

A Different Day.

a short story by

Colin Owen

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Tom had walked this way many times before on his way home from work, but tonight, he was unsettled. The dark corners of the doorways he was passing kept catching his eye, as though there was movement there. Each time he looked he saw nothing, which was no help at all. Tom was not normally nervous, but for some reason he was really jittery today. It had started back at work in the stock room. A cat had somehow gained access and had been creeping around the shelves. It had jumped out suddenly as Tom was reaching for a carton of corn flakes and scared him out of his wits. The fright had stayed with him for the rest of the day, and here he was, walking home afraid of his own shadow.

There were plenty of people about, it was early evening after all, and folks were on the move. Some off home like Tom, and others off out to the pub. Busses were passing, and cars, and all the noise of the evening was there, but Tom felt alone. At this precise moment, he felt terribly alone. The thought of home was no comfort either. A ready meal and the TV was all he had to look forward to. It was the same every night... Work, eat and TV. "God I'm sick of this." He muttered to himself. He wanted to shout it out, but didn't have the courage. That was Tom's problem, he didn't have the courage to take a hold of his life and change it.

There was another movement at the periphery of his vision and he spun around to try to catch it. It was a doorway, and he couldn't see anything. It was very dark being hidden from the dreary street lighting. He stood and stared into the darkness, straining his eyes. Nothing. He was just about to turn round, when he did catch something. It was a leg, he was sure of it. It had just moved out of the darkness for a split second and pulled back again, but he saw it. "Who's there?" He said timidly. He waited. There was no reply. "Who's there?" He said again, a little more assertively this time. Again he waited. After a few seconds there was a sound, a moan, faint, but audible. Tom took his courage in both hands and walked slowly towards the doorway. Another moan reached his ears and he stopped. "Are you all right?" He asked gently. There was what sounded like a gasp, a gasp of distress.

Tom moved forward into the darkness, and almost fell over her. She was huddled up in a tight ball on the steps. "Are you all right?" He asked again, only much softer this time. A hand reached up towards the sound of his voice and Tom instinctively took it. It was cold and damp as though it had been out in the open for days. It was then he caught the smell too. Stale urine and alcohol. He realised he was dealing with a tramp. His mind raced. What to do, let go and walk away as though nothing had happened, or stay and try to help? It was a dilemma. If he had known it was a tramp he wouldn't have gotten involved, but he was involved now... What to do?

Tom made a snap decision. His life never had any excitement in it, and this at least was something different. He got a firmer grip and said, "Come on, let me take you home." He couldn't believe he'd said it, but his ears didn't lie. To his surprise, the tramp made an effort to get up. Tom slipped her arm over his shoulder and reached down to put his arm around her waist. He achieved it, and he lifted her to her feet quite easily. "She probably

hasn't eaten for days." He thought to himself, she was very light. "You OK to walk?" He said with a slight chuckle in his voice. The tramp just groaned, so he took that as a yes.

slowly, Tom helped her down the steps and onto the sidewalk. People stared at him as he began to walk her down the street towards his house. It struck him, that once they were walking, he lost the smell. The tramp was very slow at first, but managed a little better as they walked on. By the time they reached Tom's house, she was almost walking without his help.

Tom fumbled for his key. It was in his trouser pocket which made it awkward to reach whilst trying to hold the tramp up. He eventually managed it and got the door open. She went easily through the door and into the hallway. Tom closed the door and flicked the light on. The sudden brightness hurt his eyes, but he saw his companion for the first time and was not surprised at all by her appearance. She was in a terrible state, her old and tatty clothing filthy in the extreme. "We'll have to do something about that." He said softly. She made no sound or movement. "Come on, let's get you into the warm." She followed his lead into the lounge. He got her sat down in his favourite easy chair. Her head flopped back into the soft cushion and remained still.

Tom stood up to his full height and looked at her trying to figure out what to do next. He knew she needed food and a hot drink, but the state of her made him hesitate. "You really need a bath." He said, hoping to get a response. He decided to try a hot drink first to see if she would revive. He didn't fancy the idea of getting her into the bath as she was. "I'll go and put the kettle on." He said in an over loud voice as though she were deaf. He left the room and went to make a pot of tea. The kettle seemed to take an age to boil, but when it did, he made her tea and put plenty of sugar in.

When he got back to the lounge, she hadn't moved an inch. He set the tea down on a side table and put an arm around her shoulders to get her to a position where she could drink it. She moved easily, as though she was made of pipe cleaners. He held the tea to her lips, and to his surprise, she sipped the tea heartily. He helped her to take the whole cup, and then moved away. She didn't flop back into the chair, but said softly, "thank you." "You're welcome." Tom replied, glad that she seemed to be coming around.

"Look," he said after a few seconds, "you need to get out of those filthy damp clothes. Do you think you can manage that? I have some stuff you can wear." She nodded feebly. "I'll help you up stairs to the bathroom... OK?" Again she nodded. Tom helped her out of the chair and up the stairs to the bathroom. He sat her on the loo, it being the only thing available. He turned to the bath and began to fill it. "I'll get some towels." He said going to the airing cupboard. He returned shortly armed with towels and a dressing gown. When the bath was ready, he helped her up and gestured that she take her heavy coat off. She couldn't seem to manage the buttons, so Tom carefully helped her.

The coat came off revealing a torn cardigan and dirty blouse underneath. He helped with the cardigan, and then backed away. "Can you manage now?" He asked in that overloud voice. To his surprise, her response was tears. This really threw him, he hadn't expected tears. He found himself drawn to her to offer a hug. She accepted and he held her gently in his arms as she sobbed. Tom was close to tears himself by now. Her distress was real, and he felt it. She slipped out of the remainder of her clothing. Tom kept his eyes closed. It wasn't that he was a prude, it just didn't seem right to take advantage of one in such distress.

She moved him backwards a little until he heard the water. She slipped into the bath and Tom turned his back to her. Without opening his eyes, he said, "There's soap in the dish, and shampoo on the side, use all you need. He moved to the door saying as he passed through it, "I'll cook some tea for us, take as long as you like." He closed the door behind him and breathed a big sigh of relief.

He took the stairs 3 at a time going down them. He was in the kitchen in seconds. The ready meal was left in the fridge. Tom found some potatoes and began to peel them. He didn't usually cook, but somehow he felt she deserved more than convenience food. He searched the cupboards for things to turn into a meal. He found what he was looking for and set about preparing his speciality.

Ten minutes later, he was singing away to himself, happy as a sand boy. The smell from the kitchen began to waft up the stairs, and she caught it in the bathroom. She had had a good soak by now and washed her hair. The plug had been pulled, and all the filth of the previous months began to drain away. She watched it go and tears once again filled her eyes. The dressing gown was too big for her, but she was used to that.

Tom set the table and even lit a candle. The big light was out out and a standing lamp turned on. The effect was pleasing. "Food's ready." He called up the stairs. He waited until he heard movement and went back to the kitchen to get the food from the oven. On his return trip, bumped into her as she came down the stairs. It was all he could do to not drop the food. "Wow," he said, "that's what I call a transformation." He nodded, and she went ahead of him into the lounge. He put the dish on the mat on the table and turned to face her.

She was young. He hadn't even entertained the thought that she might be. She was blonde too and very slim. This was made worse by the dressing gown that looked enormous on her. He chuckled, and she smiled back at him. "You have a lovely smile," he said pulling a chair out for her. "Thank you," she said as she sat down, "this smells wonderful." "It's my speciality." Tom replied a little proudly. "I thought you might like it." He served up and they began to eat. "May I know your name?" Tom asked. "It's Sarah." She replied. He wanted to ask her more questions, but thought better of it for now, the night was young.

The meal was good, even by Tom's standards, and they were both full up. "Shall we sit in the comfy seats?" He asked. Sarah smiled again and got up from the table and made her way to the sofa. She was careful to keep covered up, and Tom noticed. He figured she had probably been taken advantage of many times, and determined that this would not be one of them. Though he had to admit to himself that she was quite attractive now that she looked human again.

Tom made some more tea and left Sarah in the lounge whilst he went up to the bathroom to collect her clothes. He hesitated before picking them up they were so filthy. He had been going to wash them for her, but he could see that it would be a waste of time, they were way beyond redemption. Without asking her, he put them in the bin.

When he got back to the lounge she was stretched out on the sofa with her arm over her eyes. "Tired?" He asked. "Yes, a little." Tom hesitated a little before saying, "I've put you clothes in the bin, I didn't think they would stand a visit to the washing machine." Her arm moved and she looked at him. "Don't worry," he said, "I'll buy you some more in the morning." Her arm went back, and she said, "I can stay the night then?" "Yes of course you can," he said, "stay as long as you like, I live here alone. I have a spare room, I'll make the bed up for you." He left to do it singing to himself again as he climbed the stairs.

Half an hour latter, Tom came down to find her asleep. He figured she would be out for hours and didn't want her to wake up cramped on the sofa, so he gently picked her up and carried her up stairs and put her in the bed in the spare room. He pulled the covers over her and switched out the light. "Good night Sarah. He said softly, closing the door behind him.

It was too early for Tom to go to bed, so he went back down the stairs and did the

dishes. It had been a funny day. Not at all like he'd imagined it would be. His normal mundane routine had been shattered, he had an attractive blonde in his spare room and he was happy again, and he owed it all to a stray cat. "Funny old life." He said, getting a clean dish cloth from the drawer.