

Berserk

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Extract

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One

It was Devil who had my finger. We were hanging around under the bridge with the usual crowd: the Farrow twins, Connor Blacker, Devil's sister – Lexi – and her ugly mate Debs. It was the tip of my middle finger on my left hand. Imagine how embarrassing it is to lose your rude finger when you are a boy like me! How am I supposed to express myself?

So anyway we were messing around on the towpath by the canal. There's like, a million names tagged on the underside of the bridge. It reminds me of one of those war memorials you get, with all the names of the dead soldiers.

My name is one of the recent ones.

CHAS PARSONS.

I'm right below Devil but there are other names which I can't stop looking at. Right over the other side there's one which is sprayed in massive pink letters.

SELBY P and next to it in clear white curling letters it says **COLD BOY** and there's a fist drawn around both names.

These are my brothers' tags. They're not around.

The other tags I look at are dead centre of the arch, halfway up. They've got moss over them and are pretty faded but we don't let anyone spray over them.

J.JUBY

That's Devil's dad.

NAPPY PARSONS

And that's my old man.

It's a family tradition.

Anyway, enough of the history lesson. It was a school night and it was getting dark and we were all messing around with Devil's knife and having intellectual discussions. Like this:

Devil: "Hey, Debs, why don't you show us your bra?"

Debs: "Tee hee hee."

Lexi: "Shut up, you perv."

I'd have rather seen Lexi's bra (or what's inside it) any day. But Lexi is Juby-the-Killer's daughter. Juby lives on our estate and his daughter is as untouchable as your schoolteacher's knickers.

We were playing "Knife", where you spread your hand on someone's skateboard and your mate stabs the knife between each of your fingers, slowly at first, then quicker and quicker. Connor Blacker had already scraped Devil's little finger so I suppose Devil was after some blood of his own. Anyway, the girls hated it, they were like, "Stop it, someone will get hurt." Girls are

like that, I find. So the more they go on, the more we do it.

I'm getting bad vibes when it's my turn. I'm already annoyed because my box-fresh trainers have got canal mud on them. Devil keeps licking his bleeding finger and shooting shifty looks at Debs (the man has no taste, Debs hardly counts as female). But Lexi is watching so I put my hand down on the board and give Devil the knife. I decide to put down my left hand just in case. It was like I knew something bad was going to happen.

Connor's supposed to be holding the board steady but he's not concentrating.

"If dogs remember their ancestors were wolves, do ovens remember their ancestors were fires?" he goes.

He's always coming out with random crap like this.

"Shut up," I say. "Focus." After all, this is my hand at risk, here.

It's quite hard to cut off a finger. They don't just wave bye-bye to your hand and tippy-tap away. There has to be some sawing involved. But Devil keeps his knife very sharp and he reckons he's good at this game. So he's going faster and faster with the knife and not being careful enough for my liking.

THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP. The knife jumps between my fingers.

"Stoppit," squeal the ladies and the Farrow twins start clapping in time to the knife falling. Then they start clapping faster. And I really don't like the look on

Devil's face (it's not pretty at the best of times). Devil's slamming down between my fingers now and Connor is having a job holding the skateboard steady.

"That's enough," says Lexi. "You children."

But it's too late. Connor loses his grip and the skateboard goes flying off into the wall. I feel this pinch and my middle finger is missing from the top joint.

"Oops," says Devil, and Debs lets out a scream.

I don't feel anything. This isn't so bad, I think to myself. Everyone is looking a bit freaked out so I raise my hand and waggle my remaining fingers at them.

Someone mutters something about playing the piano but no one laughs.

Then the blood starts pouring out.

"You bastard," I say to Devil, as the pain kicks in. It's like my finger has been slammed in a car door. I'm boiling hot, and then I'm shivering with cold. It hurts even though it isn't there any more. It's like shoving your finger into a red-hot oven.

"Ahhhh," I say and the world gets bits in it, like when the TV isn't tuned in properly.

"Chas," shrieks Debs.

"It's nothing," I tell her, though actually I don't think I can stand this. I don't know what to do with myself.

I pass out.

I wake up and I'm still under the bridge. Nobody has called an ambulance. Nobody has got me a bag of frozen peas to put on my stump. In fact, there's nobody

here at all. I sit up. I feel dizzy and my finger REALLY hurts. All I want to do is get home and get some painkillers. It's like my finger is being turned inside out and I'm panting like a dog.

"Ouch," I say and try to breathe slower.

It's quite dark now and beginning to drizzle. The towpath is deserted except some old bloke and his dog, which is pissing up against a lifebelt. Where's the rest of my finger?

"Devil," I shout. "Where are you?" My voice breaks.

The old man looks in my direction, yanks his dog, mid-piss, and hurries off. My stump is oozing blood as thick as gravy. I haven't got a tissue so I take my cap off, fold it over a few times and press it against the wound.

The pain, strangely enough, comes booming in from my stomach before zooming up my ribs, down my arm and ending in an explosion in my finger. I don't cry though. I'm not the sort.

I start feeling around in the grass with my good hand, looking for my finger, but then I get scared about dog turds. I have to find it, or they won't sew it back on in the hospital.

To my relief, I see a shimmer of blue flashing lights up on the road. I bet it was Lexi who called me an ambulance. Maybe she'll be with them and will hold my (scary) hand all the way to the hospital. They'll have lots of lovely painkillers there.

But then this thing rolls out from behind the bridge and grabs my scruff.

Devil.

I swear at him and tell him I'm going to kill him. But I sound like a gasping old man.

"Run," he says, ignoring my death threat. "Some old biddy saw the knife and called the police."

So that's why everyone scarpered. We all got a warning about knives from Polly Panda about a month ago. And today, we've been drinking, and our cans and bottles are lying around everywhere.

"I can't run," I say, "I'm too weak."

"I didn't cut your feet off, did I?" says Devil, and drags me after him.

He's pretty thick, is Devil. But every now and then he comes out with a corker like that.

"But what about my finger?" I say as we are legging it over the grass.

"Forget it," says Devil. "It's gone."

I am in a bit of a dilemma. Do I go back to find my finger and meet the lovely kind policeman who will be interested in all the naughty stuff we kids have left behind, or do I keep my freedom and lose my finger to some tramp's mangy dog?

"What do you need it for anyway?" says Devil. "You've got nine others."

"Seven, Devil," I say. Then I feel really sick and I think I'm going to faint again.

"You've got to get me to hospital," I say.

"No way," says Devil. "I'm not getting caught up with them."

We make our way along the towpath. When we get to the trees Devil grabs my hand, and accidentally knocks my finger.

"Aarrgh!" I can't help yelling really loud.

"Let's see," says Devil. He holds my hand up and whips off the bloody hat. I'm too weak to stop him.

"It's nothing," he says, dropping my hand. "You don't need to go to hospital. All them nosey doctors an' that."

Devil hates anyone in uniform. I can understand his feelings towards police officers and traffic wardens, but he also doesn't like paramedics, nurses, postmen, shop assistants, even school kids.

"It's dark," I protest. "You can't see properly. My finger is missing, Devil."

"I'll take you home on the back of my bike," says Devil. "You wuss."

I am feeling really shitty now, so I just have to go along with him. I'm totally in his hands. Devil is sort of my best mate. But he's pretty twisted. He can be well lairy and isn't scared of using his fists. He's got a short fuse and when he gets annoyed, he takes it out on the weak, whoever they are.

This is why I act hard when I'm around him.

It's a few hours later. I've got my finger all padded up with bog roll and the bleeding seems to be stopping at last. I've found some ibuprofen in the cabinet and necked a couple. The pain is just about bearable as long as I don't touch the wound. Part of me wants to run downstairs and show it to Gran, and get her to call

me an ambulance, but in a way I don't want anyone to know. I feel really weird about it.

It's the sort of thing that would really freak Mum out. She's got problems. She always has. But she's doing really well at the moment, and I don't want her upset. And to be honest, I can't quite believe it myself. I've lost my finger! And knowing Gran, she'd find out who did it using her granny underground and go round and try to smack Devil one round the head. I don't want Gran going round Devil's house, not because of Devil, though he is dangerous in the wrong hands (he's dangerous with any hands – especially mine) but because of his dad.

Have I mentioned Juby?

Devil and Lexi's dad is about five foot eight, the same size as me, but that's where the similarity ends. He's not human. He's nails. It's like he's made of bricks and wood and metal. He's square all the way down and he hasn't got a neck. He's got HATE tattooed on his knuckles. He's moody and, according to Devil, can be very, very mean. He's not around that much and Devil and Lexi spend a lot of time home alone. I shouldn't think they mind too much. Juby delivers cars for people but Devil told me this was a cover-up, and really he's part of a ring that knocks off stuff from stately homes and mansions. He's a middleman. So he's not exactly straight but neither is he a major-league criminal. I don't go round to Devil's house if I know Juby's in. Apparently he's known my dad since they were kids

but my dad has made sure he'll never be welcome back in this estate again. If I meet someone and they find out that Nappy Parsons is my dad it's like they're sympathetic and disgusted at the same time. I've seen it over and over again. He's a total alky waster and would steal the shoes off his own grandmother. No one seems to miss him. Anyway, back to Juby, two years ago, Devil, me and Connor were messing around out near the bus stop. Me and Devil thought it would be funny to hang Connor upside down from the bus shelter. Connor wasn't happy but we were only mucking around. Juby turned up and went bananas.

"So you think you're bully boys, hey?" And he slapped Devil round the head and shoved me out of the way so hard I tripped backwards on the pavement and landed on my bum. Juby got out a knife, cut Connor free (which ruined all our school ties) and lifted him down. He pointed his knife at me and said if we ever did that again he'd teach us a lesson we'd never forget. It was only a laugh. Anyway, afterwards Connor said he was more worried about Juby than being upside down. So now I stay well out of Juby's way and I don't want my grandma going round his house yelling her head off.

I need to eat so I have to go downstairs. I get up off the bed feeling like an old man. My arm aches because I'm holding my hand at a funny angle so I don't knock my finger. And my shoulder feels stiff. I make it to the stairs before I take a breather. I'm dizzy. I don't know if

it's because of my finger or because I've been a bit trigger happy with the painkillers.

Unfortunately both Mum and Gran are in the kitchen.

I hide my injured hand in the loose pocket of my big, baggy hoody. There's probably no need – Gran is half blind and way too vain to wear glasses, and Mum wouldn't notice if I was missing a whole arm let alone a fingertip.

The food cupboard is open and I aim for a red and white packet of cakes.

"We've not seen much of you today, young man," says Gran, taking off her apron and folding it away.

I grunt. Nothing is going to stop me reaching the cakes.

"They look like thieving pockets," says Gran eyeing up my hoody. She takes a step towards me. "And you look like you're on something."

I can't deny that.

"Oh, leave him alone," says Mum from the kitchen sink, where she's sucking sherbet lemons and scraping burned chips off the tray.

"As long as he lives in my house," says Gran, "I'll never leave him alone."

I smell her bread breath and I feel weak and sick. It's probably because I've lost a lot of blood.

"You shouldn't criticize my clothes," I say, "I'm at that sensitive age."

Gran leans close to me.

"What are you up to now?" she says.

I cast a needy look at my mother and she bangs the tray in the sink to show her support.

"If you get into trouble one more time, you're out, do you hear me?" says Gran.

I roll my eyes.

"I SAID DO YOU HEAR ME?"

"Yes, Gran, the whole estate can hear you."

"Cheeky little bugger," she says, and swipes me round the head pretty hard for a woman in her sixties. My instinct is to put up my hands to protect myself but I only use the one, for obvious reasons.

"Child abuse," I protest.

"You need a firm hand," says Gran. And she gives my mum a dirty look.

I take advantage of the lull to grab the cakes and get out of the kitchen.

Gran would never throw me out. At least, I don't think she would. After all, she finally busted me out of Care four years ago. She wants me here. She loves me. She didn't boot me out last winter when I got arrested for thieving. And she told me I had "just one more chance, my laddie" when I was caught abseiling off the canal bridge in the spring. The cops came to our door three weeks ago about the burned-out Toyota in the next street and she saw them off quicker than Devil could chop off your finger.

Ah yes, my finger.

I still don't know if I should go to Casualty or not. I'm the sort of person who likes to keep his head down.

They're bound to ask lots of questions at the hospital. It might go down on my records. I'd be instantly identifiable for the rest of my life, like the muppets with tattoos. But my finger still hurts and I'm worried about it going bad and getting gangrene or something. I might end up losing my whole arm!

Anyway, I've got other things to think about, like the next job me and Devil are planning. It's got to be bigger and better than the last one. We've set the date, Monday, next week. I'll have been at school every day for a whole month by then so I'll be due a day off.

School. Don't go there.

It's just gone eight o'clock in the evening, there's nothing on the telly and I'm lying on my bed examining this manky flap of skin where my finger used to be, when there is a thump at the door.

"What are you doing in there?" screeches my gran.

"Having some private time, Gran, a man has his needs."

"Pack your bags," she snaps. "I won't have that kind of talk. I want you out in the morning."

"Right, Gran."

I hear her muttering to herself and turning herself around.

"Gran?" I call.

"What?"

"What did you come up for?"

There is a pause while she tries to remember. Then the door handle slowly turns, like in a horror film.

"Why is the door locked, Chas?"

"I told you that, Gran."

"Oh." She clicks her tongue against her (false) teeth and I hear shuffling sounds and the click of an old back as something is pushed under my door.

I swing my legs round and sit up. I rub my eyes, but only with one hand. If you had lost a finger a few hours ago, you probably wouldn't be rubbing your eyes with it either.

There's a yellow envelope on the carpet.

I pick it up.

There's no stamp, but there is a franking jobby. Which says, "Louisiana, USA."

I hold the envelope and bite my lip. I never thought it would come so soon. To be honest I thought it would never come at all. Right now I wish it hadn't.

"Oh God," I whisper. What have I got myself into now?

Two

I didn't want to write to a woman. I wanted a proper killer and preferably one who had mown down innocent bystanders with a sub-machine gun, Rambo stylee. Someone who would go down in history; a mass murderer with bodies in the basement. Now what fifteen year old can say they have a killer as a pen pal? Me, Chas Parsons, that's who. I may look like a skinny teenager from the estate, who only just goes to school and whose ultimate fantasy is to snog the face off the daughter of the resident hard man, but I have a few little secrets and this letter is just one of them.

Sometimes I have funny ideas. Like when I went into school pretending I'd lost my memory. (The teachers didn't notice.) Or when I freaked out the kids by the canal because the only word I said all day was "**Death**". Those are just the small things. And of course, there's the stuff me and Devil get up to. My teachers call me A Ringleader. But I prefer to work in a small organization. That's not to say I haven't got mates, I've got loads, but only Devil is allowed into the inner circle, it's only him who gets to come with me on my campaigns and magical mystery outings. It's only him who knows the