



*In Search
of the*

**PERFECT
SINGING
FLAMINGO**

CLAIRE TACON



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POPULAR
PRESS

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for Javier and Rafael

HENRY

I SEE THE AD EARLY IN THE DAY, WHEN I'M TAKING A coffee break between servicing the Skee-Ball lanes. A Frankie's Funhouse eighty kilometres out of Chicago is converting a Nifty Trio Set to Digital One. They've got an old Franny Feathers, my daughter Starr's favourite character, in Urban Cowgirl costume, as is. Hasn't worked right since the Spooky Good Time show was loaded in last Halloween.

I email them right away, asking price.

Nineteen hundred dollars – fire sale rate – pick it up by the end of the month. They want to know if I'm an owner. *Buyer beware, she lurches more than a stick shift in January.* They've had her off-grid for the past three months, draped with a spare curtain. Too many parts need to be machined.

My wife's already drawn the line in the sand. We're running out of basement square footage. I've boxed in the furnace and laundry

machines to make room for the stage. There's Frankie on vocals, Tops the Turtle on stand-up bass and The Rattlers on drums. In the middle is Starr's mic stand, a barbell weight threaded onto the base for extra stability. An old desktop is off to the side, with a three knob panel – junked panic buttons from elevators – that lets her run the system. Green plays the music on her computer through the speakers, yellow makes the band play along, red shuts it all down.

Across from the stage is a semicircle of couches for an audience that rarely appears now. But turnout doesn't matter to Starr. She'll stand there, tiptoed like a little girl, watching herself in the full-length mirror, singing along to YouTube. After each song, she waits, as if her fans are showering her with a hundred roses. She knows they aren't, but she pauses like they should be.

Kath's been campaigning to get the space back for a few years now. She doesn't push it, doesn't articulate her plan exactly, but there are signs. Comments about how it doesn't match the rest of the house. About guest rooms. Resale value.

Deep down, she knows I can't bring myself to sell it all off. Not while Starr enjoys it. Especially since I lost the bigger war about where our daughter should live. It's a sore spot, Starr in the condo with the independent living support. Instead of with us at home. Two years away from Freedom 55 and we're carrying a new mortgage. That nineteen hundred dollars of animatronics would cover two months.

Still, Trio Stages are getting scarce and there won't be a lot of liquidations like this again. Certainly never at that price. Eight hours isn't too long to drive.

Wednesday night and I'm sprinting the van along the 401, gripping the wheel against the crosswind. We're late for dinner at Melly's, my youngest, and there are thirteen boxes of misprinted sweatpants in the back. Kathleen is silently cursing the teacher who signed off on *Streetsville*

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Secondary. What kind of an idiot, she's thinking. What kind of person walks past the same word every day and still gets it wrong?

There's a Goodwill, a Value Village and a Talize on the way. It doesn't quite meet Kath's fifty kilometre rule, but it's close enough. It's high-quality product – wicking fabric, slim cut, screening on both the hip and rear. Someone's got to have a sense of humour.

At the first stop, Kath unbuckles her seat belt, but I tell her to stay put. She's eating the cost because Professional Imprints gets a lot of business from the athletic department. She doesn't need her nose rubbed in it. "Here," I say, handing off a bag filled with two giant canisters of prenatal vitamins. Darren, the walk-around mascot at the Mississauga Funhouse, got roped into a health supplement scheme. The kid had to front the money for the first batch of product with the promise that he'll net four hundred dollars once he sells all the inventory. "These are for Melly. See what you think."

I grab the boxes of misprints two at a time, feeling good to be taking care of things for Kath.

By the time we reach our daughter's semi-detached on the far side of Milton, my thoughts are on something else. I don't remember the gift until we're ringing the doorbell. When I turn back to the van, however, Kath holds me steady. "Leave it," she says. "I'll explain later."

Our daughter's approach is blurred behind the door's frosted glass.

Suddenly I'm embarrassed about the purchase, the way I am when Melly asks me not to call her that anymore. She's Melanie now, Lainey to her husband and co-workers. Says it with such emphasis that I feel accused, as if I'd coached the other kids to call her Smelly Melly Ding-Dong.

As she opens the door, though, it's the word that comes out. "Melly!" She slips past to take Kath's coat, leaving Chester to shake my hand like he's wrenching a jar lid. They usher us deeper into the potpourri-and-meatloaf smell of the house.

Christ, their place looks better than ours. Everything neat and in style, like a show home the night before the sales office opens. Melly's always had a knack for that; makes her living as a production assistant on a local home renovation show. Thursday nights on the Women's Network – we've yet to miss an episode. Not that Melly's ever onscreen – not even the back of her head as she lines up the next shot. Instead, it's half an hour with the Ironed Prune, a senior designer whose face has seen more renovation than her career.

I don't understand why Melly doesn't have her own show yet. She seems content to wait, happy to trade grunt work for perks like their walnut coffee table that was a prop in its previous life. She's young, I suppose, still has time.

They've torn the walls out between the rooms so the downstairs is one huge open space. Melanie peels off behind the breakfast bar and fusses with the pans on the built-in range. I follow Chester over to the sitting area and wait while he distributes three rosemary gimlets. I recognize the cocktail from the cover of this quarter's *Food & Drink*. There's a frozen grape in each ice cube. I know it's meant to look elegant, know Melly's gone to a lot of trouble over this, but I can't help thinking it looks sad. I keep checking my drink to track the fruit's liberation. Wonder if I'm supposed to wait until it melts or if I should fish it out with my fingers. I've choked knocking back maraschino cherries.

Too late, I realize Kath is staring at me. What are she and Chester talking about?

"I'm amazed that beast drives," Chester says. "What is it, twenty years old now?"

"Twenty-five. Got it the month before we found out Kath was pregnant again." I lay my hand on my wife's forearm but she bristles. I'd forgotten – she'd strictly warned me not to bring up babies or pregnancy. "Anyway, somewhere around that time."

"What's the mileage?" If Chester's annoyed, he doesn't show it.

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“Almost three hundred K.”

Chester swirls the liquid in his glass and nods. “You do most of the maintenance yourself, right?”

Never missed an oil change. Never left it out in winter. Never let the salt sit on it. Do that and the maintenance takes care of itself.

Melanie pops her head over the granite counter. “You should teach Chester how to tune up our car.”

When I first met Chester, I’d been excited that he worked at the station. Figured a firefighter would be good at mechanics. Or at least handy. Figured he and Melly would get a fixer-upper and we could bond over ripping out knob and tube or framing a closet. Even hoped that the two of us would spend afternoons tinkering with the animatronics in our basement while Melly, Kath and Starr visited upstairs.

I don’t think Chester’s ever replaced a light switch. Sure, he’s good at driving the fire engines (which are all automatic transmission now), he knows the right ratio of compressions to breaths for CPR and can work a defibrillator. But when they went house hunting, it was exclusively new-build, everything up to code and move-in ready – he didn’t want to lift so much as a hammer.

That’s not fair, I think, Chester’s a good egg. Even if he’s on the wrong side of humourless.

Besides, for the most part, their choice has worked out. The only area off-limits in the house is the second-floor bathroom, where their budget ran out and they had to settle for builder-grade fixtures and RTF cabinets. Now that the house has settled, water pours right over the shower curb and the vanity’s vinyl coating is peeling off like an eczema flare-up.

Melly comes out with nibblies arranged on a giant platter. Stuffed mushrooms, pigs in a blanket, jalapeno poppers, cheese and crackers with a dab of red pepper jelly, bordered by spears of veggie sticks, shot glasses of dip in each corner. Kath coos in appreciation. “We’re just your

parents. You're spoiling us." She makes room for Melly on the couch, rubs her back before wrapping an arm around our daughter's shoulder.

Starr calls them two pieces of the same cake – they look that much alike. When Kath told me about tonight, I'd asked if Starr was coming too, my three girls together like old times. If it's a family dinner, why couldn't she? Kath tried to brush it off, said they thought it would be nice for the four of us to visit. She'd started to say that Melly needs to have some undivided time too, but stopped herself. Usually Kath's straightforward with her feelings, so there's more to this evening than a casual meal. Last night Starr was so upset that I asked again if she might be included but got the same refusal.

We're here to discuss something important and I wish they'd stop pussyfooting around and get to it.

"Do you notice anything different?" Melly says.

At first I think it's her hair. Women pay millions to have the long, thick, honey-blond hair Melly had as a girl. But in college my daughter chopped it into a bob and darkened it to something you'd spread over pine to pretend it's mahogany. Kath's gazing pointedly across the room at a loveseat. The velvet's the same bright green as a grasshopper cocktail.

"Have a seat," Melly says. "Check it out."

It's what I'd call a firm cushion.

"Perfect height and depth." Kath swings her legs out to show how comfortable she's finding it.

"How much do you think it sells for?"

"Last week, in the flyer, Ikea had a three-seater for six hundred dollars." I feel like I'm losing on *The Price Is Right*.

"I told you not to ask your father to play this game."

Melly angles her body toward her mother. Obviously Kath already knows how much it costs. "It's an emerging designer," Melly explains. "It sells for five thousand dollars at NTKA. We used it for a promo

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and had the family do a pile-on shot for the opening credits. One of the kids had a Sharpie in his pocket.”

I dutifully hunt for the flaw, but can't find it.

“I found matching fabric on Queen Street and reupholstered the bench.”

I get up, careful not to put too much weight on the armrest.

“We'll find out in the next few weeks if we're picked up for another season,” Melly says. “You could get a ton of this stuff if you went on the show.”

She's mentioned it in passing before but we've always missed the deadline. Apparently most of the show's clients are relatives or friends-of-friends. Otherwise they end up with crazies.

“How much say do you have over what that woman does with the place?”

Kath tries to dab a giant broccoli floret into the glass of curried mayonnaise without tipping it. Considering the cost of what she's sitting on, eating at all seems reckless. “That's a good question. Sometimes the reveals are out there.”

“There are two consultations. But you're family, I know the team would take extra care.”

“When's the deadline?”

“End of October.”

“Good,” Kath says. “That will give us time to clean the place out.”

“Do you think they could rig up a proper stage for Starr? I could help them incorporate the band.”

Melly looks at her mother and Kath tilts her head slightly. “I think it'll be a longer discussion.” She wipes her mouth, leaving a trail of coral on the linen. Their planned renovations do not include the Laughing Rat Band. This is what they've been driving at, why Kath and Melly were so keen to make dinner plans, why Starr wasn't invited.

“Didn't you tell me they use duct tape on the furniture?”

“Just once,” Melly says, defensive. “We were behind schedule. They duct-taped fabric over the existing cushions. We replaced them later.”

“Well, I don’t want duct-taped cushions.”

Chester has made a pot roast with braised root vegetables, side salad of green beans, ground pork and almond slivers. By the time it’s served, I’m feeling guilty about being belligerent. The kids have had a hard enough time this year.

“If I’d known the food would be this good,” I say, “I’d have joined the firefighters myself.”

There’s a communal dinner at the fire station each week, enough for the crews coming on and off duty. Everyone pitches in five bucks for the burn unit.

“We’re cooking all vegetarian for the month,” Chester says. “So with you coming over, I thought I’d throw meat in as many things as I could.”

“One of the guys has a kid with autism,” Melly says. “The doctor wanted them to try a low-meat diet, low processed grains. The station thought they’d show solidarity.”

“They said it’s good for regular kids too.”

Melly quietly corrects him. “It’s ‘typical.’”

“Right, sorry. Typical kids.”

“They’ve brought that up at some of the Williams groups,” Kath says. It’s news to me, but what I want to know is why, when Chester sticks his foot in it, no one holds up a giant you’ve-done-the-wrong-thing placard like they do with me. “Sugar is the other one they’re trying.”

Kath’s the only one of us who still goes to those meetings, held once a month in the basement of a United church in Toronto. I found it too awkward. Other than our kids having the same condition, our lives were entirely different. I didn’t want to spend my Tuesday night listening to someone else vent.

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“So, we’ve been feeling a lot better lately,” Melly says. Chester reaches for her hand. “We’ve been thinking about trying again.”

“That’s the main thing,” I say. “Actually, I have something for you.”

I don’t wait for a protest from Kathleen. I’m glad for the excuse to get to the van, to ease the awkwardness of discussing my daughter’s reproductive plans. I feel good about the gift, glad to have taken the chance. When I return to the table, the three of them are eyeing me with wary anticipation, as if I’m an amateur magician and they’re not sure if the pigeon I summon will be dead or alive. I brandish the canisters for effect. “Enough prenats for seventeen kids.”

“That’s sweet of you, Dad,” Melly says. She places the jars side by side right at the edge of the table. “Actually, we’ve just had a consultation with an IVF clinic in Toronto.”

She lets the words hang and I think I’m supposed to jump in with approval. “I thought that was for older women.”

Kath adopts her most soothing voice, something she’d use with Starr after a long day. “A lot of older women do use it. But for Melly and Chester, they can do tests before they implant the embryo to make sure the baby’s healthy.”

When Chester called from the hospital it took some time to figure out what he was talking about. They were at nineteen weeks and Kath said they were clear of the danger zone after twelve. Ever since, I keep seeing articles in the paper about how common it is, about how many women go through it. When I bring this up to Kath, however, she recoils, tells me I don’t understand. By the middle of the second trimester it almost never happens.

Kathleen had being a grandmother all planned out – she’d crocheted a blankie, picked out the name she wanted to be called, was imagining all the places she’d take the little one. The baby wasn’t real to me yet. I felt worried for my daughter, wished I could have spared her the pain. But part of me still thinks Melly’s too young. Perhaps

it's just another reminder that she's about to pass a milestone her sister may never reach.

"You're only twenty-four. Are you sure this is the business you want to be getting into?"

Melly studies the pill bottles. "These don't have folic acid in them."

"Darren's catalogue said they were doctor approved."

"Who's Darren?"

"He's a kid your father works with." Kath bats her toe against my calf.

I don't know why I'm being censored. "He does the character walk-arounds."

"Why is he selling vitamins?"

Kath places her hands flat on the table. "That's not what's important right now. Melly and Chester have decided that this is their safest option."

If they've worked it all out, I don't know why I'm being included.

Chester speaks next. "I know it's been sprung on you here. But we've spent a lot of time thinking about this."

"You know my co-worker June," Kath says. "Her daughter struggled with infertility. They went to the same clinic and now they've got happy, healthy twins. Boy and a girl."

"Any other surprises?"

They all look deeply uncomfortable. Melly's on the verge of crying and I don't know what the hell I'm doing wrong.

"It's a state-of-the-art centre," Kathleen says. "All the online reviews say the doctor is a miracle worker. They're young so there's an excellent success rate and likely they'll get several embryos to freeze for next time. But it's not covered by OHIP." Kath sweeps bread crumbs off the tablecloth to avoid meeting my eye. "It's ten thousand with all the testing."

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Never in a million years did I expect to be asked to pay for my own grandchild.

My pants start buzzing and I pull my BlackBerry out, despite our rule about phone calls during dinner and setting limits for Starr. Kathleen starts clearing plates. Melanie motions for her to sit down, she'll do it, and pretty soon they're all up and outdoing each other. Chester flicks on the coffee machine and I remember that he has to go to work after this. It's half past nine and his shift starts at midnight.

Starr is upset because her roommate, Della, isn't talking to her. The TV's on in the background and I wonder how long she tried to self-soothe before calling. She's grasped the phone to her ear, her fingers muffling the mouthpiece. It's going to be a long time before she calms down. If we can't get her to settle, that means a Lorazepam and Kath coaching Starr through her fear of choking. *Take a sip of water and count to five. Try again. Good girl.* She should have been here tonight, with her family.

Kath motions for me to hand over the phone. She's furious with me, but she's trained her voice to project composure, whatever the situation. If Starr thinks that her mother is unhappy, it will upset her more. She'll worry it's something she's done. "No, sweetheart, it doesn't sound like you did anything wrong. Della might just be upset because of personal problems." *Personal problems* is one of the few code words that can ease Starr's anxiety. "I'm going away for the weekend, sweetie, but I can make an appointment with Della's parents. We can all sit down and have a friendly conversation." As the primary contact with the community agencies, school boards and medical team, my wife has always been better at handling those conferences.

Chester is in the kitchen, laying out a plate of biscotti. His willingness to keep up the social niceties, to prolong the evening, strikes me as both valiant and depressing. I take up Melly's abandoned post

at the sink. Her pink rubber gloves are draped over the lip of stainless steel. She's gone I'm not sure where.

"I'm sorry I wasn't more enthusiastic."

He can't read what I'm trying to say.

"You had us over for a nice dinner."

He takes a glass from the tray. "I'm sure it's fine."

"Well, if I've offended." I let it hang there. "You two will have children one day."

Something sharp comes over his voice, "I hope so." We have no rapport, this kid and I. He goes off with dessert and I'm alone again.

From the other room, I hear Melly tell Starr she'll go over next week with a video.

When we leave, Kath pulls our daughter into a tight hug and whispers encouragement. I know exactly what she's promising. Melly's goodbye to me is like a 1950s slow dance – plenty of room for the Holy Spirit. I have a terrible feeling that when the door closes, she'll be crying until Chester has to leave.

"I'm sorry," I repeat. "We'll think about it."

Chester shakes my hand before wrapping himself around his wife like an oversized beach towel. "It's been a rough year."

And then Kath pushes me out the door.

When Melanie was born, Starr took to being a big sister right away. She found it hard to hold the baby because of her muscle tone, but she loved to sit on the couch with Melly propped in her arms. She'd talk to her sister non-stop, calling her "my sweet baby."

That first year we didn't sleep for more than four hours at a stretch. Less because Melly was fussy, more because any amount of crying would wake Starr up too. She found the pitch deeply upsetting. She needed constant reassurance that the baby wasn't dying, that the

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crying was normal. Kath would get up to feed the baby and I'd go quiet Starr, trying to make her laugh with my rendition of "Big Girls Don't Cry." In the end, we moved the baby's crib into our room and I ripped out the drywall in Starr's room, packed in decent insulation and replaced the door with something heavier.

For a while, the girls were inseparable. Melly was the only kid whose older sister never minded her tagging along. By the time Melly turned eight, however, she'd started to catch up. Her social circle became more about school than home. The other kids liked Starr, but they didn't always want her around. I still grieve those years before Melly's seventh birthday, that time we were happiest as a family.

Kath saw the switch coming. I think she was annoyed that I didn't. Things couldn't go on like that forever, she'd said, even if they were both typical.

The van is still rolling to a stop as Kath steps out. The rubber of her tennis shoe catches on the concrete driveway and turns her ankle. She insists on hobbling inside without any assistance. When I hand her the bag of frozen peas, she lets it thaw on the table, inches away from her raised foot. I place Robax and a glass of water next to it.

"You hate wearing flats at trade shows."

Professional Imprints has two hundred square feet booked this weekend in an Ottawa exhibit hall. Kath taps out two pills and swallows them in such a way that it's clear she's not accepting my kindness as an apology. She flaps the bag of vegetables onto her heel.

It always comes back to the same complaint, our fights. That I'm too indulgent with one, not tender enough with the other. As if Kath's manner is the yardstick of parental involvement.

"Isn't this something they could have registered for at the wedding?" My joke comes out flat, too hard-edged.

"You're better than this, Henry."

“We’re still paying that off.” A full sit-down with four courses, over a hundred guests. “And we helped with college.”

“You know what I’m going to say.”

We both know neither of those expenses will be duplicated. And that, over the years, we’ve spent far more on our oldest. But no one said that the expenses for each of your kids is meant to work out like a balance sheet. During her TVO phase, Kath once sat me down for a documentary on Marx. The only thing that stuck was that line – “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” If I could, I’d get a bumper sticker of that. Pay Kath’s company to embroider it on a cap. Break it out when the discussion starts up about equal treatment.

She knows we don’t have ten grand. After borrowing on our house to buy the condo, we’re more in the hole than Melly and Chester. Retirement’s not a word in our vocabulary.

“Does she know that she won’t be able to do that job with a kid?”

“Chester’s schedule is flexible and his mother got packaged out at the bank.”

If Kath’s going to do it anyway, why bother pretending? Another canker we’ve been picking at for decades.

My wife returns the peas to the freezer and rests her weight on the fridge door. She’s locked into herself, trying to control her anger. I shouldn’t be so combative. I should be softer to her. I give her my hand, half-expecting her to ignore the gesture. She takes it and rubs it along her cheek.

“I’m going to tell you something that you’re not going to like. If you ever let on to Melly and Chester that you know –”

I give her hand a squeeze.

“No, I mean it. God knows we have too much shared responsibility to split up. But if you betray my trust on this.”

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Never once, in thirty years of arguments, mild to blowout, has Kath ever threatened me with divorce. She doesn't look angry anymore, just terribly sad.

"Melly's baby had too many chromosomes. The specialist said it wasn't likely to live for more than a few days outside the womb." Kath threads out the words evenly, but her arms are shaking. "They did all the tests. Melanie asked and I gave her my blessing."

They didn't tell his parents either. It must have killed Kathleen that, to keep up the pretense, she couldn't have been there with our daughter until after the procedure.

"The past year, she's had to tiptoe around you and your complete lack of understanding about how much it broke her heart. Now, with the help of medical science, Melly has the chance to make sure she never has to go through that again."

I don't need to be told twice. I pull Kathleen close and she pours herself against me. All night she wants to be held, my arm around her ribs, her hair swept vertical on the pillow. I lie awake a while, counting her breaths, feeling like some dumb mouse nosing the cheese who hasn't figured out what's about to fall.