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Lee Mather

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"The child's laughter is pure until he first laughs at a clown."

Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus*

It was colder that morning than many expected. A layer of thin frost covered the garden like sprinkled icing sugar on a cake which meant there was little chance of the buds on the rosebushes developing into flowers in the near future.

"It's supposed to be bloomin' Spring," Harold Harper muttered to nobody in particular as he eased the wrought iron gate shut. The metal was freezing cold, and despite his fingerless woollen gloves, the sensation was quick to seep through into the bones of his hand.

Harold took his time to shuffle up the path to his house, careful not to slip on the icy approach. His hip was already giving him jip and he was quick to blame this on the irksome weather.

"Frost in bloomin' April. What chance have you got?" he mumbled, setting the key in the lock.

Harold gave one final glance in both directions and exhaled loudly in disappointment. The street was empty and he would have liked Sarah, or Sally – whatever her name was – from next door to be there so he could tell her about his trip to the Post Office. Forty five minutes he queued just to get his pension. Forty five minutes! He courted a girl many moons ago – Rosalin – who looked the spit of that Sarah woman – not that it lasted long with Rosalin.

Nothing ever did – and as for people? Harold never let people get too close, not even that nurse woman who came around twice a week to check up on him. He couldn't even remember her bloody name.

Shaking his head, he lingered in the porch and was further deflated when he saw there were no letters. There was no such thing as junk mail to someone of Harold's years who lived alone. He liked to flick through the offers in the latest supermarket brochures or hunt for spelling mistakes in the variety of takeaway menus that were posted through his door with surprising regularity. It was amazing how many of the buggers couldn't write decent English.

They come over here – they should learn the bloody language, Harold thought as he walked into the kitchen to unpack the potatoes and carrots he bought for supper.

He slammed the bag on the sideboard.

“Harold’s Amazing Hotpot,” he said with a grin to the dahlia he kept on the sill next to the back door. He removed the groceries from the bag. “That should ward off the cold, eh Pretty?”

The dahlia didn’t answer. Like the sixteen other plants Harold kept dotted around his small home, the dahlia he called Pretty was unaffected by the overnight frost because Harold kept his heating on full at all times. He wasn’t one of those penny pinching pensioners worried about the gas bill. That was one of the benefits of never starting a family. It meant he was able to squirrel away enough money to have a comfortable retirement. Harold had no pets either. He hated small animals. Always had. Plants were better. They were low cost, low maintenance. Clean too – no bloody hair or shit anywhere.

Harold filled the copper kettle and placed it on the stove. A pressure in his gut told him the cold had reached his bladder. He needed to piss and he thought he might have time to visit the toilet before the water boiled. He hobbled through the living room towards the stairs.

And stopped in his tracks.

It was only a small mirror on the mantle. It was circular, mounted on a golden stand, purchased for just a few pounds from a flea market Harold visited last year. He didn’t need a bigger one because it only took him a few minutes to comb the wispy remnants of his hair. The mirror was hardly outstanding next to the various items of bric-a-brac Harold had acquired over the years, but there was something alarmingly wrong with it today, a difference in Harold's reflection.

Harold was numb until he found enough strength to reach out a quivering hand for the mirror. He brought it closer to his face and stared disbelievingly at the thick black circles around his eyes, bile rising inside him. The mirror shivered in his grip – even though the heating was on full and the cold was confined to the world outside. He'd not put on any make-up, not for years now, but his reflection disagreed. It looked as though he'd painted the two charcoal rings with painstaking precision.

He remained rooted, too shocked to make sense of what he saw.

Suddenly there was movement behind him. The mirror caught the rush of something small and shadowy. Harold turned as quickly as his creaking bones allowed and was rewarded with another stab right through his hip. He cried out in breathless pain, stopping when he realised nobody was there. Harold’s house was as empty as it had been for the last thirty five years.

His despair rising, he returned to his reflection. His eyes were normal once again. The panda markings were gone and only a scrunch of wrinkles remained in their place. The pain moved from his hip to his heart.

“No, no,” he gasped, clutching his chest.

Not now – not with this in my head – surely not now.

Finally the tightness faded and Harold let out a wobbling breath. He held the mirror so tightly his fingers were white.

The kettle suddenly whistled and Harold’s skin turned inside out.

He screamed and dropped the mirror.

The glass shattered across the floor and Harold’s carpet glistened like his frost-covered lawn.

Harold woke and was thankful it was morning. Normally it was enough not to wake in some dingy retirement home where the corridors smelled of disinfectant, in fact, sometimes it was enough to wake at all. But that morning Harold was thankful for the daylight. His sheets were tangled and his head heavy. He couldn’t remember exactly what happened during the night but nonetheless he felt disturbed, afraid even. The fragments of some forgotten nursery rhyme lingered with him and he shuddered at the horror of what he must have dreamed.

It took him a while to get out of bed and the movement caused that cattle-prod jab to shoot through the ball and socket of his hip.

Too old to operate, he thought grimly, knowing the pain would never leave him.

“Nobody with a bloomin’ knife is coming anywhere near me,” he said loudly as he wriggled into his slippers. His words weren’t as confident as their volume suggested.

Harold put on his robe and trudged to the bathroom, hopeful that the day was brighter so he could spend some time in the park. He liked the fresh smell of the grass there.

He hesitated by the door, called himself a stupid old sod, and then entered the room.

The large wall mounted mirror greeted him.

Harold's reflection held no sign of the darkness around his eyes from the day before and he breathed a great sigh of relief.

"Bloomin' foolish," he said shakily and jammed the toothbrush in his mouth.

Harold took time to brush his teeth and the anxiety drained from him as he polished them. Most were still his own and he was proud of this. He swilled and then spat in the basin.

He wiped his mouth on a towel, looked up and screamed.

Vivid red lipstick covered his lips, his grin salacious, his expression disconnected from his terror. The smile was startling; hungry and cruel. Harold whimpered, his heart faltering. Something banged hard in the hall outside the bathroom and he jolted, stepped away from the mirror.

There was nothing there.

When he looked back the stranger's smile was gone. His lips were dried prunes, same as always.

"Leave me alone! Leave me alone!" he wailed.

He stood breathlessly, too fearful to move. As he fought to calm himself he considered the bang. A sickening notion crept into his thoughts. He found movement and hurried along the hall, stopping beneath the hatch to his loft. It was half open when it should have been closed.

Harold wobbled and placed a hand on the wall for balance. The world spun and Harold fought to keep upright. He knew what was stored up there in the dark, behind a ton of heavy boxes, buried beneath the loose floorboards.

Harold cursed his imagination, berated himself for being an old fool. But despite this bravado he couldn't shake the sensation of plummeting.

He stared fearfully at the hatch to the loft. He could have sworn that was where the bang came from.

The park had some activity in it as the local school kids were enjoying their Easter break. There was a flurry of noise by the duck pond and the day had more of a seasonal feel about it than those earlier that week. Children gathered by the water, tearing off strips of stale bread to feed the greedy birds with. Harold sat alone on a park bench watching. He wasn't enjoying the sunshine.

Children made him nervous – and more so that morning. Recent events had stirred something in him, something buried deep, and he was reminded of a time he'd spent the last thirty five years trying to forget.

Some secrets, Harold knew, were best forgotten.

He told himself the crimson smile and the panda eyes were maybe tricks of the light, or perhaps the strain on a tired old mind, but his lies were futile. He knew better. He knew they were the first signs of something else, something stirring beneath his surface, something wicked. The memories were slowly returning and no amount of tears would send them away.

“I'm an old man,” he moaned, nobody close enough to overhear him. “I'm not *him* anymore. He's not *me*.”

Harold stifled his sob and stood to leave. The magic of the park hadn't rubbed off on him. He shouldn't be around children, not then, maybe not ever.

Was his appetite returning? Was that it?

A boy, no older than six, ran across Harold's path. The youngster threw a handful of crumbs at the ducks and scattered them in an eruption of quacks. The boy giggled, his excitement rising as the fattened birds regrouped to clamour for an easy meal. Harold stopped dead, his hands limp by his side. He saw little Sammy Johnson in place of the boy. He hadn't thought of Sammy for over a third of a century. The boy there, that day, wore bright yellow shorts and a blue t-shirt. Bold, happy colours. Sammy wore grey shorts with matching socks rolled up to his knees. His shirt was sombre, white and crisp. Until blood saturated it.

Harold closed his eyes and Sammy's screams were as real as they were back in the day.

Tears poured down Harold's cheeks. Urgency caused him to move quickly. His breath was short and his hip winced but he didn't care. He needed to get out of there. He had to be alone. No children. No memories. He was an old man for goodness' sake.

Why now? Why after so long?

The happy boy moved too close to the pond. He slipped and fell in, his splash causing the ducks to flee as if their lives depended on it.

Harold looked around frantically. There were no parents in sight, nobody paying attention. Harold watched for a moment before he sighed. He hobbled to the

pond to fish the sobbing child out. Harold wasn't a monster any more. Notions of harm didn't exist within him.

"There, there boy, don't cry," he said as patiently as he could and he bent, reaching out a wrinkled hand.

Harold stopped. Horror pulsed through him.

His wobbling reflection was distorted by gentle ripples on the water but despite this it was clear his face was all wrong. It was white as snow and this time his expression was cold and sinister. He was a ghost – the spirit of something terrible. Harold recognised the face but it couldn't be true. He stumbled, toppling into the pond beside the howling youngster. The ghoulish reflection shattered as Harold smashed through it into the water.

"Bloody hell mate are you okay?" the anxious father said, appearing from the ether to haul out his son. He offered Harold, dripping wet, a lift up.

"Steven I told you not to go near the edge," the mother scolded, there a fraction later. She looked sympathetically at Harold. "Thank you for trying to help him, really are you okay?"

Harold nodded sheepishly. He was a rickety old man, feeble and easily broken. But he was okay. He was okay because he wasn't *that* man any more.

He reassured the family of his wellbeing, and then sodden, started the hike home.

Harold's core was frozen by the time he reached his house. His clothes were wringing wet and they clung to his wiry frame with icy fingers. He shivered so violently the teeth he was so proud of clattered like castanets. For all Harold knew this could be the onset of pneumonia. It wasn't bad enough he was losing his mind, he didn't need his health to fail too. As he thought this he coughed, as if his body had already subconsciously capitulated to the illness.

He entered his home to eerie quiet. The place was dark with shadow.

"Hello?" he ventured nervously.

The silence was a suffocating mass, real and oppressive.

Part of him wanted to turn and flee, but he was cold and tired and needed to change his clothes. With a wobbling sigh he took off his waterlogged jacket. He stopped when he saw the palm potted beside the coat rack.

It was dead.

The leaves, so green and vibrant earlier that day, drooped lifelessly, and the bough sagged almost to the floor.

Harold stared despairingly at the broken plant.

How could this happen?

A stab of fear rippled through him and he staggered into the living room. The petunias were black, rotten and cancerous.

Harold feared every room would be the same and the pain he felt was more severe than anything he'd ever experienced.

The kitchen confirmed his suspicions. Pretty, his prize dahlia, greeted him. She looked like she'd been torched. There were three more of his special friends there, shrivelled, the victims of some terrible plague that came and corrupted while he was away.

Harold combed the entire house on trembling legs. All his plants were dead.

This isn't about guilt, he thought, terrified. *Something has been here, something evil.*

Harold wept, collapsing into a chair facing the burned dahlia. It wasn't Pretty, or the other plants, or even Sammy Johnson he thought of. This time it was a little girl. Her name was Susan Phillips. She was eight years old with brown bunches and a spray of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Susan cried and cried and cried but nobody came for her.

Now it was Harold's turn to cry. His tears came in floods. He remembered the children, all of them. He remembered what he did.

His memories and the grief they brought were a punishment long overdue.

Harold Harper was a children's entertainer for six years before something changed inside him. Maybe it was all that time playing a role, hiding behind a mask that did the damage. He never really understood why. He never really understood what caused him to do the things he did.

It was the clown.

At least that's what Harold told himself – that the clown was a person in his own right. The clown was evil, out of control. It was the clown who wanted to hurt. It was the clown who hated children. It was the clown who loved the smell of blood and the sound of screams. It was not him, not Harold.

Sammy Johnson was the first. Sixteen others followed over a period of four years. There was so much fear, so much pain. When the madness eventually left him, Harold managed to forget. It took time; broken relationships, job after job, one town and then the next – until finally he settled in what became his home. The children became somebody else's bad dream, and he locked them beyond reach within some dark dungeon in his mind. Harold had not thought about them in thirty five years.

He was normal once – of that he was sure – a part of *The Wilson Brothers' Family Circus*, touring the country with a troop of forty fellow performers. It was the early seventies and back then he felt truly happy. He was a clown – that was his act – and he loved to make 'em laugh. He was Harry High-Hat, so vibrant and alive beneath the make-up and the slapstick. But one night things changed.

Wilson Brothers' had four clowns in all and in their well practiced routine they each wore garish satin costumes of bold design. Harold's was bright green with big blue buttons. He was meticulous in the way he cared for it. Nothing else he wore came close to how it felt on his skin. The material became a part of him, seeping into his flesh like the make-up disguising his face. That was until the night he dreamed of wearing a different costume. There was so much red. It felt different on him, strange and unfamiliar – yet so vivid. Some dreams were hard to recall, blurred like clouded reflections. But not this one. Harold remembered it like gospel. In this dream he was someone else, some other clown. The features were clear to him even down to the smallest detail, like the mole above his lip, or the black tear drop at the corner of his left eye.

When Harold woke he knew the new clown was important, and he felt compelled to write down everything he could remember about the costume. The detail nagged him, stayed with him every day and every night until finally, a month after the dream, he decided to don the make-up.

Harold spent hours perfecting the look. It had to be exact and he made it so. The darkness around his eyes appeared to swirl from the very centre of his pupils. He added smiling eyebrows and dimpled cheeks and he finished the effect with lipstick of

the most striking red he could find. He used this on his lips, his ears and his bulbous nose. The wig he wore was curly and red, matching the buttons on his new outfit. In those days make-up was not as readily available and it took serious dedication to find the exact shades from his dream. But he took pride in the detail and he worked until he perfected his creation.

Harold called himself Bojangles from that point on, after the song, and Harry High-Hat was no more. His troop grew in stature. Bojangles created a vibe, an electricity, that the others – Charlie Pepperpot, Mister Joe and Rosie – fed off. They became the best in the business and Wilson Brothers' went from strength to strength. Harold had money in his pocket, a string of women on his arm, and pride coursing through his veins. Brendan Wilson, the owner of the circus, presented Harold with a shiny new Ford Cortina to mark the impact Harold had made. But for some reason, despite his success, Harold couldn't help but feel something was missing.

It was at the height of the circus's fame when Bojangles claimed centre stage. It was a show like any other. The circus was about to play to another packed audience.

That night Bojangles, wearing Harold's face, finished the act and wandered the stalls with a pint of beer spilling clumsily in his hand. At this point he had no motive or expectation, but when he saw Sammy Johnson something just clicked. It was a certainty, the missing piece of his jigsaw. Sammy was a bonny boy, there with his parents, celebrating his birthday with a yellow balloon in one hand and fluffy pink candy floss in the other. Maintaining his Harold disguise, Bojangles followed Sammy and his family home when the Big Top emptied.

It was a month later when Bojangles came back for Sammy, when nobody remembered the circus had been to town. He waited until the boy was alone and then he dragged little Sammy into Harold's Ford Cortina and took him away.

Bojangles brought the petrified boy back to Harold's trailer that night. The moonlight empowered him and it became the way that it was always at night. Bojangles didn't make people smile in the dark. He turned the radio up loud so nobody else would hear, tied the boy up, and made little Sammy watch as he donned his costume. He wore his famous white suit, the one with the red buttons and ensured his wig and eye shadow were applied perfectly, only this time his make-up was not like in the show, this time it was smeared and angry, applied with a brutal touch. There was no painted smile.

When he finished, Bojangles fetched the shiny cutthroat razor Harold used to shave with and showed it little Sammy. Bojangles laughed and pranced and then slashed and swiped. He drank the boy's screams.

After Sammy, Bojangles engraved the initial 'B' deep in the blade of his razor. From that point on it was Bojangles' cutthroat, nobody else's.

The clown developed an appetite that evening. And he gorged himself, took his fill from every faceless town the circus visited over the next four years. Each show brought a new adventure. Bojangles liked to remember how happy the children looked when he made them laugh. He would take the time to reminisce as he twirled his blade before their frightened eyes.

One night his hunger ended. It was as simple as that. Harold was back and Bojangles was no more. It was like the monster had eaten his fill. It was not a case of a near miss, or a warning or of any newly discovered guilt or anxiety. Maybe it was the recession? Maybe it was the fact that folks stopped coming to see the show? Harold couldn't be sure. All he knew was he woke one day and the clown was gone. Harold left the circus the very next day and made a bonfire on the moor to burn all the costumes in his possession. Only he couldn't. One outfit in particular. He held the white suit, freshly bleached, and it felt like part of him, like his true skin.

Instead he nailed shut an old wooden crate with the words *fragile* branded into the side. In it was the ruby wig, the make-up kit, the cleaned white suit, and of course a sharp silver razor with the letter 'B' carved into the blade. Harold kept the crate in the boot of his car, never took it out. That was until the day he bought his house. He hid the crate in the loft, behind a ton of heavy boxes, beneath the floor. The years did the rest. Cobwebs grew and snowfalls came and went until Bojangles was buried so deep in Harold's memory he might never have existed.

Only the clown never really went away.

And as Harold stared at the collection of shrivelled plants with the reeking odour of decay filling his nostrils, he felt a terrible dread.

He and Bojangles had unfinished business.

Harold woke in a mess of dishevelled sheets. Light poured through the window and he knew it was morning. He was not happy, nor thankful. His head ached

and his heart stammered as if he'd endured another odious dream he couldn't remember. He shook off his disorientation and dragged himself from the bed. He stopped and took in the silence.

No birds chirping, no wagons in the street, no steady vibration of next door's television. It was as if no other soul existed in the world. Harold suddenly felt so very lonely and he wept.

It was some time before he had anything like the strength to limp towards the bathroom to rid himself of the building pressure in his bladder. Despite living by himself Harold never really suffered from loneliness. The feeling was so alien, so despicable, he wanted to vomit. He felt like he was drowning, gasping for air.

He paused before the doorway to the bathroom, remembering the mirror. He didn't want to see his reflection. He couldn't bear to see a flash of ghostly skin, or a glimpse of those red, hungry lips, or a peek at those black eyes, the eyes that would burn into him; that would judge him for the life he tried to forget.

Harold took an awkward step, looking straight ahead, and continued on until he reached the toilet. He kept his eyes forward, almost as if he stood over a public urinal. This was not about etiquette though. Harold dared not look in the mirror.

As Harold relieved himself a noise began somewhere in the house. It was faint yet loud enough to chill. A child sang words Harold couldn't hear, not that it mattered. He knew the tune. He remembered it from his nightmares.

Harold swooned but somehow managed not to fall. Insects wriggled beneath his skin as he frantically tried to finish. He needed to get away from there and fast, but he couldn't stop quickly enough and his frantic actions caused piss to splash over his blue pyjamas.

With the sound of the nursery rhyme ringing in his ears, Harold jerked himself back in his pyjama bottoms. He turned, stared at the mirror before he could stop himself.

There was no clown. Only Harold, so distorted with fear he barely recognised himself.

The singing stopped suddenly and the eerie, otherworldly silence returned to the home that had been Harold's for thirty five years. Harold felt like a stranger there, like he was no longer welcome.

He wanted to get outside more than anything. Not caring about his piss-sodden pyjama bottoms or the scream in his hip, Harold rushed from the bathroom to take the

stairs two at a time. He had to escape. He needed to breathe the cold air of the morning, needed the bright sunlight to chase away his terror.

But it was dark when he reached the bottom. The house was black. Harold tripped off the final step in disbelief. It was as if he imagined the daylight.

Trembling hard he felt for the light switch.

He flicked it on and gasped in horror.

The plant pots Harold removed from his house yesterday were back in position. None contained plants. Instead, in each of the terracotta pots, was a single brightly coloured balloon. They looked like they would belong to a child or perhaps a clown.

“No, no, this can’t be happening,” Harold whispered.

He broke into a sudden run for the front door. The pain in his hip was terrifying. That was the thing about dreams – no matter how real they seemed they never actually hurt.

This is real. This is real, screamed the voice in Harold’s head.

He reached the front door, fumbled with the handle expecting it to be locked. It was not. He fell from the house, screaming with terror.

The scream caught in his throat.

The street was darker than normal. The lamps flickered on and off like beating hearts. It was empty – there were no people, no cars in the street. Every door was closed, every curtain drawn.

Suddenly Harold heard a giggle, then another and another. The laughter was riotous. This time the nursery rhyme was much closer. This time Harold heard the lyrics.

“Harold’s Bleeding, Harold’s Bleeding, fetch the razor, fetch the razor, pour on water... drown the bastard...”

The voices repeated the rhyme. They became louder, and angrier, and more urgent.

Harold gagged and physical pain spread through him. From behind Harold’s front hedge a small figure appeared. It was little Sammy Johnson, still wearing his grey shorts and matching socks. Blood covered his shirt and the boy’s face was different to how Harold remembered him – not even his own mother would recognise Sammy with all that make-up on. The blackened eyes and smeared red lips and bulbous nose made Sammy appear angry, furious even. He sang the rhyme with as

much ferocity as a young boy could muster. Susan Phillips came next, holding Sammy's hand. They marched side by side chanting their odious rhyme. Then came Catherine Tompkins and William Smith. More followed. The children walked in pairs, hand in hand. Each wore their own clown-face. Not that the disguises counted for much, Harold knew who they were. He remembered their screams – every last one of them. More and more children came from the shadows and Harold knew seventeen would appear, the same number of plants he kept in his house, the same number of lives he took, the same number of balloons that waited for him inside.

Harold staggered back into the house with the hateful rhyme ringing in his ears. The nearest balloon popped and the sound was so loud that something burst within his eardrum. A second balloon exploded and he suffered another intense pain in his head. Thankfully the noises distorted as if Harold's head was underwater. He made it as far as the living room. Blood trickled from his ear. He tripped, almost fell. The room was black once again. In the centre was a tall freestanding mirror with a twisting silver snake entwined around the circumference of the glass. There was something wrong about it, something obviously rotten. Harold had never seen it before. It shouldn't be there. But there it was, startlingly bright. Harold stepped before it, frozen, mesmerised by the glare.

His reflection wasn't in the mirror.

Bojangles stared back at Harold. This was not the entertainer. The clown was dressed for pleasure. His outfit was a crisp white and his wig impeccably fixed, but his make-up was the clue. It was smeared and angry and applied with a brutal touch. The evil within those black eyes was tinged with something like excitement.

“Leave me alone!” Harold screamed.

Bojangles grinned, stepped towards the glass. The mirror bulged as if it was made of jelly.

Harold suddenly found his legs. He lurched for the front door only to find Sammy Johnson standing in his path. Sammy brandished a flaming torch in his hand. He was a villager come to burn down the castle and drive out the monster. Sammy repeated the nursery rhyme vindictively. He had eyes only for Harold, seemingly unaware that the real monster lurked in the mirror.

Harold yelled and his heart strained. He hobbled to the kitchen as quickly as his disobedient body could manage. The back door was blocked by a wall of leaping

flames. Susan Phillips turned and flashed Harold a wicked smile before tossing the torch she carried into the spreading fire.

Harold faltered, found himself back in front of the mirror. Bojangles touched the glass. It bent and twisted as if moulded by an intense heat. Bojangles warped, became one with the pulsing mirror as if he was about to come through into Harold's world.

Harold screamed and screamed. He was suddenly hauling himself up the stairs into the darkness of the second floor.

Instinct pushed him on and he ran behind the only door inside his house to be equipped with a lock. He slammed the door shut, flipped the lock, and fell down on the toilet. He soiled himself but this was far from the forefront of his mind. His heart pounded with a ferocity that shouldn't have been possible at his age. He needed to get out – but how? And where to? Smoke crept into the bathroom through the gap beneath the door and despite the pain in his bloodied ears he suddenly heard the nursery rhyme start up once again.

Harold slumped, resigned. The tune crept beneath his skin. He knew the words. They would live with him forever in hell.

The taps in the bath suddenly switched on and the movement more than the sound caused Harold to start. A chill swept through him as he remembered something hideous.

He looked up just as Bojangles began to climb through the mirror on the wall. The clown's teeth were stained red and his eyes were crazed with appalling desire. Melted glass stuck to the clown like glue. Harold lurched and tumbled into the bath. His hip finally cracked. Harold didn't feel it. His eyes darted to the soapholder and in it was something that didn't belong there.

In the place of soap there was a cutthroat razor with the letter 'B' engraved on the blade. Harold hadn't seen this razor for thirty five years, the razor that as far as Harold knew, was hidden beneath the floorboards of the attic in a crate with the words *fragile* branded on the side.

Bojangles leered over Harold and reached out a gloved white hand towards Harold's face. Long satin covered fingers flexed just inches from Harold's cheeks. Harold couldn't stand the thought of the glove touching his skin, couldn't stand the rustle of fabric brushing his flesh.

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