

# The Clown Continuum

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A strange man asked if he could hit me in the face, straight on, with a pie. He said he was a clown, pies were his thing.

“Sure!” I emailed back, complete with the seemingly uncontrollable enthusiasm, perhaps a little forced, implied by an exclamation point.

“You’re a good sport, Monica,” he wrote.

His words unnerved me.

When I tell people about the story, I want to talk about the clown. I want to say that Jusby the Clown has a degree from Evergreen State College. A degree! He’s worked to forge “a bridge between Eastern and Western forms of clowning.” He’s interested in “the special healing role of the clown around the world” and “the organic link between the clown and the shaman.”

I want to build his credibility because that builds mine: I didn't just meet a strange man in a park to let him smear my mascara in his whip cream in front of children. I opened myself up to a spiritual experience.

But the truth is, I didn't know his credentials when I said yes, and before I ever get that far telling the tale my friends, my audience, stop on the first part. You said yes?

Why would I say yes? A woman I know, a writer, recently published an essay that starts out, "At the very beginning of what I now know was a mid-life crisis, I let a guy pee on me." And I found myself at a party spilling my drink as I leaned over to insist, "It's entirely different! It was a pie! He's a clown! He teaches laugh yoga, for God's sake."

Really the only thing I knew about Jusby, when I agreed to his plan, was that he'd read my novel *Clown Girl* and quoted from it. That was plenty.

This is what it means to be a first-time novelist: I'd spent ten years writing and revising a novel about clowns, clown community, and the creative struggle. Now a member of my newfound readership wanted to offer me that big, physical comedy kiss of a pie in the kisser. How could I turn my back?

Booksellers tell me the best way to move a book is to hand-sell it, one person urging it on another. When *Clown Girl* came out I said yes to everything, always for that chance to hand-sell. I drove across state lines and read in chain bookstores. One night I read to an audience of empty orange chairs and a lone man in a trench coat who yelled over my words then tried to touch my hair. I drove my little Nissan through dark streets to a tiny radio station for an interview where the late-night host hadn't read any of my writing. I flew to the heart of the country, slept in a stranger's house, and taught workshops in exchange for a bottle of water.

My friend of the golden-shower essay writes, "I was desperate to know I was desirable." She says, "The man who would pee on me ... he'd read my memoir." Oh, booksellers! Oh, honorable Best Seller list! Those sweet enticements. Somebody tell me there's a difference between dating and marketing, between seeking readership and a relationship, blind dates and the ongoing literary conversation, because I have lost track.

Though the secret truth is, I may be made for the life of the reclusive writer merged with risk taking. I've been both shy and a hand-raiser my whole life. I was in a theater class, ages ago, when a stranger sent a note through our teacher that he needed clowns. There was money in it. I raised my hand. That job led to more clown work, the way one decision stumbles into the next. That experience led to my novel, and the novel led Jusby the Clown to me.

Pie throwing could be a valid act of cultural criticism in the clown world. Maybe it's a necessary baptism or a hazing. Going along with the role of willing victim, I chose the time (daytime, definitely) and the place (public). We'd meet in Peninsula Park, one of Portland's many urban green spaces. I arranged my own blind date with a clown.

People who say they're afraid of clowns oversimplify the demographic. There's plenty to be afraid of, more in some corners than in others, but clowns aren't a single species. It's a continuum, and ranges from the Evangelical arm of Christian clown ministries to the hot and bothered corners of the fetish scene. In between you've got birthday parties, business promotion, political activism, and rodeos. Depending on how you do it, clowning can have a built-in drag-queen glitz or a transformative, outsider appeal. There's been a serial murderer or two behind the paint, John Wayne Gacy-style, but that's not the norm. And then there are the Juggalos, latchkey followers of Insane Clown Posse, a branch of youth culture with no actual clown skills, not even when it comes to eyeliner.

The day I said yes, for all I knew Jusby could be anywhere on this continuum. I rounded up a crew, my backup, who'd serve as witnesses, partners, and a roving party. I invited three friends, all of them at the time also first-time novelists. They were the willing. I invited Lance Reynald, James Bernard Frost, and Kassten Alonso. Kass is my husband. Whatever tricks Jusby the Clown had up his silky sleeve, my husband and I would be in it together.

Our troupe arrived at the park first. We gazed out between towering cedar trees, then over the concentric rings of a manicured rose garden, past a giant classical fountain. Kids played on the swings and slides. It was Oregon's best weather, with blue skies and a reasonable sun. I wore a retro nylon maxi-dress salvaged from the seventies, a cross between a muumuu and prom wear, fancy yet synthetic enough to clean up in a basic wash. We scanned the perimeter.

What to expect? I looked for a fetishist creeping up behind me, stalking a pie virgin. Then I saw our guy. He loped across the park sporting a red rubber nose. Jusby has a soft, manly face, made for the role of a rugged clown. He came in full paint, his eyes highlighted with a heavy white arch over each lid, and a classical clown smile that crept up onto his cheeks. His lapels were festooned with buttons, around a mix of black and white stripes and polka-dots. Under that he wore layers of red against red. A workingman's white Hanes T-shirt poked out at the neckline. He's a bear of a man.

"Aboriginal clowns called [pie-ing] entering the Creamtime, in Old French the Tarte Blanche, ancient Romans had Cobbler Rasa." Jusby poured out a quick patter that gave the impression he'd done this a dozen times. Turns out, he's done it upwards of 560 times. He handed me a clipboard and a pen. A man with a camera trailed behind him. It was all more formal and ritualized than I expected—formal to the point of involving forms. The clipboard held a waiver of liability. I signed away photo rights and legal rights, as though I were an extra in some improvised theater. He passed another set of the same forms to my husband, then to Lance and Jim.

With the camera involved, I had new reservations. I was in makeup. Not clown face, but ordinary woman's war paint. My skin would totally blotch under whip cream and the social pressure of anything like audience. I'm a blusher, big time. James Bernard Frost, aka Jim, gave it up fast. He got down on his knees near a flower bed in a supplicant's position and made the universal *bring it on gesture* with both hands. Jim could go first.

Jusby has rules about his pie work. He also has beliefs. Later he'd tell me, "The pie gets a sensory experience that's also a ritualized initiation."

He tipped a pie in front of Jim's face, moving with a grace and strength I know now was developed through studying Butoh dance and Poekoelan, an Indonesian fighting art.

He says, "The pie represents crossing into dreamtime, into a lucid euphoria, a liminal space between ordinary states, neither the known world nor the unknowable ... " He works with anticipatory anxiety, extending that moment of knowing a pie is on the way, like a sneeze coming on. A Latino woman and a pack of what may have been grandchildren paused to watch, held by the energy of an event about to happen.

And in that moment it happened: Jusby offered Jim a dose, a hit, a big smack of clown pie, whip cream in an aluminum tin. He welcomed Jim into the unknown of dreamtime, and there, indeed, was the euphoria! Jim broke into a grin, wiped his eyes, fumbled for a towel. He laughed out loud. Maybe he laughed at himself.

Lance Reynald stepped up next and chose his own corner of the park. Fine by me. The audience for our little pie-an-author event grew. We still had the grandmother and kids, joined now by a pair of hot Portland-style hipster lesbians, a white guy in a basketball jersey, and somebody's golden retriever. They got in line as though Jusby was an amusement park ride. They wanted to be hit! They asked for it, begged for it, recruited each other, and willingly signed waivers of liability.

Could it be they sensed the possibility of a transformational magic through public spectacle, a moment out of time, carving a significant experience out of an otherwise fleeting, incidental slice of existence? Maybe not. Maybe we were in a modern day town square, lining up to be pried by the village idiot. Who, exactly, was the fool then?

Jusby bent and swirled whip cream into another aluminum tin with the hiss of a whip-it. He didn't actually throw the "pies," but pressed them into each face. Lance was sticky with whipped cream. A guy in sideburns and skinny girl jeans slid into his place, in the new official/unofficial pie-ing corner. I'd lost my spot in line.

And I thought, this guy, was he even a writer? Had he published? If he had, was it with a vanity, indie, or corporate publishing house? I mean, I was the one who brought everyone together. I'd worked for a decade on a book about clowns. It was my pie party. Jusby slapped a little boy with a pie, at the boy's request and delight. The photographer took pictures of every mom and baby, duck, and dog—but I was the author who'd been sought out for this!

It was up to me to make a move. So why did I hesitate? Sure, there was the makeup question, my own vanity, and a photographer's lens trained on each pie recipient. Mostly, it was just easier to take on the audience role. As TV watchers, we're trained for it. I could stay witness or step into action, take a spot on that fleeting stage, a place defined only by the eyes of the crowd. I said, "Okay." We'd do it, while there was still space on that camera's memory card.

Jusby waved Kass forward. “Husband and wife, let’s do this together.” Kass stepped up with me. We stood side by side and held hands. Jusby rolled up his sleeves, reached into his duffle for a fresh pie tin. The photographer raised his camera. I felt in my stomach a familiar flutter of trepidation. It was our wedding all over again. Who were those strangers in the crowd? They made me self-conscious. I’d been eight months pregnant at our actual wedding, that’s how shy we’d been about having a ceremony. I waited until the last moment I was willing to put on a dress.

I was thirty-nine before I had a child, that’s how long I hesitated—until my last good egg.

A plane cut across the blue sky, leaving its white line of toxic exhaust. Jusby tipped the nozzle of a whip cream canister to his pie tin. Everything I’ve ever done that matters has been through saying yes, haltingly, in the face of doubt.

Jusby managed to balance a second pie tin in the same hand as the first, one for each of us.

Lance smiled at me from the crowd. His hair was sticky and in spikes. James Bernard Frost had gone off to duck his head in the park’s do-not-swim-here chemical-laced water feature of a fountain. And I saw the hipster-girl couple, their eyes on us. If they ever wanted a wedding, they could have one! At least this kind—the clown kind, which is to say not the legally binding sort, not the religious version, the kind considered “real.” They too could have a moment in a park.

The sun gleamed off the whipped cream and the edge of the aluminum tin as Jusby put down his canister. And I felt in my body the beauty of saying yes against doubt: it’s necessary. Yes to the future, and to this moment, and to our daughter, the most important decision we’d ever made. I wanted to give back to the world. I was in love, in that wedding ceremony way. Everyone should have the right to say yes, wildly, within the law. The crowd smiled back at us. I beamed into the camera. I wanted our lives to have meaning, our actions to take on a narrative shape.

“A messenger arrives and the recipient becomes the message,” Jusby said. The camera flashed.

The world went dark. I couldn’t breathe. He’d caught me off guard. The aluminum pan pressed against my face, my nose, my mouth—the whip cream was giving, but the pan wasn’t. My nose flattened. I was drowning! I’d suffocate under cheap whipped cream. It was no way to go. The audience roared. They laughed. This was the end.

I’d made a mistake, said yes once too many times. I heard a child yell, me next! And I wanted to tell that child, *Go back. Don’t do it!* I flapped an arm, tried to drop my husband’s hand, but he held on. Then the pressure on my face subsided. I blew whipped cream out my nose, opened my mouth to gasp for air. Somebody put a towel under my fingers.

The sun came back, while my eyelashes were heavy and clotted. I gulped for air and laughed out loud, and now the laugh was at my own fear of death. My heart knocked against my chest. “You may kiss the bride!”

I was newly baptized, married, initiated. I was the fool and the folly. Maybe I'd hand-sell one book out of this. My books weren't even there. It wasn't about books. It was about the careless freedom to make random adult mistakes and see what would come next.

When the whipped cream pies were gone, and the sun sat low over the roof of a Java Hut across the street, I pulled a bottle of red wine and cups out of my bag. Jusby accepted a cup with a nod, that silent clown language of the body, then found a bench. My friends and I were tourists in the pie world, high on new experience. Jusby was spent, and deflated. It showed in the slope of his shoulders. He sipped wine with the calm energy of a bartender after hours.

Our friend of the golden-shower essay writes a redemptive tale: She wised up, she says, and found instead the life and experiences she really wants. My experience wasn't so sordid, and perhaps that's why my break hasn't been so clean or clear.

I have photos of that day. They're as lovely as any from our wedding. Over a year later, I'm still sorting out why the pie-ing was important. Jusby's explanation goes like this: "When the clown comes ... you're participating in an event that lasts seconds but whose residue lasts quite a bit longer."

That's exactly how I'd describe our wedding. "When the clown comes ..." Maybe that's one way to describe that sex act, the moment that led to the birth of our daughter, to ballet classes and tantrums and sticky kid hands.

The residue lasts much longer.

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