

What comes next?

By Jonathan Wheatley.



He didn't believe in heaven or hell, and it wasn't on his mind when he was putting up Christmas decorations. The house smelled of Marmite and cookies. Two of his three boys were at home, the other at school, and while they were quiet, he turned on the laptop and carried on his job hunt. He'd been off work for two months, and Jess had been picking up extra shifts. Feelings of inadequacy as a man and provider overwhelmed him. He hadn't told Jess, but when he was home alone he struggled to get off the sofa, staring into space, surrounded by the growing anxiety. Some days he felt that if he heard the word 'Daddy' one more time, he would break down. He'd then cry for being short with the boys. Had he made enough sacrifices for his family? Was he doing this for himself or for his children? Either way, Christmas would be tight, so he needed it to be extra special.

When he looked around the house it seemed bare, and his shoulders slumped. He wanted to make his boys happy even if he wasn't. The cheap artificial tree stood in the corner with last year's red and white baubles and warm blinking lights. It smelled of the dusty garage. Home-made paper-chains hung from the ceiling in dull silver and gold, and three old stockings dangled on the back of the door,

swinging from red and white striped candy canes, chipped at the edges with ribbon fraying. Cheap silver stars stuck to the fingerprint stained front windows, and he saw the ominous grey sky rolling over the brown muddy fields. Naked trees swayed in the breeze and nothing else moved.

Henry was in his high chair, snacking on crackers and cheese, his strange wild hair sticking up. Tobie was on the sofa watching an iPad, eating crisps and chocolate, his pale face concentrating on the screen. Sounds of munching filled the room mingling with Band-Aid's '*Do they know it's Christmas time?*' It was a mess, toys piled on toy-boxes because there was no room inside. Green and brown plastic dinosaurs, jigsaw puzzles of farms, and pieces of bright Lego hid under the sofa. Jess used to say he didn't understand when he used to moan at the mess when he came home from work, now he did.

He picked up a pile of paperwork from one of the dining tables chairs. Overdue bills and demands for payments and piled it on top of a stack of rejection letters. Felt tip purple scribble adorned the wood of the chair, but he didn't notice the wobble from the loose screws. He had felt snow and Blu-tac, which he held between his teeth as he clambered upon the chair. Bing Crosby sang about a White Christmas on the TV while Henry watched him. He stretched to put the Blu-tac in the corner before fixing the felt snow on top. The other end dangled down, too far away, so he had to stretch further this time. The chair crunched and gave way as it folded under his weight like an accordion. He fell in slow motion and as he came down; he struck his head hard and blacked out.

Waking with a start, dreamlike and groggy he reached round to touch the back of his head. He felt nothing but his hair and the natural shape of his skull. Far away he heard Henry screaming. He was lying on the floor and saw the underside of the highchair. Smears of old food and spaghetti. He felt guilty at his lack of cleaning. Henry's feet were kicking hard, struggling to find a way out of the chair. How long had he been out? He pushed himself up to his feet and dizziness overtook him. His fingers and toes tingled and his mind was quiet, a rarity for him.

The light was strange; it seemed as if he was looking through a sepia tone filter. The living room was dull, two-dimensional. The music sounded far away. Henry's red face was wet from crying, big tears rolling down his chunky cheeks and he was still screaming. He looked at Tobie who was still in the big brown cuddle chair under the window; in his own world with his iPad. In the corner, he saw the remains of the chair, splintered and sharp. 'That was so dangerous.'

Only after checking on the boys did he see the body lying on the floor. He couldn't understand what he was seeing. It was his body. His newly gained paunch from lack of exercise, and his food stained pyjamas. It was his thinning hair and his eyes that were open, staring up into nothingness. A puddle of dark red was pooling around his head and into the cream carpet. He looked up at Henry's face.

'Hey buddy, you see me don't you?' Henry carried on screaming and crying. He ran over to Tobie and knelt down.

'Tobie, hey Tobie, please god tell me you see me,' he saw Tobie's dark brown eyes, 'Like pools of chocolate,' Jess would say. But Tobie didn't turn to look at him.

He reached out to touch him, but his tingling fingers flowed through Tobie's leg. Those soft legs he remembered stroking when Tobie would snuggle into him on that same chair - those were his favourite times cuddling, watching a film, feeling like the luckiest man in the world, his heart overcome with love.

'What's going on?' he asked himself. 'This isn't funny.'

He went back to the body. It was him. He looked around the room and he saw a red stain on the corner of the wooden TV unit. He slumped to his knees with his back against the unit and stared at his dead body. 'I'm dead,' he declared to no-one.

What could he do if he could do anything? There was no preparation for death, no preview of what happens next. This wasn't taught at school. He looked at his boys, beautiful and fragile, robust yet innocent. What would they do, growing up without him, would they replace him? He had so much to show them and teach them, so many adventures they would share. Their first football game, Their first day at school. Who would they ask for advice when they got their first girlfriend? Who'd they have their first beer with? What about the birthdays and Christmases he would miss?

He needed to reach out and hold their hands. Longing to cuddle them, and stroke their hair, and tell them it would be okay, but he couldn't.

The clock in the window read 10.33. Jess and Joe weren't due home till after school. The boys would be alone for five more hours. It would stick Henry in his highchair for another five hours. Tobie might go anywhere, and on queue, he looked up and said 'Daddy.'

‘Yes, Bubba,’ he answered, forgetting that Tobie couldn’t see him. He watched as Tobie got down from the chair and ran over to his body. ‘No Tobie!’ he saw his son run to his cold corpse. The candle flickered on the wooden unit as he passed it.

‘Hehe, silly Daddy,’ Tobie said, with that fascinating smile that melted people’s hearts.

‘Oh god, no!’ He put his head in his hands and cried dry tears unable to look.

Tobie walked around the body, playfully smacking and prodding his dead body, and giggling thinking it was a game. But when his Daddy didn’t move his shoulders stooped, and he tucked his chin into his neck.

‘Daddy?’ he said again.

Tobie’s face sagged, as a child’s does when told off, and his sad sobs joined with Henry’s wails.

He prayed.

‘Please God, if you are there, please help my sons. They’re alone and scared with no-one to look after them. Please God, help my boys.’

‘Hi,’ said a man seated next to him.

‘Hello,’ said a Ginger cat, rubbing itself at his feet. No sound announced their arrival, they were just there.

‘Who are you?’ he asked.

The man stood up. His head an inch off the ceiling. He wore a dark blue suit, and a flamboyant patterned waistcoat with a pink flower in the buttonhole. His shoes were snake-skin leather, coming to a point at the tip. His face was angular and pointed with dark stubble at the edges and his eyes were blue like the midday sky. He smelled of fire smoke.

‘My name is Malphas,’ he said, his voice like rolling thunder. ‘I see how much pain you’re in and I want to take it away.’

‘How?’ he asked, looking up at him. ‘I’m dead aren’t I?’

‘Yes, but it will be ok,’ purred the cat with a serene look on its whiskered face.

The man glared at the cat. Hatred in his eyes.

‘I can save your boys and they will live long and happy lives. But you will never see them again. Not even at the end of their lives, but you have to come with me now.’ the man said.

'Pah.' said the Cat, as it glided in front of him. Its bright orange fur rubbing against his legs. He couldn't stop himself from reaching out and stroking it. It was silky. The cat purred and arched its head towards the sky before looking at him with deep hypnotising yellow eyes.

'I am Azrael,' it said. 'There is no promise I can make for today but I can promise you, you will find your boys again when it's time. You'll all be together again as a family in heaven.'

He heard dogs barking from next door; it sounded far away.

'But what about today! I can't leave them alone like this, they can't be on their own, so weak, so helpless,' he said, as he looked at them. Henry's face had turned a deeper red and his nappy was full to burst. Tobie sat next to his dead body, holding his cold corpse hand, still not understanding what his Daddy was doing.

'Have faith,' the cat purred.

'I can't, they can't be on their own. Look at them, they're scared, they're in pain.'

Malphas looked at him. 'Have faith, puh, that's what they always say. Have faith... I spit on the idea... Faith is believing in something that can't be proved. Do you wish to leave your boys alone with a prayer... Isn't your front door unlocked? Look, that candle is still burning. Tobie could knock it over. Henry could fall from his highchair. The stair-gate is wide open... They could die,' he left the last word hanging like a fish on a hook.

He looked at Azrael. 'I wish I could go with you, I do, but what would anyone do? How can I put the lives of my boys on something I can't see? I can't. Malphas, I will go with you.'

The cat nuzzled in closer, purring loudly. 'Please have faith, you don't want to do this. You know where he will take you, you know what he is.'

'To Hell,' he said, looking down to avoid the hypnotic gaze of the cat. 'I understand, but if I have to and it means my boys will be safe, I will'

'He lies,' said Azrael.

'But I have to,' He looked up at Malphas again. 'I will come with you, but you must save my boys,' Malphas nodded and smiled. His teeth as white as icebergs. 'It's done.'

A knock at the door, followed by a shout.

'Hello?' a face appeared at the window, silhouetted by the grey clouds. The man's expression changed from puzzlement to concern. The face disappeared, he heard him try

the front door.

‘Hello? Is anyone there?’ the man said again, poking his head through the doorway like a woodpecker. Tobie stood up to look at the stranger in his house. He let go of his Daddy’s hand for the last time.

‘Thank god,’ he said, as he looked up to the sky, blowing out his cheeks, and closing his eyes. Even though he had failed as a parent and a husband he had done this one last thing right.

Malphas looked at him and winked.

‘You’re thanking the wrong person,’ the room span out of focus, a smell of smoke and burning flesh entered the room. The last thing he saw was both his boys crying and watching this stranger in their home.

Azrael slunk out of the front door, and past the delivery driver’s legs. The cat looked up at the man. ‘I knew you were coming. I wish I could have told him. Stupid bloody rules.’ With that, the cat walked down the road past the white van and vanished into the day.

The End.