

## Crispy, Dingdong, Rocko and the Hard Chaw

Crispy was in a hurry. If he didn't make it on time, Dingdong would be at his patch. Crispy needed the readies to pay for a hostel that night. And there were only two places in Dublin that allowed dogs in with their owners.

Rocko twisted his thick neck and glanced up at Crispy on the higher end of the lead, but kept his steady gait. Rocko was a pit bull-bulldog cross.

In the distance along the seafront he could hear young ones and young fellows, their squeals and laughter. He smiled. Kids having a good time usually made him smile. He watched them crossing the road from the ice cream shop. Some were singing 'Jingle Bells'. As they grew near, he saw a small woman with blonde hair calling out and running after some stragglers.

"Children, wait. Children, wait for everyone else." And she ran after them, her arms out like aeroplane wings when she reached them. She walked past him like this, her arms out, and her hands curved backwards, like she was protecting the children from him.

"C'mon, Rocko," Crispy said. He took a final drag from his rollie and flicked it away. He looked back over his shoulder. "Next time I'll let him fucking ate you. The whole bleeding lot of you."

He then dropped his walking pace. Just to show all the morons gawping that he didn't give a shit. Even the long queue across the road outside the ice cream shop seemed to be looking his way.

"Look at all the gobshites, Rocko. Queuing for ice cream. And it Christmas."

On passed the old baths, and the new Lexicon library and up into the town.

Crispy's eyesight wasn't what it used to be. And ever since the fire he felt it was worse than ever. Even though the optician chap told him he'd done the right thing by pressing his hands over his eyes. He wasn't so lucky with the rest of his face and neck. That's how he got the nickname *Crispy*. The other street people gave it to him. Fucking hilarious it was the first time someone used it. His skin had the appearance of a pork joint left too long in the oven. And his ears were gone. Crispy was sound with the nickname. Had it been one of them, he'd have had no problem breaking his bollocks laughing at them too.

Slouched over as he worked his way around a bunch of young yobs sitting and standing at the outdoor café tables, he felt something clip him in the side of the head. A paper cup. Crispy twisted about, squinting at the group. Three or four of them looking his way, were cackling like a bunch of hyenas, beer cans and bottles in their hands.

"What the fuck are you playing at?" Crispy said, as he minced threateningly at them.

One of the group, as short and compact as a silverback, stepped in front of him.

"Easy, Rocko." Crispy said. "Take it easy." And he pulled on the lead as though the dog was straining on it.

"If that thing touches me, I'll bleeding batter the pair of you," the ape said.

"Leave him be," another young fellow with red hair said, as he stepped between them. "He's old enough to be your granda." Although twice the size the red hair, the ape seemed happy to slip away and back to his mates.

Crispy shuffled off and on towards the bank. As he drew near, his defective eyes locked onto the ATM like a myopic eagle telescoping in on a hare. People shifted out of his way, on their faces the usual look of distaste.

Nobody. His patch was empty. Why had he gotten his Alan Wickers in such a twist?

“Ding dong, ding dong. Get out of that garden,” Dingdong said from behind him, shouldered by and almost threw himself to the ground beside the ATM.

“You bleeding dirt-bag, Dingdong. Get to fuck out of it. I mean it now.”

Dingdong ignored him and pointedly shook a few coins in a paper cup at the line of people queuing to withdraw cash. “Anyone got a dollar for Dingdong?” Dingdong said.

“Right, that’s it,” Crispy said. “Rocko, get him. Kill it.”

The white crossbreed smiled up at Crispy, its stubby tail pathetically wagging.

Dingdong pushed to his feet, laughing a gravelish laugh. “I’m only pulling your wire, Crispy. I’ve done me tapping for today. I’m off now for a few gargles.”

He emptied the few coins he’d placed in the cup into his own hand, separated two euro coins and dropped them back into the cup. He passed the paper cup to Crispy.

“There you go, me auld flower,” he said. “That’ll get you a start with them lot.” He nodded at the queue.

“Thanks, Dingdong. Fair fucks to you, man.”

Dingdong, moving off, back waved over his head.

“I’ll see you later, right?” Crispy shouted after him.

Sitting with his back next to the wall beside the ATM, Crispy saved his breath and only tried to tap from those he considered his own. People whose faces told him they’d come from similar backgrounds. The holy fucking Joes and Josephines dressed up for evening mass in the church across the road, he ignored. And likewise the laudy daw suits and the Lady Mucks prancing about like they owned the fucking world. Arseholes.

“Happy Christmas, love,” he said to a rough looking young mother with a few kids hanging out of her.

“Here,” she said to one of the kids, a small boy. “Give that to the man.”

The little boy took the coin from her, toddled over to Crispy, an even-toothed smile on his face, and dropped it into his paper cup.

“Thanks very much, son,” he said. He watched as the young mother waddled away. Up the flue she was. Three kids and another on the way.

Fractured images of his own childhood came to him. He and his two brothers fighting to hold their ma’s hand as they walked to mass on Christmas morning. And later on, when they were having their Christmas dinner, his da’s angry face shouting at their ma. She shaking her head and pleading with him not to be frightening the children. And it Christmas.

“Fucking bastard,” Crispy said aloud. He buried his head in his arm resting on his knee.

Only when someone dropped something into his cup did he glance up and shout thanks at the procession of legs. And he looked up too when he heard drunken voices and rowdy laughter coming along the pavement. He recognised the ape and the other yobs from earlier. As they were passing, one of them slammed his palms into the shoulders of another pedestrian.

“Watch where you’re going, you stupid prick,” he said. The gang exploded into laughter.

Crispy shook his head, but stayed where he sat.

Pretty soon the street lighting and the Christmas lights took over the daylight. By now, Crispy’s body shook and he could hardly bend his fingers. That’s when

somebody placed a fancy paper bag next to him. “That’s for you,” an old man’s voice said. “Happy Christmas.”

“What?” Crispy said, as he watched the tall, heavysset figure move off through the crowd. “Thanks,” he shouted.

Inside the bag was a raincoat. Not a used one but one with a tag on it from the shops. And it had fur inside it. He stood up, faced the wall and pulled on the coat. The instant warmth made him realise how cold it had become.

“C’mon, Rocko,” he said. “It’s bleeding brass monkeys. Time for me and you to get a few chips.

When he got to the chipper, Crispy put the end of the thin rope he used for Rocko’s lead under his arm and wrung his hands together. They were raw red. The dark-haired girl from the chip shop came out with a white paper bundle, as she usually did.

“There you go, Crispy,” she said. “I’ve chucked in a few pieces of cod for you too.”

Crispy feigned the usual surprise.

“Ah thanks very much,” he said, taking the fish and chips from her. “Are you sure?”

“Happy Christmas,” she said, with a big, white-toothed smile so perfect, Crispy felt like crying. Something he would do later, when he’d think about her as he tried to get to sleep in the doss house.

He pushed on as far as the shopping centre. The doors whooshed open. Crispy stepped inside, squatted down and tore open the white paper. Before stuffing a handful of chips in his mouth, he placed a chunk of cod into his dog’s open jaws.

“There you go me auld brown son,” he said.

Crispy was on his third handful of chips when he heard a familiar voice:

Dingdong.

“Ah lay of us, will you, for Jayzus’ sake. Leave it fuckin’ out.”

Two security men in dark blue suits, each holding him by the arm, were escorting him from Tesco’s.

“Oi,” one of them said to Crispy as they neared. “You too.”

Crispy slid his back up the glass he was resting against and got himself to his feet.

“That’s us, Rocko,” he said.

“Didn’t you not manage to get any tins?” he said to Dingdong, as they left the shopping centre.

“I had one or two earlier from the garage,” he said. “But them wankers in there fucked me out before I even got to the till. The bastards.”

Crispy told him not to worry none. And from his pocket he took out a can he’d got from Lidl. “Here,” he said. “Put a hole in that. I’m on a diet.”

Dingdong’s eyes locked to the can. He took it and poured half its contents down his throat before coming up for air. “Thanks brother. I like the clobber. A regular bleeding dandy, what?”

Crispy and Dingdong shuffled off until they came to a large crowd, laughing and sneering at someone or something at the side of the road. They stopped and worked their way to where they could get a better view.

Stripped to his underwear and attached to a lamppost with industrial tape was the young man who had helped Crispy earlier. He recognised his red hair. The crowd was goading him and sneering at him.

Crispy didn't like no shower of scrotes picking on nobody and the whole lot. He wanted to urge Rocko on at the crowd to shift them. But waited instead until most of the crowd dispersed.

Crispy then stepped up to the young man and asked him if he was all right. The lad told him he was sound. But Crispy could see he was just playing the hard chaw. He then told him that it was one of his mate's stag nights. And that they'd started on the piss early. But because his mate was a bit of a bruiser, they stripped him instead and tied him to the lamppost. Just for a laugh like. He was very embarrassed, and he looked like he might actually start blubbering.

"Take it easy, son," Crispy said. "I'll have you out of this in a jiffy."

From his pocket, Crispy took out a dinner knife he used for spreading butter on his rolls.

"Here," Crispy said to Dingdong. "Hold on to that fellah, will you?" The dog obediently allowed itself to be guided away from Crispy and to a shopfront.

Crispy got to work. He used the serrated edge of the knife to cut through the tape binding the young man to the lamppost. This took some time, but finally, the young man was free.

"Where's your clobber?" Crispy said.

The young man just stood there with his hands over his groin area. And he shuddered with the cold. "I don't know," he said. "They took everything away. Maybe they threw them somewhere."

"Here," Crispy said, as he took off his new raincoat.

"But I can't take your coat, mister," the young man said, his head shaking. But took it anyway and wrapped it around his shoulders. He then told Crispy that he'd get

his father to pay him the cost of it. And what was Crispy's name and where could he reach him?

"Never you mind, son," Crispy said. "But hang on a sec. I just left something in me pockets." He dipped his hand into one of the pockets of the young man's coat and brought out his loose change wrapped up in a rag. He counted the coins, took a few for himself – the cost of the hostel for the night - and handed the rest to the young man.

"There's a few yoyos for you, buddy. That should be enough for a taxi."

The young man shook his head. "I don't know what to say," he said. "Thanks. Really. Thanks so much. Thanks a lot."

"You're all right, buddy," Crispy said. "Here," he shouted and whistled at a passing taxi.

The taxi pulled in.

"In you go, son."

The young man took Crispy's hand and shook it, before getting into the taxi.

"Look after that lad," Crispy said to the driver, and he slapped the roof.

The taxi man, a foreigner, smiled whitely and nodded.

"Come on," Crispy said to Dingdong. "The tea isn't going to wet itself, is it?"

Crispy, Dingdong and Rocko, looking like refugees from a passage in a Dickensian world, shuffled off for the hostel.

Behind their backs a small crowd of onlookers applauded and cheered.