

The Growling
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The Growling

“Stop it! Stop it, for Christ’s sake! You’re killing him!”

The voice was distant, a dream within the nightmare, fogged by fury and the need to get even, to set things straight; rage fuelling the repeated pummeling punches; blunting the pain in the knuckles as they parted lips, mashing them against teeth, the sickening crackle of a nose disintegrating under the onslaught. The gurgle of warm blood in the back of the throat.

Retribution is a cold beast, but Cory Anderson was warmed by it, juiced up on it, getting positively high on it and all the time his heart pounding, pounding, pounding; in beat with the beating he willfully doled out.

Hands upon him now, small hands, hands with nails that used to rake him in the throes of desire; Jennifer Spencer loved to do it, hell, he loved her to do it, loved her leaving her mark on him.

A sign of her love.

But no love now. No love for quite a while, in fact. Just lies and deceit and distance.

And Malcolm.

Malcolm with his Ford Tigris and faux gold Rolex that rotated on his twig thin wrist. Malcolm with his thin laugh and wide boy charm. Malcolm with his bloodied lips and pulped nose.

“Get off of him, Cory!” Jennifer was back in his head, insistent, the tone in her voice lilting and frantic, and the nails raking his neck.

Anderson dislodged her, knocking her aside as he climbed to his feet. Jennifer was on her knees, mouse-blond hair hanging, strands of it clinging to the sweat about her neck.

God, even pissed off she looked great.

Malcolm lay sprawled across a coffee table, his face splattered. He waved an arm feebly in the air and one of his loafers had fallen off. He was making thick mewling sounds.

Jennifer scuttled over to him, her hands unsure of where to go. They settled on his chest.

“Why did you have to do this?” she sobbed without taking her eyes from her lover.

Her little secret, now in the open and bleeding out on the green carpet.

“Why did you have to do that?” Anderson said, his sneer made even uglier by his breathlessness. His eyes caressed her lithe frame in an attempt to avoid any possibility of meeting hers.

“You just don’t get it do you, you fucking animal?” she spat. “You and me, we’re done. And that was before this. Now GET OUT OF HERE!”

Her skin on her neck was mottled red fire. With some incongruity Anderson noted that it was the same colour as when Jennifer came, hot and hungry and holding onto him breathless and sated. That was back in the days when their lovemaking had actually been informed by love. Anderson felt a tear in his chest, realisation that he would never again bear witness to such an act. Never again feel her warmth lying against him, around him.

His remorse chased off the remnants of his anger. His desire for vengeance now giving way to his desire for her. He opened his mouth to say something but nothing wanted to step up to the mark. Nothing wanted to be shot down in cold blood. Instead he turned and without looking back left Jennifer’s flat to the sound of sobs and ragged breathing.

* * *

Threlfall House had fourteen floors; a stalagmite of shite brought from the brink of demolition on more occasions than anyone could remember. The housing estate that existed in its shadow was no better; tried, run down, the people who lived there pretty much the same. Anderson loathed the place. The smell of stale piss and booze pervaded the stairwells. And the lifts were something else. Floors eroded by years of drunks using them as latrines, the top layer of linoleum a corroded ovoid, a mini piss-lake for all to avoid.

But if Anderson was totally honest, it wasn’t this that kept him from using the lift. It was something far more primordial, far more basic.

Confinement wasn’t a friend of Cory Anderson. The thought of those small cars and the long drop had him shivering and heading straight for the stairwell. What were nine floors amongst friends? Besides he’d have guilt and the sharp stinging in his knuckles to keep him company on the way down.

He’d not meant to lose it like that. He just wanted to know why Jennifer had traded him in for a no-mark like Malcolm. And then the little shite had answered the door, the grin on his face, Jennifer’s lipstick on his neck, pushing all the wrong buttons and setting the green eyed beast loose. It had started with a shove and then went from there. Anderson’s muse unleashed in the tiny flat in a giant turd of a building.

Anderson began his descent, his footfalls amplified by the concrete space about him. He kept his hands in free space, avoiding the stair rail. His hands hurt enough without coming across a hypodermic strategically placed to catch an unsuspecting police officer or Community Nurse.

Junkies and their sense of humour.

He made the seventh floor before he heard it. It was loud enough - close enough - to make him stop in mid stride.

Growling.

His first thought was that a dog was loose in the stairway. There were plenty of them in the building after all; their owners mostly drug dealers or games machine junkies. He tried to place it. Was it above or below? He waited; his breath on hold for a while.

It came again, from the landing below, thick and gruttal. And no matter how many times Anderson told himself the contrary, he knew now that it was definitely not a dog. He knew this for many reasons, but the main clue making him sure enough to start backing up the stairs, was the click clicking sound accompanying the growls; the sound of big claws tapping against concrete.

Someone had once said that we fear the unknown more than anything else in the world; and it was this adage that had Anderson going against his instinct to get the hell moving and encouraging him to peer over the railings, to make known the unknown, to quell the gnawing fear in his belly.

Slowly he inched over the banister, the vertical corridor of railings coming into view and dropping out below in a dizzying sense of height. He leaned over a little more, trying to catch a glimpse of whatever was on the next landing, and began to question his initial trepidation. He was about to call time on his misplaced anxiety when he saw it.

And it saw him.

Anderson pulled sharply away from the railing, his back slamming against the pistachio coloured wall behind him. He wished that the concrete barrier could absorb him in some way, make him invisible to the thing he'd seen on the floor below. The thing that was slowly making its way towards him.

It had been a brief glimpse, but the image was branded upon his brain, seared there as though he'd inadvertently stared at the mid-summer sun. Red eyes, it had red eyes and they bore into him, marked him far deeper than the nails of his ex-lover ever could. And teeth, oh God it had teeth, lots of them that cluttered its maw so much so that the mouth had been forced into a razor sharp grin.

Anderson noted the door leading to the seventh floor flats. It was made of wood and glass and had no chance of stopping the thing coming to introduce him to those terrible teeth.

But through the glass he saw something else: the steel doors of the lift were open; wide and inviting. And although Anderson never thought the day would come when he'd welcome such a thing, he found himself weeping with joy. He edged towards the stairwell's exit, eager to get inside the lift before the creature could get anywhere near him. The door to the exit opened smoothly for the first few inches, then the squeal of neglected hinges carved its name in the air.

"Shit!"

An explosion of movement now; heavy footfalls from below, the hideous growling a soundtrack to the event as the creature pounded up the steps. Anderson moved too, throwing open the door and launching himself towards the lift, his feet slipping haphazardly on the greasy linoleum.

But he was a few feet away when, to his total horror, the doors began to close.

* * *

He threw himself at the doors, his arm stuck out in front of him in an attempt to activate the opening mechanism. He got lucky, his hand made it through and the sensors picked it up. The doors slid lazily open with the incongruous, bright chime of a bell.

Just as Anderson bundled his body into the car, the doors to the stairwell were yanked open, the noise loud as the frame came with it and the remains were cast aside with the din of splintering wood and shattering glass.

The growling was louder now, filling the landing, filling Anderson's world. The reek of piss was overwhelmed by another stench, the stench of something he couldn't immediately place until it was so powerful it was difficult to suppress.

The stink of dead meat.

Not the clinical butcher's shop stink, but that of road kill, or something trapped under a floorboard or behind a skirting board.

In his frenzy, Anderson flailed at the buttons on the wall. The lift doors began to close just as Anderson's new buddy came into view, the eyes - ruby red and devoid of empathy - scanning his, a streak of viscous saliva swinging from its lower jaw almost hypnotising the trapped man with its pendulous motion.

The doors dragged themselves together as the creature launched at them. The lift began its descent as the beast's bulk struck the outer doors, the impact bowing them inward and shaking the car violently. Anderson cried out as he was dumped on his ass as the car shimmied. The lift shaft creaked and groaned but the car was moving, leaving the thing battering the external doors on the seventh floor landing.

"Guess again, you sonofabitch," he said, his voice frayed with fear and relief. As the car slid down the shaft, Anderson climbed to his feet, his mind trying to shrug off the sluggishness his fear had saddled him with. Rational thought needed to re-assert itself and fast.

He pulled out his mobile, his intention to notify the cops, to tell Jennifer and that sorry fuck Malcolm to stay put. His brain was just registering that there wasn't any signal when a huge, distant thud occurred overhead. There was the distinct din of metal being bent and twisted and then something clattering down the lift shaft, bouncing against the sides with a series of dull echoes until it smashed into the roof of the car.

Again the whole lift bucked and Anderson was knocked into the doors, cracking his forehead a good one as he went, and filling his head with bright shiny lights. The car came to a shuddering halt as fell to his knees, his hands clutching his brow.

Then, the lights went out.

* * *

Darkness, complete and suffocating.

Anderson tried to stem the tide of horror threatening to wash over him and drag him down into madness. The car remained stationary; the steady creaks from outside adding to the ominous sense of threat.

He activated his mobile phone, the light from the tiny screen seemingly huge in the pervading blackness about him. He checked his signal again, his heart scudding against his sternum before falling into the pit of his stomach when he saw the "No Service" warning on the screen.

Another squeal, another creak brought him into focus. The car jolted, skidding down the walls of the lift shaft for a few seconds before grinding to a halt. Anderson cried out in surprise and terror.

How the tables have turned, his mind teased. And it was wearing Jennifer's voice just to drive the point home. Who's scared now, Cory? Who's at the mercy of something that has no care for the fear of others? How does it feel? How does it taste?

He tried to shut her out. But that would mean facing something else, right? Facing his true fear: the confined space.

The darkness.

It brought back memories, memories as dark as the ebony piss perfumed cloak wrapped about now. Hiding from Tommy, his psychotic brother, a perverse game of hide and seek that always ended the same: a beating for being so shit; then confinement, thrown in the cupboard under the stairs, a real life Harry Potter but wearing bruises rather than a cloud of magic.

Even though Tommy was now kept somewhere with lots of doctors and nurses keeping him a splendid isolation, courtesy of heavy doses of Olanzapine and dull brown leather straps with bright silver buckles, Cory Anderson wore his brother's legacy like an ill fitting suit. Usually a quiet soul, nagging from a distance, but sometimes, times like these for example, coming to the front of the stage and bringing the whole wretched house down; the phantom bringing about destruction in a wreath of flame.

A huge crash on the roof of the car sent the phone tumbling from Anderson's grasp. The small screen splashed its watery light to the ceiling, and Anderson followed its beam instinctively, his braised hands clamped across his mouth; not in an attempt to stifle his scream but to stop a huge wave of vomit ejecting from his mouth. "Fear is nature's purge" Tommy had once said before beating Cory senseless with their mother's old broom.

Now the purging was back and wanting to let off steam. He swallowed hard, the acrid vomit burning his throat on its return journey. And all the time Anderson watched the roof of the car, waiting for something terrible to happen.

His fear wanted to morph so badly into anger. Some of the hot stuff he'd dished out to Malcolm not fifteen minutes ago as Jennifer begged him to stop. But impotence had moved in, his fear consuming as the thing overhead began to pace, heavy foot falls making the car tremble in a steady, sullen rhythm.

"Oh God, oh God," he whispered behind the palm clasped to his mouth. "What the hell is it?"

But he wasn't really concerned about what it was; he was more concerned about what it could do. What it would do. Part of him became convinced that there was no way on this God-given-Earth the thing would be able to get into the car.

Get to him.

But then Anderson's rational mind suggested that if it could smash its way into a lift shaft and jump three floors onto the roof of the car, then it would be near enough able to do what the fuck it wanted. And what it wanted now was to torment and tease and show that it called the shots. It wanted its prey to know that it was cornered, and although he'd fought against his darkest fear and entered the lift, Anderson was yet to know what fear truly was; what it could truly do.

The power save mode kicked in, throwing the lift into total darkness.

"Jesus H Christ!"

The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them, and the sounds of pacing overheard came to a sudden halt. And then the growling returned, deep and coarse and powerful.

Anderson scabbled around for his phone, trying bring back the light. "Are you nuts?" his mind sang. "You really want to see what's about to tear you apart?"

From far away, he made the decision, that yes, perhaps, after all of these years the dark could become a friend. He would make his peace with it. Just for this one day, the last day of his life.

The roof overhead groaned as a huge force struck it, and the lift was suddenly full of light, Anderson covering his eyes from the brilliance as the fluorescents came back online. Through his blurred vision he could see a portion of the roof had been hit with such might it sagged inwards. Another blow opened the dent like a lanced blister.

Anderson could only stare as the big gnarled hand came through the gap, probing, searching for the edges. Twisted fingers - thick as rope and blending seamlessly into wicked, wicked talons - curled around the ragged hole they had carved and then yanked backwards, peeling away a section of roof as though it were a swatch of fabric.

Below Anderson watched, his eyes so wide that to any onlooker they appeared about to leave their sockets, his fear morphing into terror, not the mind numbing kind, but the kind that is bright and final. Anderson opened his mouth and gasped, and it came as a reed-thin sound.

And when the growling began, filling the car with its savage music, Cory Anderson added to the lift's aroma by pissing his pants.

* * *

Sitting in a cooling pool of his own urine, Anderson watching the thing as it emerged through the makeshift opening. First came those hands, fingers hooked and eager, followed by a long slim wrist, the skin smudged with whites and purples, the veins knotted and so close to the surface Anderson could see the blue-green blood pumping through them. Saliva dropped into the car from the dark, ragged hole above in viscous strings, a terrible rain that purged nothing.

Then came the face.

And those eyes.

Up close Anderson was mesmerized by them, twin orbs of fire locking onto him, piercing him, branding his very soul with their intensity. The rest of the creature's face was no less incredible: a high brow, thick black hair matted and plastered to its skull, and the side of its head so the pointed ears jutted from the mane like twin shark fins cutting through the surf.

Then it was in the lift, landing with a heavy thump and bringing with it the putrid reek of decaying meat; forcing Anderson's gut to unload its contents again, and there was no stopping it this time, his puke slapping down his chest and into his lap, where it made its acquaintance with his piss soaked pants.

The thing reached down and took hold of Anderson by the throat, lifting his dead weight as though it were nothing at all. Instinctively, Anderson's hands went for the wrist attached to the vice now crushing his larynx. The world turned to fog as his oxygen supply was severed, but in the mist of his fading consciousness, he realised that the hands he'd clamped about the beast's wrist were making contact with cold, hard metal. Before he could make sense of it the creature was savaging him, teeth making contact with the flesh of his face, ruining it, severing lips and ears and the nose, chewing on the skull as though engaged in a brutal, bloody kiss.

Then powerful jaws clamped down and cracked open the skull, and Cory Anderson ceased to exist. The beast sucked out his brain and swallowed it in two bites; releasing the mutilated corpse almost immediately and leaving it to crash to the bloodied floor.

For a short time the thing watched Anderson's remains, its eyes unblinking, and as red as the blood splashed across its misshapen face. Then it was moving again, its long scrawny arms reaching up to the ceiling and hooking onto its crude exit in the roof.

And as the beast reached up and hoisted itself out of the car, a small object slipped down the creature's wrist, an object made from cheap steel and plated with yellow paint. A fake Rolex watch.

END?