

EGOR'S EMPORIUM

(a dark comedy short for grown-ups)

Adrian Baldwin

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a dark comedy short story

Brighton Pier is over 520 metres long. At the heart of its high-stilted Victorian boardwalk sits Aladdin's Arcade, where Zak had been losing to a myriad of one-arm bandits, pinball machines and various slots for the last two hours.

'Are you frigging kidding me?' His curse is aimed at the pile of coins hanging over the front ledge of the coin-pusher. 'How the fuck are you not falling?'

He so wants to shove the machine but he doesn't get the chance: a hand with long, orange fingernails grabs his shoulder and jerks him round.

'Knew I'd find you here,' rasps the owner of the colourful talons.

'Oh hey, Steph,' grins Zak inanely. 'What time is it?'

'It's ... let's see ... *an hour after you agreed to meet me, you selfish prick.*'

'Seriously?' Zak glances at his wrist, forgetting for the moment that he'd pawned his watch a week ago.

'Do I look like I'm joking?' scowls Steph. 'So much for a scampi lunch on the seafront,' she hisses. 'Our walk on the beach,' she reminds him, 'eating ice cream and watching the waves. Any of that sound familiar?'

'Yeah, sorry, I didn't realise,' kowtows Zak. 'We can go now if you like.'

'I've eaten,' huffs Steph.

'Okay ...' Zak shrugs, looks around. 'Wanna see if I can win you a plushie or a Minion or something?'

'Are you for real?' frowns Steph.

'I've been watching that one with the spinning light. You know, where you have to stop it in the right place to win. Pretty sure I've got that thing sussed.'

Steph's nostrils flare, her fists pinching her sides.

'I'm a bit low now but I might have enough left.' Zak checks his pockets.

'What the fuck, Zak,' fumes Steph. 'What the absolute fuck.'

'Everything alright here?' asks the amusement arcade's oily manager, Tod, inserting himself and sliding up close to Steph.

'Oh, hello, Tod,' smiles Zak.

'Lovers' tiff?' smirks Tod.

Zak's face adopts the *I'm in trouble* setting. 'Forgot I was supposed to meet Steph at Harry Ramsden's,' he explains.

'Really; cod and chips?' frowns Tod. 'That's no way to impress a girl. You should be taking her to Valentino's. Treat her to a nice steak. Ravishing little thing like her,' he oozes, 'deserves some prime meat inside her.'

Steph angles her body away as the forty-something-year-old attempts to squeeze her shoulder.

'Are we going then or what?' she asks irritably.

'I thought you said you'd eaten,' queries Zak.

'*The walk*,' Steph reminds him. '*The fucking ice creams*.'

'Yeah, okay, sure, sorry.'

Steph turns and at a brisk pace, heads for the exit. 'Well, come on, then!' she calls back.

'In the bad books again,' sighs Zak as Steph hits the door.

'Women,' laughs Tod. 'What can you do?'

Zak shrugs and sets off. 'Hey, what's that by the way?' He waves a hand at a large tarpaulin, not far from the exit. 'What did you do with the air-hockey?' He assumes this a new machine, still under wraps.

'This is better than air-hockey.'

'Yeah?' froths Zak. 'So, what is it?'

'You'll have to wait and see ... opens tomorrow.'

'Mystery, eh?' smiles Zak. He reverses, nodding and scratching his chin, backsides the door, then disappears down the pier.

'You're the fucking mystery, pal,' snipes Tod.

A group of girls are giggling by the change machines.

'Having fun, ladies?' froths Tod gliding their way.

* * * * *

The next morning, Zak's back, and disappointed to find the new machine still covered.

'You're early,' yawns Tod. The arcade's doors open at 10 A.M. but it's rare for anyone to show up before 11.

'Thought this might be ready.'

'Shouldn't you be at work?'

'Nah, wasn't feeling well,' winks Zak, 'thought I'd take a day off.' He taps the tarpaulin. 'So, are you unveiling the mysterious object or what?'

'Just about to; she's all wired in; tested her first thing – just gotta fire her back up.' Tod steps to the cover and grips.

'Can *I* do it?' asks Zak.

Tod blinks and little else. 'Sure, why not. Be my guest.' He swaps places with Zak, who gathers a handful of tarpaulin and stands ready.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' announces Tod. 'For your pleasure and amusement, your delectation and delight, we present ...'

Zak whips off the cover.

'*Egor's Emporium*,' sings Tod. The banner heading on the front of the glass panelled cabinet confirms as much.

'Another claw-grab machine,' intones Zak pantomiming mock excitement.

'Nothing gets past you, does it,' sneers Tod.

'Well, I guess everyone loves a good grab,' quips Zak.

'I know some that do,' mutters Tod. 'Come on, I'll let you hit the switch.' He unlocks a small panel on the

side of the cabinet then steps back. 'Go on, she looks even better lit up.'

Zak wastes no time in flicking the switch and firing the machine into life. Inside the now brightly lit case, a whole host of sci-fi- and horror-based goodies are laid out under the claw's range: a Freddy Krueger glove; Hannibal Lecter watch; *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* jigsaw; *Hellraiser* Pinhead pin-cushion; Chucky doll; *Scream* mask; The Joker from *The Dark Knight* keychain; a travel cup featuring the zombie clown from *Zombieland*; pack of *The Walking Dead* playing cards; *Predator* bobble-head; Darth Vader lightsaber; *Friday the 13th* Jason hockey mask; a *Jaws* shark; plastic face-hugger creature from *Alien*; a *Donnie Darko* 'Frank' rabbit; and yet more action figures, an extensive range of them: a series 800 Hunter-Killer *Terminator* robot; Billy from *Saw* on his tricycle; horror clowns Pogo and Pennywise; *Texas Chainsaw Massacre's* Leatherface ...

Hands running around the glass fronts, Zak takes them all in. He loves arcades and has an obsession with anything horror or science-fiction related. This for him is the perfect storm, as his face will testify. Nerdgasm.

'Egor's Emporium,' Zak reiterates in a sing-song voice, nodding approvingly.

'Two quid a go,' advises Tod.

'Can I have first stab?'

'Sure, kid.'

Zak fishes a pocket and comes up with a £2 coin. He studies the cabinet's layout. What to go for? Claw-grabs are usually filled with kiddie's soft toys, cute and cuddly animals, mostly; but not this one – Egor's Emporium is cool!

Before Zak could roll in his money, though; before he had even decided on his target – the cabinet fell into relative darkness.

'Shit,' grumbles Zak turning to Tod.

‘Fuse,’ tuts Tod. ‘It must have blown. Never mind, I’ve usually got a few on me ...’ He roots a back pocket and comes up grinning. ‘This should do,’ he winks.

As Tod sets about replacing the fuse, Zak peers into the shadowy case, squinting at the prizes, gaining a complete knowledge of everything on offer.

‘Steph working today?’ asks Tod nonchalantly.

‘No, it’s her day off,’ replies Zak. ‘Which is just as well,’ he grumbles.

‘Why’s that, then?’

‘Oh, she’s sleeping off the night before.’ Zak throws his head back and rolls his eyes.

‘What was it this time?’ asks Tod.

‘Hen party.’

‘Yeah, good one,’ scoffs Tod to himself. *Who the fuck has a hen party on a Monday night?* Fuse replaced, he asks: ‘So, she’s sleeping at one of her mates again is she?’

‘No, not this time; she’s back at the flat.’

‘Right.’ Tod flicks the switch and hey presto, Egor’s Emporium claw-grab is back online.

‘Hey, I thought you were gonna let me do that.’

‘Oh, yeah, forgot,’ shrugs Tod. ‘But listen, I gotta nip out for a bit. Fancy looking after the place for an hour again?’

‘Sure! I’ll play this. Like it says on the sign: *If you play till you win, you can’t lose!*’

‘Good lad. Here ...’ Tod rummages a front pocket. ‘Some free tokens on me.’ Already edging to the door he adds: ‘Have fun.’

‘You too.’

‘Oh, I will, don’t worry about that,’ mutters Tod. ‘In fact, make it two hours, eh?’ he grins.

‘Sure,’ beams Zak weighing up the generous heap of tokens in his palm.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

With Tod gone, Zak sets about re-investigating the contents of the cabinet. And that's when he notices the female clown at the front, just behind the glass. Borderline old man but no, definitely female, of that he is sure.

'Yikes, you're no Harley, are you?'

And he's right, this is no shapely Harley Quinn, a sexy bad-ass with a flair for carnival colours and circus props; this dame is a skinny, eerie-looking monochromatic she-devil; twisted in stance; lanky and emaciated of physique; almost skeletal – vampiric. Bony hands on bony hips. Head cocked at an awkward angle, facing the opposite way to her stick-thin body – as if her head is turned 180 degrees to confront whatever trails her. Bald, apart from tendrils of greasy black hair that stick out on either side; the backwards face bone-white and mask-like; deep black eyes: part make-up, part malevolence – creepiness personified. A smile, somewhere between a smirk and a sneer, cuts her gaunt, pinched face. Below the long scrawny neck, an unbuttoned dark jacket splayed open to the naval. Except that there is no navel, nor breasts or a womanly stomach; only a jagged display of angular vertebrae – for the jacket is worn back-to-front. Then, under an inky micro-skirt: black suspenders, torn stockings over skin-and-bone legs, and finally, pointy feet in flat black pumps – which, like the rest of her, are at odds with her freaky reversed head.

Hard to tell if she's coming or going, thinks Zak.

And he's further stumped: thought he knew every clown, good or bad, that had ever graced the screen or comic book page but this one's a mystery. So macabre and so ghoulish, so remarkable and unforgettable, and yet he doesn't have the first clue as to her name.

'Ramona Stone.'

'Say what?' Zak spins around.

The arcade is empty, apart from a bleach-haired lout losing his patience with a pinball machine (cockney by

the sound of the swearing) and some old bloke way off in the back, blowing his pension on the Whack-a-Mole. *Whack! Whack! Thud!*

‘*Ramona,*’ carps the scratchy voice impatiently. ‘My name is Ramona Stone.’

Zak assumes a child is teasing him. He peers round the sides of the cabinet; a bit unnecessary seeing as it’s all glass; rechecks behind his back then announces: ‘Come on, game over, where are you?’

‘For fuck’s sake,’ scolds the voice. ‘*In here.* Jesus, you were looking at me just a few seconds ago.’

Zak gawks at the toy ... it hasn’t moved. ‘That’s it,’ she hisses, her black lips curling into a half-smile.

‘No ... this *cannot* be happening.’

‘And yet it is,’ blinks Ramona. ‘Hi.’ She waves.

‘Wow, are you one of those smart interactive figures? Do you have like, hundreds of phrases? What do you run on, a single triple-A battery?’

‘Do I look like a fucking Furby to you?’ cusses Ramona. ‘Now listen up ...’

‘No, this is way too weird.’ Zak massages a furrowed brow. ‘I’ve had too many coffees and—’

‘Hey! I’m talking!’

Zak clams up.

‘Good, that’s better,’ scowls Ramona.

Zak’s eyes roll to the exit. *I’m not really here,* he tells himself. *This isn’t happening. I’m back at the flat – in bed – I’ll wake up in a minute.*

‘Don’t even think about doing a runner,’ warns Ramona, black eyes narrowing.

‘I wasn’t. I was just making sure no-one—’

‘Hey!’ Ramona bangs on the glass. ‘Focus!’

‘Okay, okay,’ says Zak. ‘Sorry.’

‘Now, come closer,’ orders Ramona. She beckons with twiggy fingers. ‘I have a question.’

‘Oh, God,’ sighs Zak ... *Okay, this is just a weird dream,* he thinks. *Has to be ... in which case ... I might*

as well see what happens next. After hesitating he steps even closer to the cabinet, directly over Ramona.

Zak checks on the cockney punk: with the pinball on lockdown following a third and final Tilt warning, he's kicking the machine, effing and blinding on every boot. If Tod hadn't decamped, the goon would be out on his ear.

'Look at me, Zak.'

Jesus, she knows my name.

'*Look at me!*' barks Ramona.

Zak peers down. Ramona stares back.

'What do you want?' he asks after a beat.

'Like I said, I have a question for you,' she grins.

Zak swallows hard. 'Go on.'

Craning her scrawny neck Ramona checks left and right before asking: 'Do you want your luck to change?'

'My luck?'

Ramona nods slowly. 'Or do you want to stay as you are?'

'Er ...'

'Your choice.'

Zak ponders the question: he thinks about his crappy job and how he hates it; considers his girlfriend, Steph, always on his case about something or other. He contemplates his bad luck in Aladdin's Arcade: hardly ever won a penny, on any machine, skill or luck. And if and when he did, it went straight back in; if not in the same machine, in another. Like, for example, the coin-pusher: for him they'd stack and stack and stack, row upon row of piled coins, heaped on the very edge of the lower ledge, until he was spent, and then some little brat of a kid comes along, rolls in a single penny, and bingo, coinage landslide!

'What would I have to do exactly?' asks Zak. 'You know, for my luck to change?'

'Win me,' blinks Ramona.

'Just win you? That's it?'

'Exactly.'

Zak scratches his chin then nods real slow. 'I can do that,' he says.

'That remains to be seen,' sniffs Ramona quietly.

A clatter of metal on glass as Zak empties his pockets of coins and tokens onto the top of the cabinet.

'Fear not, Lady Ramona, I *will* rescue you from your glass coffin,' he announces dramatically. Amongst his other nerdy interests, Zak is also into medieval role play.

That's right; he's one of *those* people!

Zak walks around the cabinet, placing an eye as close to the panes as possible, checking all angles, as if he were about to play a vital snooker shot. He scrutinises from the front, both sides, the rear, and the front again – Ramona's head turning slowly, following his every move.

'Shame you're so close to the glass,' sighs Zak.

'Oh dear, want me to see if I can wade into the middle?'

'Yeah? Can you do that?'

'Or maybe I could just crawl to the corner and jump into the drop chute. How would that be?'

'Oh, I see,' says Zak picking up on Ramona's acerbic tone. 'Okay, never mind, I got this.'

Finally, happy with his plan of attack, Zak rolls in a token. An electronic tune plays a haunted house style ditty and 30 seconds appear on a digital countdown clock. Using the joystick he quickly moves the claw, positions it back, forth and sideways, until he believes it to be directly above Ramona.

20 seconds left.

Again, he walks around the cabinet, calculating and confirming placement and distance to the drop area; Zak takes claw-grab machines very seriously – especially when they have the best prizes he has ever seen. Ramona, unfortunately, seems wedged in tight, between a Michonne mini-katana letter opener and a

Quasimodo snow-globe, and her skinniness will no doubt be an issue, too, but being angular might help.

10 seconds left.

Zak makes a final check – it’s hard to line up a first drop without knowing if the claw turns a little on its descent; sometimes they do – then he hits the trigger button. The grabber falls and despite a slight rotation lands in exactly the right place: Ramona is within the claw. The three prongs close; she’s hooked and rises slightly inside the slack cage ... but then she slips and the claw continues without her.

‘Damn!’ curses Zak. Still, at least he’s loosened her a little. And now she’s leaning at an angle. A second grab should do it.

Except it doesn’t.

And by the time Zak is down to his final £2 coin, every token spent, Ramona remains unwon. She is, however, now ‘free’ – lying unconstrained and face-up on top of the other prizes rather than wedged in by them. And she’s much nearer the drop chute. Indeed, he really thought he had her on his last attempt but the claw seemed to jiggle violently before commencing its run for the hatch and again she fell.

‘Fuck’s sake!’ Ramona hollered.

‘Sorry,’ hissed Zak in frustration.

He’d accidentally won the Hannibal Lecter watch at some point but didn’t even bother to celebrate.

‘Down to my last go,’ Zak informs Ramona.

‘Better get it right, then,’ she urges impatiently.

The thought of some cocky little upstart wandering in and nabbing Ramona first try, troubles Zak deeply. ‘I have to do this!’ he fumes. Yes, he’s angry now, his dander well and truly up. Zak rolls in his final coin. The Egor’s Emporium spooky tune plays for the umpteenth time and another 30 seconds appear on the clock.

Zak twitches the joystick; the claw moves this way and that, sideways, forth and back again, another tweak, until he’s happy the grabber couldn’t be

positioned any more precisely over Ramona if he tried. He hits the trigger with a full 15 seconds left on the clock. The claw drops. Perfect. The prongs slide under Ramona and up she rises. A slight jiggle at the top but the prize holds. And now the slide for the hatch corner begins. A second later, the grabber stops abruptly over the drop chute and opens, but Ramona's left arm catches on one of the claw-fingers and she swings to and fro before being thrown down and to the side; she hits the Perspex that sections the drop chute from the rest of the cabinet, bounces up, and lands with a clatter on top of a Tardis model-kit box.

'Motherfucker!' yelps Ramona.

'Fuck me!' curses Zak in frustration.

'How's it going?' asks Tod returning with a bright and breezy grin. 'Still at it?'

'This machine is a piece of shit.'

'Jesus, lighten up, lad. It's just a claw-grab.'

'Is it fixed?' rasps Zak.

'Fixed?' No sign of the grin now. 'Fixed how?'

'I dunno, don't they have dials in them or something? The claws seem a bit weak and sometimes it jiggles just before—'

'Don't think I've ever been so offended,' frowns Tod, playing the mock outrage card. 'Questioning my integrity? Do you want to get yourself thrown out?'

Zak looks to Ramona. 'No.'

'Well, just be careful, then; throwing around accusations – that's a dangerous game. Besides, you've won something.' Tod points at the watch on top of the cabinet.

'An accident. I was going for—something else.'

Tod shrugs. 'All great prizes in there, mate. That's a good watch that is – worth twenty quid all day long.'

'Yeah?'

'Definitely. *Collector's* watch.'

'So, would you give me ... a tenner for it?'

'Nah.'

‘A fiver?’

Tod shakes his head.

‘One free go?’

Tod picks up the watch, studies it. ‘Fine, one free go.’ He roots a pocket and comes up with a token.

Zak finally notices Tod’s wet hair. ‘Been swimming?’ he asks. No rain on a sunny day like today.

‘Shower,’ answers Tod quick as you like; *perhaps a little too quick*. ‘Some strenuous exercise,’ he winks, ‘and then a steaming hot shower ... it was a thing of beauty.’

Exercise and a shower: a thing of beauty? Bit of an odd thing to say, thinks Zak. But it matters not; he has another chance to rescue Ramona!

Token. Tune and timer. Joystick and claw. Trigger.

The dropped grabber lands perfectly around Ramona, scoops her up and lifts her bony arse to the glass ceiling.

‘Yes,’ hisses Zak, cautiously triumphant.

The claw jerks and heads for the chute ... but without Ramona. See, that jiggle was just enough for her to slip from the grabber’s grip and nosedive into the sea of prizes.

‘What the fuck!’ screams Ramona. ‘Can’t you do anything right?!’

‘No fucking way,’ rants Zak. ‘That is such bullshit!’ To Tod: ‘Tell me that’s not rigged!’

‘Right, you’re barred.’

‘What?—No,’ appeals Zak.

‘Come on.’ Tod pushes Zak towards the door. ‘Out you go.’

‘No, please!’ petitions Zak digging both heels into the tacky orange carpet. ‘I was just venting.’

Tod eases up. ‘Okay,’ he relents. ‘But any more scurrilous accusations and you *are* barred.’

‘Understood,’ nods Zak. ‘No more outbursts. Sorry.’

‘And maybe it’s time you called it a day,’ suggests Tod strongly.

‘Yeah, well, I’m all out of money, anyway,’ sighs Zak.
‘Fine, so go home. You look terrible.’

Tod steps over to the door, opens it and waits.

Zak hesitates a moment then, after a whispered
‘Sorry, Ramona,’ he exits.

Outside, Tod fires up a cigarette. ‘Go on, off with you.’ He blows a cloud of smoke, instantly lost to a brisk sea breeze. ‘Go and see how Steph is.’

‘*Steph?*’ frowns Zak. ‘I’m sure she’s okay.’

‘Better than okay, I’d have said,’ mutters Tod quietly. He inhales deeply, a sly eye watching Zak plod away down the pier.

* * * * *

A new day and Zak’s having as much luck with the ATM as he had on Egor’s Emporium’s claw-grab. He tapped in his PIN successfully but the cash-point spat out only ten pounds of the forty he’d asked for.

And now it’s flashing OUT OF SERVICE.

‘Fuck’s sake,’ he sighs.

Whilst calling work on his mobile, he pulls his card from the slot.

‘Hi, is that Becki? ... *Rebecca*, I should say, sorry. Hi, could you let Mr Adler know I won’t be coming in today? Still no better, I’m afraid ... *It’s Zak* – sorry, I thought you—*Zak*; the pudgy one with the bad haircut ... remember you said—That’s right ... yep, the guy with the breath problem,’ he nods. ‘And again, thanks for pointing that out—What? No, please, there’s really no need—Oh, he does? Okay, thanks, Becki—*Rebecca*, I mean.’

As Zak holds for Mr Adler the ATM comes back online.

‘Yes!’ froths Zak. He reinserts his card ... nothing but a blank screen. He pulls the card, wipes it on a trouser leg and reinstates it. The machine requests his PIN. He taps 1309 (Steph’s birthday) and presses Enter.

The ATM swallows the card.

'*Fucking arsehole!*' fumes Zak. 'Oh hi, Mr Adler, sorry about that, I was just—no, no, still no better, I'm afraid. Yes, I realise I'll have to get a doctor's note if—Yep, yep, I'm sure I'll be fine in another day or—Yes, I appreciate this leaves you shorthanded, Mr Adler, but—Okay, yep, I'll make sure to do that. Hello? Hello? Mr Adler?'

Zak kicks the ATM. It neither surrenders his card nor offers any reason for the kidnapping.

'One lousy fucking tenner,' gripes Zak.

When Zak enters Aladdin's Arcade a boy, aged ten maybe, is playing the claw-grab. Zak scuttles over and stands opposite him. Ramona lies between them.

'What you going for?' asks Zak nonchalantly.

'What's it to you?' sniffs the kid tapping the joystick.

'Nothing, just wondered.'

The claw drops, clamps onto the *Alien* face-hugger and transports it, successfully, to the drop hatch. The prongs open and the lad grabs his win. He sticks it on his face and growls at Zak.

'Face-huggers don't growl,' advises Zak.

'Grrrrr!' snarls the kid.

'You done?' asks Zak.

'Maybe, maybe not,' mumbles the kid through his mask.

'Mind if I have a go while you make your mind up?' Zak moves next to the joystick. The kid not only stands his ground but takes his sweet time scanning the inside of the cabinet.

'Whatcha think of 'er?' he asks at last, pointing to Ramona.

'Pfft,' scoffs Zak. 'The Yoda bobble-head looks good.'

'Nah. Think I'll go for 'er. Bit skinny but she's got suspensidies on.'

'Aren't you a bit young for—'

'Move it, lardarse.'

'Excuse me?'

The kid points to Zak's backside, blocking the coin slot.

'Oh, right.' Zak steps aside with a sarcastic *'Sorry.'*

In rolls a coin, the Egor's Emporium spooky tune replays, and the kid swiftly manoeuvres the joystick. With hardly any seconds used, he thumbs the trigger and the claw drops. The grabber closes its grip and rises with Ramona nestled in its prongs.

'Ha!' crows the kid.

Zak firmly knees the cabinet and Ramona falls.

'Hey!'

'What?'

'You nudged it.'

'As if,' denies Zak rubbing a knee.

'With your leg.'

'Nope,' counters Zak.

'Bloody did.'

'Now, now, don't be a bad loser, kid. And if you're done—'

'No, I'm not. And if you do that again I'll punch you in the balls and tell people you tried to touch me.'

'Jesus, kid, don't do that.'

'Well, shift your arse, then.'

Though reluctant, Zak spreads his arms and steps back until he's no longer within touching distance of the cabinet – and more importantly, the kid.

'Right ...' sneers the boy holding up a £2 coin.

'Billy!' shouts a female; a mother's voice. *'Ah, there you are. Come on, we're going.'*

'But, mum!'

'Now, Billy, don't make me ask again. Your brother wants nuggets.'

'Fuck's sake,' mutters Billy trudging towards mother, now waiting at the exit.

'See ya!' sings Zak. He makes a show of clinking five £2 coins, in a line, on top of the glass cabinet.

Ten minutes later – and ten pounds lighter – Zak marches, prizeless, down the boardwalk, seagulls squawking as if highly amused.

Back over dry land Zak spots Billy again. The kid's sitting on a bench (by the low wall that runs alongside the pier's entrance) making a big show of laughing and pointing at Zak's empty-handedness. *Oh balls*, thinks Zak, but it's too late to turn back. And anyway, he's just a snot-nosed brat.

'Hahaha!' cackles Billy through a ball of chip-mush. Zak is close enough to smell the vinegar.

'Fuck you, kid,' rasps Zak passing the bench. He notes mother and brother are nowhere to be seen.

'Mum! Mum!' yells Billy jumping to his feet. 'That's the bloke who tried to kiss me!' he hollers over the wall, in the direction of the enormous inflatable castle just beyond.

Stay and defend your honour against an outrageous fiction? Surely the word of a grown-up would be believed over that a fanciful child. No matter, the point had already become moot: for Zak's body – rather than stand and *fight* the damnable lie with the sword of truth – selected *flight*; just happened automatically, it seemed – and fast, too: his legs had already run past the Royal Pavilion and were now heading, at a sustained sprint, for Grand Parade.

That's adrenalin for you.

* * * * *

'Oh, come on,' pleads Zak. 'They must be worth more than that. That's like my whole collection. There must be eighty-odd horror and sci-fi DVDs there.'

'Tenner's the best I can do,' sniffs the old woman. 'Take it or leave it.'

Zak sighs and tries a heartfelt 'Please?'

The crone scratches an ear. 'You got a phone?'

'You've already had my phone.'

She hesitates, then: ‘The shoes and your coat and I’ll throw in another tenner.’

It’s a cold, damp evening outside but the pawn shop isn’t far from Zak’s flat. ‘Twenty the lot?’ he confirms.

The old bag nods.

* * * * *

‘Want me to win it for ya?’ asks a cocky young teenager with dark eye make-up and purple lips from the other side of Egor’s Emporium.

Zak notes the clear plastic bag full of prizes dangling over her shoulder.

‘You win all those in here?’

‘Yup.’ The girl blows a gum bubble until it pops.

Zak swivels his head toward the two old claw-grab machines beyond the change dispensers. Both are virtually empty; bright glass cabinets with barely an unwanted prize between them – every soft toy worth the label now in the possession of a schoolgirl with a swagger to match the swag.

‘Cleaned out a couple of the coin-pushers first,’ she boasts. ‘More or less.’ Another *pop*.

‘What are you?’ inquires Zak, ‘a professional or something?’

Pop. ‘Nah, just good at it. Grabby Gabi they call me.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, so ya wanna? I’ll snag any ya want.’ She studies the contents of Egor’s cabinet. ‘Which one ya goin’ for?’

‘Haven’t decided,’ Zak lies. ‘But just out of interest, how much would it cost me?’

‘Two pounds.’

‘Two pounds?’

Gabi points to the notice above the claw-grab’s coin slots: £2 FOR 1 PLAY (CASH OR TOKEN) it affirms.

‘Ah – so ...’

‘Sure, why not, I’ve had a good day.’ Gabi jiggles her impressive bag of bounty.

‘And you reckon you could snag her – *it* – first go, then?’

‘Yep.’ *Pop.*

All of, what, fourteen, fifteen? thinks Zak, *and she’s cleaned out half the arcade. How is that even possible?* But he has a more pressing question: ‘So, how come you didn’t clear this one? Why the others? The prizes in here must be a lot more valuable than those.’

‘Don’t like horror stuff,’ shrugs Gabi. ‘Prefer soft toys, plushies and that. I can sell ’em to little kids’ mums and dads on the sea-front. No-one buys their kids horror stuff.’

Zak nods; that makes sense.

‘So, ya wanna?’

Zak pauses. ‘Nah,’ he says at last.

‘Okay. Ya sure?’

‘Yeah, I kinda have to win her—I mean, *it*—for myself, or, you know, it doesn’t really count.’

‘Fair enough,’ pops Gabi. ‘Want some tips?’

‘Nah, I’m good.’ Zak’s male pride fucking with him.

Thanks for reading the sample.

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