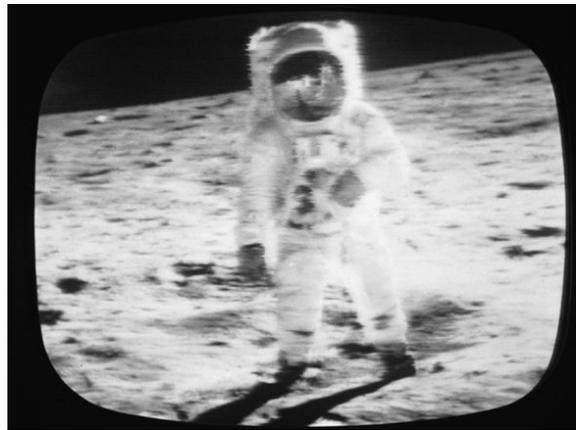


The Age of Giants

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The Age of Giants

Colm Ó Ceallacháin

She had always wanted a summer wedding. To Caitriona a summer wedding was a thing of rare beauty, a flower that bloomed only once in a lifetime. She believed this for she had been there on that sultry August afternoon, years before, when her sister Máire had married. Although only fifteen at the time, the sole bridesmaid, she remembered the day vividly. The small hotel on Parnell Street was packed to capacity but the gardens at the back, in the late evening sun, had provided her with a welcome respite from the commotion. Here she had sat listening, in a rare moment of solitude, to the unrestrained laughter and the babble of voices within.

Later still, the sung notes of a slow air had floated up through the open bedroom window to her. A brief shower in the middle of the night had drawn her to that same window to catch there an overpowering scent of clematis and gardenia, the flowerbeds below having been likewise roused by the rainfall. The following day, one of farewells, was brought to a close when the newlyweds crossed the road to take the Galway train. There remained then only for Caitriona and her mother to walk the short distance home to a house that would be quieter, from this night on, without Máire's presence.

'Who will I put beside Máire and Pádraig?'

Ten years since her sister's wedding, and Caitriona was preparing the seating arrangements for her own one.

'Put your aunts there,' her mother told her. 'If they're anywhere else they'll only start bickering.'

Once more Caitriona read over the cards she was about to post, their gold lettering proclaiming, or so she imagined, her joy to the whole world.

Caitriona and Máirtín would like you to join them in celebrating
their marriage at the Church of Mount Saint Alphonsus on
Sunday, the 20th of July 1969 at 2.00 p.m.

Later on she would call Máirtín to discuss these final arrangements with him. It wasn't ideal to be separated by sixty miles at a time like this, but she knew that she would soon be covering that distance in order to set up home in what was still, for her, an unfamiliar town. She had gladly given up her teaching position to do this but she would miss her mother, a widow since Caitriona was a child, and a woman who would now be alone in the house. But Caitriona was happy, and excited too, at the prospect of starting a new life with the man she loved.

Máirtín was reading the paper when the hooter sounded. He looked up, but nobody was stirring. He was still finding his feet on this new line, the Escort assembly, and he was not going to be the first one to make a move back.

It wasn't that he was any slower than his co-workers, men who seemed happy to piece these cars together whenever the mood took them, but as the last man in he had already become the butt of their jokes.

'What date is your wedding?'

Nedser had spoken, the veteran of their line.

'July the twentieth,' he replied.

'They're due to land on the moon around that time,' someone said.

'Well, that's a good omen for us,' said Máirtín.

'It is if they make it there, but what if they fly right past the moon?'

Willie, who had passed the last remark, was a bit of a clown, and Máirtín knew that there were more jokes coming unless he cut them off fast.

'I'm sure they'll be grand,' he said.

'I'm sure they will, but you'd better make sure that you don't miss the target yourself that night,' said Willie.

Before long, the whole team was chipping in with advice for him.

'Just aim for her gearbox.'

'Imagine you're hammering rivets into a Cortina.'

As usual, Máirtín was glad to get back to work.

As he was returning to his line, Nedser called him aside.

'I've got something here for you,' he said, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and placing it in Máirtín's palm.

When he opened it out, Máirtín saw that it was a large silver medal. With a catch in his voice, Nedser continued.

'I have it for twenty years, since the the year of 'forty nine, when we celebrated the General's silver jubilee. It's hard to believe that he's forty five years over us now, God guide him.'

'God damn him, more like, the senile old bastard.'

It was Willie who had butted in, having eavesdropped on their conversation.

'And God damn the lousy rotten crowd that follows him,' he continued. 'Almost eighty, and he still thinks he's fighting the Tans.'

'Be careful what you say,' Nedser warned Willie, as he placed a protective hand on his medal.

Máirtín felt its sharp edges press into his skin as Willie started up again.

'Does he think that it's himself the Yanks have chosen to fly the Apollo while Armstrong and Aldrin go a-moonwalking?'

'Careful,' Nedser said again, but Willie was already walking away, laughing to himself.

As soon as Nedser had released his grip on him, Máirtín turned the medal over in his hand. Reading its inscription, a pompous and worthless encomium, he wondered how he could convince Nedser that he had no need for such a thing. That man had powerful friends in the movement, and apart from Willie no one had ever dared to insult the General in his presence.

'Thanks, Nedser,' was all that he managed to say in the end. 'This is a great honour for me.'

'My pleasure, boy. Have you seen enough of it now?'

With a discreet sigh of relief, Máirtín wrapped the medal in the handkerchief again.

He was only to be granted a brief glimpse of it, like one pilgrim among many before the relics of a saint. When Nedser had put it away in his pocket, he spoke to Máirtín again.

'Let me give you a small bit of advice now about your wedding day. You young people don't realise the importance of these things but the twentieth of July is a big day, the General's day, the anniversary of his coming to power. Don't dishonour the occasion with your own little celebration, Máirtín. Pick another day to get married.'

At the corner of Thomas Street Caitriona stood waiting for Máirtín who was, as usual, late. It had become a tradition with them to meet here whenever Máirtín came to visit, from the day that they had chosen this spot for their first proper date together. It was the boat club which had originally drawn him to the banks of the Shannon, although the regatta ball which followed the day's rowing was the real attraction for young clubmen like Máirtín. There had been other dances later on when himself and Caitriona were going steady, dances which had often gone on until dawn. Máirtín would usually walk her home afterwards, having stolen a few kisses, before jumping on the early bus to Cork and from there directly to work. Today, also, when he finally arrived, they were heading for her home, but in this case it was to make their final wedding arrangements.

'What's wrong?' he asked her, as they walked along.

He had sensed her unease as soon as they had met. Saying nothing for now, she walked beside him as she always did. She was never one for holding hands, not through some distorted sense of modesty on her part but because she felt his company alone was pleasure enough. Although she was not going to sleep with him before they were married, she was no prude. Such matters were rarely discussed by her married peers in any case, and when they were it was usually in a negative vein. Every sexual act was portrayed as a cross that had to be borne by long-suffering women such as themselves. Caitriona had no sympathy for such a bleak appraisal, for she had desires of her own that she was well aware of. She was going to enjoy every private moment that she shared with her husband, however awkward they might first be, as they became physically acquainted with each other.

As she had not immediately answered him, Máirtín put the question to Caitriona again.

'What's the matter, love?'

She kept perfect pace with him as she replied.

'I didn't want to mention it until we got home, but there's no point in putting it off now, I suppose. The hotel has cancelled the reception.'

Máirtín had a fairly standard approach to life's setbacks. If things weren't great right now they would soon improve, or at the very least they would remain as they were. And if things did get worse? Well, at least we have our health. Unless we die in the meantime, that is. In other words, he was a born pessimist. Caitriona, on the other hand, always positive, was beginning to exert an influence on Máirtín, and his answer to her now reflected this budding optimism.

'We can always find another hotel.'

'You don't understand,' she replied, a little exasperated. 'There's not a hotel in the country that'll book us on that date, and for such a stupid bloody reason.'

'Let me guess – to mark forty five years under the cosh of the great man himself. No fun allowed on the twentieth of July, and definitely no weddings. Long live the General!'

'I'd like to wring his scrawny neck, the big ball of misery. We'll have to find another date so.'

'And another priest too. Didn't you tell me that Séamus was only going to be home for a couple of days?'

Caitriona's uncle Séamus, a priest in the missions, had been due to marry them. Away for ten years now, his order had granted him a few days leave around the time of the wedding. By now they had reached Caitriona's house, but Máirtín halted before they turned in.

'Have you talked to your mother about any of this?'

'I wanted to tell you first.'

'Good. We'll tell her the wedding is going ahead in a fortnight's time, just as we'd planned.'

'What about the hotel?'

'Never mind it. We'll have a quiet celebration somewhere else.'

'Are you sure, love?'

'What can they do, throw us in jail?'

'Probably. I'll cancel the band so.'

'Do that. Maybe Máire can sing a few tunes in their place.'

'Do you want all our guests to walk out on us?'

'We won't be having that many now, anyway. The way things are going we could probably hold the reception in there in your Mam's sitting room.'

At lunchtime on the following Monday, Máirtín was called in to his supervisor's office. Waiting there for him were two strangers – a fat, balding man in his forties and an older companion whose eyes, peering out of narrow slits, followed Máirtín into the room. What the fuck did the cops want with him?

'Sit down,' his supervisor said, lighting a cigarette as he sat down behind his desk.

No sooner had Máirtín sat down than he felt an extra pressure on his chair, as the fat cop had come up behind him and was now resting his hands on the back of it. Máirtín leaned forward, trying to avoid even the slightest touch from those chubby, hairy digits.

'Your last week's work as a bachelor,' his supervisor said, stretching back on his chair.

'That's it. Then it's bye bye freedom.'

'I see you're taking a fortnight's holiday.'

'Haven't I done enough overtime in the last year to earn it? Your man here wouldn't know the meaning of hard work,' he said over his shoulder, but the other two remained silent.

Blowing out a long jet of smoke, the supervisor started up again.

'When's the big day?'

'A week from Sunday.'

'A week from Sunday.'

It was the older of the two detectives who had spoken. Up to this point he had remained standing against the wall, out of Máirtín view behind his companion.

'A week from Sunday,' he repeated. 'What date would that be?'

'The twentieth,' Máirtín replied, 'according to my calender anyway.'

'The twentieth, according to your calender. Would that be the twentieth century? Or the twentieth stone in weight, like Pat here?'

'Mind your tongue, you bollocks,' his companion retorted.

'The twentieth of July,' said Máirtín quietly.

'The twentieth of July. That date is in the back of my mind for some reason now, but I can't put my finger on it. Any idea why that might be, Máirtín?'

For thirty tense seconds, the only sound that Máirtín could hear was Pat's laboured breathing above his head. The question was repeated to him.

'Any idea at all?'

Pat was the first to speak.

'Isn't the Leinster final on that day, Éamonn?'

'By Jaysus you're right, Pat. The Leinster final, that must be it. Although in fairness now, it won't be the same without my own county in it. Poor old Wexford, and not a year passed since they won the All-Ireland. Have you any interest in hurling, Máirtín?'

'A small bit.'

'Have Cork any chance this year, do you think?'

'More than Wexford do, anyway.'

Máirtín felt Pat's knuckles come down hard on the top of his skull.

'Have some manners, you little shit.'

The menace of that simple act sent Máirtín into a kind of stupor, and he listened on in stunned silence as Éamonn now resumed his questioning.

'Did you never go to school, Máirtín?'

'I did of course.'

'You did of course. Were you missing for the citizenship classes, or for your history lessons?'

'Not at all.'

'And still you don't realise the significance of certain dates. The twentieth of July, for example.'

There was silence in the room again, until Pat eventually spoke up.

'Well, I've heard enough anyway,' he said, shaking the supervisor's hand. 'We won't take up any more of your time. Come on so, Máirtín, 'til we go for a little spin.'

After a half hour's drive on twisting country roads, flitting in and out of the trees' shade under a sweltering sun, they came to a small bridge. As soon as they had crossed it, the car pulled in. Beside the little stream there was a narrow path, and they followed it now as far as a grove of elder trees.

'Where are we going?'

The two detectives led the way, chatting to each other and ignoring Máirtín who struggled to keep up. It was obvious that they knew this pathway well as they hurried on past branches weighed down with elder blossoms. Máirtín, following behind, was soon coated in a fine dusting of pollen. The path became steeper then, and the pair in front grew quieter as they laboured uphill. For a while the only sound to be heard was the rush of water and the angry clicks of a grasshopper, always a step ahead of them, constantly complaining. Abruptly then, the pathway levelled off as they came to a building.

Pat pulled a bunch of keys from his pocket and, trying one after another, he finally managed to unlock the padlocked gate. The building seemed to be some kind of workshop, with pieces of wood and metal scattered about the yard or heaped in a pile at the back. Unlocking the door of a prefabricated building, Pat beckoned Máirtín inside.

There was barely space for the three of them in the small office within, the detectives resting against a desk and Máirtín facing them with his back to the only window in the room.

'Where's the reception taking place?' Éamonn asked him, as soon as the door had been shut.

Máirtín mentioned the hotel's name, while telling him that they had cancelled the reception.

'Of course you have,' said Pat. 'I can see what a great patriot you are.'

When he took off his jacket, a stench of stale sweat wafted through the room. As Máirtín held his breath, Éamonn spoke again.

'Where are you getting married?'

Máirtín gave him the name of the church, reminding him that it too had been cancelled. They were going to have a private service at home, he told him, one that wouldn't impinge upon the official ceremonies of the day. Pat stood up now, just inches away from his face, treating Máirtín to the full force of his sour breath.

'This is a great country,' he said, 'but some people have no respect for it.'

A fat finger was thrust into Máirtín's chest with every word that was spoken.

'Those people are scum,' he continued, spittle flying in every direction, 'scum who can't control themselves. Degenerates!'

As he sat down, Éamonn spoke again in the same reserved tone as before.

'What will Séamus do?'

'Séamus?'

'The very reverend Séamus, your fiancée's uncle. The man who was to marry you.'

'Did you know, Máirtín,' Pat broke in again, 'that we live on the seventeenth-biggest island in the world? The seventeenth-biggest. Bigger than Cyprus, bigger even than, than New Zealand! I don't hear the scum mention that when they're putting our country down.'

'Séamus was a good hurler,' Éamonn continued. 'I marked him a few times. A small, hard bastard. He should have a fine big scar on the back of his head from the time my hurl caught him. Have a look at it when he has his back to you on the altar.'

'We won't be getting married in the church now.'

'You won't, of course. What's your hurry, anyway? Why don't you wait a few more years, until Séamus is celebrating his silver jubilee?'

The longer the questioning continued in the cramped, airless office, the weaker Máirtín was becoming. As the sun beat down on the back of his neck, he could feel his tongue get ever drier. Was this really happening, he asked himself, was he really being interrogated about something as innocuous as his own wedding? He started, then, as Pat jabbed him playfully in the ribs.

'Look at him, Éamonn, the randy old devil. He couldn't wait another month to get married, never mind a couple of years.'

Delighted at his own wit, he collapsed back down on the desk in a fit of coughing and laughter.

'What I still don't get,' said Pat, 'is how they're going to steer the Apollo during the day, when it's too bright to see the moon.'

He was driving slowly, one hand on the wheel and the other tapping out a jaunty rhythm on the roof of the car. As he drove, Éamonn turned around to face Máirtín in the back seat.

'Do you hear him, Máirtín? Did you ever hear such stupidity? He's after disgracing me. Anyway, Máirtín, here's how we'll play it. The twentieth of July is a national day of commemoration, as you well know, when only official celebrations are permitted. Call in to the station in a week or so with a new date and venue for the wedding. Did you ever hear tell,' he turned to Pat again, 'of the dark, empty vacuum of space? I'd lay a bet that it's nothing compared to the space between your ears.'

They were still laughing when they let Máirtín out on the side of the street. Before they drove off, Pat stuck his head out the window.

'See you next week,' he shouted. 'And don't forget, Máirtín, we're the seventeenth-biggest island. All the best, now.'

For a while after they had driven off Máirtín remained where he was, standing motionless under the unrelenting glare of the sun. He was soaked in sweat and soaked also, from the waist down, in his own stinking piss.

'Éamonn in the Special Branch. To be honest, that doesn't surprise me in the least.'

Séamus was sitting in the back yard, a glass of whiskey in his hand and Máirtín beside him on the bench. From the kitchen door the sound of laughter could be heard, interspersed with the occasional burst of excited radio chatter from the game in Croke Park. Caitríona was celebrating her summer wedding at last, on the date of her choice, and no amount of decrees was going to prevent her from enjoying the day. That morning in the chapel down the road Séamus had married them. At times during the service he'd had to switch to Tagalog, so unfamiliar was he with the new liturgy in his own tongue. It had made no difference to the newlyweds of course, who were simply glad to be married no matter what language was used. After the ceremony everyone had called back to the small country pub (far from prying eyes) owned by Caitríona's granduncle Jack to toast the happy couple. The goodwill had prevailed there, the guests had lingered, and in the late afternoon sun Máirtín had stepped outside to enjoy a quiet moment with his new in-law.

'He wasn't a bad full back,' Séamus continued. 'Defenders had no mercy for you in those days, especially on the edge of the square, and Éamonn was as ruthless as any of them. He always struck me as someone who would gladly follow any order, especially if he could get a dig or two in at the same time.'

'And you never layed a hand on an oppnent, I suppose.'

'There was devilment enough in me alright, before I went to Maynooth. Afterwards as well, though it wasn't on the hurling field.'

'Maynooth must have been like another world to you.'

Séamus took a sip from his drink before answering.

'You could say that. I was eighteen years old, and naive along with it. I believed in my vocation, the call from God if you like, but the rules were hard to take. It suited me to go to the Philippines, in truth, although I badly missed my family. I found my voice there, until I was muzzled again when I spoke up against *Humanae Vitae*.'

'Humane what?'

Séamus gave a quick laugh.

'My apologies. I sometimes forget that the church hierarchy moves in ways far beyond the understanding of us mere mortals. *Humanae Vitae* is a papal encyclical that banned all forms of contraception.'

It was blind, as is often the case with such things, to its consequences on a human level, but I was not. My flock consisted for the most part of large, poor families, with young mothers who seemed to be constantly pregnant or suckling a child or both. When I spoke up I was banished to a small parish in northern Luzon, and if it wasn't for the lack of priests there I wouldn't even have been allowed to say mass publicly.'

'You haven't had a change of heart since, for the sake of a quiet life?'

'I haven't. Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of uprightness, apparently, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. You didn't have a change of heart yourself, did you, regarding the date of the wedding, for the sake of the same quiet life?'

'I did for sure, but I was more afraid of Caitriona than I was of the cops. If I didn't leave things as they were she'd have made my life hell.'

'I'm telling you they're everywhere, Máirtín, these persecutors.'

They were both smiling at this when Caitriona appeared at the back door, a glass in her hand. A pearl, they both thought simultaneously, illuminating the lengthening backyard shade.

'What are you two up to?' she said, sitting between them.

Making space for her, Séamus spoke.

'I was just asking this man what sorcery he used to get you to marry him.'

'Oh, you wouldn't be up to his tricks, Séamus. He's totally deceived me. He must have been casting love charms in the butter.'

'I was too,' said Máirtín, 'and she swallowed them all.'

As he spoke to Caitriona, his fingers were absent-mindedly braiding her long tresses.

'How are things inside?' he asked her.

Their twenty or so guests had spent the afternoon in the kitchen, eating and drinking at their leisure.

'Grand,' she replied. 'As soon as the match finishes, we're crossing over to Hanleys. They've got a television there, and they'll be broadcasting the Apollo landing soon.'

'What about the big celebrations in Dublin?'

'They're going to cut it short to go live to the moon landing.'

'I don't believe it! The world is changing, love, even here at home.'

'Don't I know it? Will you both come across?'

Standing up, Séamus took off his glasses and started cleaning them.

'How's the match going?' he asked Caitriona.

'I'm not sure, but I think Kilkenny are winning.'

Sighing, he put a hand on Máirtín's shoulder.

'Let's go over, then. The world may be changing, but some things will always stay the same.'

By the end of the broadcast everyone was happy, or drunk, or both. They had seen with their own eyes the ghostly images of the two astronauts, each setting foot on the moon in their turn. As night fell an excursion was planned to Knockeen, a small hill about half a mile away, to watch the moon rise. They made a strange procession, the fittest and the drunkest of their guests, as they headed off to find the gap in the ditch that would lead them to the top of the hill. Caitriona led the way, and as soon as she felt the dew beneath her feet she took off her shoes. Beside her, Aoife did likewise. Aoife, her best friend since they were children, beautiful Aoife, always guaranteed to turn a boy's eye. Aoife had also been by her side when she had first seen Máirtín at the regatta ball.

He was standing at the counter of the bar, and when he turned around they were there in front of him. At first he had averted his gaze a little shyly, but he had turned to face them again almost immediately. Caitriona noticed that it was on her that his eyes were focused, a half-smile forming on his lips. He had looked at Aoife too of course, and what man wouldn't, but then he had turned his attention towards her again. All of this had taken place in less than a minute but Caitriona remembered it again now, as they neared the summit, when she heard his laughter among the chorus of voices behind her.

Turning around she searched for Máirtín, but in the twilight every shadow approaching her looked alike. This was the man that she was going to spend the rest of her life with – not, of course, because of a fleeting glimpse in a dancehall, although she still cherished that moment. They lived in cruel times now, in an age of giants, the realm of generals that stretched as far as the moon. Caitriona knew that she was powerless before such people, and that if it came to it she would have to bend to their will. As they reached the summit, she finally noticed Máirtín by her side. He too would bend, she realised, as he had practically collapsed after less than an hour's interrogation by the detectives. How often had he yielded to her own entreaties, not through some flaw in his character but because of his inherent decency. These traits would not win out against their masters, but they were what Caitriona desired. He would bend and he would yield, this man who was placing his arm around her waist now, but he would never break. She knew this as surely as she recognised his plaintive voice, a little out of breath, whispering in her ear.

'Were we just wasting our time coming here? Where the hell is the moon?'

Under a veil of clouds the wedding party spent a good thirty minutes on the summit, chatting and singing together. It was not until the railway line below them began to glimmer in the moonlight that they realised that the sky was clearing. Between breaks in the cloud a crescent moon was revealing itself, although no one seemed quite able to visualize the two lone figures up there, walking around on its surface.

'Do you think they're sleeping?' someone asked.

'A snooze is the last thing on their minds right now.'

'They'll be there until tomorrow all the same, the craturs. They'll need some bit of a rest.'

'Maybe they took their beds with them.'

'I wonder how they go to the toilet up there.'

It was in this company that night fell on the newlyweds, their first night together as man and wife. As the banter continued they listened on, not wanting to be in any other place at this time.

Little by little the party started to break up, and Caitriona and Máirtín were about to follow them down the hill when they saw the lights. Two in front and two behind – two cars, obviously, making their way here from the Junction. They watched as the cars passed below them and drove on then as far as Jack's pub, where they pulled in briefly. As they listened the engines started up again, and they could see from the glare of their headlights that they were returning in their direction. When the cars stopped at the bottom of the hill the gruff voices of men could be clearly heard in the still air, arguing among themselves. Doors were slammed shut and flashlights were lit, as these men then made their unsteady way up the hill towards them.

Máirtín was following the progress of the lights when he felt Caitriona's hand grip his own. He squeezed it back and they both looked on in silence again at the scene below them, under the cold glare of an indifferent moon.