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Opening extract from

Circus of Thieves on the Rampage

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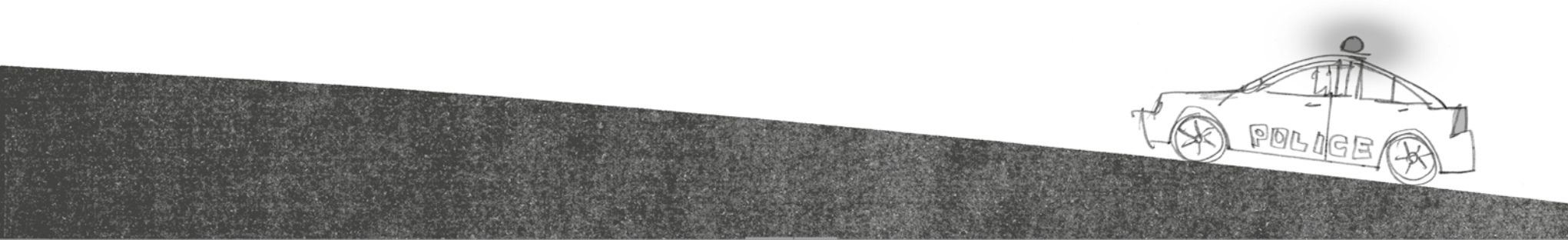
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ONE

Just one more bath

LET US BEGIN WITH A LEAF. Not a green leaf, but a brown one, curling up at the edges, clinging on by a feeble, sad little dried-up stalk. Yes, folks, it was autumn – the time of year when leaves have had enough of being leafy and pretty and green, and decide all at once to shrivel up and dive-bomb into the mud. We all get the urge to dive-bomb into mud from time to time, but leaves are very good at waiting until mud is at its soggiest and squelchiest, probably because they

know they only get one dive.

This particular leaf – let's call him Kevin – had his eye on a deep, pungent, cow-patty puddle directly beneath the branch where he'd been hanging all summer. He'd been watching this puddle ripen for more than two weeks. When he decided it was time to take the plunge, he yelled out, 'GERONIMOOOOOOOO!' and went for it, shrugging himself free of Old Branchy and fluttering downwards.

This was the high point of his year.

'Bye-bye, Branchy,' he hollered. 'To be honest, I never really liked you anyway!'

Sadly for Kevin, a gust of wind came up at that exact moment and blew him off course. This may have been divine punishment for his ingratitude and rudeness, or perhaps it was just a coincidence. It didn't blow him far, but this was no ordinary field, and Kevin was dismayed to find himself

landing not in a lovely, cold, murky, composty, dank puddle, but in a hot, soapy, clean-as-a-just-cleaned-whistle, lavender-scented bubble bath. Yes, he fell from his tree, as leaves always do in autumn, and he landed in a bath, as leaves, on the whole, don't.

How on earth could a disaster of this kind befall an innocent, filth-loving leaf such as Kevin?

How is that even possible?

I've never heard such nonsense in all my life! What a load of absolute tripe!

Take a deep breath. Calm down. And allow me to explain.

The cause of Kevin's soapy demise was an outdoor bath belonging to the internationally renowned, semi-retired and deeply fragrant trapeze artist, Queenie Bombazine.

Queenie loved to bathe. It was her favourite activity. She also loved fresh air. Most people with

two incompatible enthusiasms of this sort would have been happy to bathe, then go for a walk, or vice versa, but Queenie Bombazine was not most people. She was Queenie Bombazine, circus legend, aerialiste supreme, Mermaid of the Skies (but we'll come to that later).

So – and it's not that strange; in fact, it's surprising more people don't do it – Queenie Bombazine had hired a plumber to run some water pipes into the field behind her house and connect them to a cast-iron, claw-footed Victorian bath.



In this way, Queenie Bombazine put herself in the lovely position of being able to enjoy hot baths and fresh air at the same time.

Queenie's bath-in-a-field was her favourite possession. Whenever Queenie was in this bath, she was happy. Except today.

Today, even an open-air bath couldn't cheer her up, because that morning she had received a troubling phone call from her accountant, Fiscal Cliff.

Fiscal Cliff had rung with Bad News. His news was on, the one hand, very simple and, on the other, rather complicated and difficult to digest. The news was this: Queenie Bombazine had run out of money. She was skint.

Now Queenie wasn't the kind of person who was particularly interested in money. Not long ago, she had been extremely wealthy, but that hadn't really excited her, and she didn't have

much idea where all the money had gone (beyond the occasional plumbing extravagance). But skint, she knew, was a problem. A big problem. Skint meant the gas would be cut off. Skint meant cold baths.

In fact, she definitely remembered having borrowed a large sum of money to buy her large house with its large number of bathing options. Skint, now she thought about it, meant getting kicked out of her home. It meant moving somewhere smaller – somewhere where she might have to use a . . . a . . . and she could hardly allow this word into her brain, it revolted her so much . . . a . . . brace yourselves . . . a . . . are you ready? . . . a . . . shower!

Hideous! Water spraying at you in horrible, jittery-jabby jets! While you stand up! Unspeakable!

Something had to be done. But what?

Queenie had been in the bath for two hours, struggling to think of a plan for how to save her

home, when Kevin fell out of the sky and landed on her freshly-washed knee. In a fit of uncharacteristic anger, she tore Kevin into tiny little shreds which she then threw onto the ground. Or tried to, but she couldn't, because the shreds of Kevin stuck to her wet hands.

I'm finished! she thought to herself, scraping half-dissolved Kevin-goo onto the edge of her bath.[1]

Queenie, however, wasn't a sulker. She was Queenie Bombazine, circus legend, aerialiste supreme, Mermaid of the Skies (but we'll come to that later). And after her short moment of Kevin-destroying dejection, after her brief little pity-party, a plan pinged into her head. It was the sight of all those other leaves falling from the sky – Kevin's friends[2] – that did it. The way they fluttered to the ground, floating, almost weightless, drifting hither and thither and then

[1] Kevin's story ends here. It wasn't a very long story, and it was not a happy one, either. Poor Kevin. He was extremely rude to the branch that looked after him all summer, though, so perhaps he got what he deserved.

[2] Actually, they weren't his friends. Nobody liked Kevin. He was a brat.

hither again reminded her of something.

Queenie reached out and picked up the phone, which she kept on the all-weather cabinet next to her bath, and called her Business Manager, Stage Manager, Tour Manager and Man Manager, Reginald Clench.

'Reginald?' said Queenie. 'I'm calling you with some awful news.'

'Pip pip, Queenie! How are you, what what? I haven't heard from you for ages – not since the last time you ran out of money.'

'What did you say?'

'You heard, duckie.'

'How did you know I'd run out of money?'

'Why else would you call me?'

Reginald was a civilian,[♫] and not just an ordinary civilian, but a very civilianny civilian. He was, in fact, a retired army major – strict and disciplined in all matters, punctiliously punctual, precisely precise and rigorously rigorous. He had served in the British Army for thirty years, until his career was cut short by an unfortunate incident involving a tuba, some goats, a Maharaja's ornamental garden and a runaway steamroller. The details were murky, but, to this day, he still blanched at the sight of a goat. Or a steamroller. Though he did still play the tuba.

Reginald was very much not your usual circus type, but Queenie was strangely fond of him. He was the invisible yet essential element at the heart of all her shows, which starred a large cast of performers, all of whom were eccentric, unpredictable, flighty, flippant and flouncy. The circus needed him in the way a tent needs a tent pole, because without Clench's military discipline, the cast was just thirty people with thirty different ideas, all arguing and bickering and pulling in different directions, the upshot of which would

♫ This, as you will remember, is what circus folk call non-circus folk. It's not an insult. Not to a civilian, anyway, because civilians don't know any better. To a circus person, calling them a civilian is about as rude as tipping a wellie boot filled with tadpoles into their underpants (i.e. very).

have been thirty very short shows in thirty different places, which is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a circus.

'OK, so you've guessed the awful news,' said Queenie, squeezing the phone in frustration, which caused it to fly out of her soapy hand and plop into the bath.

Queenie often dropped her phone in the bath, so she kept it in a waterproof ziplock bag. She submerged her head and fumbled for the handset in the soapy water, listening for the faint, gurgly sound of Reginald saying, 'Heglugllo? Quebubbabubbabeenie? Are you stibubba-bubbabible there?'

It wasn't too long before she fished out the wet, angry-sounding bag.

'Reginald? Hello?'

'It's a very bad line. You sound like you're underwater.'

'Listen – I've made a decision. There's only one thing for it. I'm ready for a comeback. It's time to put on a show.'