

The Hospital Clown a look from the other side

by Beth A. Kolotkin



Ima Raskal is my clown name. I am a hospital clown who clowns almost exclusively for children with life threatening diseases, their families and the staff that takes care of them. Actually, I prefer to clown for kids with cancer. As such, I have learned a great deal about myself, and the art of clowning for those who are dying and those who care for them.

However, there is a unique side to my clown. You see, I am the mother of one of those children. Let me clarify this -- I am the mother of a child whose disease decided to make the transition from life threatening to life taking. My four-year-old son, Kalman, died after a two year battle with a brain tumor.

During those two years, my son and I spent endless hours living in the hospital. He was getting either chemotherapy or radiation, or trying to recover from the debilitating and life threatening results of the very treatments that we were giving him to try to cure him. Our treatment team consisted of a very caring oncologist; the care coordinator, who tried to coordinate the second and third opinions I kept pursuing, a team of nurses, and eventually a family of clowns - yes, a family of clowns!

Let me clarify this too. I was born and raised in New York, but have spent the most recent half of my life in Ohio. When my son's condition worsened to the point where there was nothing else to be done in Ohio, I did what any self respecting New Yorker would do. I took my child to the only place that offered us any treatment options - Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City.

The treatment team there took a new twist. The Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit provides clown care to those children, and the families. My son insisted on following the clowns through the hospital. He insisted, when he heard them down the hall and could not get out of bed to get to them, that I go down the hall and "get

the clowns" for him. Frankly, my son loved the clowns, and they loved him. The night before he had to be med-flighted back to Ohio after treatment failed, the clowns were there, with tears in their eyes.

When we returned to Children's Medical Center in Dayton, Ohio the day before Thanksgiving, 1999 my son's room was full of stuffed clowns, clown balloons, pictures of clowns . . . clowns of all types. The next day, Thanksgiving day 1999, nine real live clowns from our local clown alley appeared bedside, much to my son's delight.

When we did finally return to our home, the clowns followed. Every weekend a family of clowns (really, a mother, father, and their 11-year-old clown daughter -- Michael "Mickey" and Patricia "Boof" Thompson and daughter Shelby "Scooter.") along with a couple of unrelated clowns, came to our home and twisted balloons, and juggled and otherwise made it all a little more bearable.

Then it happened. My son's speech slowed, and stopped. He had short periods of being awake intermingled with long periods of sleep. I called the clowns and told them to stop coming, and they did -- all except one -- *Matti Huggles* (Sharon Beverly). I learned that she clowns in memory of her nephew Mat who was killed in a car accident at 16 years old. She asked if she could come and just sit with ME. I told her that my son wouldn't know if she was there or not so if she wanted to come she should come as Sharon, her alter ego. *Matti* responded that she could come, but as *Matti Huggles, the clown* because if my son woke up, even for a minute, she wanted him to know who she was . . . and he wouldn't know her as Sharon, since neither of us had ever seen her out of makeup.

Matti continued to call each week and come over to spend time with us. She and I would sit and talk about death, dying, the sheer loneliness of it all, and what hard work it was, for my son and me.

One day my son woke and reached for her clown nose, I snapped a picture. It hangs on her refrigerator to this very day. She was right . . . he knew who she was. He was still in there.



Four year old Kalman reaches out and touches his clown friend, Matti Huggles, who had so many times before touched his life as a caring clown.

Finally, the day came and I called *Matti* and told her that I thought for her own good she should not come back, until he had died. I asked her if she and the other clowns would come to his funeral, and she said, "Yes, but we will come as clowns because how else will he know who we are?" It made sense to me.

My son died at 3:30 a.m. Sunday morning May 7, 2000. I made one more phone call to *Matti* at 6 that morning. She called the other clowns. And they came . . . the next day as they always had . . . but this time to his funeral.

And what a source of comfort they were. Because in with my son - in the closed casket along with his two blue baby blankets were, unknown to anyone, except me, a red foam nose, a kazoo, and a squeaker. Because the clowns had grown to be that important to him and to me.

That day the clowns, nine of them, sat quietly in a group in the front rows of the crowd of over 200 people at the funeral. And they all stayed composed in character, because after all clowns are not supposed to cry. *Matti* had called me that morning and warned me of that. And had asked me not to say too much to her, because she would cry. The child clown, the 11-year-old *Scooter*, did drop character, and cried (frankly I was glad she did). Otherwise, they broke their silence just once: when I led a salute to my son at the beginning of the service. They honked their horns in a tribute to their fallen comrade.

They walked past the casket and left foam clown noses, plastic animals and squeakers on the top of it. When we proceeded to the cemetery, much to my surprise, the clowns went too. One of them had a small violin and played it as the crowd assembled.

At the cemetery the clowns each took their turn tossing soil on the casket, but in true clown form they were sure to use the smallest of the shovels; the one we had provided for the children who did attend. And when the service was over, they took out their bubbles and gave my son a bubble salute.

A couple of months later, I went to the clown alley meeting to say thank you. And I never left. You see, they wouldn't let me. I went to clown college, a six week adult education course at a local high school, which was taught by Mickey the Clown, the father of the clown family. And the clowns took me under their wings and mentored me.

On March 9, 2001, my son's fifth birthday, at my request *Ima Raskal*, *Matti Huggles* and our friend *Sparkle Lee* (Andrea Schott) went where no other clowns had gone before; we ventured for the first time into the Oncology Clinic at Children's Medical Center. It was the first time I had been back since my son's death, and it was with the permission of his oncologist. This clinic is where the kids spend an entire day getting treatments. If they are not too sick they get to go home, but come back the next day and do it all over again.

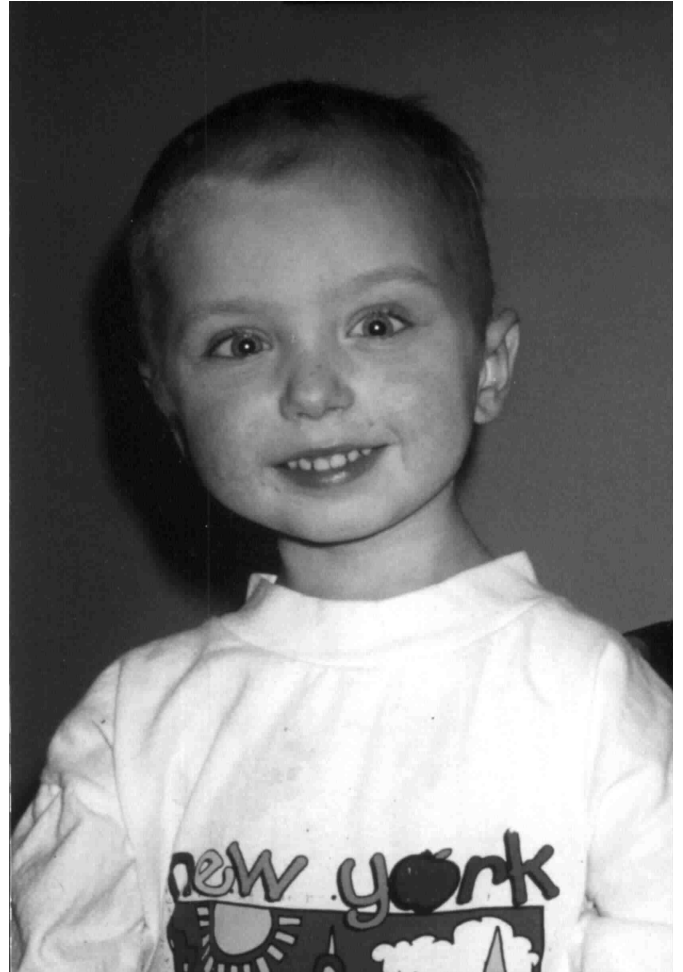
Frankly, I have no memory of that outing, but it must have gone well, since I have been invited back on a regular basis.

Now, two years after my son's death and his friendship with the clowns, I am one of them. If you are wondering, *Matti Huggles* helped name my clown. She remembers vividly my son saying "Mommy, you are a rascal." *Ima Raskal* was born.

I have a unique understanding of this other side of the coin. You can read about it, you can study it, but until you have been there you don't have any idea of what it's like.

My son left me a gift that I hope I can share on many levels. He left me an understanding of what is really important in life. Even in his worst moments he smiled and laughed, and insisted I chase the clowns. He taught me how important and healing humor can be and the importance of passing it on, even when things seem hopeless. And most important, he helped me discover the clown in me. If I can be as successful as he was in passing on this wisdom, then a little bit of my son will live on through me everyday.

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Kalman Kolotkin-Harlow, who left a legacy of clowning to his mother Beth Kolotkin, Ima Raskal the clown.

Beth Kolotkin lives in Germantown, Ohio. She received a Juris Doctor degree (law degree) from the University of Dayton, School of Law in Dayton, Ohio and has been in private law practice in Dayton, Ohio since then. Besides clown college she attended Clown Town in Newark, Ohio and, Clown Camp in LaCrosse, Wisconsin with one of the Mark Anthony scholarships. However, most of her caring clown knowledge has been through the "hard knocks school of clown knowledge while tending to my son and his life threatening/taking disease." She also clowns at Dayton Hospice.

She clowns at Children's Medical Center in Dayton, Ohio, and for Special Wish Foundation of Dayton, and was in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade on Nov., 2001 - thanks to arrangements made by Special Wish Foundation of Dayton.

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