

Second Wind

John had a plan. In a few short weeks, he was going to buy a few acres up in Alaska, a bush plane, and then he was going to never step foot near this awful city again. These thoughts were on his mind as he stepped out of the shower. They vacated his mind with force as his foot skid across the tiles, sending himself face first into the edge of the sink.

John opened his eyes. Or, tried to, his face buried in dirt. A few seconds of frantic clawing had exposed his face and torso. It was evening, and by the looks of it he was in some kind of run down factory? He tried to sit up, but found he was still held down by dirt and debris around his hips and legs. He dug through the loose soil, pulling himself free. Looking around, he realized this was in the docks, far from his home. How did he get here?

Wiping himself off he found a large gash on his forehead. It stung as his hand touched it, but it didn't seem to be bleeding. He climbed out of the worn down ruins and up onto the road. John considered how to get home. He was filthy and had a large head wound, he wasn't sure a taxi would take him in his current state. At least he wasn't naked. John shook his head and began walking as he

tried to remember how he got here. He knew his way around the city, and once he was closer to downtown, he was able to make his way to his apartment as night fell. He arrived at sunset, and as soon as he did, he knew something was wrong.

Someone had broken his fence.

The door was open.

His car was gone.

Stepping inside revealed a scene of chaos. Dressers emptied, mattress flipped, in the bathroom was a pool of blood, he assumed from his head wound. His gaze passed over the broken mirror and froze.

That wasn't his face.

He moved closer to the mirror. This man, who was he? He had a nasty cut over his right eye, and looked dirty and beaten, but either way, that was not his face. Patting his body he pulled a wallet out of his back pocket. It had no cash or cards, John blessed his luck, there was an ID.

Johnathan Rigby, age 25, typical looking thug. Who the fuck was this guy?

John wasn't sure how to proceed. The only lead he had, was himself. Did his body die? How did he inhabit this body? What even happened to him?

The frantic thoughts rushed by until they all narrowed down on one conclusion.

"That fucker took my body." John spoke out loud in a voice that wasn't his.

His body... was it now in the hands of this guy? John looked into the mirror. He trashed my apartment, and who knows what he's planning on doing with my body.

Did that matter though? It didn't change his plans. Even if he was in a new body, he was now younger by a number of years, it's not like he had any attachments to his old life. Some would call this a positive.

"I was planning on leaving this all behind anyways, right? I'll empty my bank account, and follow the plan. This guy even had the same first name as me, easy." John spoke out loud as he washed

off the blood and dirt.

He found some clean clothes, a spare debit card, and stepped outside. Right, no car. He grabbed his bicycle and rode off towards the bank.

“I can still just buy the plane, buy the land. I’ll build a cabin and just go off grid till the end of my days. It’s fine!” John continued to try and convince himself.

He rode a few blocks till he arrived at the bank he kept his money, and in fact, was the same he worked as a manager. Keeping a low profile, he inserted his card, entered his pin, and... empty.

Empty? He checked again, remaining balance: \$0.62

He had hundreds of thousands of dollars in the bank! He had saved for years! His job as a bank manager paid well, and he hadn’t spent a dime he didn’t need to. It had all gone to his savings. Now it was gone?! He stared at the screen, trembling in rage. What was he supposed to do now!? Where was this asshole who was robbing him blind? How long had he been unconscious? There’s no way he’d be able to empty out his accounts in a day? John opened the tab for recent transactions. For the past two weeks, there were steady withdrawals. The final amount? Emptied today in one large lump sum.

Two weeks!

He stalked off from the ATM, unsure of what to do next.

It was night, and it was cold. He hadn’t grabbed a jacket before he left. As he thought it over, a passing car slammed on its brakes, screeching to a halt. A jab of throttle brought the vehicle around and into the bank parking lot. This didn’t look good. John gripped the bike, ready to flee, but he was a banker! What was he supposed to do in this situation? He had never had to flee in his life! Should he go now? Get a head start? By the time he thought it over, he realized it didn’t matter, the car had already parked nearby. The doors opened as two burly men hopped out. They looked dangerous, they looked like gangsters.

“Johnny? Holy shit, it is you! Still in the land of the living, I see.” The first man grinned.

“I told you I didn’t hit him that hard, we thought you were dead Johnny boy! Glad to see you out and about!”

The two men approached and John tensed, he should have fled by now, but his feet felt like they were glued to the ground.

“You just need to tell us where you hid the case, Johnny.” The first man had pulled out a handgun. “And no games! We know you took it, we know you hid it.” John’s eyes widened as he stared. He had never even held a gun in his life!

The second man spoke again. “We know it’s in the docks, Johnny, we have GPS on the box, though the signal gets all screwy down there. It’s just...” He gripped his hands until the knuckles cracked. “You’ve gone and hid it too damn well, didn’t you, you fuck? Now all you gotta do is tell us where the box is, and everyone goes home happy and healthy, okay?”

The two were only a few feet away from John, his mind reeling. As the second man neared, John did the only thing he could do. He finally built up the courage to flee.

Grabbing the bike, he tossed it at the two gangsters and ran into the nearby neighborhood. A moment of confusion was all the bike brought before gunshots rung out. A planter exploded to his right, a car’s window burst to his left. Bullet impacts rained down around John, but he ran on, unharmed.

Running down the block, he could hear the heavy, thudding footsteps of a man somewhere behind him. They were gaining. He didn’t dare look back.

An old beaten up car that was driving the opposite direction slammed on its brakes and turned around.

Oh great.

The car pulled alongside, the window rolling down.

“Johnny?” A woman’s voice called out. John looked over mid-stride and saw a wide-eyed young woman looking him over. She glanced back and seemed to think for a moment. Pulling ahead she stopped and threw open the door.

“Get in!” She shouted.

John had no idea of who this person was, but the pounding footsteps gaining ground behind made the decision for him. He dove into the open door and the woman sped off, leaving the two gangsters to slow and abandon the chase.

John looked through the mirror, huffing. This body was at least in shape, he would never have been able to run like that in his original body. He leaned back and took several deep breaths.

“Thanks.” He looked over and saw the woman was breaking up into tears.

“You...” She wailed out. “I thought you were dead!”

John didn’t know what to say, how did she know of his supposed death? Was she part of that gangster group? She was wearing a nurse uniform, and looked far and away from any gangster he had seen in movies or on TV.

“I was attacked, but I’m not dead... Just gone for a couple weeks.” John tried to defuse the situation.

“A couple of weeks!?” The woman screamed at him, swerving the car as she did. “You’ve been gone for over a year you-you-you, bastard!” She seemed like she had to squeeze out the last word. Yup. She didn’t act like a gangster at all.

John paused for a few moments, unsure of what to say. She unquestionably knew him, he wasn’t sure who else he could rely on at this moment.

“I hit my head, my memory is a little fuzzy.”

“Fuzzy enough to forget your wife? To forget your daughter?!” She screamed through the tears.

Wife? Daughter? Don’t tell me this guy was a father?

“We’ve been struggling, and where have you been, huh? Out playing at being a gangster? How did that turn out, huh?” She gnashed her teeth as she drove.

“I’m sorry.”

“Huh?” She seemed surprised.

“I said I’m sorry, I did get hit in the head, I’ve been in a bad situation, and I’m having a hard time remembering why. I’m sorry for leaving. I’ll try to make this right”

She stared at him for a bit before looking back at the road. After some time she whispered a few quiet words. “You’ve never said sorry before...”

John cursed in his heart. What kind of asshole was this Johnny guy? This girl had definitely been lead astray by this awful man. He was so bad to her that saying sorry was enough to shock her? He nonstop mentally cursed the previous owner of the body as she continued to drive.

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The streets grew worse, and after a short, silent drive, she turned into the driveway of a run down apartment complex. John had never been in such a sketchy neighborhood, but he couldn’t go back to his apartment. He followed her out of the car and up the stairs. She kept glancing back at him in a suspicious manner. John felt like it must be obvious, he was so different to her husband, of course she’d know something was wrong. What could he say though? ‘Sorry, I stole his body, I’ll give it back shortly!’ somehow didn’t sit right.

They walked up the stairs and entered into one of the apartments. Walking inside, the woman turned to him.

“Lily is asleep, so keep it down.” She looked him over. “Do you want to wash off, or should I go first?”

“Please, you go first.” His instinctual response made her screw up her face before she turned and marched off to the back of the apartment.

‘Dammit, I need to watch how I talk...’ John thought to himself as she walked into the bathroom. As the door closed, and the sound of water began to run, he jumped up and began looking for anything that would give him this woman’s name. He was lucky enough to hear the daughter’s name, Lily, but he couldn’t call what was supposed to be his wife ‘hey you’.

A letter by the door revealed her name. Katherine Rigby. Sure enough, she married this bastard.

He sat back down and tried to pretend like he hadn't been snooping around this woman's apartment. Though, what was he doing? Was he going to hide at this Katherine's home? Wouldn't that bring them danger? He didn't know what else to do, but the last thing he wanted was to bring harm to innocent people who had tried to help him. Someone else's body or not.

Uneasy small steps came into the room as he thought over what his next steps should be. He glanced up to find a small child standing in the living room, sending furtive glances his way.

"Oh, you must be Lily." He spoke without thinking. He realized this was supposed to be his daughter! Though, he had been gone for a year, would she even recognize him?

She stared at him for a few seconds before toddling off. She returned with a printed out photograph. She held it up and looked at his face, and then the picture. Looking back and forth, she then pointed at the photo.

"Daddy?"

John leaned over, and sure enough, there was a photo of this Johnny with Kathrine, both looking happy together.

He took a deep breath, what was he doing? "Yeah, daddy." He gave a thin smile to the girl. He wasn't sure how to act.

The girl looked at the photo and his face a few more times before stumbling closer, putting a hand on his leg.

John didn't have a family, in any sense of the word. He didn't have siblings, and his parents had long passed away. He had never had kids look up to him in any fashion, and now he was a father? This was all too strange to process right now.

"Oh! Lily!" Katherine ran over with an oversized shirt and wet hair. "Nono, you have to sleep baby."

"Daddy." Lily pointed at John.

Katherine gave a helpless smile before picking up the girl. “Yes, but come on, you have to sleep.” She carried the child out of the room as John sat in thought. This was weird. How was he supposed to act? Maybe it would be best if he left now, before he brings them to harm.

Katherine came back into the room. “Sorry, she’s held onto that picture since she was young. I wasn’t sure if you’d ever come back, but I figured she’d need a father figure.” She wrung her hands.

“It’s okay, she’s cute.” John gave a smile that he thought would be disarming. Instead, she looked at him with a distrusting gaze.

She grabbed her head. “Okay, okay, what is this?” She waved her hand at him. “What do you want?”

John was taken aback. “I don’t... nothing.”

“Nothing? No, no no no. You... Do you need money?”

“No.”

“Are you planning on hiding here from your gangster friends?”

“No!”

“Then what? Why are you acting like this?”

John didn’t know what to say. He was acting normal, right?

“Listen, Katherine, I’ve just taken a hit to the head, I’m trying to get my bearings but... yeah, maybe I’m in trouble with some bad guys, I don’t know, my memory is... hazy right now. But I plan on leaving, okay? I’m sorry for coming here, but I was just a bit shaken up.” He stood up as he prepared to leave.

She stepped in front of him. “You really did hit your head, didn’t you?”

He laughed as he touched the large gash on his face. “You just noticed?”

She looked at him with a strange gaze. “You’re different. You’ve never called me Katherine before.” She grabbed his shirt and pulled him to the bathroom. She sat him down on the closed toilet and began to pull out bandages and alcohol. John wasn’t sure what to make of this sudden attitude

change.

“I swore I’d curse you to death if I ever saw you again, but now... do you remember me?” She took a wet towel and began cleaning the dried blood around his head wound.

“I...” He wanted to say yes for some reason. To be nice? To not be cruel? But he knew he wouldn’t be able to keep it up, he couldn’t even act like the asshole that previously existed. “I’m sorry, but I don’t. I don’t remember myself if I’m honest.”

She looked at him in the eyes, staring at him. He began to squirm under her gaze. “Hold this.” She placed a bandage and began taping it over the wound.

She glanced at him as she finished up. “You used to call me Kat. You hated the idea of being a father, and you seemed to never even want to lay eyes on Lily. I almost understood when you ran off.”

He stared back with his mouth open.

She continued. “I never forgave you for leaving us though.”

“I’m sorry.”

“And that!” She raised her volume. “You have never said you were sorry before. Not once! Just today you’ve said it over and over, it’s like you can’t help yourself.”

He couldn’t help himself, he almost said it again. He stood up as if he wanted to go somewhere, do something, but again, he didn’t know what to do. Leave? Apologize? He was never good with people, any relationship he had was unsatisfying and over quick.

They both stood, looking at each other in silence for a while.

“You really aren’t lying?” she asked as she hung her head.

She stepped forward and shoved her head into his chest, wrapping her arms around him. She began to cry. “You just left... you left just when we needed you the most. I moved out here for you, and now...”

She sobbed into his chest as he wrapped his arms around her. He felt awful. He didn’t do these things, but it felt like he was now responsible. This woman had gone through a lot of hardships because

of one asshole.

He didn't know what to say, so he said nothing. The two of them stood for a while, holding one another.

She pulled him into the bedroom. He said he should leave, but she insisted on him staying at least one night. She slept with her head on his shoulder

He couldn't sleep at all.

Katherine had curled up next to him, gripping him with desperation as if she was afraid he would run off again. Like he was doing now. He got up and left the room as quiet as he could manage. After finding a scrap envelope and a pen, he wrote down how he needed to leave, how he'd come back. It felt empty. He felt like he was doing what this body had done before.

He shook his head, he had to leave.

He grabbed a large, hooded jacket that fit him and stepped out into the cold night. He knew he couldn't stay here, every second he did brought more danger to Lily and Katherine.

He ran down the steps and began making his way down the street. The men had mentioned the docks, perhaps some memory would jar out of this damned body. Then he could find this stupid case for those gangsters and get out of this mess.

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A car parked on the street jolted as a large man leaned forward. "Oh! That's him!" He watched John as he made a call.

"Hey, Tony, I got eyes on Johnny."

"So he was at his lady's house," a voice responded.

"Should we go check inside? Check if he's stashed anything there?"

"Nah, the case is still pinging somewhere near the docks, we can pay them a visit later. For now, keep an eye on where our boy Johnny is heading. I'll get the boys and head over."

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John, unaware of anyone following him, made for the docks. He wasn't sure which docks, or what part of the docks they meant, but he assumed it was somewhere close to where he had been prematurely buried.

Echoes of cars and signs clanging in the wind made him jump every few blocks. He felt terrified out of his wits. As he drew close, he halted.

That's his car!

He moved closer, creeping up on the sedan, before glancing inside. It was empty. He let out a tense breath, unsure of what he had planned to do. Was he going to kick his own ass? He didn't know. He looked over the car, it looked far more beat up than it should. That was his license plate, those were his seat covers. The car seemed to have hit every single pole and brick wall downtown. He clenched his fists in anger. "You can't take care of your family, and now you can't take care of my car??" He wasn't sure why he was so mad, this wasn't even his car anymore. He huffed as he turned and continued on. It seemed like this Johnny was in the area at least.

He had a sudden fearful thought. "If this guy takes the case and runs off, I'll be on the hook!"

John rushed forward, picking up speed as he looked into every abandoned looking building, glancing around every corner. He had to find the case, his life depended on it! He glanced around another dilapidated warehouse when he spotted something.

A small boat, slipping down the harbor. On board was a familiar shape. It was odd seeing his old body, but he recognized it without question. He rushed forward as he saw the boat coming to a halt at a small dock that stuck out into the bay.

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"What is he doing?" the man tasked with watching Johnny spoke. First he looked over a

random car, then he went down and looked at every building in the area. He seemed to spot something and ran into the ruins of an old fish market built over a pier.

“Surround the place, don’t let this fucker slip out.” A large scarred man gave orders from the back seat, and men rushed around the building. Armed to the teeth, they wouldn’t let Johnny go this time.

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John crept through the building, it was filled with old stalls, metal pans, perhaps fishing equipment? John didn’t know. He moved as quietly as possible, but he didn’t see his old self. Did he not enter? He moved all the way to the back before hearing grunts of exertion and the sound of digging. Peering around the corner, sure enough, there was Johnny, digging into a pile of debris. He began yanking out a two foot by three foot locker box, sweating with the effort. His body had on a very nice suit, and wore gold rings on every finger.

“This asshole has been spending my money!” John realized in rage. He had saved up for so long, only to have this guy blow it on tacky jewelry???

A sudden voice froze both of their movements.

“Hey! Johnny boy! I know you’re here, I’m guessing the box is here too, huh? You hand it over, NOW, and we won’t pay a visit to your sweet wife and daughter, okay? Won’t lay a finger on them! But if you waste my any more of my time, I’ll bury you three together, DO YOU HEAR ME?!”

John froze, scared out of his mind. He wasn’t used to being yelled at by gangsters, and this guy sounded terrifying. He looked over at Johnny to see what he was doing.

This asshole was trying to run away! He crept along, trying to haul the case over to his small boat. He didn’t care about his family at all! A sense of rage rushed over John and he threw himself around the wall, kicking out at his old body. Johnny collapsed into heap, his old body was terribly out of shape.

Shaking these thoughts out of his mind, he picked up the case and carried it back. Johnny had been huffing and struggling to move the box, but John picked it up with ease, holding it overhead.

“I have it here! Please! Don’t hurt the girls.” He stepped out to where he was visible to the gangster who had called out to him.

“There you go, Johnny. See? Wasn’t so hard, was it? Now bring it over here, nice and easy...”

John took a few steps, but now had to navigate over and around the scattered rubbish and debris with a large box in his arms. As he took another step, a shot rang out.

A splotch of blood erupted from his stomach, he looked down in shock. Looking back, Johnny had gotten back up and had drawn a handgun. A second shot rung out and his shoulder exploded in pain, sending him and the case tumbling to the floor. Johnny ran over and grabbed the case dragging it back with him. The two shots had alerted the group of gangsters, but they were too surprised to do anything about it. Now they saw this third party dragging off the case, the entire building erupted in gunfire.

Johnny slid behind the brick wall and shot the gangsters that were moving to surround the building. Gunfire rained down around John as he tried to bury himself under rubble. He was a banker! What on earth was he doing in this situation!?

The gunfire lashed across the tables he was hiding under, tearing up the wood floorboards and brick walls. Glass jars broke, men groaned in pain, the world felt like it was exploding around John. A table collapsed over him, and a voice cried out in pain. His voice. His old voice. The gunfire slowed then stopped. A thumping noise approached, then passed by as it marched towards the back.

“Got the case!” A voice called out.

“And? Inside?” The boss character wheezed over the rubble.

“It’s all here, we’re good!”

There was a bit of tension that let go from the gangsters and John at the same time. They were both worried that idiot had taken some out.

“Alright, grab our boys and let’s get out of here before the cops show up, who was that asshole anyways?”

“I don’t know, some old tubby accountant-type. He’s dressed like he wants to be scarface though, hehe”

“Whatever, as long as the fucker’s dead, let’s go!”

The group seemed to forget about John as they rushed to leave. Once the pier was quiet, John crawled out from the rubble and crept over to the body. It was strange looking at himself, dead. A look of pain etched onto his face, frozen in death. He snapped out of his reverie as he began to hear sirens in the distance. Realizing he was now trapped on a pier, he looked around for a way out.

The small boat Johnny had brought sat bobbing. He hopped on board and untied it from the dock. It was electric, a quick key switch and a simple throttle made it easy to leave. He was a good distance away when police cars pulled up, lights flashing. He went further down and ditched the boat closer to Katherine’s place. As he was about to jump out, he noticed his old gym bag in the boat. Curious, he unzipped it to check inside. His savings! That bastard hadn’t spent it all! He closed up the bag with a grin and hefted it over his good shoulder, keeping the coat over his body to hide the wounds. His side ached in pain, and his shoulder seemed broken, but he could last for now. He marched back, arriving at Katherin's as the sun was rising.

He felt exhausted, but he climbed the stairs. He was getting woozy, was he losing blood? He looked down, yeah, he was. He made his way to the door, huffing. He went to knock when the door yanked open. Katherine stood, eyes puffy, his hasty letter gripped in her hands. She looked at him first in anger, then in shock as she saw the blood.

“You! What happened?” She pulled open the coat, paling as she revealed the extent of his wounds.

“I fixed my problems.” He smiled at her.

She grabbed him and pulled him inside, pushing him into a chair. She began cleaning up his

injuries.

He pointed to the bag. "Open it."

She looked at the bag, then back at his wounds. "Later, we can deal with that later."

"No, open it." John insisted.

It would be easier for her to resist if he was acting like his old self, but for some reason gentle urging was far more effective than yelling. She went over to the bag and unzipped it, revealing hundreds of thousands of dollars.

She looked shocked before looking angry. "Did you rob some place?"

"What? No."

"Did you hold up a bank or something? Is that why you're shot?" She was now yelling.

"Wait, No! I earned that money! Working an honest job!" he shouted back. "I earned it, it-it's hard to explain, but I promise, that money is mine, and I got it legally. A man tried taking it from me, and I got it back."

"With the gangsters?" Katherine pouted.

"Ah, no, that was something else, but that's also been resolved" He knew he sounded like a liar. "Listen, I want to be with you. You and Lily won't be alone any more. Have you ever thought of moving to the countryside?" He looked at her with hope. "Would you like to live somewhere out there, with me? Away from all this?"

"You don't want to be a gangster? You want to move out to the countryside and what, become a farmer?"

John smiled. "Maybe?"

She huffed as she looked him over. "It would be nice to have you around, Johnny."

He looked at her with a warmth he had never felt before. "Call me John."