**Clown Fire**

Beth Sherman

I’m wearing baggy pants, a vest, ugly shirt, fright wig. My yellow plastic shoes are three sizes too big, like defective lifeboats.

Sophia, the birthday girl, is turning five. She tugs on my checked waistcoat. “What’s your name?”

“Petunia.”

“I thought you’d be a princess,” she says, eying me with displeasure.

*Magical Birthday Parties & More. Seeking motivated, hardworking college student to work weekends. Must have own car*. It sounded straightforward enough. According to my mother, by the time they figure out I’m neither *motivated* nor *hardworking* the summer will have ended.

“Snow White is overrated,” I tell her, looking around the backyard at acres of manicured grass, an Olympic size pool, tennis courts, hot tub, cabana, wet bar, even a cascading waterfall.

There are 20 kids. Parents lounge on the wraparound deck sipping gin and tonics. *Helicopter parents*, my mother calls them. Only these moms and dads ignore their offspring. They’re chatting with each other. The world could blow up and they wouldn’t notice. I want a drink, but I’m not old enough to ask for one. First, I make balloon animals, which doesn’t go well because the balloons keep popping LOUDLY, making the children cry.

My second trick is pulling flowers out of an empty hat. It takes three minutes for the hat to break. After that, I dispense with magic and have them play duck, duck goose.

When Sophia’s mother yells “lunch,” the kids race to the deck where a long table is decorated with balloons sporting photos of each kid’s face and edible flower arrangements. Sophia’s mother tells me I should help myself to whatever I want. She either doesn’t care that she’s hired a sub-par clown or is too bombed to notice.

I clomp to the hamburgers, expertly flipped by a guy my age. *He has a better job than you do*, my mother would say if she were here.

It’s so hot my white face paint is melting. I reach for a bottle of vitamin water, trip on my too-big shoes and knock into the grill. It happens quickly. An awkward flailing of limbs, then my hip slams into the faux wood deck.

“The clown’s on fire!” someone screams.

It’s true. Flames lick the plastic and kids are laughing, like it’s part of the act.

Writhing like a worm, I kick off my left shoe, which skitters across the deck. The right one is burning.

“Help!” I yell.

The heat licks my skin and I bang my foot, trying to put the fire out. Burger Guy magically appears with a bucket of ice. I hear a sizzling sound and then a plume of black smoke rises from the mangled shoe.

One of the parents peels off my charred sock. The top of my foot is red, already blistering. Sophia’s mother brings me a tube of aloe cream and a margarita. She asks if I want to go to the hospital and I say no. What I don’t tell her is my mother got fired in January for mouthing off to her boss. We no longer have health insurance. *Careless*, I hear my mother say. *Irresponsible*.

I limp to a chaise, nursing my drink. When the kids are finished eating, they run around the backyard—riding the fake unicorn, jumping in a bouncy house that’s nearly the size of my real house. Everyone assumes my clown duties are over.

I have a second margarita, then a third, wait for the throbbing to stop. The afternoon starts to soften and blur. I pretend this mansion is where I live, that Sophia is my daughter and her father—a short, balding stockbroker—is my husband. I’m not a princess, but I’ve never been a clown. I feel myself relax. Everything’s going to be okay because this is where I live. This is who I’ve become. Light bounces off the surface of the pool, and I stare into the sun until there are dark spots everywhere.