

“JUST GEOFF” – BONUS SCENE FROM COLDER THAN THE GRAVE by JD Kirk

This was Geoff Palmer’s big moment. This—here, now—was his chance to shine. And by God, he was going to grab it by the goolies.

He’d sat through the first couple of acts. They’d been open mic spots, like him, only nowhere near as good. He’d sipped his drink (a lemonade, because he wanted to stay sharp) while he watched and listened to both the performers and the audience.

The first act had been a woman. Oriental. Was that the word, or was that racist now, just like being white and not setting next to Muslim women on the bus?

That was good. He made a mental note of that. Maybe not for tonight, but he’d use it at some point.

The woman had raised a few chuckles, but nothing more. Even that had been generous, Geoff thought. She was all, ‘Ooh, periods!’ and, ‘Ooh, sex!’ That had been bad enough, but it was when she started talking about—Geoff felt his face crinkling in distaste—*fanny farts* that he’d switched off. That wasn’t comedy. Not by a long shot.

The next person up was a man, which was more promising. He had come over for the gig from Fife, and much of his comedy seemed to be quite specific to farmers and the east coast farming community. A lot of it had gone over Geoff’s head, and while the audience might have been laughing, Geoff couldn’t help but feel they were laughing *at* the poor yokel bastard, rather than with him.

With was what you wanted, according to the blogs he’d read. If they were laughing at you, you’d lost them. If they were laughing with you, you had them in the palm of your hand.

None of the blogs had explained how to tell the difference, unfortunately, but he reckoned he’d figure it out. Besides, with material like his, the whole room was guaranteed to be on his side.

The host of the open mic night was on stage now. Well, not a stage so much as an area at the far end of the restaurant where they’d pushed the tables aside and hung a couple of curtains.

He was a young guy. Short, with big glasses. Apparently, he’d done one or two things on the telly. The BBC probably, judging by his blatant lefty bias. He’d declared his pronouns

as part of his opening ‘bit,’ and while Geoff had found it useful—he was a bit girly-looking, and his name, Chris, was pretty gender-neutral—it had enraged him all the same.

“More woke bullshit,” he muttered, as he sipped his lemonade.

The audience seemed to like him, though, which was a bit of a concern. On the *Spectrum of Wokeness*, which Geoff had devised, he and the MC sat at opposite ends.

Geoff didn’t consider himself to be anywhere near the far end—he wasn’t calling for cultural or literal genocide—but he was sick of having damned political correctness rammed down his throat. And so, he thought, were most people. The people who commented on the same newspaper websites as he did certainly were, that was for sure!

Although, some of them *were* calling for genocide, so he didn’t want to associate himself with them too closely.

He’d written his material down in a notebook, which he’d planned keeping in his pocket in case of emergencies.

Unfortunately, it was far too big to fit in his pocket, so he’d had to write it all out again in a smaller notebook, which he could now feel pressed against his right arse cheek.

He didn’t expect to have to call on it—he had it all memorised—but it was a good idea to have a safety net.

His slot was five minutes, but that could be extended at the host’s discretion, if things were going well. Which they would be, Geoff thought, so he’d prepared ten minutes of material, and had a couple of half-formed ideas to draw on if the audience was still hungry for more.

There was a tap on his shoulder, and he turned to find a young blonde-haired woman standing smiling at him. She wasn’t a stunner in the traditional sense, but she was cute. Bubbly. Geoff liked her at once.

“Sorry, are you ‘Just Geoff’?” she asked.

Palmer’s eyes widened in surprise. Wow. This was happening fast. A fan already, and he hadn’t even set foot on stage yet.

“Why yes,” he said, a smile playing coquettishly across his face. “Yes, I am. And you are?”

“I’m Sarah.”

Geoff took one of her hands in both of his and squeezed it. “Charmed,” he said. “Are you after an autograph?”

“What? No.”

“A cheeky selfie, then?” Geoff guessed.

“No, nothing like... I’m the stage manager. You’re on in a few minutes.”

Palmer fought very hard to keep his smile in place. “Yes. Yes, I know,” he said.

“Comedy.”

The stage manager frowned. “Sorry?”

“I was joking. Comedy,” Geoff said, then he knocked back his lemonade, got to his feet, and thumped a fist on the bar. “I’m ready. Let’s do this!”

Sarah nodded slowly. “Right. Yeah. Well, like I say, you’ve got a few minutes yet...”

“Oh. OK. Yes,” Geoff said. He looked around as if searching for something to do, then sat back on the stool again. “Have I got time for another drink?”

“Not really.”

“Right.”

They waited there in awkward silence, him sitting, her standing there, shifting her weight from foot to foot like she couldn’t wait to be somewhere else.

And then, finally, catching some secret signal from the host, Sarah put a hand on one of Geoff’s elbows, said, “That’s you,” into his ear, then gave him a nudge in the direction of the stage.

“Our third lamb to the slaughter tonight is a local...” The host squinted at the index card he was reading from. “...double act, is it? Please put your hands together for *Effin’ and Geoffin’!*”

“It’s not a double act,” Geoff said, raising his voice to be heard over the applause. He didn’t quite raise it enough for the host to hear, though, and Chris was forced to stop midway through his exit.

“Sorry?”

“It’s not a double act. I’m not. I’m... I changed the name. Didn’t they tell you?”

Chris looked past him to Sarah, who shrugged and nodded. “Eh, no. Sorry. I didn’t get the update.”

“It’s *Just Geoff* now.”

“Oh, right.” The host looked around at the audience. They had all stopped clapping now, and were starting to look confused. Confusion, he knew, was the arch enemy of

comedy, so he quickly presented the man beside him to the crowd, announced him as, "Just Geoff!" and hurried off the stage.

"Thanks. Bit of a breakdown in communication there, I think. Not a great start, but these things happen," Geoff said. "Bit disappointing, but there you go."

There was a chuckle. Just a single one. The glare of the lights made it difficult to make out any faces in the audience, but Geoff shot a stern look in the direction the laughter had come from.

"That wasn't a joke. I hadn't started," he said. He took a deep breath. "This is me starting now."

He tapped the microphone a couple of times then cleared his throat. His mouth made a strange clicking sort of sound as he opened it to speak.

Nothing emerged. Not a word. Not a cheep.

He smiled. Smiling was important. He'd read that somewhere. It felt different to his usual smile, but that was fine. They didn't know what his usual smile looked like, anyway. Why would they?

"So, right..." he said, but then nothing else followed.

Something had happened to his brain. He could feel the cogs spinning like the wheels of a cinema projector, but the reel of film was just flapping about, and nothing was playing on the big screen.

Christ. Was he having a stroke? Was that what was happening?

Push through it, Geoff. Push through.

"I, em, so anyway..." he began. "It's good to be here. This is my first go at stand-up."

"No shit," came a voice from the audience, which drew a murmur of laughter.

Geoff had read about hecklers, and knew just what to do. You couldn't let them get the upper hand, or they'd ruin your act. You had to nip it in the bud, and the best way of doing that was by taking their comment, giving it a comedic spin, and firing it right back at them.

"Yes shit, actually!" he said, and then he grinned hopefully, waiting for a chorus of approval that didn't come.

"Tell us a joke, then," suggested another man in the crowd. Possibly the same one. It was so hard to tell with the lights. And Christ, they were hot. He could feel the sweat beading on his forehead beneath their relentless burning glare.

“Right, you want a joke? I’ll tell you a joke. Your mum. She’s the joke,” Geoff clapped back. “Boom. That put you in your place, didn’t it?”

“Aye, that showed me, alright,” the man replied, which—despite the sarcastic tone—Geoff chose to take at face value.

“Good. Right. Glad to hear it,” he said, the battle won. He could feel himself relaxing into it a bit now. Certainly, words were coming out of his mouth, which was a big step in the right direction. “Any Americans in the audience tonight?” he asked, cupping a hand above his eyes to allow him a better look at the crowd. “No? Anyone? Because I’ve got a joke about... Does anyone know any Americans?”

There was a half-hearted whoop from somewhere near the back of the room, and Geoff seized on it excitedly.

“Aha! Here’s one, then. If you’re American when you go into the bathroom, and American when you come out, what are you when you’re *in* the bathroom?”

He gave them half a second to reply, and not a millisecond more.

“No? You’re *European!*” he cried, then he shook his head. “Wait. No. *European*, I mean.” He grinned manically in the rapturous silence. “You’re a-peeing.”

The silence continued. Somewhere in the audience, a woman coughed.

“Too political?” he ventured. “OK, here’s just a silly one. You’ll like this. This’ll be more up your street. What did the fish say when he swam into a dam?” This time, he didn’t even give them the half-second response time. “Damn.”

There was a groan. A groan was good, though! A groan was a reaction, at least! Many new comics would kill for a groan. A groan said they were listening, and that was half the battle.

So, they liked the fish material then, did they? Luckily, he had more to give.

“What do you call a fish with no eyes?”

“A fsh,” replied the same man as before.

“Look, why don’t you just fuck off, mate?” Geoff snapped, jabbing a finger out in the direction of the voice.

“Because I paid to get in.”

“Yeah. Well, joke’s on you, then,” Geoff replied, and there was a ripple of something not entirely unlike laughter that lifted his spirits and gave him a much needed second wind.

The problem was, that he'd forgotten most of his jokes. This was problematic. Sure, he could take his notepad out of his back pocket and have a quick flick through, but he was so close to hooking them all and reeling them in, and if he made them wait while he read through his notes he'd lose the momentum he had built up.

Time, then, to go off script.

"This isn't my real job, in case you were wondering. I'm a Scene of Crime Officer. With the police. You know, forensics? And... do you know what Will Smith's favourite type of forensic evidence is?"

This time, confident that they wouldn't get the answer, he allowed them three whole seconds to consider it.

"Fresh prints," he said, which drew a titter. Just the one, though.

He unhooked the microphone from the stand and began to pace back and forth. He'd seen other comedians do that, and thought it looked good. It didn't feel very natural, though, and so he walked to one end of the stage area, turned around, and walked all the way across to the other.

He continued to do this throughout the next few jokes, marching back and forth like he was parading in front of the Queen.

"Working alongside the police, you see some funny stuff," he announced. "Like the thief who got arrested recently for stealing a lamp. He got a light sentence. Or the time I went into the station and everyone was in bed. I said, 'Here, what are you doing?' and they said—"

The voice in the crowd beat him to the punch. "We're undercover."

Geoff stopped marching and glowered out into the crowd. "You're ruining the fun for everyone else, you know."

"What fun?"

"You might not be enjoying it—maybe the jokes are over your head—but everyone else is. Aren't you?"

They weren't. And they made that quite clear.

"You're shite, mate."

"Piss off and give someone else a go."

"I've had funnier anal discharges than you."

"Oh yeah? When?"

“On a daily basis.”

Geoff screwed up his face. “Then you’ve probably got bowel cancer and are going to die a horrible death. So, *ha!* Joke’s on you. Again! Boom!”

He grinned desperately to the crowd. They’d been tickled by the previous “joke’s on you,” response, but they weren’t seeing the funny side this time.

Chris, the MC, hopped back on stage, clapping and smiling just before the booing could really ramp up into high gear.

“Just Geoff, everyone! Who’s now going to *Just Geoff* off.”

He shot Palmer a look of scarcely contained fury and practically shoved him out of the performance area. Sarah, the stage manager, caught him by the arm and hurriedly led him through a side door. The crowd was getting ugly, and for insurance purposes if nothing else, she had to get him out of sight.

They stopped out in the restaurant foyer, and Sarah stood with her back to the door to block anyone who might come racing after Geoff with violence in mind.

They could be a tough crowd when they wanted to be.

“Well, eh, thanks for coming,” Sarah said. “It’s not easy when you’re actually up there, is it?”

“Speak for yourself,” said Geoff. His eyes were twinkling, and his smile was wide. “All things considered, I thought that went pretty well!”

“You did?”

“Better than expected, anyway!”

Sarah blinked, trying to process this. “What the fuck were you expecting?”

“Worse than that, anyway! Far worse. They’re pussycats, really,” Geoff said. He sidled in closer to the stage manager, raised a suggestive eyebrow, and cranked his smile up a notch or two. “So,” he said, his voice becoming a low purr. “Same time next week?”