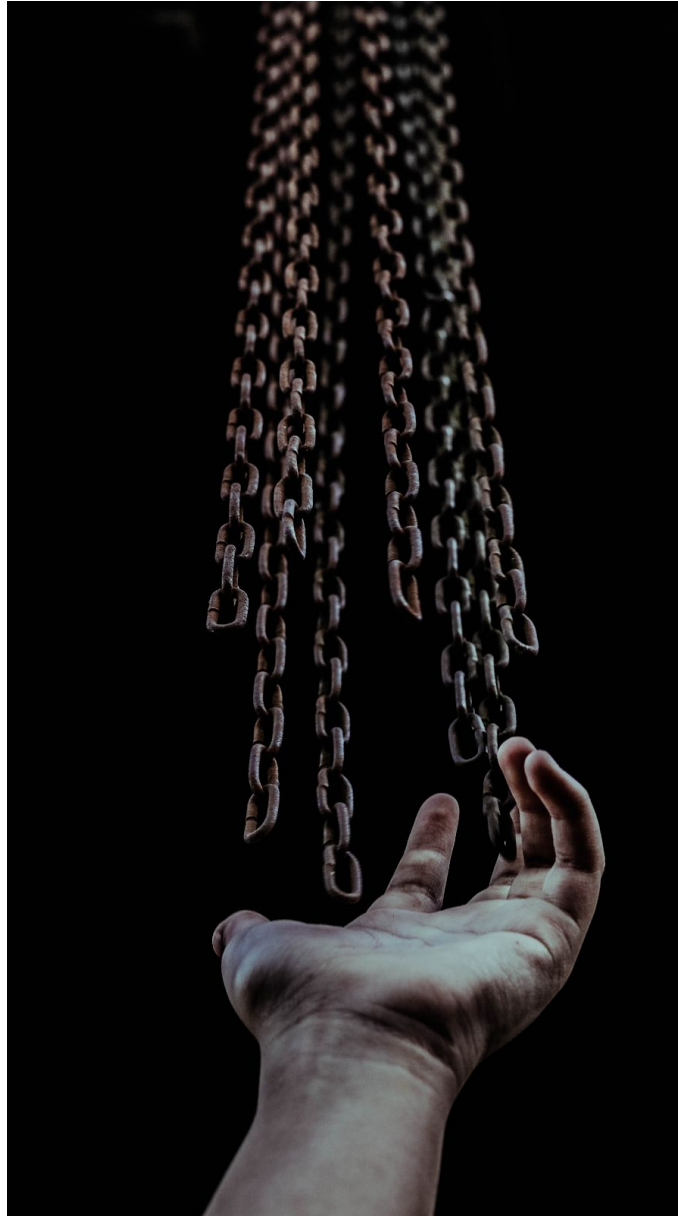


Chainless I.R.L.

By Ryan Gray



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I AM, I.R.L.

The long metallic chain is fastened to a D shaped ring, sewn into the thick canvas strap around my neck. Every once in a while, I'll pull from it, fight against its power, struggle with its hold on me. I've tried backing away in every direction, or running away at a moment's notice. But, the leash remains a life sentence about my neck.

Others pass, their lead and their leash, dangling from their necks, they bark at me, mocking me, thumbing their noses at my discomfort, my inability to be free from the same chains weighing them down.

The collar is uncomfortable, so I'll scratch at it to ease the chafing. But, the chain is the real problem, pulling me around by the collar, keeping me from getting to where I want to go or forcing me into places I'd rather not be.

Some years ago, before I even knew about this collar, I had never thought of places such as these: Mud pit arenas meant only to destroy one another, or worse, a stage for criticising one chained person after another, until each were destroyed in body, mind and spirit.

It wasn't always like this, you know? I once explored, and ran freely to wherever my feet felt like going. I discovered new places and different ways to get there. I met others, who were different, new and exciting, arriving from far off amazing places.

It was almost two decades ago, when collars and chains first appeared. I thought this new chained idea was a passing fad. But months turned to years, and years to decades. Every year, more and more donned the collars, even the young have been fitted with collars, some as young as babies. The chains, which were fairly loose to begin with, year by year, shortened, link by link by link.

Now, most of us wear more than one collar, each tied to several chains, pulling us in various directions. This leads to the necessity of restriction. There is no more free exploration nor new experiences. I no longer meet new and exciting people from different and distant lands. Rather, I'm confined to a zone of like taste, similar smells and identical passions. Experiences of differences are not prohibited, but with many chains pulling in several directions, venturing to a new unexplored zone is just too difficult. More and more every day are convinced that visiting a new zone is not only bad for you but possibly for the rest of the chained as well.

The first defensive position of a zone was not built on purpose, rather it's said that it was the result of one of the early zones, simply walking in its restrictive circle. Before that time, many would come and go from zone to zone, but the mindless circumventing in one direction over and over created a barrier so deep that none could penetrate it, none could escape, yet none had the will to take the barriers down. Now, most zones have a protective barrier of some kind. Most can't imagine a world without them, and every day more are born into a world in which zone barriers have always existed.

Momentary frustration by the noose about my neck wins control of my faculties. I claw and strike at my neck, desperate for relief. But it's no use, the collar is a part of me, and I have to learn to live with it.

Then, she appeared. She strode freely into my zone: no collar, no chain. The barrier seemed a small obstacle beneath fit legs and well-worn boots. She smiled at my cohorts,

introducing herself as she entered our zone. Some mocked her lack of collars and chains, some hid away as if they'd met their first leper and others gawked in complete disbelief as if bigfoot or a unicorn was offering a hand in friendship.

Myself? I was intrigued. I saw the same joy and excitement in her eyes I once felt in my own heart. The exploration, the new and exciting places and people I once met from exotic, incredible places. The collarless spotted me staring and approached my designated position.

"Hi!" She greeted me kindly.

"You don't belong here, I do. This isn't your zone!" I blurted out from habit, rather than desire.

"Are you saying there's a law that says we can't have friends from other zones?"

"No," I retorted defensively, "Just...Just..." I stammered for an explanation to my ingrained feelings, "Just that it's too complicated and it belongs to us."

"Hmm" The chainless mused as she looked around, "All I see is hundreds of individuals walking in circles of dirt. There's no grass, no trees, the flowers seem long dead." She nodded her head in thought, "Truth is, if ya'll keep going this way, you won't just have a barrier from other zones, but soon, barriers from one another."

"Why do you care," I snorted, "You don't know what it's like to live in this collar!"

The collarless kicked back her head and laughed, "Oh I don't, do I?" She pulled back a lock of brown hair revealing half a dozen red scars. "I might never get rid of these fully, but trust me, the scars are much better than the real thing." She pointed at my collar, "I used to have so many of those things around my neck, I had to sit completely still most of the day just to breath!"

I lowered my voice, but allowed a little curiosity, "And...?"

"And what? I said 'enough's enough', and so here I am!"

I sneered at her preposterous claim, "Impossible, someone else did it for you, these can't be taken off!"

"Are you kidding?" She shot back, "The only person who can remove your collar, is you!"

"Right, well you were just lucky."

"Nope, I just decided I was done."

"I've tried okay, I've tried to the point of almost killing myself! But dead and gone, this disgusting thing will still be strung around my neck!"

"No." She giggled and shook her head.

"Are you laughing at my pain?" I was so appalled. How dare she!

"No...well, yes, but my own pain too. You see, the same thing happened to me, I thought I had tried, but really, I just wanted the collar off, but I relied on the chain. I had lived with that chain keeping me in place for so long, I was terrified to think of where I would end up, without my chains telling me where I could go."

"So..." I prodded, "What are you saying?"

She placed a warm hand on my shoulder, "It's time to say goodbye to the chain, and then the collar will come off quite easily."

Oh that freedom, the adventure, it all flooded back to my heart. I longed to know that feeling again. But, these chains, they had been my home for nine years, I could rely on them, trust them to be there and keep me safe, day after day. Oh, but I wanted change, I needed to

change, otherwise, I knew something inside of me would die, and never come back. Finally, I looked the chainless in the eyes, "I don't know if I can?"

"I can help." She smiled warmly and extended her hand, "We'll do this together."

I handed her the rectangular communications device, as she scooted her chair next to mine. I slurped the remainder of my iced coffee from it's cup as she went to work purging my phone. "First we cancel all push notifications, You don't need to know anything as it happens. Next we delete Facebook, Instagram and Twitter."

"What about YouTube?"

"That's up to you? Is it holding you back from real life?"

"I only use it sometimes,"

"Sounds fine, but keep an eye on it. Remember," She lifted my Iphone in the air and shook it like a politician stating the facts to end all facts, "These things were meant to help us communicate with one another better. Instead, most of us have allowed them to turn us into insecure bullies. We hurl insults and opinions based on very little information, we would never have the guts to say to people's faces. The price we pay is the eternal vigilance of opinions we are committed to for life, and the sacrifice of any friend that doesn't agree."

"In other words, the price we pay is our soul." I summarized.

"Your words, not mine." She grinned as she stood. "Good luck to you, kid. You'll do great things IRL!"

*I stood up to say goodbye, "From now on, **I am Real Life!**"*

From that day on, I began my journey of exploration to new and uncharted zones. Free from my three collars and chains, I too became an anomaly. Some mocked me and some even called me a traitor. Most didn't even notice. They just continued staring at their own feet, fearing for themselves and what others might think of them at any given moment.

I, on the other hand, climbed my zone's barrier and strode into another. I was there to explore a different landscape, hear new thoughts and ideas, make new friends because I was...

Collarless and Chainless - I.R.L. (In Real Life)