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# **The Circus**

Written by James Craig

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# THE CIRCUS

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Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere,  
diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies.

Groucho Marx

The closer you get, the more you smell the shit.

Adam Boulton

# ONE

At least it wasn't raining.

Buttoning up his jacket against the evening chill, Duncan Brown fired up a Rothmans King Size and took a long hard drag that made his eyes water. Coughing, he stepped off the pavement, still holding in the smoke. Standing in the middle of the empty street, he pawed at the tarmac with the toe of his shoe before turning back to face the small theatre that he had just slipped out of in order to enjoy a crafty fag.

He smiled to himself: couldn't even wait for the interval! This was his second packet of the day. Wasn't he supposed to be giving up?

Finishing his cigarette, he flicked the stub towards the gutter and lit another one. The second smoke never tasted as good, but it was good enough. Inhaling, he scanned the poster for the show that his girlfriend had dragged him along to see. *A beguiling blend of puppetry, animation, music and live action . . .* claimed the blurb.

Beguiling?

*Uh-huh.*

Flicking some ash on to the ground, Duncan blew a plume of smoke into the orange night sky. *Fucking puppets? How old was he to be watching a puppet show?* Gemma had said this show had been a hit at the Edinburgh Festival. 'Well,' he mumbled to himself, 'who gives a monkey's about that? This isn't the bloody provinces.' He glanced enviously towards the Grapes of Wrath

on the corner of the street, seventy yards away. He could see the flickering TV screen hanging from the ceiling – they would doubtless be showing the Arsenal game. He wondered about heading over there, ordering a pint of London Pride and catching what was left of the second half. It was very tempting. On the other hand, Gemma would be more than pissed off if he did a runner now. Tonight was supposed to be their ‘quality time’ for the week, and therefore they were watching a one-man puppet show. What did *that* say about their relationship?

A loud collective groan from the pub was followed seconds later by an electronic chirp from his pocket. Grabbing his mobile, he opened the text message to confirm what he already knew: the Gunners had gone a goal down to some bunch of erstwhile no-hopers. They were playing at home, too. Finishing his second smoke, Duncan shook his head. At least he wasn’t missing much. The mood at the Emirates had been ugly for some time and he could imagine the waves of frustration and bile rolling round the stadium as the team huffed and puffed to no great effect. Imagine paying a grand a season to watch that kind of crap. The manager’s on borrowed time, Duncan thought, just like I am if I don’t get back inside that bloody theatre sharpish.

Deleting the text, he felt the phone start vibrating while still in his hand. There was no number on the screen but he had a good idea who it was. He lifted the phone to his ear. ‘Yeah?’

‘Where are you?’ The voice on the other end of the line sounded bored and annoyed at the same time.

‘Out and about.’ Duncan stepped back up on to the pavement to let a car slide past. ‘What have you got?’

‘We need to meet.’ The source sounded like he was in a pub himself as, in the background, the commentary to the Arsenal game was clearly audible.

Duncan let out a heavy sigh. All this cloak-and-dagger bullshit was pissing him off, big time. In terms of actual column inches generated, it was proving to be a total waste of effort. ‘Why?’

‘There have been some developments,’ the source went on.

‘Like what?’ he asked, not bothering to hide his growing exasperation.

‘I can’t talk over the phone. It has to be face to face.’

‘Okay, okay.’ Duncan scratched his head. He wasn’t in the market for a story right now. Tomorrow was deadline day and he was sorted for Sunday’s paper. It was officially the silly season for stories, and his interview with a newlywed who saw her husband devoured by a shark might even make the front page. ‘*I can still hear his screams in my sleep,*’ she’d sobbed. The shark had never been caught. He thought about his byline under a 72-point *HONEYMOON HORROR* headline and smiled; it was the best piece he’d had for ages. ‘How about early next week?’

‘Nah, needs to be tonight.’

There was another groan from inside the pub.

‘I’m busy.’

There was a pause. On the commentary, audible over the phone, he made out the phrases ‘*horror tackle*’ and ‘*red card*’.

‘It has to be tonight,’ said the source finally, not raising his voice, thus leaving Duncan straining to hear over the background noise. ‘The police have been forced to re-open their investigation into the newspaper.’

‘Don’t we know it,’ said Duncan wearily. It had taken him the best part of two days to delete all his emails and shred every potentially incriminating scrap of paper. He seriously doubted that would be enough, if he came under close scrutiny, but it was a start.

‘Some plod from Nottinghamshire is now in charge.’ A sly chuckle.

‘Why Nottinghamshire?’

‘Why not? It was always going to be someone far removed from events in London. A fresh pair of eyes; an independent perspective. Apparently they don’t have any phones worth hacking up there.’

‘That doesn’t surprise me.’

‘Anyway, your name has come up.’

Duncan felt a spasm in his bowels. ‘What?’

‘They’re on to you.’

*Fuck, fuck, fuck . . .* Duncan thought about how much he had come to hate his shitty job in the last few months.

‘We need to get your story straight.’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ He glanced back towards the theatre; it must be time for the interval, surely. Gemma would kill him, but he would have to deal with that later. ‘Do you know a pub called the Grapes of Wrath? It’s on the corner of Harp Street and—’

‘Too public.’

‘For fuck’s sake . . .’

There was a pause at the other end of the line. Then: ‘Where are you right now?’

‘Okay.’ Duncan gave him the name of the street. ‘I’m standing outside the Cockpit Arts Theatre.’

‘Where’s that?’

Duncan provided some perfunctory directions.

‘Wait there. I won’t be long.’

Standing with his back to the bar, the source watched the journalist end their call and light up another cigarette. You look stressed, he thought. Like a man not in any way in control of events.

Around him the pub was rapidly emptying as the game reached its final minutes. A couple of feet away, a trio of facsimile fans in replica shirts were moaning loudly about their team’s various shortcomings. Their frustration and angst were clearly genuine. Why did grown men allow themselves to get so wound up about football? It wasn’t as if they could actually do anything to influence the result. The whole thing was beyond him. Anyway, if winning was all that mattered they should support one of the financially doped teams, like Manchester City or Arsenal. Money had totally fucked the game. If you couldn’t see that, you were a mug.

Finishing his Grey Goose vodka, he headed for the door, glancing up at the screen just in time to see Arsenal concede a



second goal. They were dead and buried now, and fans inside the stadium were streaming for the exits. Aside from the odd curse, the mood in the pub was suitably funereal. To add insult to injury, the television replays showed that the latest goal had been well offside. Some of the supporters at the bar gestured at the screen angrily; one of them started a chorus of the popular terrace lament ‘The referee’s a wanker’, but he found no takers among his fellows and the words quickly died in his throat.

Trying not to smile, the man heading for the door shook his head; *life can be so unfair*.

As the game restarted, the fourth official signalled that there would be six minutes of added time – which, ironically, was longer than Duncan Brown had left on this earth.

## TWO

*No, no, no . . .*

‘For God’s sake!’ Marc Harrington tipped back his head and threw more of the white wine down his throat. After a week spent kowtowing to a bunch of unbelievably demanding Israeli clients, he had to come home to this? It just wasn’t fair. Angrily, he banged the glass down on the granite worktop of the Boffi kitchen and glared at his wife. ‘We spend seven million to buy a house on bloody Wellington Road and we end up stuck with the neighbours from hell.’ As if on cue, the music next door ratcheted up another notch. It was now so loud that Marc imagined he could see the windows shaking. ‘I told you we should have gone to Highgate, but oh no . . .’

Knowing better than to rise to the bait, Angela Harrington sipped nervously at her gin and tonic, making a face – too much tonic. They had only moved into the neighbourhood three weeks ago and already her dream home was turning into a nightmare.

‘Instead we’re stuck here with all these bloody chav parvenus.’

Thank you for pointing that out, Angela thought. She wanted to scream at her aggressive, know-it-all husband. Instead, she took another gulp of her overly diluted Blackwoods 60, hoping that the gin would start kicking in sooner rather than later. Maybe for the next one she would just dispense with the tonic altogether. Somewhat embarrassed, she glanced at the three-quarters-empty bottle. It had been purchased from Waitrose

only two days ago; not for nothing was gin known as ‘mother’s ruin’.

Pulling open the door of the wine cooler located in the middle of the triple fridge-freezer, Marc grabbed another bottle of Chevalier-Montrachet Grand Cru 2006. After violently removing the cork with his Legnoart Grand Cru Sommelier black acrylic corkscrew, he refilled his glass, spilling some of the £345-a-bottle wine over his lime-green Lacoste polo shirt as he did so. ‘Bollocks!’

Despite everything, Angela felt a grin spreading across her lips. She quickly turned away before her husband noticed.

Taking another gulp, he gestured furiously in the direction of number 40, next door. ‘That bloody boy of theirs will have been left on his own again.’

‘He *is* sixteen,’ Angela pointed out, her words barely audible over the rock music crashing across what the estate agent had called a ‘Mediterranean-style secluded garden’.

‘The parents have basically given up,’ Harrington snorted.

Unlike you, Angela mused, as she clasped the remains of her G&T to her weary bosom.

‘He’s an idiot.’ Madeleine Harrington, sixteen herself, appeared in the doorway in an AC-DC *Back in Black* T-shirt and grey jeans. Her father noted with some distaste that her platinum-blond pixie hair had been given a red tinge since the last time he had seen her. ‘Is there any wine for me?’

The music died away, before quickly building back up to another crescendo. ‘Go and tell him to shut that crap off first,’ her father snapped.

‘It’s 30 Seconds to Mars,’ Madeleine said, slouching past her father and reaching into the dishwasher for a wine glass.

Her parents looked at each other blankly.

‘That’s the name of the band,’ she explained, helping herself to some wine. ‘30 Seconds to Mars.’ She sighed – this really was like talking to a pair of retards. ‘American soft rock.’

‘That little sod is thirty seconds from a good kicking,’ her

father grunted. By now he had the best part of a bottle and a half of Chevalier-Montrachet inside him and he could feel the alcoholic buzz feeding his fury.

‘Whatever.’ Madeleine took a mouthful, her expression suggesting she thought that the wine was okay but nothing special. ‘Anyway, I’m not going over there. The randy little sod will try and jump me . . . again. He thinks that somehow I’m his girlfriend just because I let him come along to that party the other week. If he’s not careful, Ben will give him a hammering.’

Mention of his only daughter’s real boyfriend, a useless, lazy little twerp whose father was nothing more than a glorified car salesman – he sold Minis, for God’s sake! – did nothing to improve Marc Harrington’s mood. Another couple of gulps and his glass was nearly empty again.

‘Anyway,’ Madeleine grinned from behind her wine glass, ‘right now he’s probably in there playing with himself.’

Harrington almost choked on his wine. ‘Too much information, Maddy,’ he grunted.

‘He’s addicted to porn.’ Madeleine flashed her parents the standard naughty-little-girl grin that had stood her in such good stead over the last decade or so.

That act is getting a bit tired, young lady, her father thought sourly. You’re going to have to find something else.

‘He made me watch some one time.’

Her father held up a hand. ‘Enough!’

‘Marc . . .’ Angela shot her husband a look.

‘Okay, okay.’ Harrington took a final slug of the wine and placed his empty glass on the Calligaris Park dining table. ‘I’ll do it.’ Like I have to do everything around here, he reflected. Pining for the quiet leafy streets of Highgate, he stormed towards the door.

## THREE

Hovering on the kerbstone, Hannah Gillespie waited for a gap in the traffic. Standing at her shoulder, her friend Melanie Henderson was wittering on about some cute boy called Ricky that she'd met at the Westfield shopping centre the weekend before. Hannah was not really interested in boys; at least not since she'd got herself a man, a proper bloke.

Smiling at the thought, she clocked a couple of creeps sitting in the front of a silver Range Rover, shamelessly eyeing her up. Hannah knew exactly what they were thinking and felt the urge to gag. If her boyfriend were here, he'd give them both a good slap. They were old enough to be her dad – even older, probably. They were parked on a double yellow line, too; hopefully they would get a ticket.

Melanie gripped her arm. 'I'm sure he fancies me . . .'

'Uh-huh.' Hannah took a tentative step into the roadway, hoping that one of the passing cars would slow down to let them across. Time was pressing. She needed to get back to do her homework. Then she had plans.

Inspector John Carlyle sat in the passenger seat of an unmarked police car and watched the two girls struggling to cross the road in the face of an unrelenting stream of traffic. Catching the eye of the prettier of the pair, he saw a look of annoyance cross her face before she rudely gestured towards his car with the middle finger of her right hand. Ignoring her, he stared at his reflection

in the rear-view mirror. I look tired, he thought, rubbing his hand across the five o'clock shadow on his jaw. But it's more than that. Time is moving on, and it's certainly not waiting for me. The face that stared back at him contained the familiar quizzical plebeian features of yesteryear, but there was no denying the growing bags under the eyes and the suggestion of greater fleshiness under the chin. Middle age might be an increasingly amorphous concept, but there was no denying that he had reached it. His temples were now almost exclusively grey and there was even the first hint of a receding hairline. 'You're getting old, you old bastard,' he nearly said aloud. Then thought: Talking to yourself, too? Going fucking senile, sunshine.

Maybe not quite yet.

A break in the traffic allowed the two girls to reach the middle of the road.

'What do you call an exploding monkey?'

'Eh?' In the driver's seat, Sergeant Joe Szyszkowski turned to face his boss.

'It's a joke Alice told me,' Carlyle explained. 'She's been wandering round the house with a big fat joke book, picking out the ones that make her giggle.'

'Kids . . .' Joe shrugged. He was a family man himself – he had two, a boy and a girl, to Carlyle's one daughter.

'This one is her current favourite – at least it was as of last night.'

Joe nodded indulgently. With the best will in the world, other people's kids were just not that interesting.

Ignoring his sergeant's lack of enthusiasm, the inspector tried again. 'So, what *do* you call an exploding monkey?'

The girls finally made it to the pavement on the far side of the road and disappeared down another street. Releasing his seatbelt, Joe opened the car door. 'Dunno.'

'A baboom,' Carlyle cackled. 'Geddit? Ba-*boom!*'

Joe groaned as he eased himself out of his seat. 'Tell Alice from me, that's terrible,' he said.

‘What d’ya mean?’ the inspector protested. ‘It’s brilliant. A *baboom!* Outstanding. Best joke ever.’

‘C’mon,’ Joe said wearily. ‘I should have been home more than an hour ago. Let’s get this over with.’