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Personal Essay
800 Words

Serious Silliness

by

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At the age of ten I informed my family I was going to become a circus clown. Like most parents, mine were affectionately supportive of their tween's aspirations. They assumed by eleven I would want to be a rock star and by twelve the world's first football-playing paleontologist. They were wrong. By eleven I'd learned to juggle—much to my mother's irritation in supermarket fruit aisles—and at twelve I was teaching myself to unicycle. The later had me walking like a cowboy who'd been repeatedly kicked in the groin, prompting my seventh-grade guidance counselor to gently ask if everything was okay at home. In high school, I built my own set of stilts. They broke, so I built another. They broke too, so I built a third, which I still have today.

Those childhood efforts never felt like the pursuit of a goal. I wasn't applying myself toward a long-term objective or even chasing a dream. It was simply a given: my circus life was waiting for me like a lone trapeze bar swinging in a spotlight. A week after my eighteenth

birthday, I walked into the auditions for the Ringling Brothers Clown College and leapt for that bar.

They turned me down.

Thirty-five years later, I can still feel the net burns from that fall to reality. I'd told everyone about the audition, so I had to tell everyone I'd flopped. It remains the most spectacular failure of my life, and I will forever be grateful it happened.

Some people label these moments wake-up calls; others, kicks in the pants. For me, it was like the night I got my first pair of glasses and looked at the sky. What before had been a field of blurry orbs was now a layered backdrop of stars in dazzling constellations. I was seeing for the first time what I'd been looking at for years. With that focus, came drive. With that drive, came passion. My expectations became targets; my journey, a crusade. I traded up my homemade juggling clubs—plastic pop bottles, wooden dowels, and duct tape—for performance-level European fliers. I financed a six-foot unicycle and found a professional to teach me to mount it. Most importantly, I studied the art of clowning itself. The likes of Buster Keaton, Chevy Chase, and Wile E. Coyote tripped across my television screen and fell into the foundations of the performer I would become. My moderately successful attempts to emulate them included tumbling down the steps when my parents had dinner guests. I say moderately successful because I found it hysterical. My parents, not so much.

In 1990, two years after my rejection, I strategically positioned my assets and attacked. I chased the Ringling circus up the east coast and auditioned in Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Hartford. In every city, I showed them something different. The clowns got to know me so well, they greeted me by smacking me with their rubber fish, foam

hammers, and, on one heart-warming occasion, a shaving-cream pie. They could tell I was now taking my silliness seriously.

Out of 3,000 applicants that year, Ringling accepted thirty-nine apprentice fools, myself included. Though I admit I danced around my kitchen with my confetti-sprinkled welcome letter clutched to my chest, the rest of my celebrations were muted. I'd made it into the training program, but I wanted the big show.

Clown College was a grueling two-month boot camp where master clowns tore down our personas and rebuilt us into performers who could make children a hundred yards away spit out their popcorn with laughter. At the end of those eight weeks, we performed for Kenneth Feld—owner of the Greatest Show on Earth—who sat in the front row with a notebook and a pen. We all wore numbers on our riotously colored costumes. In the dressing room afterward, he offered eleven of us contracts as professional fools. When he called my name, a wave of joy, relief, and deep satisfaction crashed over me with the power of a spring flood. I wasn't here because of fate. This was neither an accident nor a given. Running away to join the circus had taken ten years of hard work.

A month later, the houselights went down at the start of my first show, and I ran out to strike my opening pose on the dark arena floor. The smell of sawdust and elephants filled my rubber nose. My greasepaint was warm on my face. As the music began, the murmuring of the crowd kicked into an excited hum. Thousands of souvenir flashlights twinkled in the distant black balconies. They looked like constellations.