

*No Second
Chances*

By Pete Mitchell

The hammering in his head beat in time to flashes of red and blue. Tyson blinked hard, willing the lights to stop, grinding his teeth. His jaw ached and he scratched at the tiny ants crawling in the veins of his forearm. His benders had been getting worse. The meth rush was long gone, but he knew the hangover from the *Jacks* would linger. The hammering stopped abruptly and the lights stopped their incessant strobe. The colours faded to white.

He levered himself off the floor and stood. Tyson was in the centre of a spotlight. He blinked and tried to focus. He was on a stage in a crowded auditorium. Hundreds, maybe thousands of faces stared towards him. Infants, kids, adults, elderly, everyone was eerily silent.

Tyson's mouth was dry. He hugged himself as a chill consumed him.

'Who the hell are you people?' he pleaded to the crowd. 'Where am I?'

No one answered.

He sensed a movement in the corner of his eye and turned to see a well-dressed woman walking towards him from the wings. She looked like a TV news reader. She stopped four or five metres away and was bathed in warm light.

'Hello Tyson, I'm Pauline. I'm sorry I've kept you waiting, I was running a little late. We have been so busy lately. Someone should have been here to welcome you.'

'Who are you? Am I still high or something?'

'Please, calm down. I am sure you feel...' she paused, searching for the right word. '...a little disoriented. I know I would in your position.' She coughed, scoffing at the suggestion their positions could ever be exchanged. 'I hope I can shed some light on the things that might have stressed you.'

'Am I dead? Is that what this is?'

‘No Tyson. You’re not actually dead. But you’re close.’

‘Am I in a coma? Is that what this is?’

‘I’ll try to explain things in terms you can understand Tyson, but some of this will necessitate a significant shift in your thinking.’

He noticed a small microphone on her lapel. He felt his chest to find he was also wearing one. He patted the microphone and a muffled thump projected into the crowd. A baby quietly cried.

‘Are you recording this? Is this a prank?’ He looked around the room to see if he could locate a camera.

‘No, Tyson, we’re not recording this. The audio is set up so that people can hear us. It is important that they understand. Let me explain. We call this place *The Hall of Lives Foregone*.’ She waved her hand in a wide gesture, encompassing the room. ‘These people are those who were never born into existence because of the choices you made.’

‘What! This is bullshit. You can’t keep me here.’ He walked toward the woman. Before he took his third step, he blinked and found that he had returned to where he started. Three times he repeated the futile exercise before he realised, he was going nowhere.

‘Am I in purgatory? Is that what this is?’

‘Some might choose to call it that, but purgatory is such an antiquated concept. Our focus is primarily on education, not punishment. Let me introduce you to a few people.’

She stepped to the edge of the stage and gestured to the crowd. A shaft of light swung across the room and paused on a young boy. He nervously rose from his seat.

‘This is Callum. He would have been born in 2027. His mother, Vivienne, was seventeen when the car you were driving hit her.’

‘Wait. That’s not fair. It was an accident. I didn’t mean to hit her. I...’

‘Tyson, you ran a red light doing ninety kilometres per hour in a fifty zone. It was your choice. It was hardly an accident. She didn’t stand a chance.’

‘It’s not my fault. It was the meth. I didn’t intend to...’

‘This isn’t about what you intended. This is reality. It’s about owning the consequences of the choices you make. Do you think Vivienne, Callum or their extended family are comforted about what you intended?’

Tyson shook his head. Surely none of this is real. Maybe it was some twisted effect from his last hit.

‘Look I know I was high, but I was only seventeen. I admitted my mistake. I paid my fine. I had my licence suspended for two years. Don’t you think that was enough?’

‘It’s not for me to judge what is enough. Let me introduce you to some other people.’

The spotlight swung away from Callum and stopped on a young woman holding a child.

‘This is Amber, Callum’s sister. If her life had not been impacted by your choices, she would have gone to university, done medicine and made major inroads into the treatment of cancers.’

The spotlight swung and widened to highlight a couple. They stood, holding hands.

‘Joseph and Rebecca. They would have established a rehabilitation facility, returning users, like yourself, to being valuable members of society.’

The spotlight focused on a woman in the last row.

‘This is Mary – she would have become a foster parent to almost fifty children. All of these lives have been forgone as a result of your actions.’ The whole back row stood with Mary.

Tyson dropped to his knees.

‘How was I supposed to know? I had no idea.’

‘What, you thought your choices only impacted one life? Surely not even you could be so shallow.’

‘It was only a bit of meth and a few drinks with mates. I’m not an addict. It just a bit of fun. I thought the only person I was hurting was me.’

‘Tyson. You need to be true to yourself. Admit that you didn’t care how many lives you impacted.’

Tyson started to weep.

‘I know. I was stupid. What can I do?’

‘Tyson. What is done is done, there are no second chances. What is done can’t be undone. I think you realise how wide the consequences of your choices can flow.’

‘Please, help me. I feel dead inside.’ He looked towards the crowd and saw a little girl in the front row. She was wearing a pink t-shirt with a unicorn on it. She timidly waved at him.

‘You’re not dead Tyson. You’re lucky. You still have choices. You can still make a difference. You get to decide how many more people you put here.’

‘So why am I here? I don’t want to be here.’

‘I’ve brought you here because you were about to drive again. Tonight’s drive would have been your last. But your choice would have brought more people here. I’ll send you back, but don’t waste the opportunity to make wiser choices.’

‘Thank you. Thank you. I’m sorry. I’ll make amends.’

The spotlight swung again, landing on the little girl.

‘Before you go Tyson. Let me introduce you to Natalia.’ The young girl broke into a heart-piercing smile. ‘One day she will be your daughter.’