

C.L.O.W.N. 242

Rod Galindo

v1.0

Wordraith Books

Copyright © 2016 by Rod A. Galindo

All rights reserved. This story or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a literary review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual events, places, government organizations or persons living or dead is purely coincidental or used fictitiously.

Wordwraith Books, LLC
705-B SE Melody Lane #147
Lee's Summit, MO 64063
www.wordwraiths.com
@Wordwraiths

Cover art by Rod Galindo

Rod Galindo's website www.rodgalindo.com
Rod Galindo's Twitter [@RodAGalindo](https://twitter.com/RodAGalindo)

Dedication

I must dedicate this story to the folks from Noble Fusion Press who host the "Story in a Bag" competition every year at ConQuesT in Kansas City, Missouri. It was in their "SiaB" of 2014 that this story was born.

Teaser

Thank you for checking out my short story, I hope you enjoy it!

Allow me to send you the first three chapters from my upcoming novel,
SENCORPS Log One: Distress Call.

Simply hop over to RodWerks.net/SecretSC and tell me where to send it! 😊

For more information on upcoming projects and books, please visit
RodGalindo.com

C.L.O.W.N. 242

I hate clowns.

Jonas froze as the murderous machine turned toward him. He held his breath. Had he been seen? A moment later, the thing turned its visual sensors in another direction. No. He was safe for the moment.

Jonas thought it silly these utility bots were called "clowns". Other than those silly triangular eyes and that ridiculous glowing nose, they had nothing in common with jesters from a faraway Earth. He'd seen old photographs of the real McCoy. They didn't have tentacles. Not that he remembered, anyway.

The bot was motionless for the moment, probably because Jonas was. He dared move only his eyes. The thing seemed to be merely listening. He had no idea why it wasn't actively scanning the area, sweeping methodically for its next target.

Perhaps she too, needs rest from time to time? This beast had already sliced and diced two of his crewmates plus their Captain, and would surely pounce as soon as it caught wind of him. He now noticed something he hadn't before: the number "2-4-2" printed in a small font on its left breast. *God are there over two hundred of these things in service?* He shuddered at the thought.

The old girl tilted her head. *Don't breathe.* She lowered herself on her haunches, and focused on the lifeless human body beneath her. Jonas relaxed. But only slightly.

He couldn't remember exactly what the designation C.L.O.W.N. stood for; Carbon-based, Logical, Organic, Web-linked, Neuro-something or other. Toying with carbon and foregoing the exclusive use of silicon, like in every other computing device, was probably where the engineers failed. They had tried to make a machine that might actually think, that could work things out better than all their former failures. Something that wouldn't leave a human being to die just because it coldly calculated the person would probably die anyway. Something that would think a little more like a human. He assumed that meant a

compassionate human. The company that made these things promised emotions wouldn't be an issue, but isn't that what the goal was in the first place?

Compassion and empathy weren't the only emotions fighting for CPU time and developing new, permanent pathways in the deranged machine's brain. Love, happiness, hatred, jealousy, longing. Over the course of just a few weeks, each had manifested and developed independently. At first, love abounded. The new robot was a joy to work with. Unlike all its predecessors, it was polite, respectful, had a sense of humor. Hell, it had even pulled practical jokes on crewmembers. It created beautifully complex sculptures from the materials it collected for processing, it painted portraits of the crew from the blood and fluids of the indigenous creatures of the Planet Hydros that it was programmed to hunt. To hunt and kill, to prevent them from destroying the delicate scientific equipment on the surface and on the ocean floor. Sure, it was a little morbid, but Jonas was told most art from Earth was poetically tragic. Or was it tragically poetic? He didn't know; art was pretty much lost on him.

Was the crew's decision to personify the thing poetic? Or tragic? One evening, several of the crew announced at dinner they didn't want to call the C.L.O.W.N. an "it" anymore. They argued that it--or rather she--had developed her own personality. It seemed, for all intents and purposes, like there was a young woman inside the rust-proof alloy casing, rather than a half-silicon circuit, half-carbon organic hybrid processor the size of an orange, bursting forth with love and happiness.

Unfortunately, it didn't last long. Inside two months of activation--Earth months, not Gliese 667 C Hydros months--love had taken a back seat, along with empathy and compassion. Somehow, jealousy had reared its ugly head. Muriel Jones noticed it first. "That thing's out to get me," she had said. Of course everyone laughed. So did the guys at Station Control in orbit. Had they even told Earth?

"Dorian could never hurt a fly," someone had assured her. The Captain of their submarine had been against acquiring a helper bot all along. And it was he who suggested the name, taken after the first female Dorian Mime clowns of ancient Earth. Jonas wondered if it wasn't some kind of inside joke the Captain wasn't letting anyone in on. He seemed to know a little about, well, everything, and

Jonas had never known him to be wrong about well, anything. The Captain had ignored the fly comment, and Muriel certainly didn't seem convinced. Far from it.

It wasn't long before Jonas began noticing odd behaviors in the bot as well. He went to the Captain, who, for safety's sake, decided to take Dorian out of service temporarily, until they could run a diagnostic check on her systems and let the doc do a psychological exam on her organic components. That was yesterday. They had been fools to think Dorian would readily agree to such a procedure.

In a single twenty-four hour period, Dorian's personality switched like the wind changed direction. All the wonderful things about the formerly pleasant machine were gone, and the only emotions that remained were the ones most people strive to rise above. The ones that, when left unchecked, often become deadly in humans. Turned out machines were no exception.

Jonas risked a glance at the open, circular hatch to his left, at the other end of the submarine's huge hangar. He tried to judge the distance. Probably two hundred meters. What the old Captain used to say was about the size of two American football fields. *Football*. Jonas had seen part of a game once via the archived holovids. *What a strange world the captain grew up in.*

How quickly could his android legs carry him cross two hundred meters? Ten seconds? *Sure, maybe a few years ago, when they were in tip top shape.* How quickly can Dorian cross the same distance? These clowns were fast. Twenty-four hours ago he would never have believed such a bulky thing could move at the lighting speeds it did. Twenty-four hours ago Jonas and Muriel were debating which holofilm to watch this weekend. Action or Comedy? Thriller or Romance? Now his life was like one of those films, but he couldn't tell which. It was all so unreal. Jonas and his fellow sailors had always been mere technicians and engineers, scientists and doctors. Now, each of them--except Randall, who had been the first to die--had become instant experts on survival. Not to mention experts on these infernal C.L.O.W.N. bots.

You didn't need to be an expert to figure out that when the oddly feminine machine's reactor buzzed up, it was about execute a large-scale maneuver. Yesterday, that was nothing to be alarmed about. Today, it meant the thing was about to strike. It sounded like a lawnmower, or so the Captain had said. Like Jonas had any idea what a lawnmower sounded like or something.

Dorian lowered her head and continued disassembling Crewman Jones. She had removed Muriel's machine parts first--her arms and various synthetic organs she'd replaced in her twenty-eight short years of life--and was now working on removing the bones of her ribcage. As she cut each one out, she cleaned the bone of all meat and blood, and stacked it with the others in a complex geometric pattern off to her left. Jones' skull and spine were laid carefully in the center of the design; they, too now burned free of all fleshy material. Material that had once made up a beautiful face, framed by shimmering golden locks. A face with laughing eyes that shimmered like the lapping ripples in a swimming pool, a face with perfect, pouty lips that Jonas had kissed only that morning. Lips his own would never touch again.

The smell of seared flesh reached his nose then, and he cringed. While he knew full well the rancid odor and the white skull lying there belonged to Muriel Jones, his mind couldn't yet make the leap that she was gone. He hadn't had time to process it. Jonas and Muriel had been hunting Dorian together only... how long ago had it been? A half hour? Five minutes? His mind was still reeling. *I'm not trained for this. I'm not a soldier.* He was merely a Hydrotech Journeyman in the Engineer's Guild, and only just promoted from Hydrotech Apprentice one month ago by Earth's calendar.

The stench became overpowering. He fought the gag reflex rising in his throat. A distant part of his brain told him he should be feeling something. He should be devastated, angry, thirsty for revenge. But Jonas had only one thought echoing through his mind. Flee.

But he couldn't. Not yet. She would see him.

The confused, half-living, half-machine thing was categorizing the bones and organs as it was programmed to do for the various, often ferocious heretofore unknown oceanic mammals the sub was commissioned to hunt. Made sense; after it killed a human and couldn't come to grips with what it had just done, the "thinking" part of its brain shut down, and its default programming kicked in. So how could they shut down the malfunctioning, emotional part of Dorian's brain while leaving the seemingly perfectly functional, programmed computer chips intact and performing their duties? Duties the crew could definitely use in this

newly discovered sector the sub had been ordered to investigate? That was the trick he and the other survivors had to puzzle out.

Or, if it couldn't be done, Muriel had reasoned, they could simply kill it. "But these machines cost over two billion credits!" the Executive Officer had screamed in the mess hall where they had met to decide what to do after the second murder. "Bill me," Jonas had said.

A clinking sound at the other end of the hangar caught the machine's attention, and its head jerked around one hundred and eighty degrees. Probably Carney, Jonas thought, trying to cause a distraction to help him get out from under the bulky equipment he was exploiting for concealment. It worked.

Jonas bolted for the door. Behind him, Dorian's powerplant revved to a deafening buzz. He had only seconds.

He pushed his legs past their authorized limits. The pistons and gears below his waist strained under the exertion. His last encounter with the aquatic mechanical beastie left them slightly damaged, but Jonas thought he still might break fifty kilometers an hour. Even that speed might not be enough. He felt a splash of wetness on his hands. Hydraulic fluid. Had to be. *Dammit!*

The sound of the lawnmower was louder now. With every step it grew. Jonas dared not look behind him. *The hatch, focus on the hatch.*

Maybe a hundred and fifty meters now. *Damn the steel. The old girl can have my legs.* He'd been looking into getting an upgrade anyway.

Run faster.

The pistons growled.

The Captain told the crew right after the first murder that, when he was a boy growing up on Earth, circus clowns were meant to have a positive psychological effect on their audience. It was intended to be a happy experience. Children laughed at their antics and balloon-making skills. *Balloon animals.* Jonas had seen them in holovids, too. *What did a balloon feel like? Would one really pop at the slightest touch of a pin?*

A hundred meters. The buzz was intense. *Don't look back. Don't. Look. Back.* Behind him, the banshee screamed. He pushed on.

Jonas hated his parents for raising him on a water world, twenty-four light years away from the Good Earth. Where he would never experience all the amazing

things they and the other old timers had. Ah, to have gone to a circus. To have held a balloon. Laughed at the clowns and the fire-breathers and the bearded ladies, which he still couldn't imagine. To have tasted the fluffy pink hair on a stick. *What had father called it again?*

Dorian screamed his name, begged him to stop. *Ignore her.* Eighty meters.

The Captain's last words lingered in Jonas' mind. He had said childhood is where the enjoyment of clowns came to an end. "Once you hit adulthood, you want nothing more than to keep those creepy things as far away from you as possible."

"But they sound like so much fun," Jonas had said, right before the machine burst through the wall and snatched the old man up. There wasn't much more time to think of fun things after that.

Sixty meters. The jealous hybrid was right on his heels. If Dorian had a breath, Jonas was sure he would have felt it on his neck. He had outsmarted her in the engine room. She was probably still upset with him for spray-painting her eyes blue. It hadn't even crossed his mind she might switch to thermal imaging. He'd read the manual next time.

Thirty meters.

Number two-forty-two screamed again, seemingly with all the fury she could muster. The sound resonated through Jonas' chest and melted his will. His heart sank and he slowed without conscious thought. Something snapped, and his right leg failed. He couldn't push his android parts any further. More splashes of hydraulic fluid hit his hands, which were still very much human, just like certain important parts below his waist, half his chest, and most of his face.

Twenty meters.

His bionics had assisted him well, especially in a fight for life against a machine hell-bent on killing everyone around him. If the metal and plastic could only hold together another few seconds, he would be at the circular door, then into the man-sized passageways leading to the lifeboats. Dorian was too big to chase him through the passageways. But those mechanical tentacles might be another story...

Ten meters.

C.L.O.W.N. 242 grabbed some loose parts dangling from Jonas' worthless right leg and he tripped. The cold, hard deck plating came up fast, knocking the wind

out of him. *The hatch.* It was so close. He stretched out his arm. Red, slippery fingertips wrapped around the inner edge of the doorway. *Just pull, Jonas. Just--*
CRACK.

He looked over his shoulder. His once shiny leg, now red with hydraulic "cherry juice", crunched in Dorian's claw.

She dragged him toward her. Her evil cackling bore into his very soul. "Finally," the deranged machine said, "you're mine, Jonas. Not hers. Forever mine."

The Captain had been right. He was surely right about those ancient circus atrocities, too. Muriel had been right. No one on their crew had listened. No one from Earth had listened.

Will they listen now? Will I get to tell them?

"I hate clowns."

Author's note

As I alluded to in the Dedication, the basis for this story came about when I joined a roomful of fellow writers and friends for our annual a Story in a Bag contest at ConQuesT 45 in 2014 (ConQuesT being Kansas City's longest-running annual science fiction convention). As usual, we each drew a random slip of paper out of five separate bags, and then sat down to write a flash fiction story incorporating all five prompts. We had exactly one hour to do so. I couldn't wait to see what random treasures would challenge me this time...

*When I saw the word "**clown**" I said to myself, **Oh dear God, NO. Really??** Like most people, I feel uncomfortable around clowns and don't much care for them. I'm not scared of them per se, I just don't "get it." I never did. And as I stared at that slip of paper in terror, wasting valuable seconds with my jaw agape, I could think of no way to write an entire story with one of these things in it.*

Yes, I could've taken the easy way out, and just had some character in my story about who-knows-what catch a glimpse of a circus poster as he walked down the street. Done with the clown bit. Next prompt! But it's completely unlike me to take the easy road. I nearly killed myself trudging through Calculus II in college when I could barely add and subtract. I made a nearly three decade career in the Army when I was better suited at fighting with an Atari joystick than with a real M-16. Why do I do these things to myself? Eh, still trying to figure it out, to be honest. So like other bumpy roads I've traveled down in my life, I straightened up, announced, "Challenge accepted" (but only in my head so as not to disrupt other writers who had already started) and hit this clown problem head-on. Oh the terror. "Hey, I'll channel that!" Then I did what I do best: I twisted it into science fiction.

In the world of sci fi, I can stomach anything. 😊

About the Author



Rod A. Galindo arrived on Earth in the Spring of 1970. He's been trying to stay out of trouble ever since, but has now accepted it as one of the three things he does well, right behind drawing and right ahead of spelling. He's beamed all around the world thanks to various military and government positions, but proudly calls Kansas City home. Mainly because his request for transfer to Stargate Command was denied. AGAIN.

"Major Galindo" has nearly thirty years of service under his belt in the U. S. Army, both Active Duty (as an enlisted M-1A1 Abrams tank crewman, Operation Desert Storm) and the Kansas Army National Guard (as a Field Artillery officer, Operation Noble Eagle and Operation Iraqi Freedom).

"Rod Galindo" is a worn-out father of four; two cyber-smart boys aged 15 and 12, one German Army (Bundeswehr) Soldatin who is as dangerously clever as she is beautiful, and he fills in as full-time father to a special young lady who never really had a dad to call her own.

Rod is a fully assimilated and very active member of the Wordraiths Writing Collective and Wordraith Books, LLC (learn more about our authors and books at Wordraiths.com). Enjoy his shiny art or delve into his literary musings at RodWerks.net or RodGalindo.com.

.
. .
. .
. .
. .

Dear reader,

May I ask a favor? I would be thrilled if you could post a super quick review of C.L.O.W.N. 242. Good or bad, either is fine; like I've often said, an honest review is better than an utterly delicious, cheese-stuffed crust, large pepperoni and Italian sausage pizza with extra mozzarella any day!

Also, I entertain all cool sci fi and speculative fiction ideas. e-mail me!
rod@rodwerks.net

And remember, please visit RodWerks.net/SecretSC to read or obtain a free download of the first fifteen pages of my military sci-fi novel, **Distress Call!** ☺

Rod Galindo
October, 2016