



Heads or Tails

by Liam Hogan

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“Heads or Tails!”

“What?” I’m tying the broken laces on my kick-about, and look up to see Smudge standing over me. Which is some trick, the scrawny little runt. I straighten up slowly.

“Heads or Tails?” He repeats less stridently.

I look him up and down, mostly down. He balls his fists and glances nervously away. I can’t remember when it started, the “Heads or tails” thing. Before my time, perhaps. I’d played on that rough patch of concrete between the garages and the back wall of the school ever since I could kick a ball without falling over, and I’d not known a time when the rule hadn’t applied. The pitch – if you could call it that – was small enough that you could start a game with just two on two. The noise of the ball hitting the garage doors was like a call to arms, and within minutes we’d be 5 a side, and at a pinch, 6. But then it got silly, too crowded to move, so you called out “Coins” and anyone who wanted to play had to wait for a pause and then challenge a player for his spot. It was decided by a simple flip of a coin - heads or tails. Just like Smudge – otherwise known as Billy Cartwright – had called out to me.

Except he wasn’t playing it right. You challenged the weakest player, or someone like Tub-o-lard Jackson, who was always willing to take a quick break for a sneaky fag. You didn’t challenge me, Jason Briggs, fourteen years old - too old really for this half-arsed game - but undeniably the king of it. And you certainly didn’t challenge me if you were a no-mates half-pint loser like Smudge. Not unless you had a death wish.

I resist the urge to pick him up and throw him over the low wall. “Have you even GOT a coin, Smudge? Has to be a pound coin, if you’re gonna challenge me.”

Grinning, he delves into the pockets of his half-mast trousers, and pulls out a screwed up hanky, scattering shrapnel. The game, which had gone on while I tied my laces, now breaks up to watch the show, and there are a few sniggers as Smudge scrambles for his change. I give them a lazy, “look what I have to put up

with” smile. Smudge stuffs one hand back into his pocket, and holds a pound coin defiantly aloft with the other.

“Well, flip it then.” I drawl, good naturedly.

“Hey! Give that back! That’s mine!” He cries as I grab the coin out of the air and pocket it. I shoulder barge him to the ground, ably assisted by the tattered bag he’d carelessly dropped behind him – a school boy error if ever there was one - and then as he tries to get up I lean over him with my arm pressed hard against his shoulder and growl – “Piss of, Smudge, you low-life waste-of-space retard. Go and peer up girls’ skirts, or torture ants, or whatever it is that you do. But don’t come round here challenging ME to heads or tails. Got it?”

And that was the last I saw of Billy Cartwright; bawling his eyes out as he ran for home, bag banging against his legs as he went, the jeers of me and my mates in his ears. He wasn’t in school the next day, while I boasted of having run him out of town, nor the next, when I was actually kinda looking forward to seeing him again, just to rub his nose in it. And then the news came down that he was permanently expelled. The story goes that he was caught by the caretaker with a bottle of white spirits and a box of matches. The police were called, I heard. Escorted him of the premises, never to be seen again.

Well, not until now, anyhow.

His family moved away, and the last thing I’d heard he’d been enrolled in some sort of military school, Cadet training or the like. That one cracked me up. Smudge, as a Cadet?

Me, I stopped playing footie. I’d tried out for the school team, but most of the lads were older than me and suddenly I was the one being pushed off the ball and made to look stupid. I didn’t like that. I gave as good as I got, and wound up getting red carded in my first – and last - game. I didn’t miss it as much as I thought I would, because by then I’d discovered girls. Oh boy did I discover girls! Mind you, they didn’t discover me until about a year later, until I’d cleared six foot and started to broaden out with it.

All of which goes through my head in no time at all as I stare down the twin-barrels of a shotgun.

I’d been doing some dopey post exam careers course, all interview techniques and job application letters. A complete waste of time I thought, and I’d have bunked off if I hadn’t been having one last crack at getting into Alice Greenwick’s pants. And that, that was no waste of time at all. That would have made the five year stretch of

enforced education almost worthwhile. It'd been going well – hell, it'd been going brilliantly. I'd buddied up with her to practice interviews and almost gotten both of us thrown out of by making her crack up in fits of giggles. And I was about to wind up with a serious question, a deal clincher, something about leaving a contact number in case I wanted to call her back for a second interview, when the screaming began.

Markie, sitting by the window and habitually staring out of it, leapt up in his seat. “Hey! Everyone’s running outa school!” We crowd round, peering two floors down on the stream of kids heading for the gates. The teacher pushes his way through, shouting at us to go back to our seats. But he too falls quiet as he watches the mass exodus.

He backs up to his desk, barking instructions. We were on no account to leave the room until he returned, unless the fire alarm went off, in which case we were to leave “in an orderly fashion”.

Yeah, right, I thought, and as soon as he’s gone I crack open the door at the back of the class room for a shufti. The corridor was clear. I turn back and catch Alice’s eye. “Coming?” I ask.

She stares at me wide eyed, and then rapidly shakes her head and looks away.

“Your funeral.” I say as I go through the door. And then a third former comes careening round the corner and bounces off the walls, shouting incoherently. The one word that I do catch though is “gun” and I decide it would be prudent to follow him, under the circumstances.

But just as I round the corner there’s a crashing boom of a noise and I look up to see a splatter of red over the tan coloured walls opposite the stairs, and underneath it an untidy heap, legs at odd angles, a scuffed black shoe separated from the mass and still rocking. And from the stairwell comes a man, a kid really, tall but skinny, wearing a full length parka coat and black shades, and clanking as he walks. I beat a hasty retreat and get back to the classroom in double quick time, only to discover they’ve barricaded the doors in my absence. “Shit!” I rap on the door. “Come on guys! It’s Jason! Let me in!”

But they’re playing possum, and behind me I can hear the heavy footsteps and the clanking getting louder. I look wildly around, but the corridor’s a dead end, other than a frosted window and a door that’s been locked for as long as I’d been at the school. I run at it, putting my shoulder against the lock, and am surprised and elated to feel it give. I go flying into the room beyond, tripping over a bin, and look up to find I’m in the girls toilets. I scramble to my feet, making for the door at the far end of the

narrow corridor between the sinks on the right and the cubicles on the left. I get maybe half way and am just hitting my stride when there’s another deafening boom, even louder this time, and something stings my calves, my thighs and my arse. I land in a heap surrounded by shards of white ceramic. The hand basin behind me collapses and a fine mist of water begins erupting from the split pipes. I push myself backwards, still dumbly making for the far door, looking in amazement at the trail of blood I’m leaving behind.

The man - kid - maniac, is framed in the doorway, a rainbow over his head.

“Look, you don’t have to do this...” I babble.

He gently shakes his head and starts towards me, breaking the barrel as he comes, gun smoke mixing with the mist.

“Please, I haven’t done anything...” I plead as I come up hard against the door, and feel it click shut.

Two empty cartridges clatter to the floor, and his heavy boots crunch on the remains of the pedestal.

“Oh Christ...” I wonder if I should try and get up, run at him perhaps. Or try and get through the door at my back. But I do neither, and feeling warmth around my waist I look down in horror to discover I’ve wet myself.

Reaching into his parka pocket, he casually pulls out two more red cylinders, and slots them into place, before snapping the barrel closed. There’s a clunk behind him as the pipe-work collapses and water begins gushing out over the floor, but he doesn’t even flinch.

“What do you want? Money?” I try to reach into my pocket but my hand snags painfully on the fabric – there’s a surprisingly large shard of Armitage Shanks stuck into the fleshy part of my hand and as I attempt to wave it away a coin goes rolling across the bathroom floor towards him.

His foot comes down hard and I flinch at the sharp report. He reaches up with his free hand and pulls off the aviator sunglasses, dropping them to the floor. And the grey eyes, the bulbous nose and the mouth that’s too large for the face rearrange themselves in my mind. He’s thinner than I remember, and harder. But familiar, at least, and relief floods through me.

“Oh my god...Smu.. I mean Billy? Is that you Billy?”

He leans forward, extending his arm until the barrel’s inches from my face. Then he looks down at the shiny black army boot covering the coin and nods deliberately towards it. And then he smiles, and then, finally, he speaks.

"Heads, or tails?"

