

From No Substitutes

By Don Zolidis

VANNA, a high school student, is explaining her fear of clowns.

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You don't understand. When I was six I had a birthday party and my Mom got a clown.

Vanna goes to a dark place. Perhaps she even stands in a spotlight.

It was a princess party. The sun was angry that day. Hot as an oven – I was dressed as Ariel, everyone else was dressed as Belle. The cake was Cinderella's castle – white frosting, topped with a plastic figurine of Cinderella and her prince, their poorly painted little faces frozen in an expression of alarm or joy, no one could tell which.

And then came the clown: Boo Boo. He had his usual clown tricks. Oversize shoes. A buzzer handshake. The squirting flower in the lapel. Behind his white makeup I could see his vacant grey eyes – I loathed Boo Boo on sight.

But we managed. Ariel and seven Belles, sweating and chanting – humoring this dead-eyed clown.

My brother, however, had other designs. He was five years older and had a pet python named Gus – Gus was eight feet long and sweet as a kitten, but my brother loved bringing him out to terrify us.

My brother looped the python in his arms and crept into the party, right behind Boo Boo. And then, as the clown turned, Gus was right in front of him. His clown mouth, painted red like a fire engine, opened in shock, all his little clown tricks firing. Water squirting from his flower as he reached out and grabbed the python.

It's hard for Vanna to go on.

The electric shock from the buzzer in his hand, combined with the water... ignited the snake. Smoke shot from Gus's eyeballs... My brother reeled back and flung the sparking python into the air... where he struck the ceiling fan – on its highest setting due to the heat.

Gus... exploded. Flaming chunks of snake, propelled by the ceiling fan, arced into the living room like debris from a mortar shell. Blood rained down upon eight screaming princesses, and I looked with horror –

To the kitchen – where Gus's severed head landed with a plop... on my birthday cake – crushing Cinderella and her prince, setting the trick candles – ablaze.

I heard Boo Boo's faltering voice... "Happy Birthday to you..." as my friends, their yellow dresses now speckled red with snake blood, fled. Two of them broke through a window, another rammed into the front door – one of my friends hurled herself into our large aquarium.

You don't come back from that.

We moved cities. Changed identities. Started a new life.

And that's why I do not prefer the company... of clowns.

Pause. Everyone looks at Vanna.