

THE CLOWN PUPPET

It has always seemed to me that my existence consisted purely and exclusively of nothing but the most outrageous nonsense. As long as I can remember, every incident and every impulse of my existence has served only to perpetrate one episode after another of conspicuous nonsense, each completely outrageous in its nonsensicality. Considered from whatever point of view – intimately close, infinitely remote, or any position in between – the whole thing has always seemed to be nothing more than some freak accident occurring at a painfully slow rate of speed. At times I have been rendered breathless by the impeccable chaoticism, the absolutely perfect nonsense of some spectacle taking place outside myself, or, on the other hand, some spectacle of equally senseless outrageousness taking place within me. Images of densely twisted shapes and lines arise in my brain. *Scribbles of a mentally deranged epileptic*, I have often said to myself. If I may allow any exception to the outrageously nonsensical condition I have described – and I will allow *none* – this single exception would involve those *visits* which I experienced at scattered intervals throughout my existence, and especially one particular visit that took place in Mr Vizniak's medicine shop.

I was stationed behind the counter at Mr Vizniak's modest establishment very late one night. At that hour there was practically no business at all, none really, given the backstreet location of the shop and its closet-like dimensions, as well as the fact that I kept the place in almost complete darkness both outside and inside. Mr Vizniak lived in a small apartment above the medicine shop, and he gave me permission to keep the place open or close it up as I liked after a certain hour. It seemed that he knew that being stationed behind the counter of his medicine shop at all hours of the night, and in almost complete darkness except for a few lighting fixtures on the walls, provided my mind with some distraction from the outrageous nonsense which might otherwise occupy it. Later events more or less proved that Mr Vizniak indeed possessed a special knowledge and that there existed, in fact, a peculiar sympathy between the old man and myself. Since Mr Vizniak's shop was located on an obscure backstreet, the neighborhood outside was profoundly inactive during the later hours of the night. And since most of the streetlamps in the neighborhood were either broken or defective in some way, the only thing I could see through the small front window of the shop was the neon lettering in the window of the meat store directly across the street. These pale neon letters remained lit throughout the night in the window of the meat store, spelling out three words: beef, pork, goat. Sometimes I would stare at these words and contemplate them until my head became so full of meat nonsense, of beef and pork and goat nonsense, that I had to turn away and find something to occupy myself in the back room of the medicine shop, where there were no windows and thus no possibility of meat-store visions. But once I was in the back room I would become preoccupied with all the medicines which were stored there, all the bottles and jars and boxes upon boxes stacked from floor to ceiling in an extremely cramped area. I had learned quite a bit about these medicines from Mr Vizniak, although I did not have a license to prepare and dispense them to customers without his supervision. I knew which medicines could be used to most easily cause death in someone who had ingested them in the proper amount and proper manner. Thus, whenever I went into the back room to relieve my mind from the meat nonsense brought on by excessive contemplation of the beef-pork-and-goat store, I almost immediately became preoccupied with fatal medicines; in other words, I would then become obsessed with death nonsense, which is one of the worst and most outrageous forms of all nonsense. Usually I would end up retreating to the small lavatory in the back room, where I could collect myself and clear my head before returning to my station behind the counter of Mr Vizniak's medicine shop.

It was there – behind the medicine shop counter, that is – that I experienced one of those *visits*, which I

might have allowed as the sole exception to the intensely outrageous nonsense of my existence, but which in fact, I must say, were the nadir of the nonsensical. This was my *medicine-shop visit*, so called because I have always experienced only a single visitation in any given place – after which I begin looking for a new situation, however similar it may actually be to my old one. Each of my situations prior to Mr Vizniak's medicine shop was essentially a medicine-shop situation, whether it was a situation working as a night watchman who patrolled some desolate property, or a situation as a groundskeeper for a cemetery in some remote town, or a situation in which I spent endless gray afternoons sitting in a useless library or shuffling up and down the cloisters of a useless monastery. All of them were essentially medicine-shop situations, and each of them sooner or later involved a *visit* – either a monastery visit or a library visit, a cemetery visit or a visit while I was delivering packages from one part of town to another in the dead of the night. At the same time there were certain aspects to the medicine-shop visit that were unlike any of the other visits, certain new and unprecedented elements which made this visit unique.

It began with an already familiar routine of nonsense. Gradually, as I stood behind the counter late one night at the medicine shop, the light radiated by the fixtures along the walls changed from a dim yellow to a rich reddish-gold. I have never developed an intuition that would allow me to anticipate when this is going to happen, so that I might say to myself: 'This will be the night when the light changes to reddish-gold. This will be the night of another visit.' In the new light (the rich reddish-gold illumination) the interior of the medicine shop took on the strange opulence of an old oil painting; everything became transformed beneath a thick veneer of gleaming obscurity. And I have always wondered how my own face appears in this new light, but at the time I can never think about such things because I know what is about to happen, and all I can do is hope that it will soon be over.

After the business with the tinted illumination, only a few moments pass before there is an appearance, which means that the visit itself has begun. First the light changes to reddish-gold, then the visit begins. I have never been able to figure out the reason for this sequence, as if there might be a reason for such nonsense as these visits or any particular phase of these visits. Certainly when the light changes to a reddish-gold tint I am being forewarned that an appearance is about to occur, but this has never enabled me to witness the *actual manifestation*, and I had given up trying by the time of the medicine-shop visit. I knew that if I looked to my left, the appearance would take place in the field of vision to my right; conversely, if I focused on the field of vision to my right, the appearance would take place, in no time at all, on my left. And of course if I simply gazed straight ahead, the appearance would take place just beyond the edges of my left or right fields of vision, silently and instantaneously. Only after it had appeared would it begin to make any sound, clattering as it moved directly in front of my eyes, and then, as always happened, I would be looking at a creature that I might say had all the appearances of an antiquated marionette, a puppet figure of some archaic type.

It was almost life-sized and hovered just far enough above the floor of the medicine shop that its face was at the same level as my own. I am describing the puppet creature as it appeared during the medicine-shop visit, but it always took the form of the same antiquated marionette hovering before me in a reddish-gold haze. Its design was that of a clown puppet in pale pantaloons overdressed by a kind of pale smock, thin and pale hands emerging from the ruffled cuffs of its sleeves, and a powder-pale head rising above a ruffled collar. I always found it difficult at first to look directly at the face of the puppet creature whenever it appeared, because the expression which had been created for that face was so simple and bland, yet at the same time so intensely evil and perverse. In the observation of at least one commentator on puppet theater, the expressiveness of a puppet or marionette resides in its arms, hands, and legs, never in its face or head, as is the case with a human actor. But in the case of the puppet thing hovering before me in the medicine shop, this was not true. Its expressiveness was all in that face with its pale and pitted complexion, its slightly

pointed nose and delicate lips, and its dead puppet eyes – eyes that did not seem able to fix or focus themselves upon anything but only gazed with an unchanging expression of dreamy malignance, an utterly nonsensical expression of stupefied viciousness and cruelty. So whenever this puppet creature first appeared I avoided looking at its face and instead looked at its tiny feet which were covered by a pair of pale slippers and dangled just above the floor. Then I always looked at the wires which were attached to the body of the puppet thing, and I tried to follow those wires to see where they led. But at some point my vision failed me; I could visually trace the wires only so far along their neat vertical path . . . and then they became lost in a thick blur, a ceiling of distorted light and shadow that always formed some distance above the puppet creature's head – and my own – beyond which my eyes could perceive no clear image, nothing at all except a vague sluggish movement, like a layer of dense clouds seen from far away through a gloomy reddish-gold twilight. This phenomenon of the wires disappearing into a blur supported my observation over the years that the puppet thing did not have a life of its own. It was solely by means of these wires, in my view, that the creature was able to proceed through its familiar motions. (The term 'motions,' as I bothered myself to discover in the course of my useless research into the subject, was commonly employed at one time, long ago, to refer to various types of puppets, as in the statement: 'The motions recently viewed at St Bartholomew's Fair were engaged in antics of a questionable probity before an audience which might have better profited by deep contemplation of the fragile and uncertain destiny of their immortal souls.') The puppet swung forward toward the counter of the medicine shop behind which I stood. Its body parts rattled loosely and noisily in the late-night quiet before coming to rest. One of its hands was held out to me, its fingers barely grasping a crumpled slip of paper.

Of course I took the tiny page, which appeared to have been torn from an old pad used for writing pharmaceutical prescriptions. I had learned through the years to follow the puppet creature's cues obediently. At one time, years before the visit at the medicine shop, I was crazy or foolish enough to call the puppet and its visits exactly what they were – outrageous nonsense. Right to the face of that clown puppet I said, 'Take your nonsense somewhere else,' or possibly, 'I'm sick of this contemptible and disgusting nonsense.' But this outburst counted for nothing. The puppet simply waited until my foolhardy craziness had passed and then continued through the motions which had been prepared for that particular visit. So I examined the prescription form the creature had passed across the counter to me, and I noticed immediately that what was written upon it was nothing but a chaos of scrawls and scribbles, which was precisely the sort of nonsense I should have expected during the medicine-shop visit. I knew that it was my part to play along with the clown puppet, although I was never precisely certain what was expected of me. From previous experience I had learned that it was futile to guess what would eventually transpire during a particular visit, because the puppet creature was capable of almost anything. For example, once it visited me when I was working through the night at a skid-row pawn shop. I told the thing that it was wasting my time unless it could produce an exquisitely cut diamond the size of a yo-yo. Then it reached under its pale smocklike garment and rummaged about, its hand seeking deep within its pantaloons. 'Well, let's see it,' I shouted at the clown puppet. 'As big as a yo-yo,' I repeated. Not only did it come up with an exquisitely cut diamond that was, generally speaking, as large as a yo-yo, but the object that the puppet thing flashed before my eyes – brilliant in the pawn-shop dimness – was also made in the *form* of a yo-yo . . . and the creature began to lazily play with the yo-yo diamond right in front of me, spinning it slowly on the string that was looped about one of those pale puppet-fingers, throwing it down and pulling it up over and over while the facets of that exquisitely cut diamond cast a pyrotechnic brilliance into every corner of the pawn shop.

Now, as I stood behind the counter of the medicine shop staring at the scrawls and scribbles on that page torn from an old prescription pad, I knew that it was pointless to test the clown puppet in any way or to attempt to guess what would occur during this particular visit, which would be unlike previous visits in

several significant ways. Thus I tried only to play my part, my medicine-shop part, as close as possible to the script that I imagined had already been written, though by whom or what I could have no idea.

‘Could you please show me some proper identification?’ I asked the creature, while at the same time looking away from its pale and pasty clown face and its dead puppet eyes, gazing instead through the medicine-shop window and focusing on the sign in the window of the meat store across the street. Over and over I read the words BEEF-PORK-GOAT, BEEF-PORK-GOAT, filling my head with meat nonsense, which was infinitely less outrageous than the puppet nonsense with which I was now confronted. ‘I cannot dispense this prescription,’ I said while staring out the medicine-shop window. ‘Not unless you can produce proper identification.’ And all the time I had no idea what to do once the puppet thing reached into its pantaloons and came up with what I requested.

I continued to stare out the medicine-shop window and think about the meat nonsense, but I could still see the clown puppet gyrating in the reddish-gold light, and I could hear its wooden parts clacking against one other as it struggled to pull up something that was cached away inside its pantaloons. With stiff but unerring fingers the creature was now holding what looked like a slim booklet of some kind, waving it before me until I turned and accepted the object. When I opened the booklet and looked inside I saw that it was an old passport, a foreign passport with no words that I recognized save those of its rightful owner: Ivan Vizniak. The address below Mr Vizniak’s name was a very old address, because I knew that many years had passed since Mr Vizniak had emigrated from his homeland, opened the medicine shop, and moved into the rooms directly above it. I also noticed that the photograph had been torn away from its designated place in the document belonging to Mr Vizniak.

Nothing like this had ever occurred during one of these puppet visits: no one else had ever been involved in any of the encounters I had had over the years with the clown puppet, and I was now at a loss for my next move. The only thing that occupied my mind was the fact that Mr Vizniak lived in the rooms above the medicine shop, and here in my hands was his passport, which the puppet creature had given me when I asked it to provide some identification so that I could fill the prescription it had given me, or rather, go through the motions of filling such a prescription, since I had no hope of deciphering the scrawls and scribbles on that old prescription form. And all of this was nothing but the most outrageous nonsense, as I well knew from past experience. I was actually on the verge of committing some explosive action, some display of violent hysterics by which I might bring about an end, however unpleasant, to this intolerable situation. The eyes of the puppet creature were so dark and so dead in the reddish-gold light that suffused the medicine shop; its head was bobbing slightly and also quivering in a way that caused my thought processes to race out of control, becoming all tangled in a black confusion. But exactly at the moment when I approached my breaking point, the head of the puppet thing turned away from me and its eyes seemed to be looking toward the curtained doorway that led to the back room of the medicine shop. Then it began to move in the direction of the curtained doorway, its limbs swinging freely with the sort of spastic and utterly mindless gestures of playfulness that only puppets can make. Nothing like this had ever happened before in the course of the creature’s previous visits: it had never left my presence in this manner. And as soon as it disappeared entirely behind the curtain of the doorway leading to the back room, I heard a voice calling to me from the street outside the medicine shop. It was Mr Vizniak. ‘Open the door,’ he said. ‘Something has happened.’

I could see him through the paned windows of the front door, the eyes of his thin face squinting into the dimness of the medicine shop. With his right hand he kept beckoning, as if this incessant gesturing alone could bring me to open the door for him. *Another person is about to enter the place where one of these visits is occurring*, I thought to myself. But there seemed to be nothing I could do, nothing I could say, not with the clown puppet only a few feet away in the back room. I stepped around the counter of the medicine shop, unlocked the front door, and let Mr Vizniak inside. As the old man shuffled in I could see that he was

wearing an old robe with torn pockets and a pair of old slippers.

‘Everything is all right,’ I whispered to him. And then I pleaded: ‘Go back to bed. We can talk about it in the morning.’

But Mr Vizniak seemed to have heard nothing that I said to him. From the moment he entered the medicine shop he appeared to be in some unusual state of mind. His whole manner had lost the vital urgency he displayed when he was rapping at the door and beckoning to me. He pointed one of his pale, crooked fingers upward and slowly gazed around the shop. ‘The light . . . the light,’ he said as the reddish-gold illumination shone on his thin, wrinkled face, making it look as if he were wearing a mask that had been hammered out of some strange metal, some ancient mask behind which his old eyes were wide and bright with fear.

‘Tell me what happened,’ I said, trying to distract him. I had to repeat myself several times before he finally responded. ‘I thought I heard someone in my room upstairs,’ he said in a completely toneless voice. ‘They were going through my things. I thought I might have been dreaming, but I was awake when I heard something going down the stairs. Not footsteps,’ he said. ‘Just something quietly brushing against the stairs. I wasn’t sure. I didn’t come down right away.’

‘I didn’t hear anyone come down the stairs,’ I said to Mr Vizniak, who now seemed lost in a long pause of contemplation. ‘I didn’t see anyone on the street outside. You were probably just dreaming. Why don’t you go back to bed and forget about everything,’ I said. But Mr Vizniak no longer seemed to be listening to me. He was staring at the curtained doorway leading to the back room of the medicine shop.

‘I have to use the toilet,’ he said while continuing to stare at the curtained doorway.

‘You can go back to your room upstairs,’ I suggested.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Back there. I have to use the toilet.’ Then he began shuffling toward the back room, his old slippers lightly brushing against the floor of the medicine shop. I called to him, very quietly, a number of times, but he continued to move steadily toward the back room, as if he were in a trance. In a few moments he had disappeared behind the curtain.

I thought that Mr Vizniak might not find anything in the back room of the medicine shop. I thought that he might see only the bottles and jars and boxes upon boxes of medicines. *Perhaps the visit has already ended*, I thought. It occurred to me that the visit could have ended the moment the puppet creature went behind the curtain of the doorway leading to the back room. I thought that Mr Vizniak might return from the back room, after having used the toilet, and go upstairs again to his rooms above the medicine shop. I thought all kinds of nonsense in the last few moments of that particular visit from the clown puppet.

But in a number of its significant aspects this was unlike any of the previous puppet visits I had experienced. I might even claim that I was not the one whom the puppet creature was visiting on this occasion, or at least not exclusively so. Even though I had always felt that my encounters with the clown puppet were nothing but the most outrageous nonsense, the very nadir of the nonsensical, as I have said, I nonetheless always had the haunting sense of being singled out in some way from all others of my kind, of being *cultivated* for some special fate. But after Mr Vizniak disappeared behind the curtained doorway I discovered how wrong I had been. Who knows how many others there were who might say that their existence consisted of nothing but the most outrageous nonsense, a nonsense that had nothing unique about it at all and that had nothing behind it or beyond it except more and more nonsense – a new order of nonsense, perhaps an utterly unknown nonsense, but all of it nonsense and nothing but nonsense.

Every place I had been in my life was only a place for puppet nonsense. The medicine shop was only a puppet place like all the others. I came there to work behind the counter and wait for my visit, but I had no idea until that night that Mr Vizniak was also waiting for his. Upon reflection, it seemed that he knew what was behind the curtained doorway leading to the back room of the medicine shop, and that he also knew

that there was no longer any place to go except behind that curtain, since any place he went in his life would only be another puppet place. Yet it still seemed he was surprised by what he found back there. And this is the most outrageously nonsensical thing of all – that he should have stepped behind the curtain and cried out with such profound surprise as he did. *You*, he said, or rather cried out. *Get away from me*. These were the last words that I heard clearly before Mr Vizniak's voice faded quickly out of earshot, as though he were being carried away at incredible velocity toward some great height. *Now he would see*, I thought during that brief moment. *Mr Vizniak would see what controlled the strings of the clown puppet*.

When morning finally came, and I looked behind the curtain, there was no one there. I told myself, as if for the sake of reassurance, that I would not be so surprised when my time came. No doubt Mr Vizniak had told himself, at some point in his life, the same, utterly nonsensical thing.