotlight. The circle of light would appear in the center of the ring and Emmett would take his broom and try to sweep it up. It would get smaller and then suddenly widen to full width and he would chase it across the ring and the whole gimmick would be repeated over and over. At first I found it delightful and even as a youth understood the underlying message of life's frustration of never reaching the elusive goal. But it went on too long and my eyes went back to the other clowns who were doing roughhouse. Little dogs with great colorful ruffled collars around their necks did somersaults and scurried this way and that way. Eventually all the clowns somehow squashed back into the little sedans which drove off through a black curtained exit. I am reminded of lines from my father Alonzo Gibbs's poem "Sight and Sound" (1959):

Attend the mime who burns a cork to black,
Makes lips of cheeks, caps the blond head, and wears
Out-and-out outlandish shoes. He seems
Much more intentioned than the commentator's
Elocution, for his comic guise creates
Gross thought at sight, which is not thought at sound.

My father was musing on non-vocal communication and what it conveyed that words cannot. The poem was inspired by the circus performance at Madison Square Garden described above. Of course in the immense stadium, non-verbal communication was essential. There was only one electric microphone for the fat singer who belted out the National Anthem and the Master of Ceremonies who would introduce the next performers, almost always with Italian or Gypsy names, each able to perform some incredible feat—multiple spins in mid-air while hanging from one's teeth. They were introduced as the "great", "famous", or "incredible."

I saw the ballerinas on top of horses and elephants heading toward the center ring, but as stated above the middle ring itself was blocked by that darned column in front of me. There were many elephants, sad looking creatures, reconciled to their endless tricks instilled in them we now know through electric prods shocking their bodies into obedience. They were herded in circles in the smaller rings. Elephants are so incredibly clever—linking those flexible trunks to tails, doing twirls on little round platforms which could hardly hold their legs, lifting huge front legs on the behinds of the pachyderm in front of them—until they were all prancing in perfectly regimented circles led by human majors and majorettes in red and gold uniforms with shakos (those tall caps with feathered plumes) and holding giant whips which were utilized if any elephant began to stray out of line. Seeing animals abused this way was a great entertainment and the evil of it did not have any impact on me at my tender age. But I did, even then, sense a certain sadness about it all.

The clowns and workmen began to set up large iron cages in each of the rings and above the trapeze artists were doing their beautiful balletic stunts from spotlighted swings—an enthralling sight because it represented real human perfection (nothing about it was evil or embarrassing and the performers were risking their lives by exhibiting real courage). Women were on swings high above us. A fellow was riding a bicycle balanced on a wire. And in Madison Square Garden these brave performers were very high above the floor and one expected that a fall even into a net would have been dangerous. A ballerina in a lovely white tutu thrust her body forward to be caught by a muscular male swinging from a bar—everything perfectly coordinated and representing something

beyond the sport itself. What was the message?—that we truly depend on each other. We willingly place our lives in the hands of others we trust to catch us before we might fall to death. It is the whole essence of real cooperation and charity which is not about superiority or inferiority. Instead it is a union of human beings who look out for each other as the species has for millennia.

A few years ago the most famous lion and tiger tamer had a terrible encounter which left him invalided. Sometimes in retaliation the animal is put down for exhibiting natural predatory impulses. Back in the 1940s, the cruelty toward these wild creatures was not at all in the minds of anyone in the audience. We had just come out of a horrible four-year war experience. Quite a few males in the audience had perhaps wielded weapons which killed the enemy and gave them the status of heroes. But not one of my five uncles who served in W.W. II was ever willing to describe a moment when they had actually fired on or killed anyone. I missed out on the center ring where surely the lion tamer had probably at one point stuck his head inside the maw of the creature he had subdued into such incredible obedience. In the outer ring I watched another tamer swing his wip over and over with a startlingly loud crack. It occasionally actually hit the beast which would grimace in agony. If the animal snarled and protested with its paws, a small chair in the other hand would fend off any attack or press the beast into the iron bars of the cage. It must have been terribly painful. The antics of the lions and tigers were like the elephants, quite astonishingly human; prancing about in unison or jumping through a flaming hoop while the trainer screamed commands.

The extravaganza came to a conclusion with a grand parade of human and animal performers, each exhibiting their perfected skills. The band remained in the wings playing that familiar circus march by the Czech Julius Fucik—probably the most chromatic melody every written—showing that even a 12-toned idea if heard enough can be recognized. In retrospect I identify another moral in the display. We are an animal species also (at least from Darwin's perspective) and we undergo never-ending training too to abolish any instinctual behavior which gets in the way of what government and business want from us—that constant automated obedience—regimented activities performed over and over and over again (all the things that art preaches against, making unrestrained creativity dangerously suspicious to those in control).

## Circus Act

How lucky I am that in my many years of retirement,
Also in my loneliness, that I at least have total freedom
Only restricted by the feebleness and infirmities of old age.
My existence is shaped spontaneously—no need to really plan ahead
Or satisfy someone else. I am my own governor. Only my conscience
Can scold me now, which it often does but in a good-humored way.

Meanwhile unscrupulous scientists are successfully experimenting
With placing electrodes in the brain, ostensibly to cure epilepsy and paralysis;
But for autocratic states a new way to electrocute human beings into submission.
The same total obedience we forced on wild animal in all those circus performances
Will be our destiny too. We also will endlessly jump through hoops
While dictators laugh in amusement and plan our next humiliation.

It brings my thoughts back to the Roman Colosseum, so named for the gigantic
Statue of Caesar which stood beside it—displayed as the Sun God but surely with
A demented cruel expression of glee. "Look what lunacy can do with ultimate power—
Burn a great city to the ground and build on the wreckage a pleasure palace,
Fit for all my decadent pursuits. I think I will kill my mother and sister tonight.
For later entertainment I will rape all the Senators' wives and daughters!"

The Romans loved slapstick and vulgar comedies.
They wore masks (exaggerated frowns or ridiculously wide smiles).
The age of great drama was behind them because totalitarian empire
Required a shallowness of thought. Eventually even the comedies faded.
Nothing in Rome was funny anymore when the wheat didn't arrive
From Egypt, stolen by the Byzantines and then the Arabs.

By the 3rd century CE most of the lions and tigers which could be found in Northern Africa
Had disappeared. The only remaining resource was to burn Christians at the stake.
This depravity was very popular for a time. Eventually the inhabitants of the cities
Dwindled away from plague and starvation to the point where there were no circuses anymore—
Only burials until Rome had a population of only a few thousand in the 7th century.

One might suggest that Rome got what it deserved—and what eventually will be said of us?
We reached the moon but forgot how to save our souls.
The flow of years was beyond our skill to harness for our benefit.
Instead eternity took its toll on us and ushered humanity to extinction—
Scientists already suggest that AI be prepared to carry on our legacy.
I think absolute oblivion would be more fitting.

Eventually I and my family exited the arena. On the way we passed through a tent where an elephant stood stoically looking at us without sweetness or friendship, but eager to grasp peanuts from my brother's and my hands. Those sad side eyes could never look straight at you. The long flexible proboscis was the focus of sensitivity and experience for the animal. The legs were like the trunks of trees. I touched the skin of the great flaps of ears which felt almost like tough bark.

A composer friend of mine as a child attended the Hartford performance of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus (July 6th, 1944) under the great tent which unfortunately had been waterproofed with paraffin and gasoline. It was one of the greatest fire disasters in American history. As she was watching the entertainments, she noticed that a fire had broken out across from her. The tent was burning and soon the audience in their seats were in flames and screaming. A riot began of desperate people (most of them children) attempting to get out through the too few exits from the tent (obscured by smoke) and finding themselves bunched up, crushed by the crowds behind them and unable to escape. My friend saved her life by going under the stands and crawling below the tent walls to the outside. Thus, with the same initiative which would later make her a significant classical composer, she saved herself. But 167 people were not so fortunate or clever. Trust in the circus was not the same after that and my parents would never allow me to attend entertainments under an outdoor circus tent. Awfully cautious and somewhat paranoid about things, they would talk to me about the horrors of the 1944 fire. Have I missed anything? Yes, the side shows: naked girlie dancers, palm readers, and magicians. But they were not part of the Greatest Show on Earth under the tent. My parents would never ever allow me to view a freak show. That was a travesty of human insensitivity which they were totally opposed to.

Now—more circus thoughts: I remember the many films I saw years ago by Federico Fellini featured marches of odd-looking human beings (some actually quite freakish with hunched backs, huge ears or noses, missing chins, toothless mouths, lopsided shoulders, bowed legs, etc.). I

understand that Fellini would scour the Italian countryside to find these odd specimens to decorate outlandish scenes in his films. They would often march and prance about in sloppy circles accompanied by funny absurd music by Nino Rota. I especially remember the side show atmosphere of "La Strada" with its talented cast including the frighteningly intense Anthony Quinn and the always angelic Giulietta Massina (Fellini's wife) as the girl who Quinn buys to be his street-performance assistant and abuses terribly. My parents took me to see it in 1954. Its great impact overwhelmed me with such feelings of pity and sadness. I have written before that we do a great disservice to our children by making sure they are not exposed to tragedy and are kept on a steady diet of shallow superhero and fantasy films. Thus they are molded into superficial adults with little capacity to feel for people other than themselves. This excessive dwelling on self leads to disappointment and drug addiction to dull the pain of existence. In actuality pain is a necessary part of life which art can translate into care, compassion, and understanding. Superheroes have only impossible skill sets and violence as solutions. They have little respect for government and prefer to take the law into their own hands. It is so fascist, and comes from an era of autocracy which appears to be resurging now—partially due to the way we are shaping the next generation—trained to always turn to brutality as a solution. Even Jesus has to be metamorphized into a muscular superhero while in reality he was a softy but with an inner heart of steal which could choose death rather than renounce his message of peace and love. Recently Alexei Navalny comes to mind. He returned to Moscow (his Jerusalem) to face the consequences of being a martyr for a cause beyond the safety of self. These individuals occasionally exist who eventually are referred to as saintly—Francis, Florence Nightingale, Martin Luther King, Jesus, and Buddha. But, what do I experience on the bus: men speaking at full volume into their smart phones while sitting right next to me as if I didn't exist and they were the center of the universe. Their endless focus on themselves is revolting.

But back to circuses! Some musicals, eventually made into films, do not at all age well. I think of Irving Berlin's "Annie Get Your Gun" with its obvious naive prejudices against native Americans. When I saw the film starring the ebullient Betty Hutton in the title role in 1950, I loved the song "I'm an Indian Too." The pigeon English didn't bother me at all—as it does now. On the other hand the song, "Anything you can do, I can do better" could be a women's-lib rallying cry even today. One remembers it belted out by the brassy Ethel Merman. The grandest of the circus films was of course directed by Cecil B. DeMille, the 1952 "Greatest Show on Earth." Why so

many prominent film stars including Jimmy Stewart and Dorothy Lamour were willing to be upstaged by elephants and lions is beyond me. In typical DeMille fashion, the film was so elaborate and overly stuffed that somehow the plot completely escaped me. All I remember were the great stars looking in horror as they had to hug wild beasts or attempt trapeze scenes (which were surely completed by doubles anyway).

Occasionally there were some real curiosities such as "Jumbo", a circus/musical from 1935 with great songs by Rodgers and Hart being sung while the indefatigable singer, Ethel (replaced in the movie by Doris Day) was balanced on a horse's rump. Circus songs tend to be in waltz rhythms (a biproduct of the balletic aspect) and Rodgers was a master of ¾ time as indicated by the gorgeous "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World." But, really, when Jumbo the elephant played a melody on the tuba it had to be influenced by "Tuba the Tuba", one of my favorite recordings when I was a child. The real original Jumbo, featured by P.T. Barnum, was killed by a railroad train in 1885 as he was guiding a younger elephant over the tracks.

The most frightening film ever made, "Freaks" (1932), is about sideshow performers. The ending is so absolutely horrifying that I would not dare to write about it and I do not recommend that my readers see it because they will always be haunted by the last scene (pre-Code). There is a certain dignity missing in it, which is granted to all human beings for just being human—for no other reason. Therefore I am totally opposed to capital punishment or cruel incarceration. We talk about the respect that should be offered to animals— creatures who cannot ask for it themselves. But yet we prefer not to offer such to each other. How a punishment can be worse than the crime committed is frighteningly illustrated in "Freaks."

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One spring when I was in college, a classmate of mine suggested that we visit a park outside of Rochester, NY which had a Ferris wheel and a bridal path. First we decided to take a ride up in the air. The seats were in wire cages and had strong seatbelts. As soon as we were halfway up I realized what a mistake I had made. The seats did not remain parallel to the ground but instead would be upside down once we had reached the top of the Ferris wheel. At the top everything fell out of my pockets to the ground—my keys, sunglasses, wallet, and pen. And after one revolution I began to feel dizzy and nauseous. When the horrifying ride was over, I staggered out of my seat and fainted on the ground. When I woke up, my friend who had not been at all affected, was laughing. I then had to search for what had fallen out of my pockets.

After a few minutes I was somewhat recovered and we walked over to the horse stable, and paid for rides. My horse was quite big and I realized that I had never really been on a horse before, only on a pony when I was a kid. The ride was delightful, through a forest and eventually along a stream with fast running water. But I made a terrible error of judgement. I thought I was being kind to the animal to allow it to occasionally munch on flowers as we passed them. But the horse only sensed it as weakness on my part. By the stream there were thickets of dandelions which the horse began nibbling. It was then when I couldn't get the horse to raise its head that I knew that I should not have allowed the animal to do what it wanted to do. He realized that he was the boss and sat down on the ground and began to roll over. I would be crushed! Thank goodness I was able to get my feet out of the stirrups. I ran backwards away from the horse and suddenly found myself in the creek, which was quite deep. Only my head was out of water. The horse galloped away. My friend had not seen what happened; I was relieve that my humiliation had not been viewed by him. I climbed out of the water, soaking wet, and walked back to the stable where the horse on its own had returned. I was horrified to see the groom in the saddle ramming the head of the horse over and over into a haymow. I suppose that the animal had to know that it had overstepped the line—but even so, I felt very guilty that I had been lax when it came to maintaining my domination over the poor creature. It was an important lesson to learn, that what one person might think is kindness, may be just the opposite for the other.

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Interlocking memories bounce against each other and I find myself back in Moscow in 1977. Along a major boulevard that stretched from the Kremlin to Moscow University where my wife and I were housed, was a small white-painted brick church—a lovely Byzantine-like structure that had probably survived the great fire which destroyed much of the city during Napoleon's invasion and occupation. Sona looked at the sign on the door and it turned out to be the club for the Circus Performers Union. It was typical of the Soviets to put a church to a secular purpose. A magnificent cathedral in Leningrad (Now St. Petersburg) was at that time a Museum of Atheism. They were all returned to the Russian Orthodox Church by Vladimir Putin—who was happy to restore the power of the church as long as he didn't have to live himself by its precepts. We didn't have a chance to enter the circus club to see what clowns and circus athletes found entertaining for themselves. During our full year in Russia we did eventually attend a fine circus performance. It appeared that circuses were still popular entertainments for Russians in 1977, long after they had

lost relevance in America. The Moscow circus was in a theater dedicated to that activity. The gymnastics had the same regimentation the Russians exhibited at Olympic Games which we now know was accomplished often with drugs. In fact the perfection of each presentation took something away from it. The aspect of impending danger wasn't there—nothing was breathtaking or death defying. All the acts came off like clockwork. The performers did their calisthenic miracles with great intensity. I'm not sure what would have happened if one of them made a misstep or fell—perhaps denial of entry into the Circus Performers Club. There were some clowns but no sleezy sideshows. It was all very professional and too clean. The jesters did their usual funny gestures but they had none of the hidden messages of frustration, anger, and ridicule of society one could sense from Verdi's "Rigoletto." And therefore it really wasn't funny and I heard little laughter. Everything was taken too seriously. It might have been a play by Chekov if one had only looked at the audience. I learned that afternoon that freedom is interesting while totalitarianism isn't. For some unknown reason this memory and observation summons another poem.

**Side Shows and High Wire Happenings**

There was something seamy about Side Shows.
Garish posters and loud barkers would entice me in
To observe something a bit risqué which I didn't need.
Over the years I avoided such frivolous entertainments.
Real life experiences were always garish enough.

Carousels of pretty horses circling endlessly to calliope music
Made me dizzy and restive at the same time. I had always been
Too grown up to enjoy it. But there was a hidden meaning
In all those repetitions of the same scenes: real life has less variety
Than fiction, fantasy, or delusion. The repetitions are frustrating
But also consoling—it is like taking in another breath.

Throwing balls to win a Teddy bear
Was a waste of time and impossible with weak eyes.
Cotton candy was too sweet and sticky.

Why bother to attempt to hit the high striker?
I would never have the strength to reach the bell.

Once on a Providence street I was grabbed by a muscular fellow
And dragged into a palm-reader's silk-draped room.
She read my lines of fate and all her predictions came true.
In astonishment, I said to myself over and over again,
"It is just stupid chance, not a real metaphysical gift."

But how did she know I was unhappy because of lost love?
How could she predict that I would soon find a new love, my salvation?
Perhaps all the readings are the same because life is so similar.
I avoided ever going down that street again.

Instead my attention under the Big Top went to the aerialists,
Those superb trapeze artists who risked their lives each evening.
They had genuine talent and much training, just like fine musicians.
And I must admit that my German ancestors were circus performers—
The Great Hauensteins wore monkey suits as they balanced on the high wires.
I always knew as a vocalist and pianist that there was an exhibitionist
Lurking inside wanting to do twirls (in my case musical roulades).

As I would begin each difficult run, I couldn't be sure that my fingers
Or voice box would make it to the last note—not that dissimilar to
The aerialist swinging higher and higher and jumping toward another
Swinging bar, while knowing that eventually it would not be reached.
Crashing to the net, the bruised artist in me was already planning
To practice harder and do it all again. The goal was perfection which
By the laws of chance could never be reached in an imperfect world.

I remember in college gym class bouncing on the trampoline.
It seemed harmless until a friend, a superb musician,
Bounced back down between two springs and broke his neck.
There would be no more beautiful etudes performed by him;
And yet in the next gym class the coach didn't even bother to
Make sure that some of us were guarding the edges
To push me back into the center of the mat.
I remained extremely fearful of it from then on.

So I will walk along the midway and gaze into the dark tents.
There goes the fat lady, hand in hand with the smiling dwarf.
The bulging strong man appears to be his competitor, but
There will be no confrontation between the two of them.
Afterall it is only frivolous showbusiness.

Now comes a giant with a stovetop hat or is he on stilts?
Stay away from the knife thrower. He might miss and pierce you!
What is that explosion?—a pretty woman is catapulted from a cannon
Into a net which has been placed we hope at just the right spot.
Anticipation or prediction is absolutely essential at such times.

Later when the show is over the animals will be herded
Into wagons and boxcars. Their pathetic calls will become muffled.
The performers will take off their costumes and grease paint.
They now look like quite ordinary people on the outside.

Their extraordinary natures are locked up within their skin and bones.
The snake charmer's slippery companion is in his wicker basket,
Still yearning to hear that plaintive oriental tune which lulls him into ecstasy.
It has the same extraordinary effect on me—the trance is longed for.

The tent is lowered and tan burlap rolled up for the journey ahead.
Over in a corner a fellow is throwing dice. He always comes up
With doubles, so it can't be legitimate. But you can't tell that to
The fools who need to gamble away everything they have.

Reality must be buttressed somehow by a little luck.
There is a rope ladder hanging over there but I can't see
Where it leads—perhaps all the way to my next existence
In a universal carnival—an entertainment for the galaxies.
A dark matter audience spurts dark energy in approval.

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It seems that in this essay I have never gotten to really explore the topic suggested by the title—"clowning." That is because there is a certain bitterness associated with it. When I was a child, I had to accept being ostracized by the other boys in school. For some reason, children who have disabilities are singled out for derision and cruelty from classmates. Why this is so often true somewhat mystifies me, even though I can think of a number of instinctual or psychological explanations—such as that the species wants to cast out runts. It began immediately both on the school playground and in the neighbors' yards at home. Its pattern of behavior was well established when I was in second grade and continued even in high school. I was completely rejected by the other boys and not allowed to join their boisterous activities. Since my sight was limited, they did not want my participation. It was made apparent that they detested me. From then on I was not permitted to play with them—and the teachers at that time made no effort to deal with such behavior. I have surely written about this before, that I spent most of my time sitting under a tree daydreaming and watching the other boys play ball games and roughhouse—never really sure that I actually wanted to join in.

Eventually I found a strategy that worked, to almost integrate myself with the other fellows—I became a clown. I would think of self-depreciating jokes and exaggerate my physical clumsiness to elicit laughter from them—which was better than being totally ignored. I gave quite an effort to perfecting my clowning and became quite good at it. But always, underneath, was the feeling of shame that I had to resort to this in order to be part of my childhood society. Occasionally there

would be other "defective" children who would join me. But I had to be careful because I found that their frustration might be deeper than mine and they sometimes could act it out with violence.

My mother, quite concerned about my isolation as I watched the children next door play ball games to which I was never allowed to participate, began searching for companions for me. I have written about this in some other memoir but since it hurts me still 70 years later, I feel compelled to write about it again. First there was the kid my age with cerebral palsy. His mother was one of the most outstanding women of the community, very dedicated to the PTA—a person of fine intelligence and lovely personality. My mother drove me to their house, and I played with the son for a few hours. I found him intellectually dumb and not really interested in any of the activities I might have wanted to share with him. And he had the unpleasant condition of constantly drooling. All of his toys smelled of and were covered with his saliva. I couldn't stand it. Now, all these years later, I wish that I had just tried harder. I have no idea as to what happened to him.

Next my mother found a boy who was an asthmatic who was quite talented on the saxophone, although he had to interrupt his melodies with coughing fits. We got along quite well. I would visit his house, accompany him at a piano, but he would never visit my house. I think his mother was afraid that he might have an episode and needed to overly-protect him. My friendship soon petered out.

In fifth grade I found a new friend myself, also a severe asthmatic, who shared my interest in stamp collecting. We would trade stamps and play board games together. Again it was always at his house, not mine. He wasn't strong enough to walk the distance. But he was close enough for me to walk to his home which was in one of the new developments of ridiculously small plywood houses on concrete slabs with tiny windows (like cellar windows), constructed for the soldiers who had returned to their war brides but had very limited resources. V.A. home loans were as low as $2000—but were enough to entice builders to create immense developments on the central plains of Long Island. George, of course, was subjected to the same endless abuse from the school bullies that I just took for granted. I often wondered what actually motivated the tormentors to be so horribly cruel toward those who could not adequately defend themselves. What inner compulsion required such meanness? I eventually found out. They had fathers, returned from the W.W. II, who treated home life just like another war barracks. They ordered their sons about with harshness and rigidity, including quite a bit of corporal punishment. When the fathers were home, the sons were expected to do endless chores around the house while the fathers sat with buddies drinking beer,

reminiscing about the war days, and complaining about an imminent communist takeover that never happened. The abused children had to take out their frustrations somehow—on me.

After I transferred from the Plainedge School District to Bethpage in 1956, I heard that on a school trip, the torment of my friend George, who was somehow always able to remain good-humored, reached a new level of violence. A group of bullies started choking him to death. The teachers and parents along on the trip, who never bothered to actually oversee what was happening, eventually noticed that George was in serious trouble. He was taken to the local hospital and it was found that he had almost died and his brain had been seriously deprived of air. I wondered if I had not changed schools, and had been with him on the trip, if perhaps I might have come to his rescue. Or would I have run away, afraid that I would be choked next? But after his ordeal, I heard that George was still the sweet person he always was. And the fact that he could never be totally demeaned was why the bullies kept up their cruelty. We occasionally corresponded in later years.

You might wonder why I even bother to include the above memories in an essay on clowning: it is because there is a cruelty which invariably goes along with fooling around. Clowns are always hitting each other over the head with any colorful object at hand. I have never found it funny—and while all the circus audience around me is laughing uproariously, I just sit silently thinking of what the make-believe cruelty really represents—such terrible inner frustration—something that I as the victim have never felt—because my parents were very loving, seldom scolded me at all, and never lifted a hand to slap me, no matter what foolishness I might have been up to.

The other way I dealt with ostracism was to excel in school classes. I followed the teacher intently and carefully prepared my studies each day. My hand was continually wagging in the air to give answers. This irritated the haughty schoolmistress Marie Whales (not her real name) who thought I was trying to hog the scene which I was. Her obvious loathing of me was because she was an old rejected girlfriend of my father. Eventually she married, but her husband was sterile. Their adopted son was a terrible youngster who I actually feared after he and my foster brother threw bricks at me from behind a bush. I have surely written about him before or will again in a later memoir—I can't help it because there still is a hurt deep inside.

Another method I used to integrate myself into society, was as a musician. I could play by ear any of the pop songs of the day, including eventually the rock and roll tunes I actually did not particularly like but were what the other students wanted. This explains to me why clowning has an element of desperation, of sadism, of insanity to it. There is a psychological distress evidenced

in all the outrageous gestures of the circus clowns. They make us laugh, but they themselves are tormented, like a Pagliacci. And the musician, at least in film, is often portrayed as a phantom (a maniac) releasing his rage through the passions of music. Over the centuries there have been some violent artists—one thinks of Caravaggio who was probably killed in revenge for an incident with a Knight of Malta. There would be no more stupendous masterpieces from Caravaggio, those frighteningly realistic works which still enthrall us so many centuries later.

It is perhaps not a good idea to probe human activities too much—searching for some sick underlying motivation. Better to just go along with the entertainment and attempt to find joy even in what may be regrettable—such as the minstrel shows I saw as a child. The funny thing is that the participants with their corked black faces and enlarged lips seldom thought of what they were doing from a social perspective. The minstrel show was part of their (our) culture. And such activities were to be embraced, but not analyzed. I loved the singing of Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor, but never gave a thought to it having a relationship to prejudice against others. They, as Jews, attempted to integrate into a Waspish culture by disguising themselves in blackface. Jolson was one of the first white "jazz singers"—one of many. Imitating someone else's culture, now called "cultural misappropriation," was a path to freedom from the oppression of Victorian society with all its artificial manners, prudish opinions, and starched outfits—all designed to hold back unrestrained feeling which might have spilled over into social dissent. Did you notice how many of the mob attempting to take over the capitol on January 6th were wearing disguises. Or were the costumes revealing who the participants really were? Would we ever want to examine the underlying souls of those desperate delusional people—probably not.

This brings to mind the song "Be a Clown" written by Cole Porter and sung with such gusto by Judy Garland and Gene Kelly in "The Pirate" (1948) which I saw when it came out. But behind the slapstick was a cynical bitter lyric of how posing as a clown brings more acceptance than being yourself—obviously closeted Cole knew all about that. It just proves the point that I made a few paragraphs back, that there is something really sad about clowning. In "It" Stephen King finds the clown frightening. So the present generation is a bit afraid of clowns. For me, it is hard to keep up with changes in perception. I would rather return to a time when the circus would come to town. A big tent would suddenly appear in a local field. With our parents we would stroll the midway and pester them to buy tickets, even though most of the sideshows were rather tawdry and disappointing.

Now it has all been replaced by digital entertainment, so lacking in reality and immediacy. Take me back to the old times that now only reside in dimming memory. No matter how seamy the entertainment used to be, at least it had a semblance of humanity. Where ever I go in this glitzy new century, I see the next generation glued to their smart phones—unwilling to take the least interest in the real world around them which must appear so disappointing that they retreat from it. Such behavior will be fitting for a future where the outdoor temperatures become beyond human or animal endurance. We become like clams and oysters, locked in our shells and frying on a beach off British Columbia. What an end for us—the glorious top of the food chain, the miracle of intelligence, and the only creatures capable of *agape* (expansive unconditional love). Whatever we were or might have been, it wasn't enough. We were too flawed and thus shaped an environment for ourselves that eventually became inhospitable—the very Hell our religious writings had imagined. Is it a fitting end? Where is our fake clown's smile now?

## Domino Dominatrix

She was a true beauty as I found her sunning herself on Potter Wood Trail. Motionless, her tail spread out to full display (like a superbly crocheted fan); her thin modest snout showing no emotion; and her sleek white and black shapely furry body absolutely stone still—my love had waited for me! She had restrained herself from spraying me too much with her heady odor. But there was enough of it on me to linger for hours and thus maintain the memory of our moment together. As I had walked the trail from its Biscuit City entrance, there had been the usual families pulled along by Lassies and Fidos. They smiled through their masks as they attempted to withdraw to the side of the pathway to avoid my possible Covid-19 Delta contamination and made embarrassing short grunts muffled by their Mardi gras disguises rather than voicing any authentic friendly greetings. She on the other hand was absolutely silent. What need did she have to squeak at me, when her image was so splendid and conveyed the startling nature of our encounter. With my weak eyes, at first I mistook her for a poodle, and thought she must be one of those little breeds of dogs, some rare cuddly species that had gotten away from its master and was sitting on the side of the trail lost in direction and thought. Was she perhaps a porcupine? No!—her aquiline muzzle was much too refined. She was splendid and rare.

Her odor was actually familiar. I realized that during her nightly treks she had lingered under my open bedroom window, having become familiar with my scent—my sweat from long overheated daily walks. She had conveyed her interest in her usual way—a waft which contained some exotic pheromones which had driven me in my dream state to some mad romantic distraction. Obviously we were meant for each other. But while she remained statue-like, I made a fool of myself, treating her like a little cuddly, saying, "Nice doggy! How cute you are! So well behaved! So smelly! My God, you aren't a dog at all! You must be a s_____!" I didn't dare say what she was for fear that our attraction would keep me close to her; and that she might leap and latch onto my pant leg with those fetchingly sharp little teeth of hers. I hated the thought that I might have had to kick and shake her off when all she was doing was proving that at 81 I still had alure for someone of the opposite sex and it appeared, species as well. It is written that priests who came to America centuries ago recognized skunk scent as the odor of sin—this I could believe.

My next thought was that she really needed a name—perhaps "Domino", a James Bond femme-fatale. Certainly that appellation related to her splendid patterning of white on black. I caressed each syllable and thought that she had some mystery about her. I kept walking at my normal speed, quite proud of myself for not displaying any emotion during our momentary encounter in the forest. Soon she was only a vivid memory of an interlude that might have been something more but had been lost by my reluctance to follow through on nature's attraction. Now it was too late and I had gone through the stone gates at South Road. When I turned around and retraced my steps, I expected to see her again, perhaps even more fetching from her left-side silhouette against the setting sun. But no, she had departed to lure someone or something else. I had lost my opportunity to draw her into my embrace. I would have smoothed her gorgeous fur, rubbed nose against snout just long enough not to be bitten, and looked into her tiny slitted eyes with their enigmatic aspect. She had limited vision almost as bad as mine. The dog owners had turned around and I passed each in turn again. They seemed so pedestrian in comparison to the natural nobility and loveliness of Domino.

Eventually I was back home, eating a delivery of pizza that had been only slightly burned. I had it covered with all the vegetation that the fast-food joint could heap on which brought the price up to $35. I drank the accompanying coke that no longer kept me awake—I was too old to be artificially stimulated. I yearned for another amorous encounter with my demure exotic love. Perhaps after an English murder mystery, once I was in bed, she would sidle up to my window

again and give me a little of her essence as I lay in my crumpled sheets, trying to find some angle where my joints (all of them worn out in some way or other) squirmed to find comfort in endless awkward positions. My conquest had been made, but only in imagination. I slipped into my dream world which just lacked the excitement and adventure of real life. My nightmare was about a conductor who wanted me to change a section of my latest masterpiece. "But that interlude is preparing the listener for the cathartic climax to come," I said. The conductor just snickered and replied, "Oh yes, that boring final section that disturbs the continuity as if there was any." I am always being humiliated by vain conductors or supercilious virtuosi in my dream world. Well it is all coming to an end—about time! And then a faint aroma reached my nose, which had been buried in the pillow. "At least she still cares," I murmured to myself and allowed my sinuses to be quite tickled. "Love from afar—that is what it is—and in this case much better from afar! I thought I could hear her paws crushing the weeds and grass below the window. Was that a hiss of frustration that I heard from her lips. Surely it was. The pain of separation was reaching both of us and would never abate.

All kidding aside, I must find something new to write about. My life is so limited, other than in the imaginative realm. The woodpeckers appear to have lost interest in my rotting redwood siding, and are contemplating some long flight to the south where they can survive the colder weather which is inevitable. Meanwhile, I am stuck here, unable to do even the most mundane activities such as facing up to my financial responsibilities and figuring out why my landline phone is no longer working properly and refuses to record messages. I have pressed every button to no effect. Have I been hacked by that pollster who hung up on me when I revealed I was opposed to school choice? Should I decide to never again voice my actual opinions about things and retreat into a deserved anonymity. I can then turn to TV-land and watch the latest quiz show and prove that I am not up at all on network trivia. Meanwhile I can't figure out who the good or bad guys/gals are in the political arena. I thought that supporting democracy was a prerequisite for being an American—I guess not.

A kind neighbor entered my basement when I told him that it was so terribly damp since the dehumidifier gave out. He examined it and made some recommendations. The smoke detector in my basement bedroom had been continuingly chirping for the last month and a half. "At least I can take care of that for you. All it needs is a new battery." Soon he had returned and the chirps stopped. I had gotten used to them and placed them in my latest music composition (I had no

choice). I was like the composer Bederick Smetana who developed a constant F# from tinnitus brought on by syphilis. His last string quartet had to have an F# in every measure. At least at one time he must have had a more active sex life than I in my propriety had ever had. Now all I could do was fantasize about charming creatures who wanted to claw their way into my affections. I had to admit that my Puritan background did not give me one Bohemian bone in my body. And it showed in my music too when my love songs inevitably sounded rather tepid compared to those by Franz Schubert. He died at 31, probably from too much ecstatic stimulation—mental and physical. Actually he ate, smoked, and drank much to much as he wrote his awfully long masterpieces. But better to go off in a burst of glory then to limp along with dishwater serenades. Was I retreating too much into demeaning self-analysis?—probably that was the case. Time to throw caution to the winds and take off the screen to the bedroom window and open it wide. Perhaps my dominatrix will be eager enough to jump in and snuggle—oh for one night of bliss with Domino—a prolonged kiss with a tongue lick or two! Perhaps she will choose to join me for Halloween. What mask will I wear this year—that of a wrinkled white-haired old man—oops—that's me without a mask.

## Postlude to Pandemic

We watched the planet burn and flood as if it in spasms was attempting to shake off our destructive influence, but to no avail. Smoke from huge western fires hung over New England, making the world seem a much more vulnerable place. It brought to the fore a realization I wish I had never had, that evil is real—it isn't just the absence of good. When I was young, my dear parents gave me the impression that goodness was quite tangible, while evil was just the result of foolish selfish impulses. Back then, living a cocooned existence surrounded by parental love, it did not occur to me that some people actually desired to be evil and were delighted by the blight they could bring on us. Hitler could be understood to be a mad man—not at all typical. That thousands of Nazis seemed willing to do his bidding, no matter how terrible it might be, was hard to explain but might be understood as a desire to follow the orders of the leader (Big Brother, etc.). It took old age, global warming, and a pandemic to open my eyes to the reality of evil—so palpable that one could almost taste and feel it. Around the planet, on every continent, there were cruel men

(fewer women) who took delight in the destructive power they had amassed at a time when energies were diverted to fight a scourge brought on by nature.

Each week in the New York *Times*, the *New Yorker*, cable news, and various websites, I took in one exposé after another. Congress seemed remarkably unconcerned except for a few radicals who were chastised for their calls for reform of institutions which appeared unable to cope with current problems (or perhaps they were meant to be outmoded so that the "evil" could maintain its hold on us). I tried to shake off the paranoic aspects of my thinking, but it seemed to be harder and harder to accept things the way they were (and are). And so it is, that in old age I find myself embracing a view (almost Biblical in nature) that there are forces at work which required more than just the act of reason to harness. I know that my atheistic slant on life will not allow me to place any faith in the oversoul coming to our rescue. No, we will have to save ourselves without any help other than from the books of wisdom which we possess and the tools of science which appear to be as useful to spread the evil as they are to enhance the good.

We all know what must be done. Those who wish to hold things back are just doing it to enrich themselves or to obtain greater power over others. As one reads articles on global warming, we are reminded over and over that things must change. Our reliance on fossil fuel must come to an end. But this month, cajoled by the agreements we had signed, we tried to restrain our use of petroleum. Immediately the prices shot up all over the world and the yearned for energy became scarce. It wasn't just Covid that brought on the scarcity; but instead a slap on the rump from our energy suppliers saying, "See what happens when you try to be too good!" Our meat-eating habits must be modified and the lids of our barbecues occasionally closed. It would seem so obvious that we should stop cutting down our rain forests, but yet every week it is revealed that some respected corporation is secretly mowing down more forests to grow fields of alfalfa to feed Chinese pigs. I picture the board room where no member is willing to ever voice an objection to despoiling the planet. And yet, in our colleges we want to do away with courses on philosophy and culture—any study which might sensitize the next generation and encourage them to voice just a bit of what their inner conscience is telling them. So, it might be stated that evil is an effort to go against what we actually know is in our collective best interest. Presently we have a relatively new digital way of spreading the necessary lies to keep the evil going. It used to be nations that had the power to spread misinformation (propaganda) but now it can be done by almost anyone—and we are so flooded by it that good advice is drowned out.

This is the cultural background upon which nature has unleashed a terrible pestilence. A dear friend of mine, quite a bit older than I am, is fighting cancer in a secure room where she has remained in isolation for close to two years. Her crime which has led to her incarceration is that she is a member of the human race. She called me on the phone to congratulate me on my latest issue of my pandemic journal and said something quite interesting. She believes that Covid-19 is just another part of global warming. We are being attacked by a pestilence which isn't all that different from the exotic diseases which are felling the trees in our dried-out national forests and killing the fish in our poluted seas. Just two months ago, a hurricane reached Greenland—surely a most improbably weather report.

Meanwhile I have been mesmerized by various documentaries on the destruction of the World Trade Towers on 9/11. For some reason (beyond my understanding) I watched Spike Lee's "NYC Epicenters" three times. I particularly liked that all attention was given to victims who were not the upper-crust occupying the highest floors where the only escape was jumping out of windows. Spike did show the jumpers who looked like leaves falling off trees in autumn. While the rest of us might have felt dejected by exposés on the horrors inflicted by our huge corporations, I remained somewhat reconciled that the reckoning would not reach me—but now it has. Afterall global warming is entirely man made. At any time in this last century our corporations might have changed course and created safe energy consumption but they just didn't bother. And half of our Congress remains obstinate in its unwillingness to tackle any of the major problems facing us. This is the way great civilizations end—decayed from within. Church attendance has fallen precipitously in recent years. But God didn't fail us—we failed God. The morality was written down for us to follow, but we had other motives which consumed us and now our prayers are in vain.

Yesterday morning I watched in such vivid orange and gold, the lava pour down the La Palma slopes and crash into the sea where the water boiled and emitted toxic gasses. Today attention has turned to eruptions in Hawaii. Natural forces are so mesmerizing. I am only an onlooker—treating tragedy as entertainment for the day. What will circumstance bring to me next week? There seems to be no way for me to keep up with it all, but yet I know it is my duty to care, even if I am too spoiled by all the comforts of life. Where have I put my clown's mask—the one with that idiotic smile from ear to ear? Why, here it is, waiting for me in imagination. Quick, get it on before I reveal to others how shallow I really am.

Enough chastising of myself. I am just wallowing in self pity. It is a pose to hide my actual curse of perhaps not caring enough or thinking that I can't make a difference. I wonder how much longer I will be writing my Covid-19 journal. Will it still be appropriate for 2022? Will my inflamed imagination and compulsive recounting of events abate or dry up completely—leaving me just a shriveled husk of an artist? No! The amazing thing about being human—something I have learned from my four score—is that the quest never ends. I have written before about the first time I heard Martin Luther King speak and how inspiring his positive rhetoric was as he talked about the "fierce urgency of now" (Obama's favorite quote). Humanity was destined to grasp the moment and shape it into something marvelous. That was the mission and I was prodded to join in—make a contribution of some sort—no matter how feeble it might be.

Art differs from other aspects of life in that it is a response to things rather than a call to action. We step backward from decision making and instead contemplate the past, present, and future from an aesthetic point of view. As with all things to be prized, there is a danger to art. And yet we have no choice but to indulge in it. Time to close this chapbook and put it aside. Real life beckons—am I up to the challenge?

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Back copies may be obtained from the writer. If you have friends who would like to read issues of my Covid Journal, please send me their addresses.