

The Chairman in Black

A short story by Mari R.

A coin flips in the air, spinning on its axis in a beautiful dance: Rotating, turning, landing on the table...

“Heads!” exclaims an obscured monster, brown hair and a devilish, unforgiving gaze. “How unlucky.” It says with an empty tone, though one could sense its sadistic pleasure. The room is filled with cries as a person, tied down, helplessly squirms; deliciously disturbing cries: The common ones you hear like the oh-so-tragic “Have mercy!” Whatever could possibly stop his already-fated demise was way too far off to help now.

It picked up the sharp, lengthy blade and swiped down: A slice precise enough to slide from top to bottom, not missing on any single human curve. Red blood spilling, black guts leaking, a sight of dark crimson unmatched by even the most unearthly hues of Mars. One slice, two slice, three for good measure. Each slash seasoning the room in more savory metallic flavour.

“That’s for messing with ol’ Jarles, ya’ hear?” It yelled at the empty sack, cleaning the blade with its tongue, before kicking the spilling body down water. Oh— the humanity. The Gull. Most chillingly, the subsequent victims. Who would be next?

Jarles wiped his forehead and smiled in relief. He was finally doing a good job, freeing people like he’d always dreamed. He enjoyed watching the people squirm and beg. He rationalized to himself that none of the deaths were his doing, by spinning a coin, he let the universe decide their fate. He decided he was doing people a favour, giving others an escape from the putrid system. Because of course, even if they did escape, they could never stop him...

BREAKING NEWS!

“The Cincinnati Slasher strikes again! Another body was found in the river, sliced open straight in the middle with the serial killer’s signature coin in the victim’s mouth. Stay on the lookout, he could be anywhere-”

The news broadcast was so rudely interrupted by one, earnest, employee. A young man, named Arnold. “Better not be getting worked up over stupid news again. They always play it up for clicks ya’ know?” His face barely disguised his annoyance, likely not uncommon for his line of work.

“Ugh— Shut it Arn. Didn’t you see that man? I could’ve sworn he was deliverin’ your mail last week too. This serial killer stuff is getting bad. I’m tellin’ you. We gotta take this seriously!” His coworker moaned to no avail; Arnold was fast back to his job. Recently though, Arnold had been becoming a little tense at the situation, but in his mind, lingering on it wouldn’t do him any good. Soon, it was time for him to clock out of his 8 hour shift at the bank.

He returns back home with a bitter feeling chewing at his diaphragm, trying to tear open his chest. He lays down beside his remote onto his worn-out couch, turning the television on to feed whatever morbid curiosity crept into his tired mind.

The news spouted about “The Vietnam War is raging on,” or “Pollution, should we be concerned?” All the boring headlines, the same repeated headlines. Until something caught his eye: another news story, one about the world’s largest CEOs unveiling a new and beguiling project. There spoke a brilliant man, brown hair and a charismatic, intriguing stare.

The renowned pundit announced to the shaded crowds. "Thank ya'll for coming to see our latest invention. The team at Moderamen Inc. have been busy, working on this beautiful, little addition to your homes!" The more he spoke, you could sense his nearly entrancing hold on the audience. The headlines read, "New device revealed by Moderamen chairman, J. Whitman."

He'd seen him on the news multiple times already. Who didn't know about Mr. Whitman? He was on television speaking constantly, and he was chairman of one of the world's largest organizations. Every time it seemed, he grew more ambitious. His smile, evermore comforting, and his black rope necklace juxtaposing his status, always seems a little impecunious for a man of his wealth, but acceptable given his origins as an orphan from Georgia. To Arnold, he felt sympathetic.

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It was already the next day. Arnold had gotten up, eaten whatever he scoured from his near-empty refrigerator, and ran to his car. It was late in the morning as he began his drive. He drove past the same homeless people on the dirtied, cracked pavement; their eyes glued to his vehicle as always. Ever since the wars fought for mindless wealth, the unfortunate people often stayed destitute, Arnold's mother being one. Thankfully, the biggest organizations tried to support the people. Moderamen Inc. had built a name for itself ever since then, though it was never the same.

Arnold had looked away for only a second, he'd always seem to grieve at the poor individuals suffering. THUD! A loud sound was heard as his car accidentally hit something. Someone? Swiftly, Arnold had hit the breaks, and stepped out to inspect his mishap. Before he could figure out what, he was suddenly...

He opens his eyes. The world around him is darkened as he comes to. Slowly waking from his daze, he found himself tied down. Looking up, he locks eyes with a peculiar, albeit familiar, being.

“I knew it was gon’ be you since I saw you.” The shadow crept closer and peered deeper into his soul. “Are you ready? Today we will be playing a little game together. You see, I’ve been watching you, and you don’t seem to be scared. How about you and I find out, how scared you should be?”

It grabs a blade and sits down. The light now barely grazes its face. You can only just make out what seems to be a black rope necklace perched on their neck. “I— Are you?” Arnold piteously mutters, but as the malefactor stood up, he couldn’t find his words. “Yes, and I know who you are. You work for me, Arnold.”

It grabs a coin from his pocket and smiles at the helpless man. “So, Arnold. Let’s play. Heads, or tails?” Arnold was unable to fully process the proposition, his head spinning. “Whitman, sir. This can’t be real. Why?” Mr. Whitman simply put his hand on their shoulder. “Do you ask why the sun shines? Why mountains rise? Or do you sit there, slaving away.” He exhaled a deep sigh. “Call me Jarles. Please, pick...” Jarles’ expression became more impatient. Arnold ran in his mind the multiple scenarios, coming to terms with a horror he never expected. “Heads.” He quietly whimpered to his victimizer. “The game’s begun...”

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Jarles shot the coin; it flipped, spinning on its axis in a dangerous dance. Once again, rotating, turning, landing on the table...

The room fell quiet. The spinning ended. Jarles stood, but his exasperated expression was this time more defeated. Did he do it?

Jarles spoke, this time, sounding impressed. “You son of a gun. Well— I guess you win.” Arnold sighed and started crying softly. Jarles moved quickly; before Arnold could fully process his triumph, he was back. Back in his room, in front of his television. The headline now read, “J. Whitman, arbiter of peace.” No-one would ever believe him. All Arnold had to remember the experience was a headache, and a letter of termination; the letter signed by one, J.