

Clowning Around
by James Craig

Joey gripped the steering wheel tighter. He couldn't see anything down the street with the headlights off.

"You think it'll be alright? Hate if anything happened to the little tike," Buck said, as he performed the ritual of cleaning his gun.

The smell from the polish burnt Joey's nostrils. "Shut it, Buck. We're not going to talk about the boy. I don't need another reason to drink tonight," Joey said.

"You're going soft, ol' Jay-Boy. I'm starting to think you actually have feelings. It's just one crying brat." His gun was clean and Buck put it in his coat.

"He's not a brat, Bee-Bee. He's six." Joey's knuckles turned white before he realized he had tightened his grip even further. He looked down into the bag on his lap. Shadows made the bag look like a bottomless pit.

"So what? You trying to use this to get out of the game? I'm sure you remember what happened to the last guy that got out." Buck was now adjusting his signature flower. He made certain that it was centered neatly on his lapel.

“Yeah, I do. His career ended.” Joey released the wheel and looked through his bag.

“Exactly. That’s going to happen to you if you try ‘n’ leave.”

Joey pulled something out and set his bag in the backseat. “Yeah, well, maybe it’s for the best.”

“You don’t mean that, Jay-Boy. What’d I do without you in this kind of business.”

“That’s funny. It almost seems like you actually care.” Joey wiped the cracking face-paint off of his forehead. “You didn’t catch my feelings did you?”

“Whoa, I never said nothing about caring. This gig would just be a little tougher without a second person.” Buck wiped his face as well and they both had pile of dirty tissue on the center console.

“You can always find another partner for your little act. Doesn’t have to be me.”

“Anyone decent is either in a troupe or running solo. I’m not going to be training some new blood. I wouldn’t have the heart to watch them eat it out there.”

“Sure you wouldn’t.”

“Well, just don’t be going and quitting over one kid. There’s a lot worse that can happen in this line of work.” The remainder of face-paint on Buck’s face gave him a grim look.

“What? Do you have some sort of horrible war story?”

“Well, you could say that.”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Joey opened the door and got out.

“Where you headed?”

“Didn’t I tell you? The bar.”

“Right. Well I’m not going to let you drink alone tonight. Everyone in this game needs a drinking buddy after the first kid they scare.”

“Thanks.” Joey lit a cigarette and headed down the street ahead of Buck.

“No problem, friend. Just a night out for a couple of clowns.” Buck tossed his gun into the car through the passenger window. It hit the back rest and slid down. As it hit the bottom of the seat, the gun discharged and let out one word on a flag:

BANG!