

# The Thickness of Clown Blood

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1

Despite the weather, Uncle Horace's funeral proceeded solemnly. Knots of earth landed on the casket, and the mourners began to trade thrifty, impatient condolences. They wanted to leave before the sky let loose again.

In her blue dress coat, jeweled with rain, a nervous young woman named Jill stood apart. Her arms were folded, her brown hair was plastered to her cheeks, and her mind was traveling back to the day when, as a five-year-old girl, she'd taken refuge in this cemetery after a game of rock tag with her cousins (they'd all been "it," and she hadn't) had turned into a hunt.

Condolences concluded, the mourners started en masse for the gate, their umbrellas bobbing. Every umbrella in the funeral party was black except for a comical orange one. It belonged to the fiancée of Horace's half-brother, Jason.

Jill hurried ahead. She reached the cars first and waited, hugging herself and squinting through the rain at her old tormentors. Games with her cousins, all of whom were female, had been common in her early childhood. At six, she'd tripped while fleeing her cousin Nancy—the family darling and a ferocious biter—and sustained a head injury. The result was minor facial paralysis, still apparent now, years later, in the crookedness of Jill's smile.

As her relatives assembled at the gate and struck up spirited arguments about who would ride in which car, Jill studied a dead worm in a puddle. When the rain ended, she thought, the ants would come out to feast. "Not in my car," Nancy told the shy, gawky daughter of a family friend. "Your breath is an atrocity. Clean your braces."

Then, without preamble, the sky opened and unearthly sunlight spilled onto the world, a reminder that behind the yeasty clouds

drifted unseen bodies: a moon, a sun, a far-strewn collection of glimmering planets.

Just as quickly, the sky closed again and it started to rain. Jill buried her hands in her pockets and hunched against the downpour. Soon she would have to tell her family about all that inheritance money. That it didn't exist.

## 2

The orange umbrella trembled as they drove. A moth caroused among the headrests, sometimes reeling with a soft thud against a window.

Jill sat in the cramped back seat with her knees drawn up. She was twenty years old, long-limbed and awkward. Veins of water wobbled across the glass. She watched a black mare galloping idiotically in a field.

Her uncle Jason was driving; his fiancée Gloria sat beside him. (It was her umbrella vibrating and shedding water on the seat beside Jill.) Jason was the only surviving relative whose company Jill found tolerable.

Other carloads heading to the reception at Grandma's house were visible ahead. Jill imagined a whole caravan of her relatives swept away by a flash flood, shouting indignantly in protest. The procession cruised past wet farmland. An obese robin on a fence reshuffled its damp wings.

At his death, Uncle Horace had been fifty-nine and grossly overweight. The pores in his spongy nose were dark and dilated, and long-broken veins in his cheeks had blurred like peach and burgundy watercolors. His fortune had been made at forty, when investments in a brewery and several shaving companies skyrocketed, and he hadn't worked for the past nineteen years. Dividends and further investments had sustained a cheerful lifestyle of gluttony, sightseeing, and sex tourism, but that died down in his early fifties. In the last years before his death, he rarely left the massive, ramshackle

house on Cullen Street where most mornings he could be seen on the porch, his fleshy lips crushing one end of a Rothschild cigar.

Horace had loved Jill, a girl whose intelligence hid behind shyness and suspicion. When Jill was eleven, she'd been assigned by a coalition of relatives (her father was dead, and her mother was a creature of almost Platonic meekness) to read to Horace after an incident involving a rabbit, a priest, and a Roman candle left him temporarily blind. His eyesight, following surgery, returned within a month, but in the meantime an odd friendship had flowered. In the freckled, bespectacled sixth-grader, the old man saw a kindred mind.

Uncle Horace loved jokes and pranks. "Sometimes you'll hear a jackass say that life's a joke and death is the punch line," he told her, "but no. Life's the punch line. And if you know the joke, you're not fucking around here anymore."

At that age, Jill had been shy and morose: eyes cast downward, shoulders hunched. But sometimes a vein of lively perversity was uncovered. Horace first recognized it when, one Sunday, Jill walked out on his porch and told a pack of adolescent boys (the sort who taunt an old man by ringing his doorbell and running away—again and again, with autistic fixedness of mind) that a stack of old porno magazines in the crawlspace could be theirs; all they had to do was wriggle under the brittle, half-rotted porch beams and retrieve the stack. The wasp stings they suffered were terrible.

Jill kept visiting Horace after his sight returned. His personality had contained great mirth but also grotesque misery. When depressed, he usually found excuses to dissuade her from visiting, but now and then she did spend an afternoon with him while he never moved from a huge red armchair, which sat, illogically, in his kitchen; he would stare with swampy eyes at the dirty dishes, then warn her away with a low moan when she tried to wash them.

Her other aunts and uncles had assigned her to Uncle Horace as punishment for being taciturn and morose (unlike her pretty, crystalline cousins), so it unnerved them that she and Horace

formed an alliance. Gradually, with a kind of horrible cosmic giggle in the background, the consequence dawned on them: Jill was going to inherit his money.

Once this realization spread through the ranks of the family, resentment began to build among her cousins. They glared and plotted.

Jill had eight cousins, all female, ranging in age from fifteen to twenty-three. Thin-legged, pert-breasted girls. She had childhood memories of being stabbed with pencils, menaced with dead mice.

Two years ago, Horace had gone to the hospital for a heart murmur. It was nothing, but other problems, advanced and severe, were discovered, and he was given eight months to live. Horace was stoic, having never attached much inherent meaning to life ("What other game do you play without knowing the rules?"), but the diagnosis prompted a reevaluation of strategy by Jill's cousins. They began to smile and extend invitations to Jill. Some asked if they could come with her to visit Horace. But she was evasive—and the longer Horace outlived his expiration date, the hotter grew the cousins' stifled rage. And yet the rage *remained* stifled, so Jill had had a two-year grace period.

Which was over. She'd met with the lawyer yesterday—alone, because the inheritance was in an inter vivos trust (which, unlike a will that would have to pass through probate, was sealed)—and learned there was almost no money left. The house was being donated to a historical society, and twenty thousand sat in a regular trust fund in case Jill ever went to college, but the rest of the wealth had been distributed to nonprofit causes such as marijuana legalization or the preservation of historic drinking establishments. The trust now contained less than six thousand dollars. "Carnegie was onto something," Uncle Horace had said. "It's a sin to die rich."

Tomorrow, at her half-blind grandmother's house, a less official meeting would be held. It had been arranged by her Uncle Curtis, and its purpose was for the family to interrogate Jill about what she intended to do with her new fortune. They had very specific ideas, in

fact, about what she should do—about what would be the *fair* thing to do.

A week earlier, Jill had rung Uncle Horace's doorbell. No answer. Unlocking the front door with her extra key, she entered the house. She found him in the kitchen.

He was slumped in the red armchair, eyes closed, swollen hands dangling over the sides. His mouth hung half-open, the tongue still moist. She approached in silence, afraid to disturb the sanctity of death. When she was two feet away, his eyes popped open and he gave a delighted cough.

Irritated, she made him lunch. By the time she left, around mid-afternoon, he was hungry again and waiting for the delivery boy from Steve's Pizza.

What happened after that could be reconstructed. The boy arrived. Horace paid for his meatball grinder and took it upstairs, probably gripping the railing and wheezing. He turned on the stereo. Then, for some reason, he went to the large open window that faced across the street. Perhaps he wanted to reach up and lower the blinds. He set the meatball grinder, foil-wrapped, on the windowsill—and immediately jostled it with his belly. The grinder went tumbling down the short, sloping roof until it was caught precariously in the rain gutter.

Probably he laughed. Two neighbors observed what happened next. First, Horace's head emerged from the window, peering down like a large curious bear at his sandwich. Then the rest of him began to emerge. Finally his whole body was out on the slanting roof. Kneeling, he began to crawl toward his prize. The drop to the concrete below was twenty-some feet, and the enthralled neighbors could surely imagine Horace tumbling through the air and bursting on the sidewalk like a ripe tomato. Sweat was visible on his wide, bald forehead. Suddenly he lost traction, and with a surprised, wistful expression, slid face-first toward death—then caught his palm on the rain gutter, stopping his descent. Groping sideways, he fished the grinder off a bed of wet brown leaves. Then he edged backward

to the window, got to his feet, and eased himself laboriously through it. The disappointed neighbors turned away.

Inside, judging from how the body had been found, Horace must have unwrapped the meatball grinder, taken a bite, and begun to choke. He probably convulsed on the rug for a little while, clawing at his throat, before he died. A day later, his stockbroker, concerned that he wasn't answering the phone and knowing the condition of his health, called the police, who found his corpse.

Jill remembered feeling bemused when she'd seen him in his casket, covered up with makeup, a solemn expression painted on his face. A parody of her uncle. It had been, for a moment, as if she were laughing *with* him.

The post-funeral procession turned onto a different road, and the town of North Bend, Pennsylvania, came into view. Red and tan buildings crouched under a swollen sky. Jill sighed. Uncle Jason, an amiable high school dropout who possessed encyclopedic knowledge of obscure trivia, was humming the music from *The Shining*. His fiancée Gloria picked at one eyelid with an uneven, badly painted fingernail. In a few minutes, they'd be at the reception.

On the back of Gloria's headrest, the rust-colored moth landed, shrugged damp silk wings, and grew still. Jill watched it, and thunder grumbled in the west.

### 3

They parked outside a squat two-story house on a street residential enough to have fire hydrants but rural enough to lack sidewalks. A caterer's green minivan sat in the drive.

Jill got out. Uncle Jason was helping Gloria gather her things. Purse, umbrella, overfed self. "I hate being crammed in that silly little car," she complained. "It inflames my knees."

Inside the house, plates of food were being set out on the dining room table. Family members streamed in behind Jill, shedding wet coats. Caterers peeled cellophane skins off potato salad, deviled eggs,

miniature quiches.

The room was filling up. Turning abruptly, Jill fled into the nearest bathroom and locked the door. She sat on the edge of the bathtub and calmed herself with a daydream of her cousin Nancy being torn apart by wild dogs.

Back in the dining room, she loaded a black plastic plate with meats and cheese. A yapping pink poodle dashed between her feet. She moved to the far side of the room, slid open the glass doors, and stepped out on the patio. Uncle Jason was sitting under a porch umbrella at the deck table, cheerfully smoking a cigarette and whistling what sounded like a funeral march. He was a stocky, red-haired, oblivious man, half-bald before forty.

"Weather's not too bad," he said, flicking ash at the drizzle.

"Can I stay out here with you a little while?" she said, joining him, smiling her crooked smile. She glanced through the glass at her cousins, who were nibbling little pyramids of grapefruit and watching her.

"Of course."

"Somebody told me you and Gloria set the wedding date," she said after a moment.

Jason turned his eyes to the glass doors, through which Gloria was visible, talking to three cowed-looking children. Distant relatives.

"October 8," he said. "Look at her. So good with kids. You know she's a professional clown?"

"What?"

"Yep. She does birthdays. The whole thing, it's a big part of her life. Clowns have their own subculture, you know."

Rain dripped through a hole in the umbrella and delivered a cold slap to Jill's arm. "They do?"

"Oh, sure. They have clown college, clown courts, clown weddings—clown funerals." Uncle Jason opened his arms to express the richness of clown society.

"Are *you* going to have a clown wedding?" she said.

He shrugged. "If she wants."

"Ha," she said. "You're pulling my leg, right? Clown courts? What, do they murder each other? Are there clown mafiosi?"

"No. The courts are for civil disputes."

Jill nodded, distracted by the fact that her cousin Lucy was standing inches from the glass, staring at her. The seventeen-year-old girl's gaze was nakedly greedy.

"As for mafias," continued Jason, "no, there aren't enough clowns. And they wouldn't want to hurt each other, anyway. They're good people. Loyal. They live by a code."

"Honor among clowns?" A faltering wind started up, tugging at loose tufts of sky.

"Baby, clown blood is not only thicker than water, it's thicker than your regular old family blood, too," Jason said, leaning forward. "Let me tell you about something. A couple years back there was this young guy—in high school—by the name of Bobo. I mean, that was his clown name. Now, to become a clown you do three years of training. Bobo was finishing his third year, and everyone could tell he was gonna make a great clown. As they tell it—I didn't know him myself—he was a good kid, but shy. So in high school, he was at the bottom of the food chain.

"One guy in particular—a backup football quarterback, I think—had it in for Bobo. Really didn't like him. Would leave road kill on his lawn. TP his house. Stuff like that. Now, Bobo was like any other kid—he wanted a girlfriend. In fact, he had a thing for a cheerleader. One of those girls with blond highlights and probably a butterfly tattoo on her ass. Not likely, right?

"But he went after her. He'd hear about parties and show up. Funny thing, though, he was so shy, he'd come decked out in full costume. Makeup. Curly wig. Big red nose. Silk polka-dot suit. And he'd follow the chick around. At first people couldn't figure out who he was, but finally somebody recognized him. Once that happened, they made Bobo's life hell. But he wouldn't give up.

"So one night, Bobo comes to a party. In costume, like always. He follows the chick around, watching her get drunk—by now she hardly notices, he's been doing this for a month—and when she collapses in the kitchen pantry, Bobo slips in after her. He's drunk, too. He sits down on the pantry floor, under the cereal and Quaker Oats, and spills out his heart. He's in love. Will she be his girlfriend? The chick just laughs and gets up to tell everyone that the clown tried to get with her.

"Now, this quarterback guy is at the party, too. And it rubs him the wrong way that Bobo's got the nerve to do that. That Bobo'd even *think* he's got a chance. It *disgusts* him. So he rounds up some friends, and they catch Bobo on the lawn as he's leaving. They're just planning to mess with him a little, but Bobo's so worked up that he lets loose, tells them in no uncertain terms what assholes they are. Somebody hits Bobo in the stomach and they drag him to the backup quarterback's car, this tiny two-door Honda hatchback. Five other guys get in that car with Bobo.

"They take him for a ride down some back roads. They take turns punching him. They rub makeup in his eyes. They toss his wig out the window and rip holes in the silk costume. After they get tired, they decide to dump him somewhere. Now, they happen to be passing a farmer's property where there's a lake. So they drag Bobo out on the pier and toss him in the drink. Then they stand and laugh for almost five minutes before they notice Bobo hasn't come up.

"Turns out Bobo was so drunk, and his costume weighed him down so much, that when he got tangled with an old piece of farm machinery at the bottom of the lake, he couldn't get free. So Bobo died.

"No question who did it, right? The five guys get charged with manslaughter. But Bobo's friends—not his friends in high school, he didn't have any, but his *clown* friends—aren't satisfied. They're pissed. Bobo was one of them."

"So what'd they do?" Jill asked.

"Shortly after Bobo's funeral, they track down this backup quarterback. Now, this guy doesn't know from clowns. He doesn't know there's a whole other world, this whole culture. So he's not expecting anything. One morning, he steps outside on his porch and sees his dog, this big rottweiler, hogtied on the lawn, painted orange, with a big bowtie around its neck."

"That was their revenge for the murder?"

"He's totally bewildered. No idea what it means. Then, the next night, he hears pebbles against his window. He looks out and sees this Marilyn Monroe blonde, wearing all pink—pink lipstick, pink dress, pink shoes. She's beckoning. He gets all excited. So he tiptoes downstairs and comes out on the porch in his shorts—and sees, down the street, the same woman standing beside a tiny pink car, a Gremlin. Beckoning. She hops in the Gremlin and starts driving away, but real, *reeeeea*/slow. He dashes back inside, grabs his keys, and follows her in his car. She leads him to a motel and disappears into the last room down. The backup quarterback hurries after her and throws open the door—and sees this little pink cannon aimed at his legs. It fires. His left leg gets ripped off from the knee down. As he's on the floor screaming, a couple of clowns with huge painted grins come out of the bathroom and reload the cannon. They wheel it over to him, aim it from inches away, and blast his other leg off too. Then they squirt him in the eyes with seltzer and they all prance away and jump in the Gremlin."

"What?" said Jill.

Jason leaned forward. "Jill, this is all true. That kid has artificial legs now. I mean, you don't mess around with these guys. They're absolutely hard core. Real clowns are fucking *tough*."

With a wet squeal, the patio doors opened, and four cousins—Haley, Lucy, Lindsey, and Nancy, the oldest and most deadly—came out dragging folding chairs, which they arranged around the table, two on each side of Jill. They sat. Jill shut her eyes and imagined four separate claws of lightning coming down from the sky and exploding through her cousins' spinal cords, the smell of burnt makeup

filling the air.

"Jill, you all right?" Nancy asked. "You haven't said a word to us all day."

"It must be tough," added Haley.

"After all," offered Lucy, "you were closest to him."

"Maybe," said Nancy, "you have some things you'd like to get off your chest."

Muttering an excuse, Jill rose and fled for the house.

She went through the kitchen, where a forlorn, barely adolescent girl lurked with a hand pressed over her mouth, to the living room. Near the door, Uncle Conrad was putting on his coat, but a red scarf had gotten tangled inside and he was extracting it methodically from his sleeve. There was a woman sitting alone on a love seat who seemed so pallid and indistinct she might have been a ghost. That was Jill's mother.

Jill went into the hall and climbed the stairs. Voices, tinged with threat, rose behind her. She dashed into the upstairs bathroom and locked it. Twilight was hours away.

She leaned against the mold-freckled wallpaper, anxious and furious. She extracted from the pocket of her coat a flattened, tightly wrapped plastic bag and a paper pouch. Rolling a joint, she lit it with a match from the cabinet. After a few drags, her fury turned to paranoia. Below her—all around her—voices were getting louder.

It wasn't difficult to shove the bathroom window open. Jill wriggled out and dropped a stomach-wrenching ten feet to the swampy lawn. A moment later she had staggered off into the gray rain, clutching her ankle.

#### 4

Jill rose from her bed in the darkness of 4:30 A.M. and limped to the kitchen, where she drank water and paced back and forth, barefoot on the linoleum. Outside, the sky was indigo.

The impending family meeting weighed on her thoughts. It

already had the amputated, totemic quality of a bad memory. She envisioned herself back in her grandmother's living room, surrounded by glaring cousins and their parents. Hemmed in, defenseless.

Pacing the dark kitchen, she became hungry. She took a frankfurter from the freezer and put it in the toaster oven. She took out her sizzling frankfurter, now bursting down the sides, and put it in a bun. Then she slathered it with ketchup and thick gray mustard, and also relish, mayonnaise, soy sauce, jalapeño salsa, and sugar.

While she wolfed the frankfurter, she went into the living room and stood by the picture window. Red-gold bands now streaked the sky. She licked her fingers and stood very still. The sun brimmed over the town of North Bend like a marvelous, unexpected gift.

People and things entered her mind like a softly glowing parade. Bobo, mooning away behind red nose and makeup. Uncle Horace chuckling as he told a joke, eyes brightening at the punch line. The hidden world of the clowns.

An absurd idea came to Jill, vague but slowly taking shape. She sat down on the couch. It smelled like cigar smoke.

Over the next hour, as Jill sat quietly thinking—*could* it work?—the town came to life. Across the street, a robed neighbor emerged to pluck his newspaper from the gardenias. Blinds rose. A small, fat dog barked. Seven o'clock passed; eight o'clock approached.

Jill made two phone calls. The first was to Uncle Jason, whose eight-in-the-morning voice could only be described as bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. She asked and got permission to use his apartment, even though he was leaving shortly to be at a comic book convention when it opened.

The second call was to Uncle Curtis's house. It rang seventeen times before he picked up, hoarse and phlegmy.

"Who's this?"

"It's Jillian, Uncle Curtis. Can I talk to Nancy?"

"She's 'sleep."

"Can you wake her up, please? It's about the meeting this morning, about Uncle Horace's money—and it's *very* important."

At once, he hurried off and, moments later, Nancy's wary, sleepy voice came on the line. Jill told her that the meeting would be at Uncle Jason's apartment. And only cousins should come.

Nancy's voice grew high. "But this is a *family* meeting. *Everybody* has a right to know what you're going to do with that money. You can't decide who—"

"You're right," said Jill. "Anybody can go to Grandma's if they want. But I won't be there. *I'm* going to be at Jason's, and if any other aunts or uncles show up, or anybody else besides the eight of you, I'm leaving. Ten o'clock. There'll be a key on the ledge above the door, so the first person there will have to let herself in. Make sure you tell the others." She hung up.

The morning crept on, holding its breath. At twenty to ten, Jill put on her coat and limped out to the car. The lawn squelched with yesterday's rain.

She drove through North Bend and stopped at the gas station for coffee. A bleary cashier with flecks of carrot-colored nail polish on his fingernails took her cash as two athletes by the candy rack shared obscene knowledge of her cousin Lucy. "Fat red caterpillars," one of them said.

At five after ten, she parked outside Jason's building and walked, coffee in hand, into the small dark vestibule, where she typed the building code. There was a click; she entered the staircase and went up to the second floor.

She knocked on Jason's door and sipped coffee. Feet padded to the door and Lucy appeared, looking tense. She was the palest of them all, and her lips were very red. Jill followed her down the hall to a tiny kitchen.

Lindsey, Stephanie, Sophie, Kerry, Kelli, Haley, and Nancy were waiting there, arranged like dolls of slightly different sizes. They stared at Jill with a blend of fear and resentment.

"I'd like to sit," she said.

Reluctantly, pinched by others, shy Stephanie gave up her chair.



"What's the point of this?" sniffled Kelli, who was twenty-two. She had a cold and her nose was dripping. "We *said* we were going to meet at Grandma's. Everyone's there."

"Well, this has nothing to do with them," Jill said, sipping her coffee.

"You know," Sophie said accusingly, "Grandma can't use her upstairs bathroom. *Somebody* locked the door from the inside. *Somebody's* going to have get a stepladder and go in through the window."

"We should be at Grandma's," Kelli persisted. "This is important to the *whole family*."

"I disagree. But let me tell you about the money and all that." They leaned forward.

"It's too much money for me by myself," Jill said. "I decided that—"

"So you really got the money?" demanded Nancy with horror. "You? All of it? *How much money is it?*"

"—I decided that I'm going to give it away."

"To who?" Nancy cried.

"To us?" Haley asked so hopefully it was touching.

"Let me finish. There's twenty thousand in a trust fund for me, and the rest of it—"

"How much is the rest of it?" Lindsey hissed.

"Let me finish. I've decided to give the whole bundle to just *one* of you."

There was hot, uneasy silence.

"One of us?" repeated Lucy.

"Well, the one who gets it can distribute it any way she wants." Some of the cousins sneaked glances at each other, but no eyes met. "On the other hand, whoever it is could decide to keep it all for herself."

"But ... is that really fair?" ventured Stephanie. Among the eight, she was lowest in the pecking order. "I mean, I'd rather we *all* just have a share—"

"Shut up," Nancy said. She leaned forward more. "*Which* one of us?"

"Well, that's the thing, Nance. I haven't decided. Now, this is all unofficial, of course, completely my idea. What I've decided to do is have a competition. A game—where the winner gets the money." Jill folded her hands and smiled. "Of course, you don't *have* to be part of it. If you don't think it's worth it, sit out. And if nobody wants the money, I'll keep it. No hard feelings."

Her cousins stared.

"Let's have a show of hands," she said. "Who's in?"

Slowly, Nancy said, "What are the rules?"

"Show of hands," Jill repeated. "So I know if it's even worth going any further."

For a moment, no one moved. Then Nancy raised her hand, glancing around in the desperate hope that no others would follow. Six more hands rose. After a further pause, Stephanie added hers.

"Oh, good," said Jill. "Looks like you're all interested in the money, after all. Well, the more, the merr—"

"*What* are the *rules* to this *game*?" Nancy managed to say, her voice approaching combustion temperature.

"Part of the game," said Jill, "is figuring out the rules of the game. That's the biggest part."

"What's the other part?" Haley asked.

"I can't tell you any more, because it would mean giving away the rules—which you have to figure out. But you'll be competing against each other. You aren't allowed to team up, and only one person eventually gets the money. Of course, you can divide it up after you get it—there's enough to go around, isn't there?—which would be the *fair* thing to do. Wouldn't it?"

Kerry cocked her head.

"How long does this game go on?" she asked.

"Until there's a winner. Of course, you can back out any time. I can't stop you."

They shifted restlessly, furiously.



"So how the hell do we get started?" Nancy asked.

"I guess I can give one clue," Jill said, "but not now, and not to the whole group. I'll call *one* of you tonight." She would do no such thing. "But whoever gets the clue isn't allowed to reveal that she got it. So if it's not you, you'll never know who it is, or what the clue was."

"I should get it," Nancy declared. "I'm the oldest."

"This is *insane*," muttered Kelli. "I cannot *wait* until Daddy hears."

"You know, I don't care what you tell your parents—but if they try any kind of legal wrangling or challenges to the trust, I'll just end the game and keep all the money, like Uncle Horace wanted. The money's mine, and legally, I can do what I want with it, so until then, the game's on. In fact, every week I'll give one person a clue, in secret. Might be the same person or a different one. That'll go on until there are no clues are left—and if nobody's won by then, the game's over. Don't bug me for extra clues or ask how much longer until the end, or you might get cut from the running. It's between the eight of you now. Okay?" She smiled—crookedly. "On your marks ... get set ... go!"

Jill watched her cousins consider the prospect of a bewildering, incomprehensible game that could drag on indefinitely. Their faces betrayed the knowledge that she'd somehow nullified their advantage, at least for the moment, and they hated it.

"That's it," she said. "I'm going to go home and take a nap. One of you will get a phone call tonight."

As she rose to leave, the cousins exchanged glances. Nancy's eyes burned with indignant, impotent rage, and Stephanie just looked half-melted. Jill wasn't sure how long—weeks? months?—she could make the charade last, but for the moment, it hardly mattered. Horace would have been pleased.

Jill limped into the narrow hall. As she reached for the door handle, she heard a key in the lock. The door swung inward and a

small, frowning clown entered the apartment. The clown wore an outfit of purple silk and had a bruise-dark foam nose, a blue wig, caked white makeup, and orange eyeshadow. A sigh came from its painted mouth, and then Jill realized who the clown was, and she remembered that on the eighth of October, the clown would, by marriage, join her family.

Which seemed, somehow, marvelously logical.