

Fergus

Fergus stared at the cobweb that sashayed between two silver angels, which, along with three ball ornaments, two Santa Clauses, and a holly wreath, had been glued on his window since two minutes after Thanksgiving. In front of the decorations plastered to the glass, on the heater's narrow ledge, a fake-looking, one-foot-high Christmas tree sat, its spiky branches buffeted by the heat blasting out the vents. It, too, was tricked up with cobwebs.

Fergus figured that as far as the nursing home went, Christmas stretched to just before Valentine's Day. By his reckoning, staring at the kitten calendar tacked above his bed, it would be only a couple of weeks before pierced hearts would bleed across his room. Then St. Patrick's Day would bring the onslaught of leprechauns and shamrocks, a little more bearable, but even so, this decorating mania made him sick. He would give them a piece of his mind if he could, but Fergus hadn't much to spare nor was he able to complain. The stroke had left him babbling sounds no one could translate except for a word or two. Maybe that was a good thing because Fergus had some secrets best kept close to his chest.

He stared out the window and tried to see a bird pick at the feeder, but the idiot girl who had stuck up the angels had placed them so they blocked the view. Being deprived of watching the shenanigans of the squirrels and birds drove Fergus round the bend. Some days he could think of nothing else except having revenge on that girl—whoever she was. And from getting even with her, it was a short hop to thinking about his wife, Peg.

Truth be told, Fergus had hated Peg for years, now even more while he sat here in this wheelchair, trapped with a useless right leg and a kerflouey right arm, and she sat all cozy in his house in his big tweedy armchair watching some dumb soap opera, helping herself to hefty tots of his Jameson's Irish Whiskey. Oh, Fergus could visualize the scene down to the glint on the Waterford crystal glass, his prized possession, given to him by his father, Fergus Senior. Thinking about Peg made him furious. Without a doubt, she was the root of everything bad that had ever happened to him. He even credited her for clogging his arteries and causing his present situation.

He remembered when he met Peg at a St. Mary's church social. She was a pretty thing in those days—red corkscrew curls and sparkling green eyes. He'd been a fair sight himself, wearing a recent hand-me-down brown herringbone blazer, a dark emerald tie, and a clean white shirt. It hadn't taken a lot of effort to persuade Peg to dance a couple of jigs and reels with him; then, after they were both heated up, he convinced her to try a slow number where he got to feel her curves against him. In a week they were stepping out together; in four months she insisted on a real church wedding before she showed. They were seventeen when they got hitched, but afterward, while he was waiting to be a father, Peg told him the truth: she wasn't pregnant and had no intentions along those lines.

This was the first rotten thing Peg did to him but not the last. There was a long list of offenses for which Fergus kept track, from her nasty thin sandwiches to her nylons and bras hung in the shower. On recent days, sitting in the wheelchair, he kept his mind sharp by remembering the

complete litany of her meannesses. Regardless of all the troubles, Fergus had never laid a hand on Peg, although he was a strapping fellow and she was a small lass. It wasn't the fear of God that kept his fists in his pockets; it was fear of Peg. As many times as he went over this in his mind, over decades of hellish matrimony, he couldn't understand why she was so fearsome. When he was in an admitting mood, he allowed that his cowardice was almost as hateful as Peg herself. Some time back, however, Fergus had found a solution. He toasted himself with the memory as he stared out at the white afternoon.

One cold day, he had stopped into The Old Sod for a hot roast beef and a few. The express delivery service he worked for wasn't keen on its drivers partaking of luncheons at the local pub, but Fergus was stewing about how to pay for Peg's charges at Shirley's, an exclusive dress shop she fancied. Why she was too la-di-dah for Wal-Mart or the like, he didn't know, but these airs blew up from time to time, and she had to have something new, something expensive. Where she was going to sport that God-awful flowery mess of purple and red, he hadn't a clue—the dress wasn't decent for church.

After commiserating with old Tommy the bartender, who'd heard it all before, Fergus had climbed in his blue truck to begin the drive along his wooded, country route, dropping off packages, getting signatures when necessary. It was at Mrs. Gloria Tauber's house that the remedy presented itself.

Mrs. Tauber had red hair like Peg's. Sort of curly, too. And she was wearing a flowered dress cinched in with a black patent leather belt that cut a mean swoop in her abundant figure. Fergus swore she even sprayed herself with musk, because she had that same gaggy sweet smell as his wife. As he stood there getting her signature, he listened to the blare of the TV and watched an old black poodle on the top of the sofa lick its paw, insolence shining out of his gummy eyes. Fergus had always nourished a fierce dislike of dogs. Still did.

"It's real nice of you to bring this inside, Fergus," Mrs. Tauber said, as she popped open the box. "Now, look what I bought." And before he could sidle out the door, she had unwrapped a porcelain figurine of a bug-eyed blond girl holding a yellow butterfly. "My, my, don't you think she's pretty? Where should I put her?"

Fergus always hated rhetorical questions. He didn't like being asked when someone already had the answer or was set to do whatever they were going to do. As he surveyed the shelves groaning with gaudy glassware and an assortment of animal and religious knickknacks, the whole scene began to tick him off—that and Gloria's red hair. When she turned her back, Fergus slammed her head as hard as he could. He knew no one else was home—Mr. Randolph Tauber had seen the light and hightailed it down to the Keys three years ago.

It took a few more blows to finish the old biddy off. Then, carefully, he took the little blond girl sculpture and stuck it up on the shelf. He picked up the empty box and wrappings, pushed in the front door lock, and stepped out onto the sidewalk. Back in the truck, Fergus fired up the engine and drove a few miles to a dumpster, where he threw away his work gloves and the packing materials.

Fergus re-lived this triumph with intense satisfaction. After all, it had been the start of his anger-management. Over the years, there'd been many housewives who had paid the price for Peg, hadn't there? That's what he recollected. And the police never even questioned Fergus. Oh, what a clever lad he was! So now, on most afternoons, when the droopy-headed men and the drooling women were in the activity room playing stupid memory games, Fergus reprised these achievements in meticulous and accumulating detail—except on Fridays, when Fergus was willing to participate in the social festivities because they handed out a free Budweiser to those who were allowed a drink. Though Fergus couldn't taste much, the beer soothed his mind as he closed his eyes and pretended he was back in one of his favorite gin mills, smoking and holding forth—he'd always fancied himself a fine storyteller, but he guessed that was just his Irish blood having its way with him.

Since it wasn't Friday—or at least he didn't think it was—Fergus had a long stretch of day before dinner. He stared down at his worn navy blue sweatshirt with its Giants' football logo and was refreshed in his animosity toward his wife. She knew he hated the Giants. The Green Bay Packers were his team. And then there was the U.S. Army mule on his green sweatpants. Fergus wished the damned mule would kick the shit out of the Giants. Why couldn't she find an Air Force outfit? And white socks—he never wore white socks! Sneakers? Even worse!

Jesus H. Christ. He had to go. Oh, no! Too late. Son of a bitch! Well, sooner or later one of those island gals would show up to change him. He couldn't understand them any better than they could understand him. It didn't really matter; he gave them the Mean Eye. That communicated. A few minutes later, Fergus drifted off.

When he woke, the sky was a shade darker, or maybe it was his cataracts. Being eighty-seven was a barrel of laughs. He was eighty-seven, wasn't he? Fergus sensed the vagueness was on him again. Sometimes that happened after he fell asleep. He thought back to a few minutes ago, whenever that was, and consoled himself that at least old Peg wouldn't see her eighty-seventh birthday. This made his mouth turn up on the good half of his face. No, he'd taken care of Peg, hadn't he? Yes, sir! It gave him real pleasure to savor every detail of her final comeuppance, the Last Day of Peg, as Fergus cheerfully titled the memory.

It had happened just last week. She'd been trying to throw his favorite shoes away, the only comfortable pair he could get his feet into. He'd even bought some new laces to replace the old knotted ones, applied a thick coat of oxblood polish on the leather, covering over the scuffs and buffing the bejesus out of the shoe tops and sides. But, no, they had to go, Peg said. "I don't need new shoes," he'd replied. Next thing, he and Peg were in the car on the way to Thom McAnn's, and Peg was carrying on: "Why can't you dress nice? What's the matter with you that you won't buy anything new?" That sort of palaver. Fergus figured his wife purchased enough clothes for the two of them, but he knew better than to bring up this T-bone of contention.

As he was driving her '89 crystal blue Buick Riviera—the car Peg had insisted on buying even though he couldn't afford it—she just kept at him until finally he was done. He pulled off the road near the edge of a cliff, feeling hot, like a radiator boiling over.

"You drive," he said. She moved into the driver's seat, a fresh torrent of abuse streaming out of her mouth. Fergus remembered staring at her like she was a loud TV set that he couldn't switch

off. Then, standing beside the car, he leaned in and gave her a few quick jabs to the head with his fist, shifted the transmission into drive, closed the door, and pushed against the rear bumper until the car rolled over the edge, smashing against rocks, tumbling down, down, down. A crash. An explosion. Music to his ears.

He licked his lips at the sunny memory as well as he could manage. The best part was that Fergus had gotten away with it. Just like with Gloria Tauber and all the others. He chuckled, pleased with himself, even if he couldn't see his birdfeeder, even if his pants were wet.

“Fergus?”

It was that damned Cruzan/Jamaican-or-whatever aide. He swiveled his eyes around to stare at her, hoping she hadn't read his thoughts. Some of them were voodoo heebie-jeebie ladies, or so he'd heard. Fergus had to be careful.

She put a heavy hand on his shoulder. “Do you know you're going to have a visitor in a little while?” she asked in that lilty voice.

One of those rhetorical minefields again. Fergus wasn't about to favor her with a reply. The aide wouldn't understand him anyhow.

“She'll be here in a few minutes. She just called.”

Who had called him and when? Fergus hadn't heard his phone ring. He looked over at the table next to his bed. No phone. Who the hell had taken it?

“Oh, dear, Fergus. You've had an accident.” That aide again.

Accident? What? He tried to protest: “Jog-jog-no-jog-jog-jog,” but he was wheeled into the bathroom at top speed, his shoes and socks removed.

“Stand up for me,” said the aide, as she shouldered him onto his good foot and stripped off his sweatpants and diapers.

If Fergus didn't have to clutch the rail, he would have cuffed her as she scrubbed him with a wash towel and dumped talcum powder fore and aft. The humiliation of this indecency was so huge, however, that the few shreds of speech he possessed were dammed up inside of him.

After attaching a fresh diaper, the aide forced his legs into a pair of black sweatpants. Didn't she know he always wore trousers and a belt? Hatred was added to the heady dose of humiliation.

“There!” she said, pleased with her handiwork. “Okay, sweetheart, let's go to the lobby.”

Fergus didn't appreciate endearments from strangers nor did he have a clear notion where the lobby was, since the tangled corridors to get there had been designed like a rat's maze. He was glad to have his wheelchair pushed, although why he was going down these halls was lost on him. He'd just as soon sit in that funny room with the angels.

The lobby was dark—all burgundy and forest green, with big double glass doors that led to freedom. Fergus wished he could escape into one of the cars that picked up and disgorged old people with their walkers and canes and wheelchairs. No, wait a minute. His car was out there in the parking lot. That crystal blue Riviera or was it his gold Dodge station wagon? And where were his keys? Fergus checked the left side of his pants, but there weren't any pockets. Bloody hell. What kind of trousers were these without pockets? Maybe on the other side? But Fergus couldn't move his right arm to find out. Deeply frustrated, he stared through the doors, wishing he could fly down to The Old Sod and have a cold beer. He remembered how the mug felt in his hand, the heft of the glass, the cool bite of amber brew sliding down his throat. Ahh. And the cigarette smoke and the music and the fellows all sitting around joshing each other.

A tear slid down his face. Fergus didn't know where it came from, but then there were a few more. He reached for his white handkerchief, the one he always kept in his back left pocket, on the opposite side from his wallet. Where was it? No pockets and no handkerchief. What kind of trousers were these anyway? He'd never owned a pair without pockets!

“Fergie! What’s the matter?” A tiny woman with bright red hair leaned over him.

Did he know her? What was that perfume she was wearing? Next thing, brazen as you please, she was wiping his face, although he didn't think he'd spilled anything on it.

“It’s me, Fergie. Come for a visit.”

Whoever this old gal was, she had nice legs. Peg had great legs once, too. Maybe with a little more meat on them than this woman's.

Without asking, she started pushing his wheelchair out of the lobby. “I’m sorry I haven’t been here since last week, hon. How about we go to the dining room and have a nice cup of tea or something? Would you like that?”

Fergus wasn't fond of her gabbing, but he liked tea. “Jog-jog-jog-yeah-jog-jog-jog.” Pleased with this communication, he let the peculiarly familiar woman roll him down the corridor past a bunch of old people. Where had they come from, he wondered? He hated old farts. They reminded him of his Uncle Mick, who used to smack him whenever they were alone. Fergus worked for him after school, shoveling coal. Dirty business. He hated shoveling, and he hated Mick. Good thing the police had never cottoned on about that wee mischief. Never even questioned him about hitting his uncle with the shovel and leaving him dead in that heap of blackness.

“Fergus? Darlin’? Would you like tea or coffee?”

It was that redhead again. She was an old coot, too, like those people he'd just seen.

“I guess you'd prefer tea,” she answered for him, in that sticky voice.

If she'd known what he wanted all along, why had she asked in the first place? One of those fool rhetorical questions.

Next thing he knew, the woman disappeared through a swinging door. People did that to him all the time. Frankly, it made him mad. He stared around the big room. Had he been here before? Maybe a year ago, Fergus decided. He looked out the window at the parking lot. His Buick was out there somewhere. Perhaps the battery was dead? Damn! He'd have to hire someone to fix it. How much money did he have? Fergus tried to reach for his wallet, but his right arm didn't move. He'd forgotten about that. An hour went by, maybe more, as he wondered why he was sitting in this strange place all by himself. Well, whoever had done this to him, he'd get even.

After all, Fergus thought, he was a very clever lad.