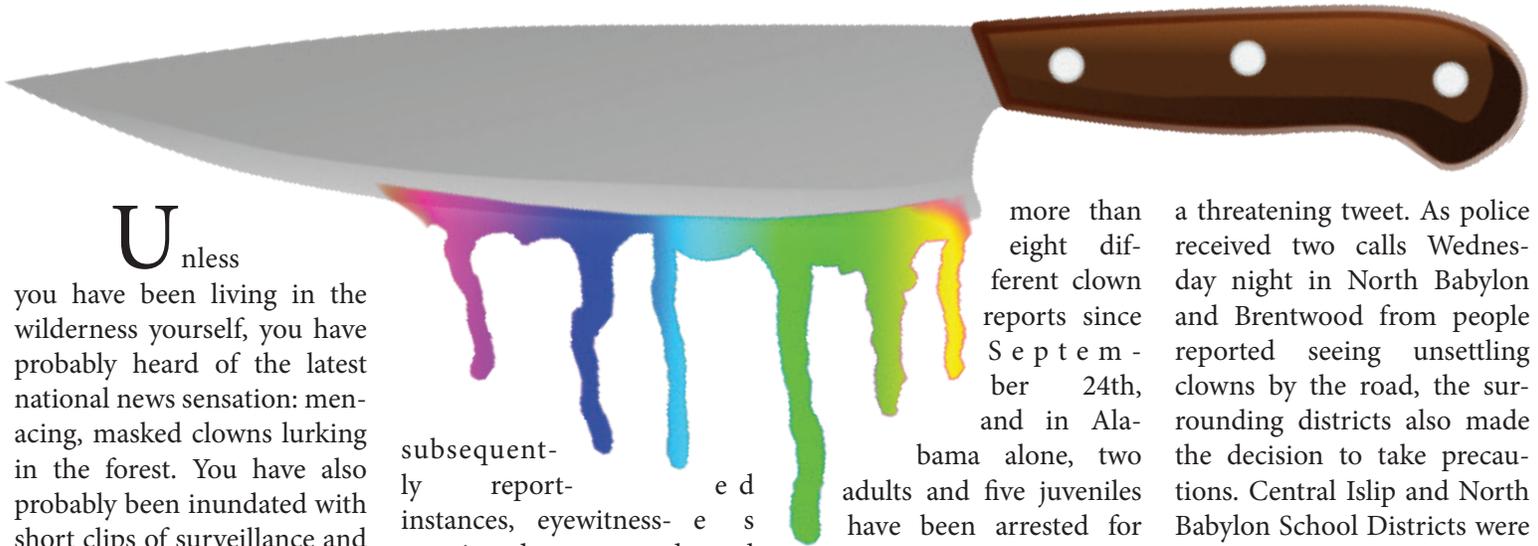


# THE ROUNDUP

BY AND FOR THE STUDENTS OF HALF HOLLOW HILLS HIGH SCHOOL WEST

## CIRCUS OF FEAR: AMERICA'S CREEPY CLOWN EPIDEMIC

Written by Nicole Rosenthal & Designed by Julia Camina



Unless you have been living in the wilderness yourself, you have probably heard of the latest national news sensation: menacing, masked clowns lurking in the forest. You have also probably been inundated with short clips of surveillance and dashboard camera footage from social media, highlighting masked jokesters making their way onto house porches and peering in through windows sinisterly, while others are loitering on desolate roads. Over a dozen people have been arrested, schools have gone under lockdown, and social media has gone hysterical with sinister homemade clown videos. The sightings were even mentioned at the White House media briefing this week. Is this another twisted tale by the likes of Stephen King, or is there really something lurking in the darkness?

The end of August saw a number of sinister clown sightings, beginning in South Carolina, when an encounter was first reported near Fleetwood Manor Apartments in the town of Greenville. In the

subsequently reported instances, eyewitnesses mentioned persons dressed visibly as clowns, who attempted to lure them into isolated locations. One resident claimed to witness a clown with a blinking nose standing next to a dumpster at 2:30 in the morning, while several local children came forward claiming that ominous creatures attempted to lure them into the woods with money. "The clowning around needs to stop," said police chief Ken Miller of Greenville. Additional reports surfaced of clowns simply staring at Greenville residents near laundromats and, again, near wooded areas.

Similar sightings were reported in at least twenty states, ranging from upstate New York to Georgia, and as far west as Arizona and Idaho. The area around York College in Pennsylvania has seen

more than eight different clown reports since September 24th, and in Alabama alone, two adults and five juveniles have been arrested for clown-related terrorism.

At least a dozen people have been arrested in total, with several facing charges of making false reports or chasing others. Police say there is at least one deadly incident linked to a clown hoax, as a 16 year old who donned a clown mask was stabbed to death during a dispute.

On Friday September 30, Long Island schools were abuzz with rumors of a looming threat that was highly publicized on social media: a since-deactivated twitter account, @LIClowns, claimed that its account holders wanted to stop by different schools for a visit. Lindenhurst school officials announced that day that the school would be keeping students inside during recess after several reports of clown sightings in the area and

a threatening tweet. As police received two calls Wednesday night in North Babylon and Brentwood from people reported seeing unsettling clowns by the road, the surrounding districts also made the decision to take precautions. Central Islip and North Babylon School Districts were on lockdown on Friday, September 30th as pupils go about normal day inside building, but were not allowed to enter and exit during school hours.

In reaction to the controversial twitter account, several students have admitted "catching" the so-called Long Island Clowns. "People say they are clown-hunting, [and] trying to catch clowns in the act [of scaring people]," said Hills West Junior Megan Sinon. "They are pretty much just walking around where the clowns have been previously spotted."

"I know a few people that, in their free time, try to hunt clowns," added Hills West Senior Autumn Morris. "Personally, I think it's dumb because it is a waste of time. They're really asking for trouble."

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In addition to the social media uproar, one Long Island teenager has experienced one of the most terrifying encounters to emerge from this craze: a 14-year-old boy from Lakeview, NY was reported being chased on his way home from school by a stranger dressed in a purple clown costume with a white mask carrying a large kitchen knife on Wednesday, October 5th. While on his way home from Malverne High School, the victim ran from Jefferson Avenue to Langdon Boulevard in attempts to escape the stranger, however, when he looked back, the figure was nowhere to be seen. Just an hour and a half before the incident, on the northbound 6 Subway train in New York City, a 16-year-old boy was approached by another mysterious clown. The clown reportedly “just pulled out a kitchen knife and stared,” according to the teenager. The teen fled and reported the incident to nearby officers. Authorities say the spike in chilling clown sightings have people “on edge”, and they’re concerned that this could get out of hand quickly. “This is obviously getting our attention because it involved a knife,” said De-

TECTIVE Christopher Barling of the Nassau County Police Department, which is investigating the report in Lakeview.

Yet, despite the abundance of reports, NYPD’s deputy commissioner for counterterrorism and intelligence John Miller stated that the department had investigated several clown threats and “found none of these to be credible, and we’ve tried to avoid falling into the trap of putting extra police protection” in areas where the clowns were reported. “We’re tracking it, but we don’t see any real threat here,” Miller said. “Our main message is: don’t believe the hype, and don’t be afraid of the clowns.”

“Stalking Clown” folklore has been with us for decades and appears to be part of the ‘Stranger Danger’ moral panic of the 1980s,” Medical Sociologist Robert Bartholomew stated. Alas, while Bartholomew argues that law enforcement should most definitely investigate reports of clowns partaking in harassment-type behavior, he adds that these supposed sightings should be treated skeptically. “Sighting clusters typically begin with a dramatic initial report or rumor, followed by

saturation media coverage. Local residents begin to scrutinize their environment for evidence of this new threat, and begin to redefine ambiguous stimuli within their new stalking clown mind set. Some children may exaggerate or even make up stories for attention. The bottom line is that no clowns are ever found.”

However, if the craze is just a figment of our imagination, then why do we pick clowns? What is it about clowns that we are so collectively afraid of? Well, a study of children in England in 2008 revealed that very few of us actually like clowns, despite them still being a popular children’s party character. In fact, the study concluded that the common practice of decorating children’s wings in hospitals with pictures of clowns in order to calm may have adverse effects. Rami Nadera, Canadian psychologist who studies coulrophobia, the irrational fear of clowns, believes that clown phobias are fueled by the fact that clowns wear makeup and disguises that hide their true identities and feelings. In other words, there is an underlying ambiguity surrounding clowns that make them, in layman’s terms,

creepy. The highly unearthly physical characteristics of the clown only magnify the uncertainty of what the clown might do next, and exaggerate the inhumanity of the character.

“These sorts of panics tend to surface when there’s underlying social anxiety,” says Benjamin Radford, a folklorist and the author of the non-fiction book *Bad Clowns*, who, like Bartholomew, insists that we’ve seen this hysteria all before. “It is an election year, there’s lots of political and ideological divisions, there’s also of course school shootings and terrorist attacks.” Radford argues that the origin of these sinister clown sightings in the 1980s were also caused by a rift in culture and general anxiety among the population.

“There was the satanic panic, the hysteria over *Dungeons and Dragons*, and sensationalized media reports of Satanists trying to abduct children,” he says. “These reports get circulated, often sensationalized, there’s a smattering of rumors and urban legends, and then there’s some idiot who actually dresses up, and then before you know it there’s lockdowns and arrests.”