

*Note: this is an excerpt from the original story, which took first place in the creative nonfiction category of Taghum Hall's Write Off the Bat! 2023 marathon and competition.*

## **Clown**

by Elenna Hope

So, there I was in a lineup at the unemployment office somewhere in the wilds of south Vancouver. I saw it lying there on the table as the lineup snaked past. A limp newspaper. It was open and there was a large photograph of this white woman wearing a poufy dress (I imagined yellow, no idea why), hair askew, wearing a clown nose (for sure the nose was red, we've all seen them) and for some reason I picked up paper and started reading.

I don't know why I was at that unemployment office because I was living around Cambie and Broadway, not really anywhere near south Vancouver. But there you have it.

I had been clean and sober for I dunno, less than a couple of months, been fired from my job as a cook in a restaurant and had applied for welfare. When I went for the second appointment at the welfare office, the chick said to me that maybe I should think about applying for unemployment because I had enough weeks to qualify. I was all,

“Daaaamn. Really?”

“Ya.”

She had dark brown skin with a reddish undertone, dark brown eyes, short, black hair, a nose which looked like it had, at one time or other been broken. When she entered the tiny office cigarette smoke wafted in and settled down with us.

I was thrilled because anyone who had ever been on welfare knows that unemployment is more money. And as I had been kicked out of where I was living and was sleeping on the couch

of a couple of women I knew. Of all the things I needed at that moment, money was high on my list.

“That’s awesome.” I was so excited I nearly jumped up off my chair. “Really?”

“Ya.”

“Like how much would I make, do you know?”

“Nope.”

“Ok. So…”

“Depends on how many hours you worked, why you left your last job. Here’s the phone number and the office you have to go to. They’ll tell you what documents you need to bring.”

She stood up. “Ok good luck.” Turned, opened the door, and held it for me.

“Right, ok thanks.”

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I was excited for sure, but it was relief more than anything. I mean I didn’t have any savings, no prudent reserve, no partner to help me through the hard times, sometimes I wondered why I even had a bank account. I borrowed money; I mean who doesn’t right? I did have a system of repayment, but it was a little fluid. Bottom line, I owed money.

Anyways, I always worked. I mean you have to, right? But somehow, I ended up with jobs I hated. I don’t know why that always seemed to happen. Look, I’m not here to whine or anything, just letting you know. And then more shit on top of a shitty job. That’s what it felt like.

So, I’m living my life, y’know bumping along, working, partying, loving the girl I’m with, oh boy, that’s another story. Anyways I always believed I was an artist but just couldn’t quite get it together to make any goddamned art. And I thought that being an artist was all painting and sculpture, right? So, while I was waiting for the painting inspiration to hit, I did a

few performances in these shows that were happening in Vancouver around that time. I thought of them like Vaudeville or something, but really, they were more like lesbian sexual variety shows.

In the Queer community there have always been shows; Drag; various houses, individuals, performing in shows, balls and competitions, Leather; fetish, kink themed shows and competitions. These shows that started happening in our town were spearheaded by the queer women's community from Seattle, leatherwomen, strippers and chicks into kink.

Fun, right? It was, usually. I mean if I didn't get too hammered or high and forget where I was, miss my musical cue, hog the stage from other folks, get escorted off the stage, trip, fall, basically be an asshole, it did have a fun quality. I don't know why the organizers kept letting me perform. I mean no one was getting paid or anything. Oh, and I wasn't an asshole every time I performed, ok? Sometimes things would just flow. Which usually meant, a) I had rehearsed enough or b) I hadn't drunk too much. A fine line to be sure.

The rehearsal process was me thinking real hard about the act, over drinks at the bar, or working the evening shift at the restaurant, then going to the bar, or blathering on about it with someone while having drinks at the bar, or getting high with someone and blathering on about it. What music I wanted to move around to; the term *dance* was a bridge too far for what I did. What kind of costume; this meant I had to build or pin something together. What to remove; how much did I want to show. Tits? Ass? Stomach? Thighs? Coochie? And which combination. Most of us took pieces of clothing off.

Once I did this Pirate and Wench thing with my friend Constanza, a Columbian, Canadian dyke. She was butch and wanted to check out being ultra fem for a show. I was more fem and was all up for being the Pirate. It was fun working with Constanza.

“I know you like to party.” She said to me one night. “But if we are going do this act, I’d like you to commit to not getting shitfaced.” *Bit harsh.* I thought. But ok, ya couple times I had maybe had a bit too much to drink but that was only because I had mixed beer and tequila. I respected Constanza, she didn’t party like I did, and she was a working class sister.

“Sure, I can commit to that. Couple drinks type thing?”