

Vanishing Act

Saturday morning, a knock at the door. The man answers it. On his front step is a bear.

No, no, no, the man says, already shutting the door.

It's too late. The bear—huge, shaggy, an unstoppable force—shoulders the door wide and now it's filling the front hall.

Hang on, the man says with an uneasy laugh. You can't just, you know ...

A stink wallops the man's nostrils, of cold nights wandering in the rain, hunger, rooting in garbage heaps. He stifles a gag and realizes he had better handle this situation carefully. Since the circuses bowed to public pressure and let the animal performers go, they've gotten desperate for work. For an audience. He's heard of that recent incident in Parksville where a retiree got roughed up trying to shoo a tiger off his doorstep.

The bear raises its head and snuffles with its big black nose. Probably catching the leftover scent of bacon and eggs from breakfast.

Here's the thing, the man says in his most calm and reasonable voice. I'm not really interested in a show and I've got a lot on my plate today. I mean a lot of work. So I think it's best if you just move along. Try somewhere else. No hard feelings, right?

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The bear grunts, a sound like a shove made of air. The man has never been the recipient of a grunt before. It's quite persuasive.

All right, one trick, he says quickly. Just one.

The man glances out the door to see if any of his neighbours are watching.

The bear rears up on its hind legs. The top of its head brushes the chandelier and sets the crystal baubles jingling. With surprising nimbleness, the bear turns in a circle, paddling its forepaws in the air as if beating time to some music the man can't hear.

The man watches the bear and remembers going to the circus as a child. The elephants, how they riveted him with awe. The lions prowled in his dreams for days. Even there, in that tawdry circus tent under the glaring lights they had kept some unknowable part of themselves. But the bears, they were different. Or not different enough. Too much like people, so easily led and eager to play along. They might have been people, he'd thought then, dressed up in bear costumes. He felt duped and embarrassed for the bears. It's been forever since he's been to a circus.

The bear drops back down onto all fours.

Wow, the man says. He resists the urge to clap. That would be too much encouragement.

Yep, he says, I can tell you've really put in the time. And speaking of time, I've got a full day ahead. So.

The bear pads over to a soccer ball sitting in a corner. It belongs to the man's son, who's out shopping with his mother for new shoes. Probably best they're not here to see this. The bear noses the ball with his snout and makes a kind of pleading *wuff*, like an eager puppy.

What are you...

Nudge. *Wuff*.

The man gets it. He hesitates, considering his choices, then picks up the ball. He places it with great care on the tip of the bear's upraised nose, which is wet, alive, quivering, like another animal itself. He glances, in spite of himself, into the bear's eyes. Someone's in there, watching him.

He backs away.

The ball wobbles on the bear's long snout but doesn't fall. The bear hefts itself onto its back legs again. The ball stays put. The bear turns in a circle. The ball doesn't fall. It's pretty impressive, you have to admit. If it's real.

The bear extends its forepaws, lifts a hind leg, executes a clownish arabesque. Miraculously, the ball stays aloft. That must

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have been the big finish, because now the bear's carefully lowering itself back down onto all fours, still keeping the ball on its perch. At the last moment, a shudder runs through the bear's awkwardly balanced body. With a bleat it lurches forward and belly-flops onto the hardwood. The ball caroms off its back, bounces out the open doorway.

The man feels hot shame rise to his face, for himself or the bear, he's not sure. His fists clench and unclench. He's aware now that his entire life since his parents took him to that circus as a gullible kid has been travelling to this moment. Enough is enough.

He starts to clap, slowly. Maximum sarcasm in each clap.

Nice try, he says. Can we end this now, please? You know what I mean.

The bear climbs unsteadily back onto all fours and stands there, teetering like a drunk, as if that last trick has taken everything it had.

Time for the big reveal, the man says. Up you get.

The bear appears to ponder this, then it lofts itself wearily onto its hind legs once more. The man steps up close to that reeking wall of fur.

It's got to be here somewhere.

The bear sways like a tree. A pendant of thick drool swings from its slack jaw.

Don't play dumb. Where's the zipper? There must be a way out of this thing.

An ursine groan. The bear's short forepaws dangle uselessly.

The man growls and plunges his hands into the bear's pelt. For a moment he's startled by how deep and soft this fur is, softer than anything he's ever known. Then he grits his teeth and keeps going.

Head, torso . . . he wades deeper, groping, paddling, sinking into a warm giving wilderness of fur. The world is so hushed in here. He's getting sleepy. It would be so easy just to curl up, close his eyes. He should stop. Go back. But the bear is all around him now, there's no telling anymore which way he came in, or when it might end. If he just keeps at it a little longer. Just a little further and the truth will be revealed.

Somewhere a heart is booming, great wild throbs that he's not certain aren't his.

Hello? he calls in the muffling darkness. Where are you?

His voice is small, so far away. He might be calling to himself.