

JOHNNY IN THE WAITING ROOM

BY LEE STODDART

JOHNNY prised open his eyes, then screwed them firmly shut again. His head was pounding, like the mother of all hangovers; which then apropos of nothing, quickly and completely dissipated.

Neon-white light crowbarred its way into his brain as he again strained to lift his too-heavy eyelids. Reticently, he peered out through the crack he'd managed to force open; the world was blurred and imprecise. Slowly, focus returned. Wherever he was had the air of a medical facility: sparsely furnished, overpoweringly bright and sterile.

He was on his back, on some kind of gurney which squeaked and creaked as he shifted about. As he acclimatised, he propped himself up on the trolley and realised he wasn't wearing his customary black jeans and tee-shirt. He had on a simple grey gown which hung loosely upon his wiry middle-aged frame.

A hospital? Makes sense. The accident was pretty bad.

Memories came pouring back, momentarily overwhelming him. He'd been side-swiped by some suicidal young woman in a red Fiat 500, seemingly desperate to overtake everyone on the snow-covered dual carriageway. She'd charged up the outside lane at an outrageous speed. Drawing level with him, she'd hit a patch of ice, spun and careened into him. The force of the collision had smashed his car into a signpost and on into a field. His BMW had rolled twice, maybe three times before—what? He didn't recall what happened after that.

Not good. The Beemer must be a complete write-off.

Other than the initial pain in his head, he felt fine, if a little disoriented. He was surprised he didn't feel more broken and bruised. Oddly, he didn't feel anything at all.

Perhaps I got lucky. Wonder how long I have to wait for a doctor.

* * *

Waking with a start, he was surprised to see an ancient, thick-set man silently looming over him. His sudden materialisation put Johnny in mind of some terrible special effect in a 1970s Doctor Who episode. The man was olive-skinned, had white hair and a short

beard. If pushed, Johnny would have described his face as 'somewhat combative'. The thing that most caught his eye was the saffron robe the elder sported, which seemed to be shimmering.

I must have taken a knock to the head.

It was cinched at the waist by a rope belt upon which hung a heavy set of keys—the kind a castle gate or a church might need.

Not the normal attire for a doctor.

Lifting himself from his supine position, Johnny faced the old man, who immediately started speaking. "I just need to confirm: you are Mr. John Richards, formerly of 24 The Mews, Eastgate. Correct?" Johnny couldn't quite place the accent. He guessed it might be from somewhere in the Middle East.

"Well, yes—but what do you mean, 'formerly'?"

The oldster ignored his question. "Good. Then we can begin. Lots to process in this cold snap. We can't spend too much time on any one person."

Johnny swung his legs over the side of the trolley. The metal framework brushed up against his bare skin, yet he still felt nothing.

What's wrong with me? Nerve damage?

"Where am I? What hospital is this? And who in Hell are you, anyway?"

The yellow-clad fellow smiled. "You English. Always so demanding. Why don't you sit back and think for a few seconds? I'm sure you can work it out."

"The accident... the lack of sensation... those keys. Jesus Christ—I'm dead, aren't I? You're..."

"Yes, I am Saint Peter, or plain Simeon if you prefer. I'm not one for formalities. You were killed in the accident. Broken neck. And here you are. By the way, it would be better, at this point and with all things considered, if you could stop taking His name in vain. It's not really a great strategy in Purgatory. My job is to ensure we allocate you to the right afterlife, so to speak."

Johnny blanched, or at least would have if he were able. His body seemed numb and unresponsive.

"The right afterlife? What are my options?" He had a creeping suspicion he already knew.

"Well, first of all, there's some good news. You aren't in Hell." Simeon smirked, like it was his little joke. One he had told

thousands, if not millions of times before. "If you were, you'd know by now."

"So, the pitchforks and the flames, all that stuff—it's real?"

"Come now, it's a bit more up-to-date than that. Still, no less painful. We've added a dash of ironic torment. It's much more effective when it hits the sinner on a personal level. Really makes the damned sit up and think."

"I'm sorry, what exactly do you mean?" Simeon's explanation wasn't helping him get to grips with his position.

"Let me give you an example. Let's say... Nigel Williamson."

Johnny looked askance. Sure, he knew who Williamson was and had even occasionally watched his TV programme.

"The car show presenter?"

"Yes. Not one of our favourites. He might claim it's just a bit of banter, but his casual bigotry legitimises all sorts of nastiness, even if he claims it's his on-screen character. For a start, he makes money promoting an industry which is knowingly devastating God's creation. Then, taking full advantage of his celebrity status, he uses sneering language to ridicule people who aren't like him: a straight, middle-class, white, English male with a penchant for environmentally-destructive sports cars. Nasty piece of work all round, really.

"He's going straight to Hell. We've got him lined up to be perpetually force fed the Daily Mail, whilst being run over, very slowly, by a demonic push-bike. We can't wait for him to arrive."

"You keep saying, 'we'. Don't you mean the Devil, the Horned One, Old Nick, or whatever you want to call him?"

Simeon looked pityingly at him. "Look, Johnny-boy, I'm not sure you're getting it and I wouldn't normally feel inclined to provide a mere mortal any explanation. But, in light of your situation, I'll give it one more shot."

"Errr, OK. Perhaps we should get back to what exactly my situation is?"

"In time, Johnny. Unless you are planning on going somewhere?" Simeon smirked. "Meanwhile, listen up. Lucifer runs Hell, sure; but we're one big happy management team, all with our own parts to play, working together to reach one overarching goal—the eradication of evil.

“We sift the souls, allocating them as either good or bad. The good guys ascend straight to Heaven and sit at God’s right hand. The bad guys descend to Hell, where we work on them to reclaim what we can in the great washing machine of humanity that is the Abyss. Once they are spun and wrung out the good essence is released and sent upwards. The evil gunk, pure sin, is scrubbed clean, recycled and sent back for re-use in the mortal realm. We manufacture reconditioned souls for new-born infants.

“Unfortunately, the opportunity for evil in the mortal realm has grown exponentially, especially since you mortals invented the Internet. To make matters worse, humanity has forgotten the original ground rules laid down by God. These days, only a miniscule percentage get to go straight upstairs.

“Plus, you humans breed like rabbits. As a result, the afterlife is awash with low grade souls that need a lot of attention. I’m beginning to think it will never end.”

Johnny looked stunned. “So, it’s all true? The Bible is, literally, the gospel truth?”

“Well...more the figurative truth, really. Right in spirit, not in the detail. The commandments, however, are spot on. Dictated by God himself. All six hundred and thirteen of them.”

“I’m sorry, how many?” John spluttered.

“Six hundred and thirteen. Of course, it’s only the top ten most of humanity seems to count. Edited through the ages, you see? ‘But, I like prawns,’ went the cry and so, naturally, the edict not to eat shellfish slowly gets redacted from the list. But, that doesn’t mean it doesn’t count. End result: we have a stubborn under-stain of crustacean-related sinning. Which, unless we have a massively successful anti-lobster media campaign, we aren’t going to expunge any time soon. Of course, it’s not a major sin like murder or coveting your neighbour’s ox.”

There was a terrible pregnant pause before Johnny snapped into gear, “You said I hung in the balance? I’m not saved, but I’m not damned?”

“And so, to the point.” Simeon looked glad to be back on track. “Which is this: you must be close to being in balance. I need to weigh you, metaphorically speaking. Let’s have a look at your file.”

From out of nowhere, Simeon seemed to suddenly have possession of a white tablet. Not the kind that Moses was familiar with; the kind you go on-line with. He flicked through a few pages making ‘hmmm’ and ‘ahhh’ noises.

“It seems for a modern human you’ve lived a pretty exemplary life. No cheating on your wife, no murdering, pretty content with your lot. Doesn’t appear to be any excessive coveting. Even put your mum and dad in a decent nursing home, so that’s ‘honour thy father and thy mother’ ticked off. You did steal a tin of Airfix paint from a craft shop when you were a lad. Happily, it seems you repented for that.” Simeon continued to run his finger down the screen.

“Oh, look at this. It seems, in my guise as patron saint of key-makers, you were one of mine. It says here you were a master locksmith and built a pretty good business consulting on security. All without resorting to anything too nefarious. Well done.” Simeon looked genuinely pleased.

Johnny felt a strange stirring in his gut: a pleasantly warm feeling of contentment, like being comfortably full. It was the first genuine sensation he’d had since waking. Looking down, his previously grey tunic was now more of a dirty off-white and had begun to shine slightly. Simeon noticed him staring at the metamorphosing robe.

“That’s a good sign for you, Johnny-boy. Grey means you are untested. The closer you are to ascending, the whiter your robe will become. Almost angelic, don’t you think? If it goes black, then you are in deep trouble and heading straight down. Oh, by the way, I should have asked earlier, would you say you were a good man?”

Johnny, warmed by the glow in his stomach and by the fine things Simeon had said about him, felt positive. “Yes, I suppose I would. I guess I may have broken a few of your commandments which I’d never heard of. But really—scampi?”

“Don’t let it worry you. Shellfish are small in the scale of things. Minor infractions incur hardly any weight on your soul. We can sieve those out in no time. In fact, we can handle a certain amount here in Purgatory without the need for getting Hell involved at all. You’ll hardly notice. It’s the big stuff we need to know about. Anything you’d like to ‘fess up to?” Simeon gave Johnny a hard, penetrating stare as though he was trying to dissect him.

"No. Nothing comes to mind. Are you trying to get at something specific?" Feeling a little panicked, the warm feeling in his stomach had gone and it was being replaced by a slightly uncomfortable sensation not unlike the acid reflux he had suffered on Earth.

"Come on, Johnny. You know there is something. If you admit to it, I can save you. Think," Simeon urged.

"No, nothing. Nothing at all. I was a good man," Johnny cried, his voice rising as he pled his case. "What do you want me to say?"

"I'm sorry, I can't tell you. You have to know. You have to tell me."

Johnny remained silent, stifling a sob. Like a small child, he wiped away some stray snot running from his nose with a sleeve of the now dark grey robe. Then, his head dropped low and he broke down in a flood of tears.

"Last chance, Johnny."

"I don't know," he eventually wailed.

Simeon looked exacerbated. "You lived your whole life as an agnostic. You failed to keep the first four commandments. The big four. You had doubt. You dabbled in spiritualism, pantheism, even humanistic atheism—anything that came along to fill the void—except belief in the one true God.

"You thought of yourself as spiritual. Yet you loved some brands more than you loved Him. Think about the amount of time you spent polishing your infernal car. You practically worshipped it. That's idolatry.

"The only time you were in church was if someone was born, married or died. You, along with everyone else, constantly blasphemed. It was like punctuation."

Johnny cried out, "No, no. I WAS a good man! I did no harm to anyone. No one keeps the faith in the way you want them to any more. It's impossible, you ask too much."

"Ahhh. And therein lies the problem," Simeon muttered. "All you intellectually-evolved hairless monkeys have moved away from proper observations of doctrine even though it's the word of God. Mankind has chosen to forget the rules or thinks it knows better. You're all about self-empowerment, your 'personal rights',

and making sure you get what's coming to you. Well, now you are going to get what's coming to you.

"You've had every chance to repent. Only by admitting your failings before being formally accused, could I save you. Only then would your clothes have turned the bright yellow of the truly penitent sinner." As the saint's ire rose, his own robes blazed a nuclear-bright gold-yellow. Johnny futilely threw up his arm to protect his eyes, as the burst blinded him and drove him to the ground.

Almost as quickly, Simeon's righteous anger abated and the searing intensity of the light emanating from him subsided. "I hoped I could save you, John Richards. I wanted to." His voice was heavy with sadness as he grasped both of the unrepentant heretic's shoulders. "Not good enough, my man. Not good enough." Johnny's gown instantly turned from dark grey to an impenetrable black. Simeon took a step back.

On his knees, Johnny desperately clutched the hem of the saint's robe. His head bowed to the floor, sobbing. "I'm sorry. I'll do anything..." The discomfort in his bowels increased to an excruciating agony as the ground opened beneath him, releasing a noxious blast of sulphur. Pallid grey long-dead arms reached up from below, grasped his ankles and slowly, inexorably, dragged him downwards.

As Johnny sank, arms outstretched in a desperate plea for clemency, St. Peter bent down to call after him, "I'm truly sorry, there can be no exceptions. I tried to help you, I really did. Stop being so selfish. Try to see it from my point of view. You've completely bugged my targets for the week."