

THE CHANGE

He had been expecting pain. In fact, as the jaws clamped around his neck and the teeth sank deeply in to his flesh, all he felt was relief. He remembered all the times he had seen wildebeest torn apart by lions on television, how he had always imagined their terror and pain. Now he knew nature was not that cruel. They felt what he felt now. Nothing. Numbness. Nothing. Nothing he could do. The run had left him exhausted. His legs just stopped. He collapsed. The hunt was over. Nothing he could do. Nothing he could feel.

It was as if his legs and feet no longer existed. No sensations from there, they couldn't help him anymore. They were irrelevant. He could feel the weight of the beast across his torso. His rib cage cracked twice as his lungs were slowly crushed. The air within escaped not from his mouth but from the now gaping hole in his throat. He could just make out the hiss as it forced its way past the vocal chords. His arms were pinned, one, outstretched as the beast had landed, broken. They were also irrelevant.

The beast paused, panting rapidly but not moving, waiting for its prey to asphyxiate. Its breath smelt foul, rotten. But then it was an animal. Animals don't brush their teeth. He forgave it. He could still move his eyes. Although they were starting to glaze and dim, he was still able to focus on what was eventually going to kill him. Its muzzle was quite long with smooth, black hair. The nostrils were flared and wet, though he couldn't tell if the wetness was his own blood. The fangs below were just out of his vision but he could imagine their scraped ivory surface penetrating his muscle and bone. As his eyes misted further, he rolled them to look into those of the hunter. What glint of victory and fire would he be able to see in them? Would they be blood red, filled with anger?

The eye he could see was not what he was expecting. The only red was in the white area, bloodshot and very tired looking. The pupils were not black and evil but light brown and almost human. The eyelid momentarily closed and the panting quickened for a second. When it opened, the pupil was looking back at him, returning the curiosity. The beast seemed sad, almost guilty at what it had done. The eye implored him to forgive it. He already had. It blinked again and he closed his clouded eyes with it. He didn't open them again.

He didn't hear the voices approach or the shots ring out. The beast did but offered no resistance. It yelped twice and let go its grip. Lifting its head skyward, it howled until cut short by another bullet that shattered its skull. It slumped over its victim adding saliva to the blood that still flowed from the wounded neck. A drop of the beast's blood hung delicately at the end of a canine. The body shivered and it dropped in slow motion landing with a splash into the human throat. It fizzed a little and then was absorbed.

"Mr Smith! Are you back with us Mr Smith?"

Mr Smith slowly opened his eyes. It took a moment for him to focus on the man in the white overall. The man was smiling. The lady standing next to him, also in white, was smiling too.

"Don't try to speak Mr Smith. It's going to take a long while so let's just take one step at a time. You're a very lucky man Mr Smith. There were many times in the last month I thought we were going to lose you. Quite frankly I don't know how you are still alive. I'll let you rest now and come back to see you later on".

He turned his attention to the smiling lady.

"Stay with him, please, nurse and let me know of any change".

He left the room and the nurse took a seat in the corner. Mr Smith moved his eyes around. His head seemed to be clamped so his view was restricted. He was too tired to move anything else. His throat itched. Possibly due to the tubes that appeared to be feeding and taking liquid to and from a hole there. Mr Smith couldn't be bothered to think about why he was there or to remember who he was. He closed his eyes and returned to sleep.

"Good morning Mr Smith. How are you feeling today?"

Mr Smith sat up and accepted the breakfast tray.

"I'm feeling like I should be going home, doctor".

"Well, the final results are due in today and, if they are as I expect, you'll be out tomorrow. How does that sound?"

"Sounds fine to me".

Mr Smith paused to start his breakfast then looked up again.

"Doctor, will there be any lasting effects of the injuries?"

The doctor sighed and looked down at his hands momentarily. When he looked up, he was smiling.

"To be honest, Mr Smith, I have never seen a recovery as quick and as complete as yours. You have quite a scar on your neck and one or two on your body. As for disabilities, there are none. My only concern is psychological. The nightmares you've been having have been quite vivid and are a natural response to the trauma you went through. They may take a long time to subside, maybe never but don't feel nervous or embarrassed to talk about them to a councillor. In fact I shall give you the name of a consultant friend of mine who will help you to get back to your normal life. I strongly recommend him. Meanwhile, eat your breakfast. We need to put some meat back on those bones".

Mr Smith did as he was told. Not that he needed telling, he could have eaten a horse, though he didn't realise quite how literally this was the case.

As Mr Smith pushed his key in to the hole and gently pushed open the front door to his house, a cold breeze whiped passed him in to the living room. a similar warm one pushed passed him to get out. He stepped through. Home at last. It felt good. He hooked up his coat and wandered the house to re-familiarise himself. Everything was the same. He was back home. Life was back to normal. He slumped into the sofa to relax. All of a sudden he felt fatigued. He slept.

Waking suddenly, Mr Smith realised that daytime had passed him by. He arose and climbed the stairs to bed. No longer tired, he lay there and stared out of the window at the view. The tree in the garden, bare of leaves, stood stark and still against the dark backdrop of night. Behind it, wisps of silver cloud drifted slowly across the moon, itself bright and full and shining back at him. He shivered slightly and pulled the covers up around him. He shivered again. Perhaps there was a draught from the window. He pulled back the covers to go and check.

As his foot touched the floor, he winced as a sharp pain pulsed up his leg. He instinctively lifted his foot to see what he had stood on. Nothing there. He sat back on the bed and rubbed his leg to get the blood circulating and rid him of the pins and needles that now spread from his toes to his thigh. The other leg started to itch and Mr Smith found himself rubbing both frantically. The rubbing didn't help. What was at first a mild irritation now began to worry him. It spread to his body and then to his arms and to his hands and then stopped.

It stopped suddenly not gradually but either way was a relief to him. He put his head in his hands and pushed the hair back from his forehead. He absent-mindedly scratched his right forearm. He scratched it again. It continued to itch. Mr Smith looked down at the red patch he had created and then stared closely to see if he could make out an insect bite. As he watched, something moved beneath the skin. He recoiled then brought it back close to his face. A black hair pushed it's way through the pores to join the hairs already there. Another forced it's way through. Within seconds, a dense mat had formed. Mr Smith had seen this before in a black and white Lon Chaney film but didn't believe for one minute that this could happen in real life. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. The hairs had spread. His left arm started to itch. 'No this wasn't happening, it couldn't happen'. His legs started to itch again. His back started to itch. His chest itched as did his neck and scalp.

This was crazy. Mr Smith rushed to the bathroom to check the mirror. By the time he reached it, the itching had stopped and he looked like a gorilla. He couldn't help a quick chuckle. 'Shame there wasn't a fancy dress party tonight', he thought. He tried to think seriously again, rationally. 'Ok, I've seen this on documentaries, people with lots of body hair with some sort of disease or other. Maybe I contracted it at the hospital, maybe the drugs'. He steadied himself and took a deep breath. Apart from the hair, he felt fine, no sickness, no headache and no loss of sensation. 'I should ring the hospital. Of course, they'll check me out, tell me it's a temporary side effect from the drugs I've had and I'll be back to normal. They know what their doing, they're educated, they've seen it all before'. He went back to the bedroom and rang the hospital.

"This is very rare, Mr Smith, not unheard of but very rare. The strange thing is that it is usually genetic, passed down through generations, not caught like a cold. The rapidity of growth is also extraordinary. You had no signs of this when you left here this morning. Having said that you check out Ok physically and don't appear to be in any pain so I don't see any immediate cause for worry. Your blood pressure is a little high though, so I would like to keep you in overnight. We'll do some more tests in the morning and I'll have a word with the skin specialist. Get some sleep and don't worry. I'll see you tomorrow".

A tear fell from Mr Smith's eye. He had been so looking forward to going home this morning and getting back to his normal life. Why hadn't he just died in the incident? He turned over and closed his eyes. He didn't get to sleep. A half an hour later, the pins and needles returned. This time just to the fingers and toes. He sat up in bed and switched on the bedside lamp. How much more hair could grow? He put his hands under the light. the fingers were swollen and the tips bulged ominously. He called out for the nurse but nobody answered. It was becoming painful, as if needles were being forced through the skin. His toes started to lose the pins and gain more needles too. The pain became intense. He clenched his fist, curled up his feet and closed his eyes in a grimace, clenching his teeth tightly. The needles were sharp, they were long and they were hot, very HOT. His extremities burnt like hell, his fists clenched tighter and tighter and he cried out in agony. Still nobody heard him.

As before, the pain stopped suddenly. He whimpered with relief and looked to his hands. As he unfurled his fist, a trickle of blood ran out and dripped crimson on to the white sheet. He stared and stared and STARED at his hands. Where once he had fingernails, he now had claws, large claws, SHARP claws. he looked at his toes. They were the same. "No, no, no, no. Help me someone, please, HELP". Mr Smith forgot about the call button on the bed. Nobody came to help.

Respite from pain was brief. His hands swelled as he watched and then he felt, and heard, the bones crack, one at a time. He held a hand up to the light and it's shape changed before his eyes, stretching, elongating, becoming more paw-like. His wrist suddenly snapped and re-set at a different angle. The pain should have made him pass out. He didn't faint and experienced the torture in it's entirety. He tried to stand and was thrown to the floor violently as his spine cracked and snapped in multiple places, re-setting with more of a curvature and forcing him to use all fours. Water flowed from his eyes, as much in sadness as in agony. "Doctor", he whispered, "help me".

He could speak no more. His mouth erupted with ulcers and blood seeped from the gums as his teeth began their own transformation. He imagined a tooth extraction without an injection then experienced it for each and every tooth. One by one they fell to the floor, pushed out by those that came after. the replacements were longer, pointed, vicious, predatory. They were larger too, and the mouth had to grow to provide enough space. He felt like he had received a blow from a sledgehammer just below each ear but the jaw bones did not break. Instead, they moved forward, out from his face and muzzled by the dense, black hair. They encompassed the nose as well and it was left cold and wet, like a dogs, just above the four fangs that now squared his visage.

Within minutes, Mr Smith was no longer recognisable as human in any way. He crouched beside the bed, afraid and angry. Despite his physical appearance, the mind within was still very much human. He knew who he was. He could feel, see, hear and smell everything but could not control his emotions nor his actions. He was frightened and very much alone.

Mr Smith sat, haunched and panting, eyeing the door. He saw a shadow through the single, wired pane of glass to the corridor. The door opened slowly. A nurse stepped through cautiously, hoping not to wake the patient who had apparently fallen asleep with the light on. She could hear the patient breathing heavily but the bed was empty. She rushed to the other side of the bed expecting him to have fallen out in his sleep and possibly hurt on the floor. She did not expect to see what she saw and, when she did, she could only scream.

Still very much afraid, Mr Smith leapt towards the nurse, then past her and out of the door. He bounded along the corridor, turned at an intersection and continued as fast as he could. The alarm was now sounding and added to his confusion as he fled the neon lights and antiseptic fluorescence of the building. Startled staff slipped in shock as he swept passed them and the security guards did nothing but gape as he sprang through the sliding glass doors on the way out, shattering the toughened laminate and

sprinkling shards across the shiny lobby. He was out in to the darkness, to where he felt safe and secure. Still he kept running.

Behind him, telephone calls were made to the police and to the zoo. Desperate orderlies searched the hospital for the missing Mr Smith, presumed frightened off and possibly hurt by the escaped animal. Most of Mr Smith's mind was also starting to go missing. The animal instincts were indeed escaping and as he rested by a hedgerow, he was overcome by hunger. He sniffed the air and scented food. His sensitive ears pricked up as they caught the sound of footsteps. A hundred yards away was a man, head down, hands in pockets and alone. The creature that was Mr Smith waited. As the man approached, he attacked.

With a howl of excitement, he rushed towards the victim. At first the man didn't see him but then he couldn't miss him. The man made a half-hearted attempt to shout then turned and ran for his life. He had a head start as he crossed the field but fear was no longer with the unfortunate Mr Smith. He was now the hunter driven by a newly acquired appetite for blood and he was gaining on his prey. Ahead of him, the man seemed to succumb to exhaustion quickly and collapsed to the ground. He rolled over on to his back and held out a hand as if it would be enough to stop the beast.

As Mr Smith fell upon the man, he felt the arm break under the weight and force of his strike. He heard two further cracks from the man's chest as he landed. In an instant he clamped his jaws around the man's neck, choking him. It was instinct, natural. There was no control. The man did not fight back and so he just waited atop of him, waiting for him to die before he ate. He was panting rapidly, almost making up for the slow breathing of the man. He must have been out drinking that night. Mr Smith could smell the stench of alcohol wafting from the man's throat. It brought back a fragment of memory to the beast and Mr Smith started to feel some remorse and sorrow for the man in whose bones his fangs were now embedded.

Mr Smith closed his eyes for a second trying to remember his humanity. He could sense his victim looking at him and opened them again to look back. He expected the man to look frightened or show hate towards his killer. Instead, the man looked surprisingly resigned to his fate. He looked calm, almost forgiving. Their eyes met. Mr Smith felt sad for the victim. He blinked away a tear as the man's eyes glazed and closed for the last time.

As they did so, a gunshot rang out, followed by another. Mr Smith yelped in pain, but it was nothing compared to the pain he had experienced before. This time, just two piercing flames to his body, nestling warmly in his belly. He remembered in that instant, who he was. Please let them release him from this torment. He couldn't stand the pain, or the guilt, of this again.
"Please kill me, NOW. KILL ME".

His howl rose high with his head. A third bullet silenced him as it entered his skull. Mr Smith was at peace. Now he could sleep at last.

As Mr Smith slumped across the man's wounded neck, a drop of saliva, cheated of the meal it was expecting, rolled down one of the canine teeth and hung delicately at the end. Mr Smith's torso shuddered in a final throes of death and the drop fell in slow motion towards the pool of blood beneath. As it landed with the smallest of splashes, it fizzed a little and then was absorbed.

The End

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