

Until I was setting up this anthology, I'd forgotten that a book safe played a role in 7 & 7. I like them, I guess. I also like wordplay, and if the opposite of a dangerous book is a safe book, then I could play on the Lovecraftian idea of terrifying tomes, along with some questions of atheism and belief.

How to Make a Book Safe

You know what a book safe is, even if you think you don't. You've seen the scene in a movie where someone takes a book down from a shelf and the music gets mysterious, and when she opens it, it's hollowed out and inside is... something. The microfiche. A gun. The incriminating letter. Her drugs.

The object of fascination.

To make a book safe you need good craft glue, some clamps, a sharp knife and a book (of course). You want a deep one, but not so big it attracts attention. It should be boring, not the sort of thing someone pulls down to idly page through. I got a used Econ textbook.

I didn't have a secret to hide. I just liked the idea of having a private space no one knows about. I'm an only child so, until I got to college, I never had to share a room.

I made my book safe in Dad's workshop while he was on one of his long trips. The first day, I put a piece of waxed paper between pages 38 and 39. I glued the edges of the two sections and let them dry. Then I clamped the big part's edges, pages 39 and onward, and cut out a rectangular interior. Cut only ten pages or so at a time, or the edges go all over the place. Then you can sand the insides, and glue them, and there you are. A hole for your secrets.

When I came to college, I didn't have any secrets, or at least, not any you could put in a box.

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Earnestlow Women's College was my first choice. I went to an all-girls high school and a lot of my classmates were eager to go somewhere with "boys." But I noticed something with the girls around the neighborhood, that when boys were around, or men, they had this tiny hesitation before they said anything. When we were all alone, it went away. I don't want that, a little instinctive pause.

Professor Patricia Starr taught a class called "History's Most Dangerous Books," covering *Mein Kampf*, *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the Koran and the Bible.

"Imagine a bomb that could kill 200,000 people over the course of two hundred years," she said in class. "A bomb that was reduced in size to less than an inch on a

side in 1901, that can be purchased in countless stores, a bomb that can travel on the Internet, on a CD-ROM, a bomb that can infect any printing press and reproduce itself cheaply and efficiently. A bomb whose killing power can spread even when it is *physically absent*, moving from mind to mind with voice power and turning ordinary people into obedient killers. That's the Bible," she said.

Professor Starr looked like she would have you brush her hair at bedtime and would never thank you for it, but you'd do it anyway because her hair is so straight and dark and has the loveliness you find in perfectly efficient things. Like the beauty of a shark's profile.

She taught another class my junior year with Doctor Sonia Iddesburden, who is her opposite. Sonia looks like she'd sit on the sofa and you could put your head in her lap when you were feeling troubled, and she'd stroke your hair and tell you you're a good girl. She wears pantsuits and big chunky necklaces, and even when she's serious, you get the sense that there's a smile ready under the surface of her open, full-moon face. Even if it's a sad smile.

The class they taught together was "Perspectives on the Faith Dialectic in the 21st Century." We sat in a circle, with Dr. Iddesburden on one end and Professor Starr on the other. On the first day, Sonia said we could call her by her first name, and we did. Professor Starr didn't give us that permission, but since Sonia was calling her Patricia (though never "Pat") we followed suit. She never seemed to mind. She said that the hierarchical displays of titles had their place, but that if Dr. Iddesburden wanted to set them aside, that was fine. She corrected a student who called her "Doctor Starr," explaining that she was still working on her thesis. She shot a flat little look at Sonia when she said it.

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"We're going to talk about the Bible, among other holy books," Sonia said, that first day. "But first, I'd like to talk about what the Bible *isn't*. That's important, because so many of you are agnostics, right? Raise your hands if you're an agnostic, or an atheist."

Patricia raised her hand. A few other women stuck their hands up high. Maybe two did it hesitantly, as if they weren't committed.

"If you listen to fundamentalists, the Bible has a unified message that explains how to function as a human being, simply and directly, the same way the manual for an alarm clock or a DVD player explains its function. That position is bullshit." Her tranquil smile never faltered.

We tittered and ate our cookies. (She'd baked chocolate-chip cookies for the first day of class.)

“Read the whole Bible with a critical eye and you can reduce much of it to disagreement and apparent hypocrisy. Its failures of coherence lead many to dismiss it as... what, Patricia? What do you call it?”

“A genocide text?” Patricia replied. “The patriarchy’s greatest weapon? A brainwashing manual for sectarian violence? Rational thought’s bitterest placebo?”

“Any of those will do. But to understand what it *is*, and how it has remained a more vital social force than organized atheism has ever been or—I would argue—ever could be, I’d like to discuss astronomy.”

I tilted my head to the side. I’ve never been good at science or math.

“The Babylonians believed the stars were gods, and they watched them obsessively. What was your joke, Patricia? ‘Like *Us* magazine’? It was funnier when she said it. Anyhow, over generations of observation, they developed a set of predictive patterns. They could tell you where Jupiter would rise on any given day and when Mercury would go retrograde.

“After the Babylonians came Ptolemy in Egypt, who took similar data and formed a theory that the planets circled the Earth within a sphere of fixed stars. To explain their apparent alterations in speed, and the changes in direction of Venus and Mercury, he said that they made little circles in their orbits. Epicycles.

“Next came Galileo, inaccurately credited with formulating the heliocentric theory that the Earth orbits the sun. Certainly he popularized it. His ambition was to get rid of the epicycles in Ptolemaic model. Those were the ghosts in his machine, inelegant corrections on an otherwise sublime system.

“Galileo pursued a model without epicycles, using all his genius, and he failed. His best attempt wasn’t even accurate as the Babylonian star charts. It was Kepler who eliminated epicycles by realizing orbits might be oval, not perfect circles.”

Her dimples shifted as she folded her hands in her lap. “Imagine a book that starts with the Babylonian data, and then includes Ptolemy’s model, then Galileo’s, then Kepler’s. A comprehensive history of astronomy, written over centuries, chronicling different geniuses and their insights. It would contradict itself at many, many points. It would have vast linguistic and stylistic differences. But no part of it would be worthless, and no scientist would deride the Babylonians for lacking Galileo’s telescope.

“Despite how the Bible is used, that is what it *is*. Thousands of years, different languages, multiple authors, varied perspectives, but all, *all*, chronicling encounters with the divine. By definition, a ‘god’ is far greater than a human. Expecting mere humans to understand it perfectly seems, to this humble believer, an unreasonably high standard for atheists to set.”

###

I followed them. I was terribly shy—*am* terribly shy, to be honest. I knew Sonia was Professor Starr's thesis advisor, so they were together a lot, but I couldn't help thinking there was more to it. The way one would hold a door for the other as they walked through the cafeteria, so they could continue their discussion without breaking stride... the inclination of their heads together... the way their footsteps synched up when they walked...

This is embarrassing but I took pictures of them with my phone. Little films sometimes. The graphics were surprisingly clear once I blew them up on my laptop. Silent though. I wouldn't get close enough to eavesdrop. At least, not while filming.

But one day, I overheard them in the library. I was reshelving, I had a work-study job there, and I took my time on the other side of the wall of books, ear right at the gap.

"Patricia, I do not accept that," Sonia said, sounding as patient as always.

"Who are you to say?"

I twitched my head back and my heart sped up. It wasn't that Patricia was loud. It was the library, after all. But I know what anger sounds like when it doesn't want to be overheard, and I immediately wondered how mom and dad were doing. I hoped it would be easier for them, with me out of the house.

Don't get the wrong impression. I was not a battered child. I only remember one time. But the thing is... the times I thought it was *about* to happen? I can't count all those.

"I'm your thesis advisor." Sonia didn't sound scared, and I wished I wasn't.

"That doesn't mean you get to dictate my conclusions! I *get it* Sonia, you don't agree with my disbelief, but I though you had enough intellectual integrity to disconnect *your* opinions from *my* logic."

"Have I ever made an unfair critique of your reasoning? If so, I apologize."

"Not in writing," Patricia sneered, and I wanted to risk a peek through the gap. I was sure her righteous anger was beautiful, but I was too frightened to look on it.

"Only in action. What is so special about that book, Sonia? What's so terrifying in the *Librim Nigris* that I'm not even permitted to handle it?"

"It is my personal property, it is quite fragile and extremely expensive," Sonia said. "It was deeded to me, specifically, because Dr. Javaheri trusted me. The sort of examination you want to make is... quite risky." I heard a rustle, as if one or the other had shifted position. Perhaps Sonia had taken her hand.

I realized I was out of books to shelve and stood, unmoving, until I realized they were still also. Finally daring to breathe, I quietly pushed my cart away.

#

“Religion,” Gina Berkes said at the next class session, “Has been called the opiate of the masses, and whatever other issues you can take with Communism, I think Marx nailed that one. The effort and time and money poured into worship represents a missed opportunity unparalleled in human history. Had the effort wasted in lavish praise of nonexistent gods been put towards the charity those *same gods purportedly demand*, hunger and want would be fragments of the past, as outdated as a papal indulgence.” Her color was high, but the effect was a bit diminished by the stiff, rehearsed sound of her words. She was reading off note cards. We were debating in class. “If the crusaders and jihadis had devoted themselves to science and medicine instead of warfare, who knows how much farther along a wiser, saner, more responsible world of atheists might be? Thank you.”

She sat, and it was my turn.

“What if,” I started, then paused to clear my throat and tried to speak up. “What if it’s real?”

I waited. I’d spoken first, then her, and so now it was my turn to respond to her statements. I looked down at the scrawled notes on my pad and felt my face burn.

“What if it’s real? And of course, what if it’s not? There’s no way to know. That’s the whole, the entire point of the question. Of this class. We can’t know. And the believers say that the fact that it can’t be proved, that’s crucial. ‘If you meet the Buddha in the road, kill...’ My pen slipped from my fingers. I’d been wiggling it like a baton. I stooped to pick it up, even as I realized I didn’t need it, that I was just fidgeting. “‘Kill the Buddha.’ Because any Buddha you can meet can’t be the real one. The truly divine is ineffable. That’s what the people who claim these, these mystic visions, Hildegard of Bingen and the rest, they can’t put it into words and if they could, if they could distill the essence onto the page, it wouldn’t be worth it. And so the agnostics and scientists all say that’s the point, that you can’t know, so you’re a fool to act like you *do*.” I glanced up at Gina, whose head was hunched over her pad, feverishly taking notes. I looked at the rest of the class. They seemed bored or confused. But Sonia smiled and nodded, and I was encouraged.

“Do people you know like to suffer for no reason?” I asked. “Do you know anyone who threw their life away for something they felt was pointless and stupid? We work at lousy jobs but we get paid for them. We put up with, with things when we have no choice... but religion? Faith, today, is easy to walk away from. Why are people working so hard if they’re not getting anything out of it? Doctor, um, *Professor Starr* would say they’re after the right to feel superior, or that they’re being conned into having hope, but when I look at the Sistine Chapel ceiling, it doesn’t look like someone who was conned. Atheists have written some great books I guess, but where’s a brilliant painting of the absence at the center of the cosmos? The proper response to the void of God isn’t the anger we saw over, over that movie *The Innocence of Muslims*. The proper response is indifference. And every agnostic I knew was

enraged, that religion was getting so much attention. That a badly-made film lampooning a prophet they didn't even believe in... people were willing to kill and die over that. While the whole argument of mainstream atheism is that the questions *aren't* worth killing over, or dying. So religion is powerful, and always has been, and agnostics deny that power at their peril.

“What does it say about atheism as a... a practice, that even if it's a hundred percent true, it's not as strong as religion? Even if religion is absolutely false?”

“So if you are a committed atheist, a deep-down to the core denier of the... ineffable and holy? Ask yourself what religion would look like if it was *true*. Ask how much more dangerous a holy book would be, if it *could* be confirmed. And maybe understand that, as least as far as those who kill and die are concerned... they are. Thank you.”

There weren't winners and losers of the in-class debates. If there had been, I think I would have lost. But Sonia did ask me to wait after class.

#

When Sonia suggested I walk with her to “her favorite spot on campus,” I was surprised that it was that same alcove where she'd quarreled with Professor Starr. There was a view out the window, autumn trees over the campus' artificial pond, but it didn't seem all that special. She gave it an affectionate glance, smiling as if at a private joke, before turning back to me.

As we went to the library, she'd asked about my home town and my academic plans and normal student-teacher matters. I'd wished, just for a moment, that I could start my phone recording, but I didn't dare. Besides, I'm sure it would have been muffled if I'd had it in my backpack, and if I'd held it, she'd have noticed.

“So Colleen,” she said, “Are you a believer?”

“I don't know.”

She nodded approvingly, though thinking back on it I'm not sure what I could have said that she wouldn't have accepted.

“I think I've been clear about my position,” she said, “And it's hard, you know. Between the unbelievers who are so stridently critical, and the fundamentalists who are so stridently *uncritical*, it's very hard to chart a middle ground.”

“You just get it from both sides,” I murmured.

“Exactly! There is little space in the discourse for someone who hasn't staked a claim and who isn't willing to attack all who dare dissent from it. Your description of ‘the absence at the center’ struck a chord with my own feelings about the centrality of our ignorance and doubt. If you're a pea on the cosmic scale,” she said, “You're going to think the whole world is pod.”

“But what about mystics?” I said. “The gnostics who claim direct knowledge, the... unspeakable experience that can’t be confirmed, but which changes their lives? Who said, in effect, that they saw outside the bubble but couldn’t explain it in bubble language?”

“Hm. In the old days, many faiths used entheogens... drugs that open the mind to the divine? Psilocybin, DMT, ibogaine? And people touched heaven, just as they expected. Only now we’re finding that transcranial magnetic stimulation can create similar sensations. So even something that feels like direct exposure to God’s radiance may just be an accident of brain chemistry.”

We were quiet for a moment before the corner of her mouth quirked up. “Of course, the same machines can make people see the color yellow when it’s not there. From atheist logic, we should then assume that there are no yellow things.”

I laughed, but I was a bit uneasy and I think she could tell.

“What did you do your doctoral dissertation about?” I blurted. I knew the answer. Dad was a lawyer and said he never asked questions unless he knew the answer, but of course it’s different in academics.

She leaned back. “There was a religious sect, long ago in Middle Asia, now almost entirely wiped out. This nameless cult was primarily visible as... a shadow, I guess. I started out comparing heresy accusations from early Christian and Muslim sources, only to find surprisingly common themes in the practices they ascribed to minor sects that earned persecution. Imagine a researcher two thousand years from now, trying to figure out what Christians are, based only on documents from Islamic and agnostic sources! That’s what these people from Yiang Ho were like, in my research. Yet for all the suppression, they were remarkably durable, cropping up again and again in new guises, their worship texts translated into Greek, or Latin, or Old Tibetan. My lucky break came here, when Dr. Javaheri invited me out to see a text she owned, known as the *Librim Nigris* for its black cover. It was a Latin translation of the Yiang Ho myth cycle and practices. Incomplete and terribly corrupt, of course—the central figure was referred to only as ‘Magnum Innominandum,’ ‘The Great Not-To-Be-Named.’ Terrifying stuff,” she said, glancing away out the window.

“Why terrifying?”

“Because it’s so pure,” she said, still not meeting my gaze. “I understood very little but I can see how it would make people kill, and die, and keep their faith secret for generations until it could burst forth and rave and rape and slaughter again. Even in a strange language, with pages missing and worm-holes through the words it all... made perfect sense.”

She looked back at me, and for the first time her smile seemed a little pitying, or condescending. “But that was long ago. I haven’t read it since then.”

#

Dr. Iddesburden had a comic strip on her office door. I took a picture. In the first panel, two people are both talking, both saying the same thing. One has a cross on his shirt, the other has a Darwin fish. They're both saying, "You don't take me seriously."

Then there's a blank frame.

Then they're both talking in unison again. "Well if you were more open and didn't insist on controlling the terms of the debate, maybe there'd be a point to taking you seriously."

Blank.

Then each shouting in unison, "Jinx! Jinx! Jinx padlock! Jinx padlock infinity! JINX PADLOCK INFINITY PLUS ONE!"

The last frame just has the words 'It was the last time they ever agreed about anything.'

I think about it sometimes, when people talk about Professor Starr and what happened. Which is strange, because I'm the only witness who really knows. You'd think I'd remember what I saw, instead of that comic.

#

I filmed it, of course.

Gina and I had a fight over some things I didn't know about and didn't want to do, and when I left it was after sunset and there were a few inches of snow on the ground, more falling, and there were Sonia and Patricia, in their low-heel knee-high boots and long winter coats, walking briskly along towards Sonia's house. (Her house was right near campus. She'd invited the students in her 400 level "Critical Perspectives on Post-Factual Media" students for a Christmas party. I was the only junior among the seniors, the only one too young for wine but she let me have a glass anyway.) Something about Professor Starr wordlessly communicated excitement—perhaps it was just the way her hair swung from underneath her knitted beret.

How could they disagree so badly and yet be such close friends? That was what I was wondering. How could they be together without shouting and slammed doors? Without Sonia, the thesis advisor, making everything an oblique threat to Patricia's freedom? That was what I wanted to learn. So I went back to my room and got my video camera and almost stopped, and started, and then waited to give them time to... relax, I guess. Start whatever it was they did, when they were alone and unwatched.

It was an hour later when I sidled up to the lit window of Sonia's library (which was lovely, all wheat-colored modern Danish furniture and sleek shelves and an old Franklin stove). The window was perfectly clear, lit from within and I knew it would be a perfect mirror on the inside. I knew it was safe but still, my heart trembled in my

chest. But maybe I'd gotten braver since the year I didn't dare record through the cracks in the library shelf.

The reading desk faced the glass and I pressed my camera lens to it as I turned my head to hear through the muffled glass.

"...thank you for this opportunity, I really..." Patricia's gratitude was obvious. It warped her face. It was disgusting to watch. Behind her, Sonia looked implacably beautiful. They were both wearing white gloves, which is how I knew the book that Patricia was handling, with the moldering black cover and tattered edges, had to be the *Librim Nigris*. Professor Starr's object of desire.

Patricia asked something, pointing to the page. I couldn't make out her words. Sonia leaned in, her hair brushing Patricia's shoulder. She murmured a reply. Patricia actually clasped her hands in front of her, like a little girl, she was that excited. She looked up at Sonia with awe, like a child on Santa's lap. Sonia looked back at her for what seemed like a long time, then nodded and left the room, padding out silently on stocking feet.

Patricia read. She looked confused. Then blank, totally absorbed. Then she sat up and for a heart-stopping instant I was sure she was looking right at me, but she was just staring into space, her face utterly expressionless. As blank as the void she felt at the heart of the cosmos. Then—almost reluctantly—she lowered her face to the book and turned another page.

She didn't even look up when Sonia came in, holding something small and black. I thought at first it was another book, until she pressed it into Patricia's neck.

I didn't know a human throat could make the sound Patricia made. She slumped, and barely moved as Sonia put a plastic bag over her head. It was transparent, one of those dry-cleaning ones. Sonia was crying as she did it, and I pressed my ear to the glass to hear what she said as Patricia feebly tried to raise her arms and get air, but she couldn't even lift them as high as her shoulders. Sonia used a taser on her, or a stun gun. Even watching the video over and over afterwards, I couldn't be sure what it was.

"If it's true," Sonia said, "How much more damage would it do? I can't let you find that out."

I pulled back and saw the print of my ear in the frost, and I scratched it out with my fingertips. I must have made some sound, because Sonia looked up.

I ran.

I don't think she chased me.

#

Now it's spring, and the memory stick with Patricia's murder is still in my book safe. I never told anyone. I don't even know why not.

As far as anyone knows, Professor Starr ‘vanished,’ though the police are making a thorough investigation. The campus has been doing mandatory personal safety classes and there are security men on Segways around all the time now. I hate that.

I’ve asked Sonia to recommend me for the M.A. program and she gladly agreed. I’ve gotten very bold with her, very familiar. It’s because I know I can force her if I need to. I can destroy her if she ever denies me, and she doesn’t even know it. She says ‘yes’ to everything anyway.

Sonia’s been sad ever since Patricia died. It makes her even lovelier. But she’s still not as exquisite as Patricia was when she turned that last page, right before she died.

I wonder if I’ve ever been that beautiful, to anyone. I wonder if I ever will.