

COVER PAGE

FINNEGAN'S CAT

by

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FINNEGAN'S CAT

A Short Story

Gordon Finnegan is one of those guys with the unfortunate knack of attracting oddities. He even admits to being odd, but that he can't help it; it's in his genes. Take, for instance, his birth. His entire family is from Blarney, a tiny village just outside Cork, in Ireland, except him. He was born thirty thousand feet above the Pacific while his family were on the way to visit relatives in New Zealand, approximately where the dateline bisects the world into today and tomorrow. Consequently, nobody knows what day he arrived non-manifested in the second-class cabin. Which was a problem because the month was February, but Gordon doesn't mind. He celebrates every leap year birthday on the twenty-ninth and every other birthday on the twenty-eighth. It's just one of his oddities.

Furthermore, when Gordon was nine, he fell down a disused mineshaft whilst taking a shortcut through the fields to the post office. That all the kids in the village knew these particular fields were littered with bottomless mineshafts, that they were all terrified of falling into one and never being found alive, was of little significance to Gordon. Even then he was a fatalist.

"If I die, I die," he often said. "If it's my time, it's my time."

Needless to say, Gordon fell down the first disused mineshaft he happened upon. He was with his dog, a Labrador called Nixon, who didn't seem to notice Gordon's absence. This wasn't seen as odd until several hours later when Gordon's older sister caught Nixon urinating on the door to the post office. Shelly

promptly walked the dog home (avoiding the field of mineshafts, naturally), only to be confronted in the kitchen by her parents.

“This is rather odd,” Graham Finnegan said. “Don’t you think so, Margaret?”

“Your father’s right, dear,” her mother said. “Where’s Gordon?”

Shelly just shrugged. She didn’t know anything, and thus the hunt for Gordon began. The police were called, all four of them, and they took his disappearance very seriously. “What does he look like?” the inspector asked.

“Nothing like us,” Graham said. “The whole family has dark hair and fair skin and not one of us is more than five foot six. Gordon’s got red hair and freckles and he’s the tallest in his class.”

“That’s odd,” the inspector said, and promptly ordered his men to search the backyard.

Alas, Gordon was nowhere to be seen, not even in the shed where Margaret often found him hiding. Then someone suggested they search the village. He wasn’t there either. No one thought of searching the field where all the mineshafts were, assuming, of course, that none of the children ever went through that field because all of them were terrified of falling into a pit and never being found alive. Then night fell.

“This is all very odd,” the inspector said, but the Finnegan family already knew that. It was exactly the kind of odd thing Gordon got up to. Not that he could help it. It was in his genes.

Soon after the police officially listed Gordon as “missing”, the local TV channel got wind of the sensational scoop. Margaret didn’t like the reporter from

the start. She looked different than on TV. She had outrageously thin arms and a permanent smile tattooed to her face. "When was the last time you saw your little boy?" the reporter asked.

Graham took it upon himself to do most of the talking. He told her all he knew, even the bit about Nixon urinating on the post office door. Gordon's disappearance was a complete mystery. The reporter agreed. It was all very odd.

Worse, three nights later, Gordon was still nowhere to be found. Shelly suggested they search the field where all the disused mineshafts were, but everyone laughed.

"Gordon wouldn't go there," Margaret said.

"He'd be too scared to fall into a pit and never be found alive," Graham added.

That was when he walked through the door. A bit grubby, and a few pounds lighter, but still essentially Gordon. The police were amazed, as was the TV reporter with the permanent smile. The Finnegan family just thought it odd.

So when, a decade later, Gordon told his Trinity College flat mates that a kitten had just appeared in his bedroom, no one, including myself, thought it anything other than Gordon's attraction with the weird and wonderful. Mandy Fletcher, our resident fourth-year medical student, took an instant dislike to the homeless guest. "I'm allergic to cats," she said, and sure enough her eyes went puffy and red and her skin went blotchy with hives.

On first appearances, it looked like any other kitten. Small, black, with white socks on its feet, it was your normal, everyday pet cat. But like its owner, it proved to be somewhat different from the norm. For a start, where did it come

from? And how did it get into a house with all the windows and doors locked? These questions were never answered, and they still remain a mystery.

“This is all very odd,” I said that night to Gordon in the lounge room, to which he just shrugged and flicked on the TV. He was used to such things.

We printed some posters with a picture of the cat from Gordon's computer and plastered them on every tree and lamppost around the neighbourhood. They were “Found Cat” posters as opposed to “Lost Cat” ones: BLACK KITTEN FOUND. HAS WHITE FEET. DOESN'T ANSWER TO ANY NAME. LIKES CHOCOLATE MILK AND WATCHING TV. PLEASE CONTACT GORDON FINNIGAN AT 9B PANKHURST STREET.

Then we waited.

We waited for the next nine months as it turned out. During that time, the kitten grew into a cat and acquired a name – Nixon (Gordon later confessed one drunken evening at the student bar that all his pets were called Nixon, but exactly why he wouldn't say). It also acquired the bizarre habit of ambushing people in the lounge room, with a particular predilection for females.

I learned of this peculiar oddity one night a week or so before the final year exams. Mandy had invited several of her medical colleagues, all young women, over to the house for an intensive study session. They were going to clue themselves up on some bodily function like micturition or cholesecretion or whatever they felt they knew least about. I was in the kitchen at the rear of the house when they arrived. I could hear them laughing and joking about something one of the tutors did to a male cadaver in the mortuary that day, when suddenly the hysterical laughter turned to hysterical screams.

I rushed into the lounge to see five terrified women under attack by a little black ball of fur. The cat had ambushed them from behind the couch.

Unfortunately, they were wearing skirts and stockings, which rather made things worse. Nixon had latched onto Mandy's leg, clinging like a squirrel to a tree trunk, fore- and hind-legs spread, claws extended, and it wasn't letting go. Everyone was screaming, Mandy the loudest.

“Get it off!” she hollered. “Get it off! Get it off!”

Susan Earnshaw, Mandy's best friend from school days, who had a congenitally short leg and a third nipple (or so I'd been told), tried to remove the cat from Mandy's leg. But it wiggled out of her hands and scampered up Mandy's thigh, disappearing beneath her skirt. Everyone's eyes widened in horror, especially Mandy's. Then she evinced a scream that deafened our eardrums.

“Get it out of there!” she shrieked. Her face was all screwed up and violently crimson. “Get it out of there! I'm allergic to cats!”

We just stood there, dumbfounded. I suspect nobody moved out of fear of witnessing some horror they knew would revisit them in their dreams. It was a terrible scene. Mandy kept screaming, “Just do something! Just bloody well do something!” except we couldn't anything; we weren't qualified doctors yet.

It was Nixon who moved first. He dropped from his hiding place, landing perfectly on his feet, then jumped onto Susan's gammy leg. As with Mandy, squirrel-like, he darted up beneath her skirt. Susan suddenly went mute and her skin went horribly white. Her jaw flew open, as did her eyes, which then rolled back into their sockets. I'd never seen anything so ghastly, not even in the tropical diseases unit at St Patrick's Hospital. She fainted, falling face first into the couch. Her head hit the cushions, bouncing once or twice like a deflated basketball, before she slithered off and collapsed onto the floor.

Now everyone was silent. Nobody dared peek beneath her skirt to see what the cat was doing. I guess none of us wanted to accept responsibility for what might happen. Even as students we'd been warned against improper conduct and the likelihood of medical litigation. So we waited. Several seconds passed, but they were an interminable several seconds.

"What shall we do?" I whispered.

Nobody answered. I looked at Mandy, figuring only she knew what was going on down there. There was a look of abject horror on her face. I knew immediately she wouldn't be any help, so I looked at the others, Finnoula Whitmarsh and the blonde O'Sullivan twins, Jennifer and Wendy. They were just as frightened as Mandy. I figured somebody had to take the lead.

"Shall I get it?" I asked, hoping it wouldn't come to that.

I still received no answer, and I was about to ask again when Nixon emerged from beneath Susan's skirt. All the women, except for the unconscious medical student, squealed and jumped in fright. Nixon was now in a frenzy of feline-madness. He began attacking the nearest leg, mine, and I froze to the spot. Thankfully, I was wearing jeans and not baggy shorts. I saw out of the corner of my eyes the twins and Finnoula creeping backward down the corridor, careful not to make any sudden movements. At least they were safe, but I was still worried for Mandy. Immobilised with terror, she was still within leaping distance of the furry critter. That wasn't the worst of it; she had begun tugging her hair and mumbling something about the Second Coming.

I knew there was no time to lose. With Finnegan's cat still clinging to my jeans, I limped back to the kitchen and opened the door to the outside. In an

instant, Nixon was off my leg. He ran across the yard and shot up the Maple tree that overhung the garden shed before I could even catch my breath. I slammed and locked the door, then returned to the stricken medical students.

When I got to the lounge room, the front door was open and the twins and Finnoula were gone. Susan, though, was awake and sitting on the couch, an expression of total disbelief. Mandy, too, was slowly emerging from of her state of temporary catatonia. I reckoned it would be weeks before either of them could talk about the incident, if ever.

When the chaos did finally calm, however, and Mandy and Susan were reassured that no permanent damage had been inflicted, Gordon and I tried to coax the cat down from the tree. To Gordon's disappointment, Nixon was nowhere to be seen. We called for it over the next few days, as it transpired, and stuck "Lost Cat" posters to every tree and lamppost in the neighbourhood. BLACK CAT LOST. HAS WHITE FEET. ANSWERS TO NIXON. LKES CHOCOLATE MILK AND WOMEN'S UNDERWEAR. PLEASE CONTACT GORDON FINNIGAN AT 9B PANKHURST STREET.

Alas, all our efforts were in vain. The cat had simply disappeared. Perhaps what it had seen in those brief moments up the medical student's skirts had caused it to lose its mind. Perhaps it had decided to finally return from whence it came.

Or perhaps, in the end, it was just one of those oddities that Gordon seems to attract. But it's not his fault. It's in his genes.