

It appears they have a phobia for everything.

I looked mine up; it's called coulrophobia – fear of clowns.



Okay, so maybe I'm not pathologically afraid of them, but speaking in public, stepping on snakes, walking through spider webs, or going to math class naked ain't nothing compared to the willies I get from big-shoes, seltzer bottles, and painted faces. Call me a party pooper, but those honking bicycle horns, huge suspenders, hobo clothes and bulbous red noses do not make me laugh. They make me want to run screaming into the streets.

When I saw Stephen King's "It" I thought it was a documentary.

And, of course, who could forget the scariest moment of the movie "Poltergeist" -- the moment toward the climax of the film when the little toy clown doll disappears from the rocking chair as the ominous thunderstorm approaches. Then at the first crash of lightning, the camera suddenly pulls a close up on its little evil, leering, beady-eyed face as it proceeds to try to strangle the little boy, all the while shrieking with peals of maniacal, high-pitched cackles of doom.

I couldn't sleep for months after that.

That was also the scene that prompted a classic, matter-of-fact line from a friend of mine who was, shall we say, fond of smoking Mother Nature's bounty. His words, glassine and slowly uttered, were as follows: "Dude ... I don't like clowns laughing when they're not supposed to."

While this thing must have come from some childhood trauma -- maybe it was the clown on stilts chasing me across the playground with a running chainsaw I dreamed about when I was five -- obviously, not all clowns are inherently evil, or even that menacing. A good friend of mine, and his wife, are both professional clowns. They are both terrific, wonderful, smart, funny people -- and they're both very good at what they do. I just sometimes wish they'd do it in their street clothes.

Still, clowns really have nothing on dolls and plastic icons. I thoroughly despise the big plastic Burger King guy. I hate the Quaker Oats guy even more. To some, they apparently look like wholesome family icons. To me, they look like active sexual predators.

But by far, the most traumatic event of that sort occurred during a family gathering at Christmas a couple of years ago at my sister's home. I was odd man out so I had to sleep in the kids' playroom. That was fine; there was a TV, the couch was comfortable, and it was just for one night. I was just getting ready for bed when I noticed something wrong. I couldn't put my finger on it at first.

Then I got it.

My nieces collect American Girl Dolls. Hundreds of them. All sitting, packed together, on shelves running all around the room. They're everywhere. And no matter which way I turn, all of them stare at me with their creepy, plastic little wide blue eyes and their fake, predatory, shiny little half-smiles.

As my knees began to knock and I noticed one or two of them giggling and whispering to each other, all the while looking at me with bad intent, my cell phone suddenly rang, vibrating and buzzing in my pocket like the joy buzzer from hell. Scarcely had I peeled myself from the ceiling and jump-started my heart than my Beloved, who was with her family that Christmas Eve, asked me how things were going.

I told her about the dolls. Always the sympathetic one, she started laughing, sounding eerily like two of the dolls on the far end of the shelf who were now winding leather garrotes around

their diminutive but thoroughlyevil plastic hands.

“Well, call me if you get scared. Don’t worry, though; they probably won’t kill you in the night.” She giggled. “Merry Christmas, baby. Sleep tight...”

“Yeah, Merry Freakin’ Christmas to you, too,” I muttered under my breath, even as I wrapped myself tighter in my blanket, there in the front seat of my locked car, a baseball bat in one hand and a steak knife in the other.

Just then, lightning flashed, thunder rolled, and I noticed a little polka dotted clown hat sitting on the hood of the car that hadn’t been there a couple minutes before...