

SECOND CHANCE

by

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SS-F  
5 PAGES

I'm at her doorstep, a place I thought I'd never see again. I knock. The door cracks. Is that hope in the air? I entertain hope.

"Janice!"

"For God's sake, Bobby. You drunk?"

"C'mon, Janice."

"What? It's been a year, you're at my door unannounced, it's eleven at night and you've got sunglasses on. And it's you."

"Whatever happened to benefit of the doubt?"

"It ran out, Bobby. Long gone."

I bend down and breathe at her.

"See? Fresh as the newmown whatever."

"That's mouthwash. How dumb am I supposed to be?"

"I never thought you were dumb."

"That's right. And I'm experienced."

I walk a straight line backwards, then forwards, one foot in front of the other, then bow.

"Ta da! Convinced?"

"You learned a new skill," she says.

"You got a breathalyzer in there? Get it. C'mon! Bring it on."

She laughs.

"Can I come in?" I ask.

"I thought maybe you were here for sex on the front lawn."

"I'm always open to new experiences."

She stares the familiar stare.

"This brings back memories, Bobby. Not good ones."

"You haven't mellowed, Janice."

"That's right. I'm tougher than ever."

"Good. I probably helped with that, huh?"

She laughs again, always a good sign.

"You give a girl scar tissue, Bobby. I'll give you that."

"I'd like to see some of those scars."

"Fat chance."

It begins to drizzle. I hold my hand out, signaling rain.

"How about shelter from the storm?" I plead. "For old times."

There's a pause, a cracked smile. She steps aside, resigned. I enter a familiar place, a place out of our past. Two paintings, each with a martyred saint in the throes of death, still hang in the hallway. That's for her mom. Mom was a problem for me. I follow Janice inside, my eyes tracing familiar lines from the small of her neck, moving down and over fleshy curves my hands remember. She looks back, reads me like a worn book.

"Calm down," she says and sits down in an armchair. She motions me to the good old sofa.

"Place looks like always," I say. "You seen any of the old gang lately?"

"It was mostly your gang", she says, but she's wrong, they were our friends, we were a group, we had good times together, maybe too good sometimes, we stumbled around, looking for something, but that's back then, you can't let the past wrap its arms around you. You can always start over.

"Let's get to the point, Bobby," I hear her say. "Why are you here?"

I want to tell her, but I don't.

"I visited my Aunt Mo today," I say and shrug. "She asked about you. It triggered a thought."

"That's it? Your aunt mentions me, you drop in at eleven?"

"It was an impulse. What's wrong with that?"

"Your aunt. I liked her. How is she?"

"She's lost. She's at The Home on 25th st. Had a stroke. Let's make a pledge never to grow old, okay?" I say and then laugh. "Actually, my new line of work helps with the short life program."

"I heard. You're some kind of cop, right?"

"Less dignified. Private Investigator."

"Is it dangerous?"

"You get a target on your back if you're not careful."

"Pay a lot?"

"No guarantee."

"I'm not getting the appeal."

"There's a future, Janice. I'm renting an actual office. With two chairs. I can wear a tie if I want to. Things pick up, I'll hire a secretary."

"I bet you will. A young one."

"Play your cards."

"Right."

The room seems dark. I realize my sunglasses are still on. I take them off. She looks down and spots my damaged hand, crushed in an indifferent punch press, a wound from my former life.

"I heard about your accident."

"You didn't come. To the hospital."

"No. I thought about it. Does it still hurt?"

"There are worse things," I say.

She excuses herself and heads to the kitchen. I stare at the saints and consider a prayer. Janice comes back with two Cokes and a bowl of chips. I see this as an encouraging sign and a temperance

lecture.

"Fortify you for the road," she says, popping her can and throwing her head back like I remember, her dark hair flying, then settling around her shoulders.

I grab my soda and begin shaking, as though the tremens are in control.

"Very funny," she says.

For a long minute, the ticking of the owl clock on the wall and the sound of chips fill the silence. I ask how her mom is, she says fine and drains more Cola. I fidget.

"This is awkward," she says.

"It's a start."

"Right. Caffeine's a funny drug, Bobby. Some people go delusional."

More silence. I raise a chip casually to my mouth.

"You seeing anyone?" I ask.

"Several."

"Searching for something, huh? Something you lost."

The owl clock strikes. She frowns.

"You still cutting hair?" I ask.

"Still at it."

"It's an art, isn't it?"

"It's a living. Your new job. You're in another world, huh?"

"Say again. Trailing people, peeking through motel windows, taking pictures that could damage someone's life. It's something out there, Janice. "

"Then why do it?"

"It's the bed I lie in," I explain.

"Your folks still good?"

"They miss you. They liked you."

“Say hello for me,” she says and stands up, signaling the end is near. "Tomorrow's a work day", she says.

My mind struggles for the right words, words that might make a difference.

“Janice, people deserve a second chance. They do.”

A hopeful, silent pause graces the room.

“A second chance,” she finally says. “That's what I'm living, Bobby. And it's going okay. You go find yours. I wish you luck. I really do.”

She turns, leads me to the door and surprises me with a peck on the cheek.

"Be careful," she says.

"Right," I say and walk out into my future.

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