

DUST IN THE WIND

Growing Up

It was a strange morning, the sky was dark, heavy and oppressive, the wind swirled the dark Fenland dust around the open fields, sculpting shapes, like fleeting phantoms.

Then it happened in the middle of a Fen Blow. What started at 6 o'clock in the morning was all over by 8.30. This sleepy little Fenland village now had two new residents, identical twin boys.

By mid-day the whole village had heard the news. The whole village was only a hundred and fifty residents, so news travelled quickly.

The proud parents had chosen the names, Bertram and Barry. At a few hours old, they were already different. They grew up quickly, as children do. They were the only twins at the village school, and even though they looked alike, a more unlikely pair you could not imagine.

Bertram was the serious one, very serious. He was not good at playing and having fun and Barry did not remain Barry for very long, he was a clown and the village children soon re-named him Boko. It suited him, he was never meant to be a Barry. That name Boko, however childish, stuck with him for most of his life. For Bertram, growing up was difficult, he struggled with everything, from lessons, to playing and to relationships. Nothing came easily for him. Boko was just the opposite; he got on well with everybody. He was very bright and found school work easy, even though he didn't really try.

And Boko had a wonderful gift, he could make people laugh, even the most serious people, and they didn't come any more serious than Bertram. Boko was always the centre of attention, both in and out of school. He was often told that he should be a clown, but that did not seem to be his destiny.

Both boys left the village school with quite different reports, Bertram was just average, while Boko was outstanding. This trend continued through secondary education, although Boko spent his time at the Grammar school, while Bertram struggled through the local Secondary Modern. Bertram left with ambitions to become a clerk at the nearby town hall.

Boko sailed through Grammar School, seemingly without any effort. His exam results were outstanding and he was offered a place at Cambridge University. Soon the time came for the twins to leave the sleepy little village, and make their lives in the outside world.

They packed a few belongings and got on the noisy old bus. Bertram got off in the nearby town, to pursue his career in the Town hall. The twins said goodbye like complete strangers. A quick hand shake and a muttered good luck, and that was it.

Boko stayed on the bus, as far as the railway station, where he boarded the Cambridge train. Through the clickety-clack of the rails, he wondered what life at Cambridge would be like. His mind drifted from the reality of the day, it was one of those strange afternoons, everything was surreal, just like a dream.

Even the weather was odd. Pink clouds scudded across open Fens, swirling twists of black dust, rose into the heavy, sultry air. Dust in the wind, thought Boko. Is that what we are, specks of humanity, here and then gone? That simple thought changed his life.

The train screeched into a little Fenland station, Boko had no idea which one, it didn't matter. He had spotted a large tent and a collection of vans in a nearby field. He picked up his bag and got off the train. The bleak little station was deserted.

The encroaching clouds were dark, confused, oppressive and threatening.

He heard a fiddler playing in the distance, the haunting music lilted and twisted on the uncertain gusts, it was an enchanting theme and it was calling him. The wind still swirled over the dry fields, dust in the wind, he thought again. As he crossed the field to get to the Circus, he had no negative thoughts. He knew that this was his destiny, and he didn't look back.

Circus life was everything that he had expected. He made use of his natural abilities and personality to become a very good and popular clown. He thrived on the buzz of laughter, it was nectar to his soul.

As the years passed there were many highlights in Boko's career. He had paraded in the Mardi Gras in New Orleans. One of his treasured possessions was an old coloured postcard showing a group of clowns dressed in their polka-dot costumes and pointed hats. They were parading on Canal Street. It was poignantly entitled; the last Day of the Carnival.

The clowns were laughing and so was everyone in the crowd. Laughter followed clowns like bees around a honey pot... Now Boko displayed this old postcard on his sideboard next to the black and white photo of his mother and father on their wedding day.

During his working life he had been friends with some of the greatest clowns in the world. One of them was George Carl, a Vaudeville style visual comic and clown, who had become internationally famous, just like Boko. George had been invited by Johnny Carson to appear on the Tonight TV show. He was

so successful that he was invited back and this time he insisted that Boko went with him.

Those were the heady days, plush hotels, business class travel and letters from fans, lots of them. Boko wished he had kept some of those letters to remind him of the good times, during the bad times.

But there had also been some strange ones written on old thick paper. He had started to read a couple of them but they were full of hatred, he couldn't understand why. He just screwed them up. Threw them away and tried not to think about them.

Then there was the time when he went with George Carl and had a bit part in a film with Jerry Lewis. Boko fondly remembered that Royal Command Performance for the Queen at the Palladium in London. And of course that coveted Golden Clown award from Princess Grace at the International Circus Festival of Monte-Carlo.

There was something he loved about being a famous clown, with the make-up and silly clothes everybody knew him and he was accepted everywhere he went. But without them he would be an ordinary person again, he could blend in with the rest of humanity. In those glory days it was a big advantage, but after retirement his life would change dramatically.

Boko had already travelled throughout Europe and North America and achieved celebrity status. He had appeared on the big screen and television and had become a household name. He made people happy, he was good at it, that was his life, and it was what he wanted to do. It was a wonderful time.

He often thought of when he was back with a travelling circus, on the road again and performing in towns through America. He was never quite sure where they were, these mid-west towns merged into a blur. But in every one he made people laugh, that was his role in life.

He would never forget that night when they were putting on a show somewhere out in the Badlands. It was the last performance there before they moved on. That evening there was a fierce wind blowing across the Prairie, it tore and plucked the tumbleweed, which rolled and danced before it. It soon became a tormented night, the big top shook and quaked as lightning streaked from a black sky.

Boko was playing the crowd with all of the routines he had developed over the years. He got a good response with the bucket of water trick and was about to move on with some more slap-stick.

Suddenly there was an almighty crack; women and children screamed as part of the big top came crashing down. He felt a blinding flash as a wooden spar smashed down and hit him. That was all he remembered.

He woke up hours later in a hospital bed, he was in agony. The falling spar had fractured his spine. The surgeons feared that he would never walk again. He did eventually manage to walk but he was a changed man. He was no longer the clown he had been.

After several months he was mobile enough to follow and re-join the circus and tried to relive his former life, but he had become a sad shadow of the clown he had been before.