



## Second Chance

by Liam Hogan

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Your primal instincts react first; the dark shape at the top of the stairs is a wild animal waiting to pounce, and you're halfway to a fight - flight reaction before your modern-day analytical brain tells you that it's probably just a black bin bag, which means your slovenly flatmate is not only home early but has finally got round to tidying up, and the thought brings a smile to your face until you raise your eyes and the smile freezes because it turns out that your instincts were right after all and there *is* a wild animal lying in wait.

The thing is perfectly still but you know it's alive for two reasons, two assaults on your brittle senses. A pair of yellow, alien eyes are locked with yours and as you stare into the black, black pupils your stomach churns because the stench of the thing has just invaded your nostrils. Rank, rotting, but fearsomely alive, the smell of a carnivore in rut. Six feet away and unable to break contact your mind struggles to take in the strangeness of it. Heart hammering you sense, rather than accurately see, the dank, matted fur, glistening in places and encrusted in others with fluids your unconscious mind persists in interpreting even while your conscious mind balks at the images it throws up. And throwing up is exactly what you do at this point, turning and heaving the remains of a KFC Zinger burger and copious quantities of happy hour Guinness against the stairwell wall. Bent double and panting for breath you look back and see that the creature is now standing, a scrawny, black, four feet high figure with twisted arms and short legs; its head wide and squat and topped by two torn and battered fur covered ears. It grins, a wide grin, and you feel your stomach do yet another somersault as you stare into a hideous collection of teeth, all seemingly random except for the front ones which are filed down to points and are dripping something claret red across the concrete floor.

“Feeling better?” The creature growls in perfect estuary English, the low pitch seems to bypass your ears altogether and reverberate straight through your skull. You stare back, slack jawed, a dribble of vomit from your nose and the only good news is you can no longer smell the creature’s musk.

“Whaaa...?” Your mind feels like it is fighting through layers of mud and ooze, and you’re not sure which is scarier, the raw animal nature of the thing or the fact that it is so clearly on top of the situation.

“Shall we go in and continue our delightful conversation in comfort?” It pushes the door open – the door that should have been triple locked, and slips inside, turning its head and giving you a wink as it vanishes.

Realising that your scarf is covered in vomit you unwind it from around your neck and use a clean patch of it to wipe your chin before dropping it to the floor. Laughter momentarily fills the stairwell as someone on one of the floors below enters or exits their flat and you fight the desire to scream for help, to run as fast as you can down the concrete stairs. You slowly take the last few steps up to your landing, eyes skidding over the red and black smears where the creature had been waiting and gingerly you push open your front door.

The creature is at the fridge, rummaging through the aged contents. A tube of mayonnaise is sniffed and then dropped to the floor, where moments later a scaly clawed foot splits it open, the off-white goo smearing across the distressed and worn linoleum. A yellowed, fridge-burnt lump of cheddar is tossed over its shoulder, hitting the wall it bounces and tumbles a short distance, outpacing the badly secured plastic wrap which flutters down half way between the creature and the final resting place of the cheese. A third of a salami, its surface waxy with fat and spotted with mould, is prodded and then wolfed down, the toughened meat making the tendons on the neck and jaw of the creature bulge briefly as its sharp teeth makes short work of something you doubt you could have cut with a cleaver. It reaches back into the fridge and pulls out two red and white cylinders throwing one in your direction. Your body is screaming with tension and every muscle tightens as

the object flies towards your face; you instinctively reach out and catch it – it’s a can of Bud.

“Cheers!” The creature laughs and using a black, gnarled talon rips the ring pull off and tilting back its head crushes the can in its fist, the contents spilling into its gaping maw and over its face and onto the floor.

You hold your can like a weapon, grasped tightly in your right hand.

“Now, Arnold Benjamin Walsh, let’s have a little chat, shall we?”

Although you top it by almost two feet it is coming towards you with that terrifying grin and a glint in its evil eyes and you back up until your legs touch the dull grey sofa at which point it barks “SIT!” and there is nothing in this world or the next that you could ever do to resist. Its grin widens and it turns and pulls across the cheap beige computer chair, swivels it round and straddles it backwards.

“No doubt you’re wondering who – or what - I am. Well, that’s not important. The important thing is what I can do for you.” It says.

“For me?” Your mind is spinning. This terrifying creature wants to do you a favour?

“Yes, for you. You’re up shit creek and paddle.com went bust over a year ago. Your life is a disaster – it was just plain moribund but now it’s about to fragment into a thousand pieces and the shrapnel is going to rip you to shreds. Happy about that?”

“What the?” You start to get up, easy anger overcoming your fear, doubt and confusion. The creature’s grin vanishes and a small growl later you find yourself firmly seated back on the sofa, despite the remote biting into your back.

“I mean, you pathetic little creep, that this life of yours has run its pitiful course. You’re a faceless, meaningless cog in this big, bad city. Your outgoings have always exceeded your income and with your recent performance it’s truly amazing that you still have a job to hold down. You haven’t been laid for 9 months and then it was a pity shag and oh boy did she regret it later. You have no friends, no style, your colleagues ignore you and your family loathes you. Forty-three years old and you’re still sharing a pokey

little flat in an unfashionable part of town. And if you had any brains at all you would have gotten rid of your flatmate’s body before his putrefying innards seeped through the ceiling of the flat below.”

You sink even further back onto the sofa. The floorboards. Your flatmate. The drunken argument and its lethal conclusion - they flash through your mind. For the past week you’ve been avoiding coming home other than to collapse in a drunken stupor – a stupor you’d be in now if you weren’t high on adrenalin and hadn’t heaved up the toxic contents of your stomach in the stairwell. You’d even forgotten your embryonic plans to flee to Spain where the brother you haven’t spoken to for over a year runs a small Taverna. But you never did summon up the nerve to call him and in the end it was so much easier drinking your problems into oblivion.

“How ..?” ... did the creature know?

“I know a lot of things. More than you do that’s for sure. You, for example, are unaware that Mrs Howell in number 11 phoned the landlord not more than an hour ago complaining about the smell.”

“Oh christ!” You can feel your shaky little house of cards beginning to collapse around you.

“Be calm.” The creature says. “He’s a lazy bastard and won’t get round to investigating it until after the weekend. So you still have a little time to salvage your life. And I can help. Interested?”

Suspicious, your mind latches on to what sounds like a sales pitch. “What’s the deal?”

It laughs, a gobbet of spittle flying across the Ikea coffee table onto your sleeve. You glance down and shudder at the sight of a fibrous strand of meat – and it’s not salami.

“Deal? Fuckwit, you’re doomed. At best you’ve got a week before you’re on intimate terms with your cellmate. But more likely you’ll be sharing a morgue with your ex-best and only friend who’s previously vital fluids are currently dripping through to the 3rd floor. And the fact that I had a quick snack before you arrived isn’t exactly going to help your cause.”

“Snack? You ate him?” You ask in disbelief.

“Just nibbled really. But it should make an interesting court case – it’s been a while since there were cannibals in Bethnal Green.”

“But the teeth marks – aren’t mine...”

And then the creature smiles, a wide, beaming smile, and your mind that maybe, just maybe, was becoming inured to the shocks does one final stomach churning plunge before giving up all semblance of resistance. The creature is smiling with human teeth – your teeth, right down to the chipped front tooth from an argument with a bouncer of a late night club who’d refused you entry.

You slump, dejected. “So what can you do for me?”

“Good question.” The creature replies. “I could consume the rest of your friend, but much as I like rotting flesh it would take a good week and even then you’d have to get rid of the larger bones somehow. And supposing I did keep you out of jail – how exactly does that improve your life? No, what I offer you is a second chance.”

“A second chance?” The creature ignores the lame echo, and waits, eyes burrowing into yours. You try and hold its stare, but all you really want to do is disappear into the crack of the sofa. Then you raise your head, a final act of defiance, even though what you say is “Alright. I’ll take it.”

At that a small grin appears on the creature’s face, and it reaches behind the back of its head and scratches slowly. “Ah. Thought you might. But there is a small problem. What do you have to offer in exchange?”

Your defiance crumbles and with a half-shrug half-whimper you offer up ... “My soul?”

The laughter is harsh and unforgiving. “Your soul? That soiled shred of a thing that you don’t even believe in anyway? What value is that? It is in any case already ours, give or take a couple of years. And frankly, we don’t want it. We only value the souls of the innocent – the unblemished, the virtuous. And you could hardly call yours that.”

Deflated, confused, you cringe on the sofa, wondering what else you might have to offer. “Well I don’t know... what do you want?”

The creature’s eyes gleam. “Everything.”

“Everything?” You repeat.

It nods. “Everything. We want you to sign away all rights you have or think you may have, under all possible scenarios, past present and future. Your soul included of course, for what little it’s worth. In return we’ll wind back all of your stupid mistakes, every last one of them, erase all of your petty failings, reset all those missed opportunities, and give you a gentle nudge in the right direction. Think of the biggest mistake of your life – well we’ll undo it, and all the smaller mistakes that led you to that moment. It’s your lucky day, Arnold, we’re going to give you a new life – a fresh start!”

It all sounds too good to be true – something you’re always daydreamed; a chance to go back and fix things up each time your life went to pieces. It can’t be genuine, can it? But then, what do you have to lose? “Well, okay...”

The creature bounds over to the computer desk and grabs a pen and a sheet of paper from the printer. “Then sign here please. In triplicate. We’ll fill in the rest later.”

The light hurts your eyes and your senses spin as you struggle to breath. A sharp retort rings out across the confusing space and the pain rips through you and in shock you wail in anguish and so take your first breath. You’re dumped onto the fleshy, sweaty chest of a woman who cradles your tiny head and croons over you. You can feel her heart beating rapidly and as you calm down the babble of noises which cascade over you, though loud and grating, start to make some sort of sense.

“Congratulations, it’s a boy!”

“We’re going to cut the cord now.”

“Have you decided what to call him?”

And then a strange voice booms out from close by. “John. He’s a John, like his father.” The voice hardens, a grim determination evident even to your infant ears. “And like his father, he’s going to be a priest.”

You try and beat your tiny fists, but realise you can’t; you have neither the strength nor the coordination, so instead you try and shout - trying to tell them there has been a mistake, that you’ve been cheated, that this isn’t you,

that this isn't your mother, that your name isn't John, but nothing comes except for gasping sobs, and as they fluster around you, trying to work out what is wrong, you realise you can no longer understand what they are saying, that you no longer have the words you wanted to shout, and all you can do is to scream, and scream, and scream.

