

Bent Necessity

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Not that Margaret would even want to go to the circus. Children disgusted her, and since she had no gift for illusion, the spectacle bored her. It bored him too, but he might have gone for the color and noise if Margaret had shown some taste for the sport.

Picturing his wife through an ale-colored glass, Findan wondered what he had seen in her then, in those beginning days. What had he seen but a pale and wan English woman, stick thin, with muddy brown hair and blue eyes, her body straight as an arrow with no curves to speak of; but she had been hot and fast to make the beast with two backs, and the beast with two backs had been a voracious one, hungry with the wrath of tigers.

Oh, years ago.

Findan nodded to John Barry for another draft. John wiped the wet spot under his glass, mopped the counter.

“What’s wrong with you, Findan? Never a man without spit for your eye,” said John Barry, clapping the draft in front of Findan. Findan nodded once, hunched around his glass as if a cord had been drawn up tightly through his shoulders into his neck.

“The nice thing about the circus,” Christy Dooley was saying two stools down, “is that they have those little girlies on the trapeze.”

“Even the old ones look like girlies,” said Joseph Bourke, the local postman, “when they put the sparklies on their tights.”

“I like to see the pretty girlies,” Christy laughed. “I tell them I have a gift for them.”

Findan sighed. Some things were more primeval than desire: Margaret’s Englishness. Only four years married when she reverted to the formalism of tea roses and elegant cursive handwriting on ivory stationery. More than one was the night he had come to his own bedroom door, his hand squeezing the brass knob tight, a bracer, before he pushed the door through to find her on the top of the bed, a lace night dress covering her head-to-knee, an empty bottle of

sherry on the writing table. The faint rose of her aureoles, the slight pink gash between the hem and her knee promised an untried sex.

Margaret, he would whisper, do you want me?

Nothing had happened to her, happened to him. It was not as if life didn't happen to others. Accidents, sick children, cows gone dry, milk gone off.

Wives gone off.

"You going, Findan?" John Barry interrupted his reverie.

Findan said, "No. I don't want to go to the circus."

"Come now," said John Barry.

Findan said that he wasn't and that he wouldn't and furthermore, he would not even believe that the circus was coming to Edenderry.

"Yes, but it is coming," said John Barry, sliding a red and white flyer down the bar to Findan. While he drew Findan another beer, Findan read it held up to his face. Finally he said, "What would a circus be doing here?"

"They've come for Christy Dooley's appendix," said Joseph across a draft from Findan. "Do you still have it in your medicine cabinet?" he asked, his laugh cracking his face into a filigree of burst veins.

"He has his own appendix at home," said Findan. "His wife came for it, snatched it straight off my desk, she did. And it was still warm."

Christy Dooley sifted his beer through the sides of his dentures. "There was no joy at home without it," he said, an old-man creak in his voice.

"Ay," said John Barry. "She thought the Doc cut off his winkle by mistake."

"She wanted his winkle proper at home," said Joseph Bourke.

"Me langer wouldn't fit in a jar," said Christy.

"Still works, does it?" asked Joseph Bourke.

"That's why the circus is coming to town," said John Barry.

"Well, I'd be happy to show it to them," said Christy, "since it doesn't get much use now but for pissing."

"I'm sure they'd be interested," said Findan wryly.

"It'll be pissing down rain soon," said John Barry matter-of-factly, with a nod toward the window. Outside, gray clouds thick enough to button collected in the space between the shops. The shadows from the clouds dulled the luster from the shop windows. They grayed everything except the cherry-red patina of Findan's bubble car.

"So we're to have a circus in the rain!" snorted Christy, and raised his glass to toast the rain.

"In the pissing rain," said Findan, thumbs down.

"Ay, the pissing rain," said Joseph.

"Pissing rain will piss down on your car," Christy said to Findan.

Findan twisted on his stool for a look. He had parked the bubble car directly out front so he could turn at intervals to check it. It was his wife's ovoid three-wheeler, a BMW Isetta. It opened at the front with a single door; a single wheel supported the smaller end of the "egg" at the rear. Inside, the steering wheel was fixed to the floor by a rod. The luggage rack at the rear was customized.

"Nothing will piss on my car," said Findan.

"Your car, now, is it?" Christy said. "A lady's car, if you ask me."

"Do you reckon?" said John Barry, "It's not the polish I'm worried about, Findan. It's the size. What's a doc doing driving such a baby car. Does the thing float? Will it bob about like a fisherman's cork? We'll have a proper flood with those clouds."

"You'll have to tether that little car, Findan," Joseph Bourke said.

"Ay," said John Barry. "The rain will wash it down to the Shannon."

"You got room in that car for an old man when the Deluge cracks?" asked Christy.

"Not a man with no winkle," said Joseph.

"An old man," said Christy, winking. "Maybe your wife can help me find me winkle."

"Old men float by themselves," said Findan. "Nothing but air left in them."

“When did you last take yours out the pickle jar?” asked Christy, clacking his palate with laughter and slapping the top of his thigh.

John Barry interrupted: “Last Sunday. It were a holy day of obligation.”

“Can’t a man drink in peace without listening to drivel?” Findan barked. “They’ll be no circus, if you ask me. It’s just another of one of those things that’s promised but never arrives.”

“Such a skeptic,” said Christy, exchanging a glance with Joseph Bourke over their beer mugs raised in time. Joseph turned to Christy with a wink, and they proceeded to count the spangles on the girlies’ tights and to speculate whether those spangles would be red or silver.

Findan watched the foam float to the top of his glass. He squeezed it to feel the ridges dig into his palm, staring through his ale into his wife’s room.

Now Margaret would be sitting at a small desk overlooking the garden where she grew tea roses. A bottle of sherry and a glass, cut crystal, would be to the right of her writing hand. She would be writing invitations, thank-you notes, or corresponding with an English lady who was part of the Jane Austen reading group. As Findan entered the scene, he imagined himself standing behind her, his shadow thrown over her stationery. Bending over, he would place one hand on her shoulder.

Margaret, do you want me? he might whisper over her shoulder into her ear.

Perhaps she would turn, drop her pen half-rising from her chair, her mouth a red oval. Then they would spill the bottle of ink, discover it only *after* by the streaks upon their skin.

“Come now, Findan, chap, you’re coming to the circus, truly?” John Barry asked again, tapping him out another pint. But before Findan could answer, Joseph Bourke and Christy Dooley had started out of their seats and stood peering through the window at the outside. For outside, the circus, indeed, was coming to town, and the lads shoved each other to get through the door first to watch it pass.

They stood under the awning that divided them from the road,

watching the street through a gauze curtain of drizzle. Across the grass median, the far lane had been left open, but in the near one the circus passed as if all the wagons moved in slow motion.

First came a white wagon like a gypsy wagon, a square clapboard set on three wooden wheels. One back wheel had been replaced by a rubber tire on a spoked, metal rim. At the reins sat the ringmaster with high leather boots and a waxed mustache. He clucked to a pair of draft horses, one brown and one black, which strained against the wagon yoke.

Findan watched from inside as the horses passed in front of him, passed in front of Joseph and Christy. Their backs were turned to him, broad triangular backs crossed by suspenders, heavy work shoes on their feet. Sturdy working men, not precisely keen on screwing their wives, not keen in the way they sought a good stinking argument, not keen in the way they taunted shop girls. They did the deed with the regularity of seeding fields, like the clouds that rained without will and without desire.

After the first wagon passed came the next, a red wagon with gingerbread cutouts in yellow at the borders, pulled by two bay horses. Inside this wagon were animal cages. A straggly lion reclined with its chin on two folded paws and stared out at the drizzle. Its mane was matted, and its black nose, dull, ran. Next to the lion's cage, two tigers curled up at the back of their bars. One licked its paw, scratched behind its ear like a tabby with fleas, paused, held the black pads up to its face to consider its claws, and then snapped at its mate with an irritated growl.

As the rain set in, the yellow wagon faded to dun, the bay horses turned brown in the mist, but the red body of the bubble car glowed, polished as with a fresh coat of lacquer.

Joseph Bourke leaned his hip on Findan's car. Findan said, "Shit," to himself, and then stepped through the door, the cold slapping him in the face.

Christy stepped out into the street, seeming to shrink in the rain. Joseph Bourke, still with a hip against the door of Findan's car, reached out for balance with one hand on the roof.

Findan shouted at him, "Get your ass off my car."

Joseph drunkenly said, "Piss on your car," and cursed him, but he moved forward, closer into the street, to see what was coming next.

Then came the elephant. It was only one elephant, the circus being small, and obviously not commercial enough to support four matching wheels on its wagon. It was a muddy brown elephant with scraggly hairs like wires coming out of its hide. It was a skinny elephant, with its body high over long legs. And now it was a wet, skinny elephant, gentle steam rising off its warm back. It was also a decorated elephant, a rope of scarlet braid twined over its head.

By the elephant's front leg walked a girl dressed like a majorette in a short white skirt that dropped from her hips. The pink plume of her white top hat stabbed the air when she twirled a baton. Her boots pranced through brown puddles as if the sun had been shining on an Easter Sunday morning.

John Barry came out then, a stained apron over his white shirt, his hands in his pockets under the apron.

John Barry stood next to Findan and gave him a sharp punch on the arm. "Should we call the elephant?" he asked Findan.

Findan said, "What, call the elephant? What for?"

The elephant's trunk swayed from side to side as it walked directly across from them on the wide paved street.

"Come 'ere, boy," John called the elephant.

"At's it, lad," said Joseph Bourke.

John Barry banged on the trunk of the blue car in front of him. It was parked next to Findan's car, and Findan gave him a look that said *Don't touch my car like that*.

John Barry said, "It's my car," but he stopped banging on the trunk.

"A man's car is his own car," said Findan and moved to stand in front of his car.

The other lads joined in calling the elephant, now Joseph hollering, "'Ere, boy. 'Ere boy."

The girl turned her head and canted her plume in their direction as if to say, "Fuck off, chaps."

John Barry reached into his pocket, pulled out a bag of peanuts, opened it noisily, and then crumpled the cellophane in his hand: “Ey, elephant.”

The lads jumped up and down on the slick pavement, waving their arms like madmen, their shirts sodden and matted on their backs, their faces shining, their hair clinging to their faces. They called the elephant. And when the elephant saw John Barry with his arm out, palm extended, standing between his car and Findan’s bubble car, the elephant slipped away from the girl, pausing to let her pass before it turned, lumbering gradually toward them, moving more quickly then, its massive shoulders ratcheting up and down, its trunk extended straight out like a divining rod fixed on John Barry.

John Barry stepped out into the street.

“Somebody get that elephant a beer,” said Christy Dooley.

“Right. A beer,” said Joseph Bourke, on his way to fetch one.

“Get me an umbrella,” said John Barry, who walked out in the rain to meet the elephant, his open hand extended palm-out to catch its trunk, but the elephant pivoted narrowly around him and it headed toward Findan’s car.

“Ey, elephant,” said John Barry, turning around to look where the creature had gone. Standing on the curbside out of the rain, Findan stared back at John Barry, the two of them framing the elephant in the crosshairs of their gaze.

“Mother of God,” Findan said.

At first it seemed the elephant would turn away from the cars, but after it turned, it stopped in its tracks and presented its haunches to Findan. Findan could see nothing past the twin pillars of the legs, the skinny tail beating a rhythm like a slow windshield wiper over the backside.

“Off you go, you filthy beast,” Findan shouted to the backside.

“E’s going to foul your car,” Christy warned.

The animal rocked oddly from side to side until it seemed to change gears to a back-and-forth motion. Surely it would move on again from this position. Didn’t animals always move in the direction they faced? The beast’s head aimed directly at the girl. But

instead of returning to the circus procession, the elephant backed slowly until it touched the car.

“If he lifts his tail ...” Christy warned.

“Get along, you,” Findan shouted at the elephant. “Where is the owner?” he screamed around its mass. Could he drive it off with blows without antagonizing the animal? Surely it would turn on him if he hit it, and he was no match for an unrestrained jungle creature.

“Girl! Fetch your elephant,” he shouted as she jumped in front of it, yelling something he couldn’t make out.

“There it goes,” Christy said.

Seeming to lean into it, the elephant gradually eased its haunches over the luggage rack and rested above it. Buckling metal groaned as glass splattered on the pavement. The rear wheel twisted, the axle warped before the tire burst with a pop. The elephant started with animal surprise as the roof buckled, but regained its balance sufficiently to raise its forelegs, tentatively pawing the air, its trunk snakily upraised in salute.

“Oh, no,” Findan whispered.

With wilted plume, the girl in the white hat jumped around as she shouted, “No. No. Down, Sheba. Down.” With her baton, she tapped at the elephant’s foot dangling in the air. Calling it down, she tapped its knees, so that finally the elephant gracelessly lowered its forelegs, coming to stand on all fours. The girl flicked its knees, rain coming down hard now and starting to stream off the elephant’s back, the ringmaster then screaming in circles around her, the wagons stopped in the center of the road, the horses pulling against the reins to nip at the grass in the median, the ringmaster’s black hat flung to the wet ground, the cars on either side stopping to watch while, now, the ringmaster flailed at the legs of the elephant with the whip reserved for the big cats, the ringmaster screaming, “Move, Sheba. Move!”

As the elephant stepped into the street, the girl cried out, “She’s got glass in her ass.”

John Barry answered her with “E’s a doctor.”

“E’ll not treat ‘im,” Christy shouted to John Barry.

Joseph Bourke came out the bar then with the two beers he'd pulled and asked, "Glass in 'ose ass?"

"No," groaned Findan.

"Here, Findan, take this," Joseph said, thrusting a mug at Findan. "Where's the ely-phamt?"

The glass slipped through Findan's shaking hands, shattered, and joined the shards of window glass in the gutter. Findan reached into his pants pocket for the key, his hand shaking.

"It's not so bad," said Christy said about the wreckage in the road.

"Mind the glass," John Barry said as he led Findan off the street.

Blue sirens screaming, the Garda arrived at the scene and parked next to Findan's car.

"The animal has been restrained," one policeman said. A second one covered in a blue slicker spoke to the ringmaster. Findan's hands shook as he tried to write down the addresses and names of persons all around, the names smearing even as he wrote them until John Barry held an umbrella over him and thrust a dry biro into his hands, saying, "The names, Findan. You've got to be able to read the names for the insurance claim."

Was the car even insured against acts of God? It was not insured against war. Yet surely an elephant sitting on his car could not be construed in the usual categories of catastrophe and must, indeed, be very well an act of God. Earthquakes, floods, storms—surely a loose and rampant jungle animal counted as catastrophe. And the car, itself, being just post-War, was irreplaceable, even though Margaret had hated it when he brought it over from Germany for her.

"It's for you," he had said that morning when she awoke on her birthday.

"The door is in the front," she had said.

She would say that he had brought it down on himself, he had to take it to work that day.

If it hadn't been so bright ...

If it hadn't been so small ...

If it hadn't been so red ...

"It didn't start," one of the Garda said as he slapped the key on

the bar next to Findan.

“Another, John Barry,” Findan said, hunched over the bar ignoring the key.

“Give him another,” said Joseph Bourke, who clapped Findan on the back.

Christy squeezed his shoulder, saying, “It’s not so bad, lad.”

It was only after the fact, when every lad in the house had doused Findan with drink, actually pouring it down his throat with a slap on the shoulder as they would commiserate with a cuckolded husband, only after the fact that Findan realized the resemblance his car must have held for the elephant. For, surely from the elephant’s point of view, the round, red body of his bubble car looked very like the stand the elephant had been trained to sit upon. It was not peanuts, nor beer, nor the cheers of the crowd that drew it. No, it was not that. From the point of the view of the beast, that car had become the object of elephant interest, the conditioned goal of many years training that brought it applause under the big top, perhaps even an affectionate pat from the girl with the white skirt. It was in the satisfaction of that trained desire that the elephant had sat quite plumply upon Findan’s bubble car.

“The elephant has gone home now,” Joseph Bourke said, through the door and pulling a tweed cap over his ears. “She doesn’t need a doctor.”

“I’ll take you home,” John Barry said, as he started to turn off all the lights. “I’ll make sure you get home all right, a man should not have to walk home in this awful rain.”

John Barry slipped the key into Findan’s breast pocket before he got Findan into his car. As John Barry eased out of the lot, Findan looked down out the window at the single, crumpled tire.

“Besides,” John Barry continued, “the insurance company will take care of the car. Even though it’s not paid for yet, well, man, that is what insurance is for, part of the natural order of things.” He turned down the lane leading to Findan’s house, stopped before the house where the front wall was twined with roses, which, in the

drizzled dark, appeared as gray balls bunched together like clumps of old tissue.

So Findan should not worry after all, John Barry continued. “It is not so bad as it seems. The animal is fine, you won’t be sued. Ay, it is unfortunate that you were made such good sport of, but when the insurance comes through, everything will be fine. Every man in town will rue the day he had missed seeing the elephant. Man, you will be a legend in your own time, and all time from henceforth will be counted from the day that the elephant sat on your car. Why, did you see old Christy Dooley? He was so excited, he’ll go home and lay his wife. Joseph Bourke will say that in all of his career, the one day he went home sober enough to talk to his wife was the day that the elephant....”

Findan climbed out the car door and slammed it shut.

As John Barry trained his headlights on the door, Findan climbed over the gate, and the slick wood left a dark smear on the inside of his trouser leg. When he tried to brush the stain off, he only smeared it around. His head hurt, and the rain blurred his sight, so he lumbered, stumbling, through the tea roses till he got to the door. There he pulled his house keys out of his pocket, found the right one, placed it clumsily in the lock, held the knob to steady himself and stumbled face-forward inside, catching himself before he tumbled. John Barry honked good night.

Findan tore his coat off with a clumsy whirl of arms, hooked two fingers in his tie and slipped the knot out, pulled the tie off, flinging it behind him somewhere.

Leaving a trail of water behind him, he made his way in the dark to the kitchen, ran the tap for a glass of water, drank it, threw the glass in the sink.

He looked down at his shoes—black wing tips, sodden—they left small tracks behind him. They squished through every step as if he had been walking through mud. At the kitchen table, he sat down as soberly as he could, and one foot at a time, pulled out the loop of his laces, loosened one, slipped his shoe off with a hand cupped

gently behind the heel. He held his right shoe up to his face as if he were taking the measure of his ruin, sighed, and set it down on the floor directly in line with his foot. Then he unlaced the left shoe, and set it next to the right. His two shoes were there in front of him, neat, in place and orderly, as if they were ready, just like that, to be put on again, as if in the next moment, they could walk outside by themselves. He could not tell by looking at them in the dark that they were wet.

For a moment, a moan nearly slipped out of his mouth. What if he were wrong? What if the insurance would not cover it? But there must be some clause in the policy. He was sure the company was obliged to make good on its policy. Yes, one could count on procedure. A case could be made. A case might even be made now if his head did not hurt so much that he could not remember which drawer held the policy.

Still in the dark, Findan stumbled through the house as if it were not his own. Where were the light switches? They could not have moved off the wall. He sat down on the brick edge of the fireplace in the sitting room. One by one, slick buttons slipped through his fingers, and he twisted his shirt off, held it arm's length by the collar tab, and then flung it on the flowered arm of a French-backed chair. It landed square on the back, the arms extended.

He tried to stand up again, his head reeled, and his eyes made no good connection with his brain. Better to wait a bit longer. Directly across from him, the dark silhouette of his shirt offered the appeal of an embrace. Me shirt's calling me, he thought. The arms were open, the only friendly thing when he was drunk, wet, and lost in his own house. "Fucking shirt," he said. He fell into its arms when he tripped against the chair, and yelled at the cold cloth, "Get off me."

As he started in the hallway, he unbuckled his belt and dropped his trousers on the floor. Stepping out of them, he kicked the trousers behind him.

Before he staggered into his bedroom, he paused at the doorway to steady himself, and then groped his way through the dark. As he stood over his bed, his socks stupidly wet, his shorts draped off

his skinny thighs, he squinted to see the face of his wife, upturned upon the pillow. She had fallen asleep half undressed, the lace hem of her slip hiked up high on her thigh, one hand languidly crossed behind her head. With the faint ache of a sailor come to port, Findan searched the landscape for the known silhouette of a familiar roof. A faint scent of sherry hung in the room, and as Findan moved closer to his wife's bed, he caught a fallen glass under the ball of his foot; it rolled away without breaking. Findan cursed mildly under his breath, grateful and angry for the familiar.

She had been at it again. At it again. But then look at him, no prize himself either, and the common fool of God and man. He kicked the glass under the bed with the stockinged ball of his foot.

If it had been only the car. If it had been only his wife. If it had not been an elephant, a stupid creature with no dignity. The only tragedy was that his situation was not tragic. No mighty adversary, no contest between forces of good and evil. No, it was terribly bad comedy at his expense. It might have been better had she taken a lover, left him, done something, gone somewhere. It might have been better if their alienation had taken a specific form, the form perhaps of a black-bearded sheepshearer whose face Findan could split with a good cracking fist. But no. No object. No tangible thing. Only a baggy, sideshow atrocity, its back outlined by gray rain.

"Fucking Sheba," Findan cursed that shadow.

At the sound in the room, his wife stirred, a dark shadow moving around on the sheets. Her hand shifted in sleep, perhaps only a reflex. She rolled to her side, and then—what sound that?—soft as a moan from her parted lips, his wife's voice called out in her sleep.

"Margaret," Findan whispered, "do you want me?"

In the illusion that she had called out his name, Findan answered her, pulling down his shorts, flinging himself up on top of her and burying her body under his cold wet skin. Making the beast with two backs, he thrust again and again at the hem of her empty invitation, with the urgent belief that the fulfillment of form might complete his desire, with the vague hope that an act of man might counter an act of God.