

7 & 7 was written as a brief sequel to my novel SWITCHFLIPPED, so it does partially spoil the fate of one of the characters from that story. That said, I don't think you need to read the novel to understand the dilemma of a seventh son of a seventh son in this urban fantasy tale.

7 & 7

I was born immersed in occult energies, aware of powers and entities imperceptible to the common run of humanity. *It sucks.* My mom told me I was always a fussy baby, which was probably because I could see things she couldn't, and in sixth grade I had a lot of cagey talks with the school psychologist. I'm sure I came within a hair's width of a lithium prescription, or worse, but luckily I grew up in a spanky-new neighborhood that hadn't had time to develop anything too weird. That all changed when I went off to college. I'd thought I was just *artistic*, although I never produced anything but bad poetry and watercolor landscapes that compared unfavorably to dragging paper through a mud puddle. When I got to the University of Chicago, though, I met my first Story People and found out the real deal.

This happened the same year I developed a crush on a phlebotomist, and therefore started donating blood, and therefore learned I was B-positive. When I mentioned this in passing, back home for Thanksgiving, Stan Mahoney went bonkers and started yelling at my mom. I should mention that Stan has A-negative blood and I spent my first twenty years calling him "Dad." In fact, I still call him that, even though, biologically, he's nothing to me.

I've never met my... sperm donor, I guess. But it turns out he sired exactly six boy children before me, and he himself has six older brothers.

So yeah. I'm the seventh son of a seventh son, heir to supernatural powers. It's not as glamorous as Willie Mabon makes it sound. I've been working on a graduate degree in History with a focus on folk religion and myth, but in the five years I've managed to stretch out my studies, I have found exactly three working spells. A few of the Story People know more, but they're not eager to share. Only fair, I suppose. I haven't been forthcoming about the lore I've amassed, indifferently useful as it is.

But to divert back to that disastrous Thanksgiving for a moment, consider this. What destroyed that marriage? Was it my mom stepping out two decades previous? Stan's reluctance to forgive? My ill-timed sharing of the critical clue? (Incidentally, that lovely needle technician mentioned how surprisingly often people find out ugly family secrets at the blood center, a week or two before she gave me the tired old "Ron, I like you as a *friend*," speech.) If it was my mom's fault, how is it that things were fine for *twenty years*? If it's on me, how could I do it without the slightest inkling of what was

happening? But how could it possibly be Stan, when he was the one guy in the whole mess who never consciously decided on any course of action?

It matters.

#

The first Story Person I met was Kung Fu Pete. I saw him at Promontory Point Park, fist fighting an octopus. Well, something like an octopus, only it was the shineless black of a night sky, and like that night sky, its surface was speckled with stars.

Pete is unprepossessing at first glance. He's losing hair up top and has a bit of a paunch, so from a hundred yards his outline looks kind of like a gourd. This is particularly true if, as on that first day, he's wearing a brown-orange sweatsuit. But I guess it was the right clothes, because he was sweating up a storm.

My date giggled as we got closer. Did I mention I was on a date? It was actually the end of a date, and it hadn't gone well. No spark. She was cute, but—and I feel bad relating this—a real mental lightweight. “Look!” she tittered, forgetfully laying a hand on my forearm. (To that point, she'd scrupulously avoided body contact.) This was before that B-positive Thanksgiving, I'd just declared my undergrad major, and I'd met the phlebotomist only twice, as the room-mate of someone from *Feminist Perspectives on Postmodern Literature*.

“What?” I asked, neutrally. I've learned to force a laid-back demeanor when I see blatant, daylight insanity. Not just for my reputation: Most of the weird stuff out there ignores you if it thinks you can't see it. Playing blind has steered me clear of encounters with animate postcards, possessed vermin birds and more ghosts than I can count.

“Look at the fat guy doing Tai Chi!” Her voice had an edge of real malice in it. Finding someone to look down on had made her happier than anything *I'd* done during our matinee-and-pastry-with-walk.

I looked and saw writhing tentacles encircling his arms, his legs, dragging him close. His fists lashed out, one-two quick, but though the rubbery sky-flesh recoiled, the beast did not retreat. I wondered how well a martial art designed to fight people would do against a larger creature, with more limbs, and also boneless. Just then the cephalopod got a real grip and flung itself at him, ghastly black bill snapping.

“He's really working it!” she giggled. I was wondering how she'd see it when he got bitten into chunks when his foot zapped it—really, there's no other verb for it, he *zapped* that thing—right in its beak, shattering it. It made a horrid sound, like when you eat peanut butter and smack your lips, only a thousand times louder, but it was drowned out by his war-cry as he slipped his hands free of the suckered coils, formed

them into little mantis-pincer shapes, and poked both its eyes hard enough to burst them.

He stood, panting and gasping, as it flailed its legs and squirmed into the waters of Lake Michigan.

“He must be a nut,” my date said, but her tone was nervous. That shout had made every hair on my body stand up, even from a football field’s length.

“Yeah,” I said, watching him stagger back against a tree and lean against it, exhausted. I felt like a traitor, even though he was a stranger. “So, hey, what time was your train?”

I walked her to the station and he was still there twenty minutes later when I got back. I got two coffees from a vendor and walked over. He’d composed himself into a lotus position and was breathing regularly when I got there. His nostrils flared when I was within ten feet and his eyes popped open.

“What was that thing?” I asked him. He turned his head towards me and stood. All the liquid grace he’d possessed in combat was gone. He moved like a guy with stiff knees who’d shoveled too much snow, or who’d shown off a bit during a pickup basketball game.

“Hell if I know,” he said. “Tell me that’s not decaf.”

“It’s not decaf,” I said, holding out the cup. “I grabbed a couple sugar packets,” I said, reaching into my jacket pocket.

“Not necessary,” he said. “I’m Pete. I’m a kung fu warrior.”

“Ron,” I said. “I’m a History major.”

#

One of the spells I learned was the Alabama Death Curse. I knew it was the real deal as soon as I read the description. I guess that’s part of the ‘seventh son’ bit.

Sounds great, doesn’t it? Or at least ‘hella metal’? But it’s just about useless, frankly. To me anyhow. To anyone who isn’t a vindictive, sociopathic assassin.

Now, you may think that having a piece of magic that *kills things* is pretty awesome, especially if my dates feature cosmoctopi and mystic martial arts experts and baby-eating witches. I won’t deny it, that thought certainly crossed my mind too. But here’s the deal with the Alabama Death Curse. To cast it, you have to construct a hammer with a piece of the target’s hair or fingernails or spit or DNA or something, and it has to have their name carved into the handle. So, already, useless against both unexpected street attackers and nameless entities from beyond. Also, politicians you can’t get near (and don’t pretend you didn’t think it). But assuming you’ve got all that, you have to take the hammer and hit every fingertip on your left hand, plus the palm, hard enough to bruise. Which sucks but, in the larger context of committing murder, seems cheap for the course. Once you do that, and recite this weird nonsense chant that sounds

like an Ozark lullabye sung by someone with fetal moonshine syndrome, the spell goes off and your target dies within twelve months, guaranteed. But again, a *year* is a long time to wait if you're mad right now.

That isn't the worst part, of course.

When I heard the Alabama Death Curse described on an old reel-to-reel tape, recorded in the early seventies, the toothless mountain warlock describing it said, "You ask Death inna yo' house fer to take a drank of water, Death won' leave 'til he don taste y'liquor and help hisself a' yo' vittles too."

When he unpacked that, it meant that the spell says, "Death come here!" It's got no provision for "Hey Death, that was great and all, but I have an early class so you probably better head out before the busses quit running."

I can't even threaten people with it, because even if they believed me, that would just mean the worst of the Story People would be hanging around trying to get curse lessons. Knowing what some of them can do, it's better to keep it secret. It would be a nightmare in the wrong hands and, frankly, I have a hard time imagining whose hands would be *right*.

But you know what? It's a consolation. I'll admit it, knowing that I can kill any acquaintance who pisses me off, and get away with it, and never go to jail, and probably escape all suspicion? That'll get a man through a lot of pissy days.

#

The second Story Person I met was the Thunder Saint. I saw him at a bus stop about three months after meeting Pete. (If you're wondering what we did that first day, it was mostly elliptically talking around the subject of "invisible magic weirdness." I later learned that it's very bad manners to ask too much about someone's process, though some people are more open than others and sometimes it's easier to guess. We exchanged phone numbers, just in case either one of us saw more boneless, sky-motif seafood.) I'd gone downtown check over an exhibition at the Art Institute but, for all its Kabbalistic hype it was about as magical as a trip to the podiatrist. It was getting dark and I was crabby and just wanted to go to my tiny, poorly-insulated apartment and watch an episode of *Friends*.

The Saint was older, smaller and thriftstore-dressed. He had a book and a bag of popcorn, and he was mumbling to himself with his mouth full. As I got closer, I heard enough to realize it was Catholic prayers—Hail Marys, Acts of Contrition, Our Fathers—on infinite playback. To be honest, I figured him for a religious nut, probably reading the Bible, so I sat on the far end of the bench. Don't get the wrong idea, I'm no atheist. There is nothing like dealing with squirrels at your junior high school that mutter, "I'ma cut you, fool" and intermittently seeing glowing movie-star faces the size of football stadiums floating in the night sky to make you shake your

head and snicker when someone says “I refuse to believe in anything beyond the reach of my senses!” But I don’t want to get preached at on the CTA either, or get told I’m going to hell. On my last census form, I was going to list my religion as “Schizognostic” until I saw there was a box for “Other” which is even more succinct.

So we sat and waited, and he did nothing more evangelical than point his full bag at me and give it a little shake. Didn’t even look up from his book. I declined, so he shrugged, flung out a generous portion on his side of the bench (delighting the local pigeon population) and continued reading.

The bus was late. Ten minutes, then twenty, finally thirty. Over the course of that half hour we sat uncomfortably, shifting position on the scarred, rigid aluminum seat with its vague urine smell, and I came to realize two things. One, the book he was reading was not the Bible but something called *The Naked Assassin*, and two, no matter how much popcorn he ate, the bag never got any emptier. He noticed this about the same time I did, and looked over at me with a raised eyebrow.

I shrugged.

He dogeared his book, wedged his snack between his knees and produced a little notepad with well-practiced ease. His ink-stained fingers scribbled a disposable Bic over the page, then presented it. All the time, he mumbled.

Ain’t seen U at Gus’

“What’s Gus...ses?” I asked, unsure how to pronounce it.

That got me another note.

U new in town?

“Um, not really.”

Everyone comes to Gus’

“I don’t know where it is.”

Follow me if bus evr comes.

I read it and looked up at him. He seemed harmless. Then again, so did the squirrels, and they left me with five distinct razor-blade scars on my shins and ankles from two separate ambushes.

“What’s your name?”

They call me the Saint

“I guess I can see why.” At that point, the bus arrived and we stumbled on. It was nearly empty, so we got seats on opposite ends of a three-wide vertical section.

“What were you doing with your popcorn?” I asked.

He gave an impatient look. His reply was jagged as our ride started, shook, and rocked down the road. His muttered prayers were now inaudible over the engine rumble, but I could see his mouth still moving.

Miracle

“You couldn’t have made the bus come on time?”

Nothing less divine thn mass transt

“Closer to infernal, I guess.”

He didn't break his “Our Father,” but he did flip me off.

A couple miles down the road we got off, went down a flight of steps into the basement of a fifties-era building, and he opened an unmarked door into a bar. It was a bar.

I know, that sounds redundant, but that's all the description that's really fit for Gus' Place. It is a bar. Whatever you think, or feel, or remember when you read or hear ‘it's a bar,’ that's what Gus' is. Gus' story is that he's a bartender, and because he's a Story Person, his bar is not merely an isolated example of a drinkery, it's a distilled, Platonic essence. It is the tavern as *ding an sich*.

That said, business wasn't very brisk. It was me, the Thunder Saint (who, now that we were inside, I could tell smelled a bit like ointment) and a guy in coveralls with a flower-shop logo screened on the back. He was sitting at the bar, watching ESPN over the shelf of bottles and ignoring the bartender, who had a handlebar mustache and was nonchalantly polishing a glass. His disinterested posture immediately changed when I came in.

“Hello, stranger!” That got the florist to turn too—he had bulgy eyes behind half-shut lids and a pinched little mouth—before he ducked his head back to his drink.

“Hi,” I said, walking forward and shaking the bartender's hand. (It seemed like the thing to do.) “I'm Ron Mahoney.”

“Gus.” Somehow, in the time it had taken me to walk five steps to the bar, he'd prepared both a highball tumbler of ice with something sparkling, and a glass of red wine. The red went to the Saint, and he presented the other to me. It had a lemon wedge garnish.

“First one's free,” he said.

“What is it?” I asked, though my hand had instinctively closed around the clear, cold column.

“It's your drink,” he replied, eyes cryptic.

I drank. It was lemon-lime soda with something crisp underneath it, some alcohol with just a hint of nail-polish remover in its flavor. It wasn't bad, but even in the years since, I've never come to love it. I know now that he'd given me a 7&7. Very much *my* drink, me being the seventh of a seventh, see? Magic is *cute*.

I guess it's also appropriate because I never came to love being me, either.

The other patron came over and introduced himself as “Johnny Bees,” and we had an awkward talk about Chicago and our hometowns and the lousy bus service before Gus brought up football and we were able to chew over the Bears' last season for a good half hour. We were just debating the defensive picks when Kung Fu Pete came in.

At the time, it wasn't a terribly wonderful, fun evening, but looking back I'm nostalgic. It's easy to get sticky-eyed over meeting the Saint, now that he's dead.

#

If I tell you about another spell I found, you might start wondering why I'm stuck taking busses. It's called "An Incantation Whereby Money Shall Cling," but I'm telling you, it's oversold. I mean, it's okay, I guess, supernaturally drawing money to me, but it's never in huge quantities. I play the lottery every day and, as long as I spend \$13.00 on tickets, I average a \$18.00 daily payout. Of course, the outlay is constant, and the income hits erratically—one time, I had to wade through six months of losses before a \$3,000 win. When I pushed my buying up to \$20 a day after that, the returns sank to an average of \$21.50 per day, over the course of *eight months*. So then I just bought a trio of dollar tickets every day for a couple months, and the payout there averaged \$3.50 a day out of a *single* win. I've settled at \$13.00 a day ever since. Spread over the course of a year, it's like clockwork... but it's like a clock that always averages out to get you out of bed at the right time by erring up to an hour early or late.

What's irritating, though? Money *literally* sticks to me. If you've ever tried to seal over a lunch bowl with cling-wrap and had it get stuck to itself, or wound up with a wadded mess of packing tape, you know the feeling. Imagine *that* happening to your hand every time you pull a bill from your wallet or fish your keys from the coin-change in your pocket. Honestly, one way it helps my finances is that I stopped making impulse purchases. Peeling the cash off my fingers and getting weird looks just isn't worth it.

Before you ask: Yes, checks and credit cards stick too.

If I put a dollar in a vending machine, it usually spits itself out after delivering my Coke or chips. I can defraud pay phones, except they're a vanishing breed. Tickets for the El and the busses return my money about half the time. I could feed myself entirely from metal boxes, except death seems slightly more appealing. I get bank errors, win raffles, and inevitably find change in coin-return slots.

I shouldn't complain. 'Grad Student' is not a lucrative trade, and magical flim-flam has cushioned my natural poverty. Still. Seems like kind of a ripoff.

#

After the Saint died—run down in a parking garage after shooting some guy from out of town—I got to meet his social worker, Alison Knewels. She didn't phone first, she just showed up at my apartment buzzer.

"Hello?" I said, uneasy. Things were usually... *odd*, around the Story People, but hardly ever violent. At least, not that I saw. Even Kung Fu Pete was like a westernized, '70s TV version of a 'spiritual warrior,' more likely to spout off about harmony and *not* fighting than he was to bust out the crane kicks. Unless it was an invisible monster

or something, at which point—all business, yeah. Between that sky-thing on the lakefront and the Saint’s demise, there was another episode with a time-traveling crab-ape the size of a hot-dog vending cart. Pete certainly saved my life with that one, which inevitably brought us a bit closer. He wasn’t an easy friend to have. His hero-narrative made him awfully smug, even above the typical Story Person narcissism. That’s probably what kept the peace between them for so long, actually. Self-involved people can’t always be bothered to interfere with one another.

Anyhow. When I said hello, the stranger down on the street said she was Franklin Bonn’s social worker. When I asked who that was, she sighed. “You may have known him as, hem, ‘The Thunder Saint?’”

“I’ll be right down.” There was only room in my apartment for two, and the bachelor mess of books and papers and cheap consumer electronics took up the space of one.

Alison was cute, and I’m not just saying that because I’m a constant loser with the ladies. She wasn’t pretty or beautiful—too heavysset and practical, but the glasses and braids and South American knit beret made her look good-natured, like your favorite emotional sounding board that you met working at the college radio station.

I kind of wished I’d taken a moment to comb my hair and put on a sweater without holes.

“Sorry for dropping in like this,” she said. “I was on my way from an appointment nearby and I got a great parking space.”

We were just standing on the street. She, somehow, looked perfectly comfortable. Maybe they teach you that as part of your MSW degree. “I was just going to... um, go check my mailbox,” I said. “People steal stuff out of my lobby,” I added.

She shook her head in sympathy and fell in beside me as I slouched down towards the UPS store.

“Did... Franklin... give you my address or something?”

“He wrote you into his will,” she said.

I winced, I’m sure. My stomach suddenly hurt, and she briefly put her hand on my shoulder.

“Were you two close?” she asked.

“No,” I blurted.

“He wasn’t... easy to communicate with,” she said.

“Did he tell you anything about me?” I wasn’t suspicious, really. Startled though. I barely ever thought about the Saint even when he was alive. He certainly wasn’t in *my* will, and I felt guilty that there was some kind of one-sided relationship. No, I’ll amend that: I felt guilt that I’d been unaware how one-sided the relationship was.

She shook her head. “He left you something.”

“Oh Jesus.”

The hand on the shoulder again.

“Let’s... let’s stop in at, um...” I looked around. We were passing the Falafel Den. “Can we go in here? They have Turkish coffee.”

“That’s fine.”

Inside, she opened her huge, owl-decorated purse and pulled out a manila folder. “It’s a standard will,” she said. “We actually did it off the internet.”

“You’re his executor?”

She nodded, and kept her head down.

“Hey are... are you okay, Miss Kraus?”

“Knewels,” she said. “Alison Kraus is a musician.”

“And Ron Mahoney is an idiot, I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m just...” I threw my hands in the air. “I don’t even know what I’m feeling,” I said, then hated myself a little more for being so lame.

“You and Franklin weren’t close?”

“I can’t honestly say we were,” I said.

She looked up, but away, and her eyes were a little red. “I think he was a very lonesome man.”

“That’s just the human condition though,” I said automatically. She turned back and gave me a sharp look.

“Do you really believe that?”

“I’m not good at really believing things,” I muttered. “What’s in the will?”

She opened the folder, got out some inkjet-printed pages—I could tell because there was a slight slant to one line—and tapped their edges on the table. ““To Ronald Mahoney, the seventh son of a seventh son,” she read, “I leave a bequest and a request. The bequest is the contents of a Puma brand shoe box under my bed in my apartment, sealed with brown packing tape, and may damnation death and misfortune befall anyone else who violates its integrity.””

“That’s off the internet?”

“Franklin was very determined when it came to filling in the blanks in the form,” she said with a little smile. “Do you know what’s in the box?”

“No clue. What’s the request?”

“Caught that, did you? “The receipt of the items in the sealed Puma box is contingent upon the completion of a final request, specifically, that Ronald Mahoney empty my apartment of my possessions and dispose of them as he sees fit, save for specific items named as bequests in this document. Ronald alone shall, at his sole discretion, dispose of any unspecified objects with the assistance of Kung Fu Pete.”” She looked up. “Do you know who that is?”

“Yeah.”

“I asked him for a proper name and he wouldn’t tell me.”

“He may not know,” I said. “I mean... didn’t.”

“Do you think he shot that guy?”

“*The fuck?!?*” I blurted. Which is probably a new low on the suave scale, even for me, but what she said was like a bolt from a cloudless sky. “I don’t... I have... I mean, he...” I threw my hands in the air. “No clue. I’ve never even been to his *home*.”

“I can’t see it,” she said, quietly.

“You think someone pinned it on him?”

“Did he have any enemies?”

“I don’t know.” It was only later that I realized she hadn’t said yes or no.

#

She made me sign for his keys and the very next day, Pete and I let ourselves into the Thunder Saint’s apartment. I’d been bounced back and forth between anxiety and curiosity over what I’d find. Mostly it was dread. I wasn’t close to the Saint but apparently I was as close as anyone, so the task promised to be depressing. On the other hand, he was one of *them* and I was going to see his innermost sanctuary. All my life, I’d been seeing the aborted garbage left behind by Story People. I could *see* magic, but these guys *were* magic, and I wanted to understand it. (If you want to see a Story Person flinch, by the way, describe what they do as “magic.” I don’t think I’ve heard one of them ever use that word, or its less popular analogues like “sorcery” or “enchantment.”) To them, things just are the way they are. I’m as different from them as an alcoholic is from a distiller. Though make no mistake, in this metaphor there are plenty of brewers with drinking problems.

I didn’t know what to expect: A miniature baroque-era chapel, crammed in his south side flat? A hermitage without any furniture but a pallet (whatever a ‘pallet’ actually is)? Just some old guy’s pad?

It was just some old guy’s pad. Crowded with bookshelves and an old CRT television. No stereo, just the kind of boom box where you can detach the speakers. One was attached, the other was missing.

The place smelled stale, like it hadn’t been aired out since he died, so the aromas of coffee and dust and, yes, ointment had flattened out in the atmosphere. The bookcase right beside the door was filled with religious books, all Christian. John Shelby Spong sat side-by-side with Andrew Greeley and Kyle Williams, though the last one had a used-bookstore sticker on it and still had the dustcover. There was a line of complete Left Behind paperbacks, a thicket of yellow post-it notes sprouting from their tops and curling up. I thumbed one straight and read the single word, ‘*bullshit*’ in the Saint’s cribbed script. There were at least a dozen bibles, ranging from a tiny green Gideon, to a huge thing that compared four different translations side by side, up through a leather-bound antique that, on closer inspection, had a list of Bonn births and deaths going back to the 1870s.

“Franklin was born in 1947,” I said.

Pete sighed.

Looking around for a pen, I found one of his Bic Round Stics by the phone, along with one of his cheap-grade steno pads. As I inked in the date of Franklin's death, Pete started paging through the back of the pad.

"Why does he even have a telephone?" Pete asked out loud.

"He could hear just fine, I guess. I called him a few times."

"Yeah?"

"You know. 'Hey Saint, I'm going to Gus', thought you might want to know in case you wanted to meet me there, I'm out the door right now, if I see you I see you,' that kinda thing. Mostly it was like leaving an answering machine message, only you could hear him praying on the other end."

"'Bang the phone once on the desk if you want me to pick you up,' that kind of thing?"

"I probably should have," I said, feeling a weird pang of guilt. "What's in the notes?"

"Just... fragments," he said, holding them out.

REM: Pray for Dnise, gall bladder.

St. Matt Rosry Grp. moved to Tues.

2/1 sandwiches at Meager's

"What's 'Meager's,' you ever hear of it?" Pete asked.

"Nuh uh. You suppose that's 'half sandwiches' or 'two for one sandwiches'?"

In the kitchen, I got a garbage bag from under the sink and started unloading produce from the shelves and fridge.

"Seems like a waste," Kung Fu Pete said, not helping.

"What do you suggest I do instead?"

"I don't know... would he have wanted us to give it to the poor?"

"No one around here's so poor he wants a dead man's peanut butter," I said, tossing a mostly-empty jar of store-brand chunky into the sack. The Saint's teakettle was filthy. Tiny fruit flies fuzzed the air over a blackened hand of bananas. His microwave was one of those huge old ones that has a tiny inner chamber, the kind that takes forever to heat anything and always leaves one side cold.

I was right. His apartment was depressing.

"You want to pull out unopened stuff from his pantry there, you can take it down to the shelter when we're done," I relented. His will had said "at my sole discretion" after all.

"He's got booze," Pete announced. "You want a brandy?"

"Sure," I said. "We can pour some on the curb."

"E & J," he said, grabbing a couple water-spotted tumblers.

"Easy Jesus," I muttered, holding up a hand before he could pour me a quintuple shot. He guzzled his like it was Gatorade and his eyes got red.

“It’s a goddamn crime,” he muttered.

I looked at him closely. He’d slumped against the counter.

“Pete...?”

“He gave up, at the end, you know.”

Something cold went down my spine at his words.

“How d’you mean?”

“Stopped praying. Started meaning it.”

“I don’t...”

“*He was a hypocrite, Ron. Don’t you get anything? He couldn’t have done all that stuff, laying on hands and making halos and loaves and fishes if he’d actually believed, that was the price. That was the point! But when he was dying, he... changed.*”

I thought really hard. I knew the Saint hadn’t made it to a hospital. He’d died on the scene, gun in hand, and though the police were making inquiries about the car that ran him down, I knew they hadn’t even made it as far as interviewing me.

Now here was Pete saying he’d been privy to the Saint’s dying conversion.

“Let’s go in the bedroom,” I said.

The bed was the saddest, loneliest single you’d ever see. It was unmade, with an unraveling crocheted comforter clashing with a plaid coverlet. It sat wedged between two more bookshelves, with a single chest of drawers at the end holding up a tiny television that was probably about my age. It had a no-kidding rabbit-ears antenna with tinfoil. Here, there wasn’t a single holy text to attract the eye—all thrillers, *Modesty Blaise* and Clive Cussler, Stieg Larssen and, three rare hardcovers in the sea of paperbacks, *The Naked Assassin* and what I believe are its sequels, *Lipstick Rage* and *Whoremongers of the Wasteland*.

The bedside table was cheap fiberboard, its top covered with tissues (both in the box and used), cough drops and an empty mug, another phone handset beside an address book, the inevitable Round Stic and notepad and a few more softcovers (old Thomas Harris this time). I figured it would probably be the worst, and in the spirit of pulling off a bandaid quickly I went to it first.

“Hey Ron,” Pete called from the doorway.

I looked up in time for a slim, light box to hit me, flat-edged, dead in the center of my chest. Pete might be swaying but he could still throw objects with inerrant accuracy.

It flopped to the floor and I saw it was a box of latex gloves.

“Really?”

“Hey,” he said. “You never know.”

Looking at the crusted kleenexes, dusting the floor like dandruff flakes on a dark suit, I decided he was right. With a sigh, I pulled out another garbage bag and started picking them up. Pete just sat down on the end of the bed and stared blankly at his shoes.

There was pocket change mixed in there too. I cursed at the pennies and dimes as they half-clung to my rubbery fingers.

The bottom compartment had porn. It was bland and unimaginative. For some reason, that cheered me up a little. I just threw it out without much examination.

In the top drawer, along with liniment and lotion tubes, there was small stack of cards paper-clipped together. Their edges were dingy and I gave them a glance.

Faster please.

Gently.

Please slow down.

I would like you to kiss me here.

“Jesus,” I grunted.

“What?” Pete asked, his voice uneasy.

“I found the Saint’s pillow talk.” I threw them in the sack with unnecessary force.

“What, really?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Really.”

He sniffled. “I don’t know whether that’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard, or if I ought to be impressed that an old guy with his issues was managing to get action.”

When the bedside table was empty, I ran my fingers over the books and felt a couple tugs. *The Prodigal Daughter* had a fifty dollar bill tucked by the back cover. *Shadow Divers* only had a twenty. They went in my wallet, with the usual struggles. ‘Sole discretion.’

Lying sideways on the bottom of the shelf was a huge hardback, too tall to be stored upright. Its cover was covered with aged, crackling cellophane. “Hey Pete,” I said. “It’s your bequest.”

“Romero’s Illustrated Medical Dictionary?”

When I picked it up, I was startled to find that it was far lighter than it should have been. Its weight shifted in my hands with a small ‘clunk.’

“Wha...?” I handed it to him and he opened it.

“It’s a book safe,” he said, showing me that the pages had been hollowed out and glued together. There was a small box inside with a bullseye printed on one corner. He lowered his face towards it and sniffed. “Gun oil,” he said. “This is where he kept his revolver.”

I swore, listlessly.

“How many bequests are there?” Pete asked.

“Yours, mine, one for someone named ‘Jennifer’—he didn’t have a last name for her, just a phone number—and one for Barbara Yaeger.”

Barbara Yaeger, also a Story Person, also dead.

###

Nobody has anything nice to say about Barbara, but I think I saw a side of her no one else got to know. I could be fooling myself, or it could be that I got fooled externally. It was several years ago and I was really drunk.

I met Barbara at Gus' New Years' party. It wasn't a costume party, but, well, any time you get a couple dozen Story People together it's going to *look* like one. Barb was at the far end of the bar, perched on a stool, facing three-quarters away from me. She had on a snug black dress, elbow sleeves and knee hem, over black hose and black heels. I remember that her foot was dangling, and the shoe hanging off it. She rotated her ankle a couple times, the gap between heel and sole opening and closing.

Her posture changed as she turned right towards me. I straightened up and looked her in the eye. I was too startled to do anything else.

She had a deep olive complexion, a tight little mouth, and eyes somewhere between angry and sad. She had a fine, pointy nose and, beside it on the left side, a black spot that was a little too big to be a beauty mark, but still too cute to be a mole. I thought so, anyway. I'd already had two 7&7s.

She was wearing a black hat, too, pointy and with a big brim. She just looked at me.

"Didja see that Imelda Two-Ways got a poem published?" Johnny Bees said, over by my left side.

"Where, on a bathroom wall?" sneered I guy I knew only as Stringer.

(Stringer's dead now too. Barbara's ghost killed him. I'd forgotten that until just now. He was always kind of a jerk.)

"No, in this, like, little arts newspaper," Bees said. "Lissen to this."

Johnny had a weird, buzzing tone to his voice, but he read it clearly and probably a bit too loud for Stringer, who was right next to him, after all.

"Treat the grapefruit like the grape
Surely, both share noble shape.
Never mention grapefruit's size
(That would be in no way wise)
Nor refer to it as 'fruity.'
In this way do fairness' duty."

"What crap," Stringer said.

"What," Johnny said, "You don't get it?"

"I'm sure I get it on more levels than *you*," Stringer said. "It's a satire on political correctness that aims to use its oversimplified rhythms and strict rhyme to deride the puerile philosophy it purports to espouse." He took a long drink.

I found that, without thinking about it, I'd taken two or three steps closer to the woman in black.

“That’s stupid,” Johnny replied. “It’s just a nice little poem about being fair to each other. If you think Imelda’s trying to run down people who mock outsiders, you don’t understand the first thing about her.”

“I think Imelda is, *as always*, trying to have it both ways and you, in your typical fashion, have missed the point entirely.”

“Don’t talk to me about points,” Johnny said. “You wouldn’t like my points.”

The argument escalated behind me as I took a chair. A 7&7 was waiting.

“My treat,” she said. “I’m Barbara.”

“Ron.” It was a tradition at Gus’ for Story People to buy me a 7&7 upon first introduction. I kind of hated it—such a gesture of pity. But that New Years’, it seemed acceptable.

“What do you think the message of Imelda’s poem is?” I asked.

“The same subtext as all poetry: ‘Pay *attention* to me!’”

I chuckled. “You think Stringer and Johnny are going to fight?”

“No, I think they’re finally going to kiss,” she said. Whatever she was drinking, it was served in a plain black coffee cup.

“Wait, what...?”

“It’s funny because it’s *not* true,” she said, flatly. “But in all seriousness, I think Imelda wanted to make people bicker and it’s working. That said, midnight *is* coming up.”

Fast forward eight hours and I was waking up in her tiny bed, in her tiny house. It was my very first one-night-stand. I had a brutal hangover but was guardedly optimistic about how I’d started the year. If you’re born an heir to weirdness, you take your good omens where you can get them.

Barbara’s bedroom was crowded, though unlike the Saint she didn’t have bookshelves or a TV. There was a workbench with all kinds of roots and plant cuttings on it, many of them suggestively shaped. Or perhaps I was just in a suggestible state. I couldn’t, for the life of me, have said where the house was. I had a vague memory of clinging behind her on what I have to assume was a motorcycle as we tore through the streets at high speed. She’d turned her head a few degrees at one point and shouted, “GRAB MY TITS!” back at me over the roar of the wind. I’d obeyed.

As I came more awake, I also became aware that while my head hurt most, my hips and thighs also felt like I’d run wind sprints and my privates felt... well, kind of chewed-on.

I slid out from under the quilt and gritted my teeth as my feet hit the icy floor. I got as dressed as I could, but I couldn’t find one sock or my underpants. I was pretty sure my parka was discarded in the kitchen, one rickety flight of steps downward. That sounded right. We’d been kissing, passionately, and she’d pulled it off me. Had it torn? Couldn’t recall.

In a moment of doubt, I looked back at her and, yeah, she did not look anywhere near as good through sobriety. I mean, no one's at her best first thing, and I'm sure I looked like something you'd find growing around the grout of your tub. Still. The black thing on her face seemed far larger and more stark by daylight, and her complexion was less 'Mediterranean' than 'green.' For just a shade of a second I squinted to make sure she was breathing, I seriously thought she might have died from alcohol poisoning. But no, she shifted while I watched, giving a little snot-snort through her pointy proboscis.

I snuck down the stairs.

My plan, with God as my witness, was to put on a pot of coffee, make some toast or eggs and give her breakfast in bed. I was still, at that point, open to the idea of a long-term romantic entanglement, or at least a friendship with privileges.

The kitchen was tiny and cramped, but clean. I picked up my coat off the floor and put it on a tiny, two-person formica table. Then I opened the refrigerator and saw that she had human body parts in her tupperware.

#

It took most of the afternoon to clean out the Saint's apartment. I'd tried the number for "Jennifer" and gotten a disconnect message, so then I'd called Allison Knewels, who had no idea who Jennifer was either. With a grunt, Pete copied the number and said he'd talk to some people he knew. "Bells," he said, as if that explained everything, then walked out the door.

For two hours, I just organized stuff, getting it... compact. I called a used bookstore and asked if they bought books by the pound. Got Goodwill on the phone for the furniture and clothing, they promised a truck, gave me a time. In his bathroom, the Saint had three tiny paintings depicting, I think, spring autumn and winter in Paris. They were beautiful and I almost took them, but I decided to give them to Gus' instead. It would be less weird, somehow.

The worst part was the notes.

You'll get yr \$, you alwys have

No it givs me hrtburn

I thnk her early albms were bettr.

It was like finding stray dead-man thoughts scattered around. There were two notepads in the living room, one in the kitchen, two more in the bedroom. Above and beyond those, there were little sheets crumpled by the garbage cans, under the sofa, lying on the tiny desk by the calendar.

Its not so bad

Can U give me a ride to F&P?

Nd. to get it fixed

Fuck Pter Sgal

Pck me up a gal. of milk I'll pay bck Weds.

I AM DONE WITH THAT PART OF MY LIFE.

That last one got me—all caps, everything spelled out, punctuation—it broke my heart. So emphatic, and what could it mean? If I had to guess, I'd bet he wrote that one for Alison.

On top of that, there were the bequests. For Jennifer, an envelope that had money in it, judging from the way it clung to me like a sock to a mass of staticky laundry. He'd left Barbara a wax-sealed mason jar with something transparent inside. Holy water? Gin? I had no idea, but I wasn't going to open it and I had no idea how to deliver it. As far as I knew, Barbara never got buried and had no monument, so I couldn't even pour it on her final resting place.

Then there was the Puma box. I'd gotten it out and set it aside in a corner of the room, along with the other bequests and those little pictures. Oh, and I grabbed a copy of *Destroying Angels* because, the way my life goes, I might need a how-to manual. (Just kidding. I'd meant to pick that one up ever since Gus recommended it. "It's like Diane Arbus wrote a mystery novel," he said.)

I'd thought about opening my present, but there was no Christmas-birthday excitement. I felt obligated, but I wasn't going to tear in until the apartment was empty. 'Damnation death and misfortune,' he'd said, and you take that seriously from a guy after you see him walk on water. (It was late at night and a boat had drifted away after the cosmoctopus came back... long story.)

Sitting and waiting for the Goodwill truck, I turned Barbara's bequest over and over in my hands. What if I just dropped it? After all, she was gone.

###

That long-ago January 1, she was waiting for me at my apartment by the time I got back to it. This didn't even require a miracle, it took me over two hours to get across town. First, I'd run out of her house screaming—yes, literally—and had just charged down the street until I found a bodega open. Then I ran into its bathroom, locked myself in, and threw up. Finally, I called a friend of mine from the University.

"Steve," I said, "You gotta come pick me up!"

After the preliminaries of him getting fully awake and me reassuring him that this wasn't a joke, he asked me what had happened.

"I think I may have slept with a serial killer," I said, then explained what I'd seen.

"Okay... you didn't, maybe, imagine this?" Steve said. I know Steve considered me 'nervous and high-strung,' I'd overheard him talking to the phlebotomist about me once.

"One of the feet had toenail polish," I told him.

“Um... maybe she’s doing some kind of special effects thing for a play or, or a movie, or it’s an art project?” Steve’s own tone showed that he knew how weak this was. “Maybe she’s a lab tech, did you ask her what she did for a living?”

“She’s not a lab technician,” I said, with more conviction than I felt.

“You really just blew Marron’s Law out of the water with this one, didn’t you?” he said, with a nervous chuckle.

(‘Marron’s Law’ is named after John Marron, who served as a dorm floor monitor when I was an undergrad. I think he’s an archaeologist now. Anyhow, his most repeated piece of advice was, ‘Don’t put your dick in the crazy.’)

“I’m glad you’re *amused*,” I told him, “But I need to get the hell out of here before she finds me, can you come pick me up?”

“Um... where are you?”

I got the address from the shopkeeper and waited twenty minutes before hearing back from Steve. His car wouldn’t start.

“You’re just telling me this *now*?” I hissed.

“Okay, first, I had to get up and put some pants on and take a dump,” Steve said sharply. “Then I spent the rest of the time fucking around with priming the pump and jumper cables and what-have-you, so don’t take that tone with me, all right? Clearly your psycho bed-hag hasn’t murdered you yet. Why not splurge for a cab, or get on the El or something?”

“You can’t start the El Camino *at all*?” I asked him.

“It won’t even turn over,” he sighed.

So, watching over my shoulder the whole time, I got on the train, got a transfer, and wound up back at my apartment where she was waiting for me, leaning against my door.

I screamed and would have turned to run if she hadn’t rushed me and given me a slap across the chops. I’m not sure if that brought me to my senses, or just surprised me so much that I couldn’t react.

“You asshole,” she said. “Who told you you could poke around in my things?”

“I was gonna make you breakfast in bed,” I muttered.

“Oh for the love of...” She folded her arms and rolled her eyes, then glared at me. “Open the damn door,” she said, and I did it.

“Are you going to kill me?” I asked. Probably whimpered.

“If I wanted you dead, I’d have done it last night while you were farting and hogging covers.” She looked over my apartment with a fine, rich sneer. “Aren’t you going to offer me a seat?”

“Oh, um, sure. C’mon in here. I’ll make Russian Tea,” I babbled as I took her to my kitchen table, which had once been my parents’. I put on the kettle and said, “Um, I’m sorry I ran out...”

“No you’re not,” she said. “You looked in the fridge and you freaked.”

For a moment I just stared.

“What did I see?” I asked.

“I think you know,” she replied coolly. “You didn’t call the police, did you?”

I tried to decide whether to answer. She just looked right through me and said, “You didn’t. Good to know you’re not *that* stupid, anyhow. They’d never even find my cottage.”

I was still trying to figure out if I’d been too smart to call the cops or too dumb when the kettle shrieked. ‘Russian Tea’ is one of mom’s recipes. It’s mostly Nestea and Tang with instant lemonade mix and some spices. Barbara took one sip and made a face.

“What did you call this?”

“Russian Tea.”

“There are two things wrong with that name,” she declared, shoving the cup away. “That’s repulsive.”

“Says the cannibal!”

“...which just proves I know what I’m talking about.”

I took a nervous sip as she leaned back and looked away. Out my window you can see a brick wall and, from the proper angle, a bit of sky. Today it was gray. I glanced back in time to see her pull her hair back behind her ear and I remembered her doing the same thing, identical gesture, when we’d switched positions so she could be on top.

I’d kissed lips that tore human flesh. In an instant, I bolted to my feet, ran to the bathroom and threw up.

“Sorry,” I said, when I came back. She rolled her eyes.

“How’d you find my apartment, anyhow?” I asked.

“Please,” she said. “I possess your garments. I could find you anywhere on Earth.”

“Oh...”

“Look Ron, you’re clearly a sad and lonesome little man. If it makes you feel better, I can tell you I put something into your drink, I can tell you I cast a glamour last night. You can tell yourself you didn’t know, and that’s even the truth.” She tapped her lacquered fingernails on the tabletop. Had they looked so long last night? “But here’s the thing. I was ovulating. I need to complete the Mother aspect of the eternal goddess.”

“Wait, *what?*”

“...so if your man-seed’s sub-par, I’ll have to regretfully come back in about thirty days for another top-off,” she said, and by God she even curled her lip a little.

“You... wait, you need...”

“I’ll show myself out,” she said, standing. She looked down at the cup, then deliberately tipped it on its side, letting a sheet of syrupy orange liquid sleet across the table. I sprang up and grabbed paper towels as she sauntered away.

“Hey!” I shouted. “What about me, huh? What if I can’t *pop a rod* for your scary green snatch?!”

“Please,” she said, “Herbal viagra is the first trick witches learn.”

“And if I don’t come when you beckon?”

She turned back and raised a finger, and I gasped. It felt like ice, like something pointy and frozen was lodged behind my breastbone. As she curled her finger, the agony moved. I opened my mouth to scream and nothing came out but white vapor.

“I can be very persuasive.” She dropped her hand and I crumpled to the floor.

“Sorry Ron,” she continued. “I have very specific needs, and you can’t get the yuck of a seventh-son-squared at the fertility clinic. You’ll do it, or I’ll kill you. Or both.”

“What happens to my child?” I whispered, trying to stand but unable.

“Don’t you worry yourself about that,” she said.

#

The Saint’s apartment was finally empty, clean as a bone, and when I saw Pete he had a black eye. That surprised me a lot, but he just waved off my questions.

“Bells have gotten unfriendly,” he said. “And I had words with Jennifer’s...” He slid a glance over at me and changed to “...with a guy she knew. I made sure *she* got the envelope though. Hope it was worth it.”

“Sorry you went through that.” I shook the mason jar. “What do you think I should do with this?”

“Take it to Gus? That was where she... um, stopped,” he said.

I just gave him a look but, I guess ‘stopped’ is as good a word for ‘had her ghost kicked into oblivion’ as any.

“I guess,” I said. Then, without expecting I’d say anything, I asked him, “Do you think it’s all over now?”

“What?”

“The Saint’s dead. So’s Barbara, and Billie, and Stringer, and that guy from Detroit... who knows how many we don’t know about? Is it done, Pete? Is Death finished rummaging in our pantry?”

“I don’t think it ever is.”

I nodded, and opened the Puma box. Inside was two jars, each full of liquid and sealed with a complicated plastic lid. One had clear fluid and a molar. The other was rusty red with something suspended in it, something so old it was floating apart into its preservative.

I squinted at a label. “It’s his gall bladder,” I said.

“Ooh, and the tooth was his too? I remember him getting that out,” Pete said. “May I?”

I nodded and handed him the receptacle. He turned it over in his hands.

“Damn,” he said respectfully. “If he’d died as he... as he was, this would be really something. Relics, you know? Artifacts of a... holy man.”

“But?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Just a dead man’s tooth. Sorry Ron.”

“It’s all right. I don’t know what I’d do with a sacred relic anyway.”

#

The day after I screwed Barbara and called Chris, I went to a little hardware store to get a hammer and one of those electric tools, like a soldering iron, that you use to burn letters into wood. I found one of her hairs, still stuck to my collar. (It cut my finger when I handled it.) She died two months later, but I only had to fuck her once. I’d borrowed a car, driven to Missouri, but she found me. It was awful, the worst thing that ever happened to me. Made that bad Thanksgiving look like a Hallmark card.

So who do I blame that the Saint died, and Stringer, and the rest? Me, for using the Alabama Death Curse? Barbara, for forcing my hand? That too-curious anthropologist who recorded the eerie song that powers it?

Maybe it doesn’t really matter at all.

#

The third functional spell I’ve found is supposed to draw love and make it stay. I’m far too terrified of side effects to even attempt it.