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AGAIN

((Yay!! I'm back!!))

by

Geoffrey **M**arshall

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Geoffrey Marshall's, "Born Again," has a beautiful nobility within. There is something very Hemingway in its determination, very King Lear in its fist shaking, and very human in its expression of loss, family, and dying. Our protagonist is dying, although he is perhaps too stubborn to give into any sickness. The relationship with his son is contentious at best and cracking the last straw at best. His wife is dead, and while their marriage was tumultuous they managed to find forgiveness before her end. He has a nurse who doesn't appreciate his last ditch efforts at sexual harassment. He has a doctor that feels it is his time to start finalizing his last plans before dying, and that is exactly what Louis intends to do. I think what Marshall does best within, "Born Again," is to create a character that is very human: humorous but not necessarily likeable, cantankerous yet has moments of relatable empathy, fighting because there is nothing to lose. In the end, we will all meet our demise. How we choose to get there and how we choose to go out is oftentimes, all be it rarely, the only moments of real control we may have in our lives. Well worth diving into the great unknown for. Enjoy.*

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language...)

How he ended up with a born again son he didn't get. Even as a kid the boy was judging everything they did. Judging this. Judging that. Do unto others, blah, blah, blah. Christ they never even went to church so where did he pick it up?

The waves were choppy and they thumped into the boat's hull like solid objects. Lightning internally illuminated the clouds with electric purple flashes and all the while Louis knew the storm had only just begun---

"Born Again"

Louis's nurse told him she didn't like his looks that day.

He told her he didn't appreciate the comment.

She looked surprised at first and her cheeks got all red. Then she said that's not how she meant it. He was pale was all. Pale and awfully thin.

He tried to grab her bottom. You're no prize either, he said when she slapped his hand away.

She told him he was jaundiced and thin and not looking very good at all. He would have to wait for the doctor to do his rounds. The doctor would tell him. He looked sick today, she said and then she closed the door.

When she left him alone the sun crept along the edge of the windowsill. There were some pictures there. His son was by just some days before and put them up. They still had dust on them from his son's house where they had been hanging until Louis took sick.

Then the doctor was in his room. He knocked but didn't wait for Louis to say come in. Louis wouldn't have said it anyway. The doctor huffed a lot and had really shiny leather shoes. His eyes were puffy and bulged a little and he held his mouth slightly open, probably so he could huff properly. Louis thought of him as Fishface.

Nurse says your tried to touch her inappropriately today, Fishface said. Just now. A few minutes ago.

Louis didn't agree and said so. He never even got close to her bottom, so who was to say if he would have really done it?

Let's just keep our hands to ourselves shall we? The light crossed the divide and jumped from the sill to the bed. Fishface said he didn't like the way Louis looked. Pale. He was pale today. Pale and thin. You're a sick man Louis, Fishface said.

Louis agreed. He felt terrible.

Your nurse said you stopped taking your pills.

She what? Louis ran a hand through his hair. Why would she say that?

Is it true? Fishface wondered aloud.

No. Of course not. Louis hesitated for a moment. What are they for again? he asked.

The pills? Fishface huffed through his slightly open mouth. He said, you take them for the pain Louis. The pain. We don't want you to be in pain.

Oh, the pain. Louis nodded. Well, no need to worry, I take them. All of them. All the time.

Tell me, Fishface said, does your son have power-of-attorney?

Louis pinched the bridge of his nose. He told Fishface that would happen over his dead body.

The doctor continued as if Louis hadn't answered. I will need to consult with your son. There are decisions to be made. That is what Fishface said. He said there were decisions to be made.

You know how much your treatments will cost I assume? he asked Louis.

Goddamn get out, Louis told him. Pretty calm and all. But still he said it. Get out. Goddamn.

The doctor left but before he closed the door he looked back. Do you think you can pay for all this? he asked. Do you think so? Insurance won't cover you and the government won't pay for this therapy. You know that right?

Later that day the nurse came in. Can I get you anything else? she asked and took his tray away.

I wanted to finish my lunch but you just took my tray away, he told her.

She pulled out a little kit with a syringe.

What's that for? Louis asked. Listen, I took all my pills.

This is just to draw a little blood Louis.

You took my tray away, he said. I wasn't finished with my lunch.

Fine, she said. She dropped his tray back on the table. Fine, finish your lunch. She packed up the syringe. Here take these. She gave him two pills.

I already took them, see? He pointed at a little empty paper cup. The truth of it was that he had flushed the pills down the toilet. Some fish was high as a goddamn kite now. But at least he could think straight. She left and he finished his lunch. At least he could think straight.

His son had found him a few days ago. He had tripped on a little rug by the door. The little prick had come by to spy on him and found him. He wasn't hurt but his son had turned it into a circus and took him to emergency.

Why the hell they did the scan Louis didn't know. Bad luck more than likely. That boy had been nothing but bad luck since day one — and now he was a goddamn born again. Always wanting to forgive Louis for all the stuff from when he was a kid. What stuff? Louis asked him once. We did everything we could for you.

You never listened to me his son said.

The scan said he was sick. Something or other was about to pop. Louis already knew. You take a car to a mechanic and he's gonna find a leaky gasket. You go to a doctor and that doctor is gonna doctor you up. It's what they do.

The nurse came in again. Did you finish your lunch yet? she asked. When he told her yes she said to him that his son told her he has a nice house.

He said what? Louis asked.

He said you have a nice house. Is it big?

It's a modest house, Louis told her. Very small.

Oh, she sniffed, your son said it might be coming on the market.

When she was gone he got out of bed and went to the closet. He felt fine. He grabbed his clothes and changed in the bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror. What the hell? He felt fine. He looked fine too.

The hospital lobby was grungy. Louis tried not to touch anything. That was pretty hard to do but he tried. He opened the doors with his elbows and stepped into a cloud of cigarette smoke hanging just outside. He went for the crosswalk and banged into an IV stand. There was an old man sitting there. His legs were bare and chapped by the cold air. He was attached to the IV stand Louis almost knocked over.

Watch where you're going, he wheezed. His cigarette bounced up and down along with his Adam's apple when he talked.

Go suck on your oxygen tank, Louis said. He flipped him the bird and crossed the street.

Then he made his way down to the marina where there were still a few boats around. Winter was coming. Soon there wouldn't be too many boats left. Not too many at all but there was only one he cared about and there she was — the Snapdragon. She was a thirty-four foot sloop-rigged beauty. Up for the summer but soon to leave. She would do the trick all right.

He hoped the right weather would come along before she went back down south. He was waiting for just the right weather to come along.

He made his way back to the hospital. He went into his room where he found his son. I've forgiven you dad, he announced. Louis felt a headache coming on. A headache unrelated to whatever the doctor said was wrong with him.

Gotcha, he said, now get out — but his son would not leave.

Will you do something for Mom? his son asked. Just ask God for forgiveness. Will you do that for mom? She would've wanted that.

The nurse interrupted them before Louis replied. Just checking on the meds she told them.

He waved her away. Whatever they all were saying, he didn't feel sick. But he did know that if they started with the morphine he was a dead man. That was how they finished you off. Humane like. They used the morphine to nail you to your bed and send you off. If they got him on that stuff he would be dead in two weeks. He knew that.

Your mother forgave me long ago. God can keep his nose to himself and so can you. Now get out, he said to his son.

How he ended up with a born again son he didn't get. Even as a kid the boy was judging everything they did. Judging this. Judging that. Do unto others, blah, blah, blah. Christ they never even went to church so where did he pick it up?

The nurse came back only to say another doctor wanted to see him. Not Fishface.

He asked her why he felt perfectly fine if he was so sick.

She didn't know anything about that. She did have a message from Fishface — he had signed all the papers. His son now had power-of-attorney.

Louis swallowed hard. He was fucked. Deep down he felt it.

This new doctor came in and only confirmed his feeling. He had all kinds of ideas. Did Louis know the government had approved MAID?

What would that be? Louis asked.

Medical assistance in dying, this new doctor told him. That's what they call it. Assistance in dying. He just came right out and said it.

You mean assisted suicide, Louis said.

Oh no. This is completely different. We don't use that word, he said. Just a little nudge on the journey we all must take. That's all it is. Really.

Then he mentioned that Louis' son was concerned the treatment for his condition was too expensive for his estate to pay. MAID was a lot more affordable. Painless too.

Sounds like you all want me dead, Louis said.

Louis needed to know that his son, the doctor, the nurse — well, everyone — was on his side. They all wanted the best for him. Just the best.

I swear I'm not even sick doc, he said. But he did feel helpless.

As to that, the doctor said, I do assure you, you are a sick man. There could be no question about it. After the scan they did. No question at all.

The next morning the nurse came in. Did he take his medicine? There was a chill in the air, she said. Did he feel it? You're not looking good this morning, she added.

He told her to stop telling him that. Just stop it.

So now she was talking about the weather, but that was ok. He wanted to know about the weather. He thought about the Snapdragon. He thought about the Snapdragon a lot that day. And the next.

He waited a few days before sneaking down to the marina again. The wind had turned bitter and there were even fewer boats. But he had a lot to be happy about — a tropical depression was forming. Not only was it forming, it was headed his way.

Babe, wish me luck, he said to his dead wife. He talked to her more and more. His son, the born again, liked to bring her up. He threw the past in his face but he didn't know anything — and Louis wasn't about to wise him up. The kid was his biggest failure alright. The truth was

that he and his wife had done their fair share of apologizing to each other. God could mind his own business.

Where did we go wrong with the kid? he asked his wife — no answer came. Maybe she didn't know either.

The nurse came on time that afternoon. Where were you earlier today? she wanted to know. He wasn't in his room.

I took my pills, he told her. Except he hadn't taken them. He saw a few kids down at the marina and he sold the last two weeks worth of pills to them. Don't get hooked he told them. They were a ride, those pills. He hoped they wouldn't get hooked.

The nurse sometimes made small talk so he asked her about the weather. Didn't you hear? she asked. A storm was headed their way. How's the pain? she asked.

I just take the pills when it gets too bad, he said.

You don't look very good, she told him. The doctor will take a look.

Then the doctor came in. Fishface. You're due for your next scan, he said. Louis was on the list for tomorrow afternoon.

That suited him fine. What about the storm doc? What if the power goes out?

Generators, Fishface said, even if the storm hits, you'll still get your scan.

What a relief, he said. He even sounded sincere and the doctor raised his eyebrows over his puffy eyes — he looked suspicious and emitted long hissing huff.

The next morning Louis looked out the window. The sky was dark and the trees were swaying. Not much was going on yet, but it was coming alright. He got dressed after lunch and left his room. Diagnostics was on the fifth floor. He pressed 'L' for lobby.

Outside the wind propelled a fine mist of rain sideways into his face. Even so, a bunch of smokers lined the sidewalk. A tsunami could sweep the whole town away and they would still be in their line — smoking their heads off.

The marina was deserted. No boats. No people. Well, one boat. One boat that mattered. The Snapdragon. He looked around to make sure no one was watching — then he climbed down onto the deck.

He reached for a grab-rail to steady himself and his foot slipped. He crashed to the deck. He had to take several deep breaths. He looked up into cloud covered sky while he made sure nothing was broken.

His son had visited that afternoon. I had to sell the house, he had told him. That nearly killed Louis on the spot. The house? Why did you sell the house?

We need the money, his son said, your treatments are expensive. Not to mention this hospital. Not to mention the long term care costs.

Not to mention, Louis cut him off, not to mention you're a greedy little bastard. You sold my house.

Dad, the bills, his son said but Louis just kept on going.

I don't think you're mine, he said. Your mother had things to apologize for too, not just me.

His son just stood there, his mouth hanging open. That's how Louis remembered him now as he lay on the Snapdragon's deck, the boat rising and falling with the increasing swell. He rolled over and got to his knees. Slowly, so slowly, his hand reached out for the railing. His grip was strong and he hauled himself up and set to work.

The owners had done their best before they headed for the safety of the hotel. The sails were stowed, the tiller and wheel lashed and everywhere possible they had removed windage. Louis was happy. He wasn't going to sail her after all, he was going to use the engine. He freed the wheel and tiller then went below deck to inspect the engine. When he returned on deck he took another look at the sky.

He couldn't even see the clouds now, the sky was simply a well of darkness. The wind was howling now. He looked around one last time and shrugged — it was time to go.

The waves were choppy and they thumped into the boat's hull like solid objects. Lightning internally illuminated the clouds with electric purple flashes and all the while Louis knew the storm had only just begun — his goal was to be on the other side of the cape, waiting with open arms when it made landfall. He made for the mouth of the harbor. He took a look back and noticed a boat coming his way — a police marine unit by the looks. Fast too, goddammit.

The wind continued to pick up speed. Thank god for the engine. Under sail alone there was no way he could round the small cape at the end of the harbor. The sky was purple and beautiful now but he was working feverishly to keep the Snapdragon on course and couldn't spare a glance for the oncoming cyclone.

The police boat was a little closer now. He could see someone standing at the bow. Waving, trying to catch his attention no doubt. The cape drew nearer and he looked back the the police boat, comparing distances. There would never catch him now. They were too far back. Just too far. It was impossible. He thought there might have been more than one person waving from the police boat. He wondered who they were. Why they chased him. Why they waved.

The cape was alongside now. He was so close he could almost have tossed a biscuit onto the rocky coastline. Almost, that is, if he had a biscuit and the weather was better. He could see

the massive waves on the open sea now and on the other side of the cape the wind was bending the trees sideways. He lashed himself to the handrail under the spray-hood and clamped his grip on the wheel.

Just in time too. He rounded the cape and the force of the storm hammered the Snapdragon head on. The pressure of the wind on the bare mast was almost enough to capsize her on the spot. He frantically spun the wheel until the wind was from his back and he began to ride the waves. He spared a look behind and saw the police boat, now tiny in the distance. Growing tinier by the second. They weren't going to risk the open seas. Not for him.

With the wind at his back, he felt a sense of peace settle over the Snapdragon. This was momentarily interrupted by a crash, hardly audible over the howl of wind and sea. He peered around the corner of his shelter and saw a large seabird huddled in a nook beside the life-raft. It had a dark brown head and upper body with a white belly and a white forehead.

He called out, ahoy and welcome aboard, but the bird — an enormous brown booby, the body almost a yard long — paid him no mind. I get it, he mumbled, I got my own problems too.

The sky was now like a cloud of red wine slowly mixing in a tub of orange juice. Louis imagined himself swirling around an ocean-sized Mai Tai and cackled soundlessly into the wind. The waves were colossal now, thirty feet of more. The Snapdragon, so large and luxurious when he first saw her on the pier, now seemed hardly more than a dust mote in comparison to the infinite seas.

A massive wave lifted the boat high on massive shoulders and then cast her down into an almost bottomless trough as it passed beneath. In all directions, everywhere he looked. Water. Water everywhere. He pushed the engine as hard as he could. He knew it would not be enough but he pushed the Snapdragon to climb out of the trough before another wave crested overhead.

Slowly, slowly, he watched the curling frothy edge of the waves high above him. They towered for what seemed like an eternity until finally descending. Four walls of water closed slowly over the Snapdragon. And then she was gone as if she never was.

No one, not his son, not the nurse, not Fishface, ever saw him again in this life.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Born Again was inspired by the personal experiences we all have as our loved ones age. The older we get, the more of frequently these moments are bound to come and often they are not easy to grapple with. In Canada we have now added assisted suicide to the mix and I think that's an important discussion to have.*

I was thinking about Patrick O'Brian and all his seafaring tales while I was writing this. Perhaps Louis read them, maybe even was thinking about them and Coleridge too, with the Rime of the Ancient Mariner possibly on his mind while he piloted the Snapdragon around the cape.

Mainly though, I was thinking about Raymond Carver. Not that I could ever compare to him, but the way he shows how such simple language can be so powerful is inspiring. For me, my most successful stories have come when the narrator is close to the characters – first person or, in this case, very zoomed in third. It's what I was going for anyway.

AUTHOR BIO: Geoffrey Marshall is a writer in Aurora, Canada. He knows just enough to be dangerous (mostly to himself) in various fields. You can find his work in A Thin Slice of Anxiety, the MoonPark Review as well as The Ansible, Academy of the Heart and Mind and Short Beasts. Upcoming work will appear in a January episode of the Kaidankai podcast . His education never really took to be honest, through no fault of his instructors (debatable), but he did manage to acquire a BA in English Literature from Carleton University. Find him on twitter @g_k_marshall.