

# Mars Needs Clowns

by **Wrestlr**

[M/M, Sci Fi]

Synopsis: An unemployed clown and a talking monkey from outer space share a long drive to Roswell, New Mexico.

Disclaimer: If you are not of legal age, or if you are offended by sexual situations, go elsewhere. Everybody in the story is legal age. Parts of this story may be autobiographical, or it might be all

fiction--who can say.

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People never ask a clown what he wanted to be when he grew up. The answer's obvious. No one gets kidnapped and forced to join the circus. No, he races to it, called by the smell of hotdogs, fingers craving the sticky pull of taffy, the electric sugar-shock of pink cotton on his tongue. Ask a lawyer, and he'll say when he was a kid he wanted to be an astronaut. Ask an accountant?--he'll say a policeman. But me? I'm a clown; I always wanted to be a

clown; and if I have my way, I'll die a clown.

My name is Augustine D. Osterreich.  
People call me Augie.

"Osterreich"? That came from my father. I never met him so I don't know how he came by it. Mom got the "Augustine" part from this saint she used to read who opined something like: We learn to be humility by being humiliated often. Given that the "D." stands for "Dee" and how easily, and frequently, "Osterreich" gets mispronounced "Ostrich"--well, obviously, my mom obviously wanted her only child to be brimming over with humility. Yep, my mom's a deeply spiritual woman. But enough about her.

This story is mine.

"Augie," said ringmaster-slash-owner Rufus J. Stovewell, shaking his head, "it's just not working out."

I was pushing forty. I'd recently lost weight in a misguided decision to get myself in shape, when everyone knows the kiddies love chubby clowns. I'd also taken up drinking, which did not go over well right before a show. So, I suddenly found myself without a job and without prospects. I headed home, riding into Tacoma by bus on a cold early December night.

Mom met me at the bus depot. She had no business driving at night, but she came

anyhow. She was standing on the sidewalk next to her ancient minivan when she saw me. We hugged.

"I'm glad you're home," she said.

I shoved my bag into the back. "Thanks."

"You hungry?"

"No, not really."

We went to the Midway Diner anyway. Whenever Mom wanted to talk, we went to the Midway. It's where she took me to tell me about the birds and the bees. It's where she took me to tell me my dog had been hit by a car.

"So what will you do now?" She speared

a chunk of turkey, dipped it into her mashed potatoes and gravy, raised it to her mouth.

"I dunno," I said. "I guess maybe I'll quit drinking, fatten up, and get back into the business." I watched her eyebrow twitch-- a sure sign of disapproval. I hefted my double-bacon cheeseburger with extra mayo, then paused. "Why? What do you think I should do?"

She leaned forward and folded her wrinkled hands on the tabletop. Then she smiled. "You've already tried the clown thing, Augie. Why don't you try something different?"

I grinned. "I always wanted to be a



sword-swallower, but you wouldn't let me."

"What about--oh, I don't know ... insurance?"

"Well, it gets steep, Mom. The swords are real."

The eyebrow twitched again. "I'm serious, Augie. Remember Marc Heckler?"

Of course I remembered Marc-with-a-C Heckler. I'd lost my virginity with him back in the eleventh grade. It was my second-biggest defining moment that year. Three days later, Rufus J. Stovewell's Traveling Big Top rolled into town, and my first-biggest defining moment

occurred. They said I was a natural--I had the look and I had the girth; would I be interested in an internship? I left a note for Marc in his mailbox thanking him for everything in great detail, hugged Mom goodbye, and dropped out of high school to join the circus.

Mom was still waiting for my answer. I said, "Yeah, I remember him."

"Well, he's some big-shot at CareTech now."

"So?" I took a bite of my cheeseburger and chewed.

"So I told him you were coming home and asked him to interview you."

I nearly choked. "You what?"

"I asked him to interview you. For a job."

I had no idea what to say.

The next morning, Mom took me to Sears and bought me my first suit in thirty years. That afternoon, she dropped me downtown in front of the CareTech building, waved goodbye, and drove off.

The CareTech building was new. I'd visited Tacoma a few times over the years, had seen buildings come and go, but I never saw anything like this. It looked like a glass Rubik's Cube tilted clumsily in a martini glass full of Jell-O. Inside, each floor took on the color-coding of the

various policies they offered. Life insurance was maroon. Auto, a deep dove gray. I don't remember what color Disability was. Each color had been painstakingly worked out, according to a brass plaque near the door, by a team of leading European corporate psychologists. Supposedly, the color-coding enhanced workers' productivity by reducing the depression inherent in the insurance industry.

While I was reading the plaque, a man walked over to me. He was Californian, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses despite the impending rain. I went back to reading.

"Excuse me," he said.

"Yes?"

"Have you seen a monkey around here?"

I shook my head, not really paying attention to his question. "No. Sorry."

He smiled. "Okay. Thanks anyway."

I went inside. I rode an escalator and two elevators. I talked to four receptionists. I sat in a chair that looked like metal but was actually plastic. I filled out multiple long, complicated application forms.

An hour later, someone took me up into an office at the top of the highest point of the inside of the glass Rubik's Cube.

Marc-with-a-C Heckler looked up. He

smiled until my escort closed the door on her way out.

"Augie D. Ostrich," he said, stretching each syllable.

"Osterreich. Hi, Marc." The view from his office was spectacular. The walls were glass framed in steel, and the city spread out around me in a sweeping arc that pulled at my stomach. The office had a modern-looking desk in the middle of it, two chairs, and a potted plant that might have been plastic.

"I'm surprised to see you again after so long. Back from clowning around?"

"I am," I smiled. "You look good." And he

did. His legs were still long and shoulders still wide, but his hair was cut short--expensive and stylish. He'd traded his vintage Cheap Trick tee-shirt for a crisp blue suit.

He ignored my compliment and pointed to another of those plastic chairs. "Let's get this over with, shall we?"

I sat. He sat. I waited and tried to ignore the places where my wool suit itched urgently.

He studied my application, then he studied me. I waited. Finally, he said, "This interview consists of two questions." He leaned forward, and I realized the button on his suit coat had popped open,

revealing more pectoral development than I remembered him having. "First question: Do you remember when you left for the circus, three days after our ... special moment?" He made little quote marks in the air when he said *special*.

I nodded. "I do. I left you a note." I grinned. "I even said thank you, in some detail."

Marc nodded, too. "Second question: Did you ever stop to think that maybe, just maybe, my father would be the one getting the mail?" He stood and pushed a button on his desk. I stood, too. "Thank you for coming, Mister Ostrich. Bernice will show you out." He extended his hand. I shook it, and it was cold.



Later, I was at the Midway Diner, working on my third bowl of ice cream and looking over a brochure on The Twelve Steps, when his assistant called with the offer.

\* \* \*

I wasn't sure I'd heard him right.

"It's easy," Marc Heckler repeated. "I want you to drive a monkey to our branch office in New Mexico."

"That's my job?"

He nodded. "Yes. And if you don't fuck it up, there'll be another."

"Another monkey?"

"No," he said. "Another job. This monkey's one of a kind."

"You're sure you don't want me to just drive him to the airport and put him on a plane?"

"I'm absolutely sure."

I should've asked why but didn't. I needed a job. "Okay. When do I leave?"

"As soon as you get your mom's car." He noticed my open mouth. "This monkey," he said, "needs as much anonymity as possible."

"I'll be traveling with an incognito monkey in a twenty-year-old minivan?"

"Yes. You'd better get changed."

"Changed?" I knew I'd worn the suit two days in a row, but I figured the first day didn't really count.

"You can't wear that. What would a guy in a suit need with a monkey? I need a clown for this one."

I was opening my mouth to question all of this when Bernice came in with a thick envelope. Marc took it, opened it, and started ruffling through the hundred-dollar bills.

"I'll get changed, get the car, and be back in an hour," I said.

Marc smiled. It was a sweet smile, one

that reminded me of oldies rock music and his parents' ratty couch. "Thanks, Augie."

\* \* \*

The monkey and I drove southeast, zigzagging highways across Washington, crossing over the Cascades into colder, dryer parts of the state. There was little snow on the pass. The miles went by quickly.

The monkey was in an aluminum crate with little round holes in it. They'd loaded him into the back in their underground parking garage. Two men in dark suits stood by the door, watching.

"You shouldn't need anything else, Augie,"

Marc said. "He's heavily sedated. He ought to sleep all the way through."

I looked at the map, tracing my finger along the route he'd marked in blue highlighter. "That's around seventeen hundred miles, Marc." I did the math in my head. "It'll take at least two days, even if I really push it."

"Just take his crate into your hotel room. Discreetly, Augie." He smiled again. "He'll be fine. You'll be fine, too."

Naturally, I'd said okay, climbed into the minivan, and set out for Roswell, New Mexico.

When we crossed into Oregon, the monkey

woke up. I knew this because he asked me for a cigarette.

I swerved onto the shoulder, stomping the brakes with one clown-shoed foot while hyperventilating.

"Just one," he said. "Please?"

I couldn't get out of the car fast enough. After a few minutes of pacing by the side of the road, convincing myself that it was the result of quitting the booze cold turkey, I poked my head back into the car.

"Did you say something?" I asked, holding my breath.

Silence.

Releasing my breath, I climbed back into the car. "I didn't think so." I started the car back up, eased it onto the road. I laughed at myself. "Talking monkeys," I said, shaking my head.

"Monkeys can't talk," the monkey said. Then he yawned loudly.

I braked again.

He chuckled. "Look, pal, I'm no monkey. I just play one on television."

I glanced up into the rearview mirror. A single dark eye blinked through one of the holes. "Really?"

He snorted. "No. I don't. Where are we going?"

"Roswell, New Mexico."

"And what does that tell you?"

I shrugged. "You got me."

"Let's just say, I'm not from around here."

"Where are you from?" But it was sinking in. Of course, I didn't believe it. I laid aside the *cold turkey alcohol withdrawal* theory at this point and wondered if maybe I should be leaning more toward a *psychotic break* theory. "Are you from Mars?"

"No, I am definitely not from that filthy little rock you call Mars."

"Then where ...?"



"Unimportant. But I'm not a monkey."

"Okay."

"How about you let me out of this box and give me a cigarette?"

"I don't smoke."

"Then stop somewhere. A gas station."

I looked back at the crate in the rearview mirror. "For someone who's not from around here, you sure know an awful lot." More suspicion followed. "And you speak English pretty good, too."

"Well," the monkey corrected. "I speak it *well*. I may not be from here, but I've certainly spent enough time on this little

mud-ball you call home."

"Really?" Definitely a psychotic break. I needed medication. Maybe psychotherapy, too. "What brings you out this way?"

"I'm a spy."

"A monkey spy?"

"Didn't we already establish that I'm not a monkey?"

"So ... you just look like one?" I gradually gave the minivan some gas and we slipped back onto the highway.

"Exactly."

"Why?"

"I have no idea. You'd have to ask my boss."

I pushed the minivan back up to seventy-five, watching for road signs and wondering if any of the little towns out here had a psychiatrist who'd take walk-ins. "Where's your boss?"

"Don't know," the monkey said. "I gave him the slip when I defected."

"You defected?"

"Of course I defected."

"Why?"

"Got a better offer."

It went on like that. We made small talk, and Oregon turned into Idaho. I never asked his name; he never offered. I found a Motel Six outside Boise and, after paying, hauled his crate into the room.

"So, are you going to let me out?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," I told him.

"Well, can you at least get us a pizza? And some beer?"

"Pizza, yes," I said. "Beer, no." I called it in and channel-surfed until it arrived.

The holes presented a problem. And I couldn't just eat in front of him. I went to open the crate.

It was locked. One of those high-powered combination jobs.

"Odd, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I said, "a bit."

He sighed. "I'm sure it's for my own protection."

"Or mine," I said.

He chuckled. "Yeah, I'm quite a badass, as you can see."

I picked up the phone and called Marc. He'd given me his home number. "Hey," I said.

"Augie. What's up?"

"Well, I'm in Boise."

"How's the package?"

"Fine. But ..." I wasn't sure what to say.

"But what?"

"Well, I went to check on the monkey, and the crate's locked. What's the combination?"

"Is the monkey awake?" Marc sounded alarmed.

I looked at the crate, at the eye peeking out. "Uh. No. I don't think so."

"Has anything"--he paused, choosing the word carefully--"*unusual* happened?"

I nearly said, *You mean like a talking space alien disguised as a monkey?*

Instead, I said, "No. Not really." I knew I needed more or he wouldn't believe me. "Well, the guy at the front desk looked at me a bit funny."

"What did he look like?"

"Old. Bored. Like he didn't expect to see a clown standing in his lobby."

"I'm sure he's fine."

I nodded, even though Marc couldn't see me. "So, about that combination?"

"You don't need it, Augie. Call me when you get to Roswell." The phone clicked, and he was gone.

In the morning, I loaded the monkey back into the car and we pointed ourselves toward Utah. We picked up our earlier conversation.

"So you defected? To an insurance company?" But I knew what he was going to say.

"That's not an insurance company."

"Government?"

"You'd know better than I would," he said. "I was asleep through most of that bit."

"But you're the one who defected."



He laughed. "I didn't defect to *them*."

"You didn't?"

"No. Of course not. Do you think I want to be locked in a metal box in the back of a minivan on my way to Roswell, New Mexico, with an underweight clown who doesn't smoke?"

I shrugged. "Then what?"

"There was a guy. He was supposed to meet me in Tacoma before your wacky friends got me with tranq darts in the old tag and bag' routine. He represents certain other interested parties. He worked up an incognito gig for me in exchange for some information on my previous employers."

My eyebrows furrowed. "Other interested parties?"

"Let's just say your little mud-ball is pretty popular these days. Did you really think the all those cattle mutilations, abductions, anal probes, and crop circles were done by the same little green spacemen?"

"I never thought about it before."

"Space is pretty big, and everyone has their schtick."

I nodded. "Okay. That makes sense, I guess." Except for the part where I was still talking to a monkey and he was talking back. It was quiet now. The minivan rolled easy along the highway.

"Sure could use a cigarette."

"Those things'll kill you."

"Jury's still out on that," the monkey said.

"I'm not exactly part of your collective gene pool." He paused. "Besides, I'm pretty sure it won't matter."

"It won't?"

"What do you think they're going to do to me in Roswell?"

The monkey had a point. The next truck stop, I pulled off and went inside. I came out with a pack of Marlboros and pushed one through the little hole. He reversed it, pointing an end out to me so I could light it. He took a long drag. "That's nice," he

said. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Suddenly my shoulders felt heavy. As much as I knew that there was something really wrong with me, some wire that had to be burned out in my head, I felt sad. Something experimental and bad was probably going to happen to this monkey. And whether or not he deserved it, I had a role in it. I didn't like that at all.

*Have you seen a monkey around here,* the California-Tan Man had asked me two days ago in front of the CareTech building.

I looked up. "Hey. I saw that guy. The one in Tacoma. What was the gig he had for

you? A witness protection type thing?"

"Sort of. Lay low, stay under everyone's radar."

*Where would a monkey lay low*, I asked myself. "Like what?" I said. "A zoo?"

"Screw zoos. A concrete cage and a tire swing? Who wants that?"

"What then?"

Cigarette smoke threaded out of the holes in his crate. "It's not important. Really."

"Come on. Tell me." But I knew now. Of course I knew. How could I not? I waited for him to say it anyway.

"Well," the monkey said, "ever since I landed on this mud-ball, I've wanted to join the circus."

*Exactly*, I thought, and I knew what I had to do.

"I'll be right back," I said. I got out of the car and walked around the truck stop. It didn't take long to find what I was looking for. The guy had a mullet and a pickup truck. In the back of the pickup truck window was a rifle rack. And in the rifle rack, a rifle. Hunting season or not, this was Idaho.

I pulled that wad of bills from my wallet, and mullet-guy's eyes went wide. He'd probably never seen a clown with so

much determination in his stride and cash in his fist. I bought that rifle from him, drove out into the middle of nowhere, and on my third try shot the lock off that crate.

When the door opened, a small, hairy hand reached out, followed by a slender, hairy arm, hairy torso, hairy face. He didn't quite look like a monkey, but he was close enough. He smiled, his three black eyes shining like pools of oil. Then, the third eye puckered in on itself and disappeared. "I should probably try to fit in," he said.

"Do you want me to drop you anywhere?" I asked him.

"I think I'll walk. Stretch my legs a bit."

"Suit yourself."

We shook hands. I gave him the pack of the cigarettes, the lighter, and all but two of the remaining hundred dollar bills.

"I'll see you around," I said.

\* \* \*

I didn't call Marc until I got back to Tacoma. When I did, I told him what happened--well, my version about what happened. And I didn't feel bad about it, either. He'd tried to use me in a plot against a fellow circus aficionado.

"I've never seen anything like it," I said.  
"We were just outside of Boise, early in the morning, and there was this light in the



sky." I threw in a bit about missing time and how I thought something invasive and wrong might've happened to me.

I told him they also took the monkey.

He insisted that I come over right away. He and his husband had a big house overlooking the water and, when I got there, Marc was already pretty drunk. I'm a weak man. I joined him, and we polished off a bottle of tequila. His husband was out of town on business, and somehow Marc and I ended up having sex on the leather couch in his den. It was better than the last time, but still nothing compared to a high-wire trapeze act, or a lion tamer, or an elephant that can dance.

Still, I didn't complain. At the time, it was nice.

Three days later, my phone rang.

"Augie D. Osterreich?" a familiar voice asked.

"Yes?"

"I need a clown for my act."

"Does it involve talking monkeys?" I asked, grinning.

"Monkeys can't talk," the monkey said.

So I wrote Marc a note, thanking him in great detail for the other night. After putting it in his mailbox, I took a leisurely

stroll down to the bus station.

When the man at the ticket counter asked me where I was headed, I smiled. "The greatest show on earth," I said. And I knew he understood because he smiled back.

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