

I came up with Cadillac Anne, the protagonist here, for Dead Leather Office in Stone Skin Press' anthology The New Hero, Vol. 2. That story makes very tangential references to characters in my novel SWITCHFLIPPED, as does the story 7 & 7 in this volume.

The Turning of the Time

I was totally ready for the anniversary, this time. I covered up all the mirrors in the apartment and told everybody I was in Kentucky. (Nobody ever calls if they think you're in Kentucky.) I had a fridge full of leftover Chinese food and three Jennifer Crusie paperbacks with the author photo taped over. Curtains drawn. Phone unplugged. Like preparing for a siege, really. As long as I could get through 24 hours without seeing a face, I'd be fine.

Last year I was in the middle of a big *thing* when it came on and I swore to myself, never again. Two years back I had to skip a nephew's wedding right here in Illinois, but luckily the family thinks I'm a flake anyhow. What did I miss? Fattening buttercream frosting, a watered-down wet bar and a dozen opportunities to explain what I meant when I said I was a "time-management consultant." That'd be the wedding *without* psychic feedback every time I met someone's eyes.

I think it's been getting worse. The first year I noticed it, but the whole thing was all so strange that I thought it was just a heavy-flow day for my irregular existential menstruation.

Man, where did *that* image come from? But for all that, I guess it fits. The first time I got my "visit from Aunt Flo," I'd been warned but, y'know, there's only so prepared you can get. I got used to it. People can get used to anything. For the one, I carry a couple tampons in my purse. For the other, I dress in layers and keep a poker face when I see people's lives disintegrate, or rewind, or fast forward before my mind's eye.

How many faces do you see in a day? I suppose it depends, but easily a hundred, right? You glance over at the car in the next lane, you pay at the drive-thru, you walk down a city street to your office. Most days, I'd guess it's a one in a hundred thing, that I flash on someone and see their life *Sideways*. Rarer than that, I get the cold-over and see what's in store. Never for photos or videos or reflections. Almost never.

But on the anniversary of the day, boy, it's 100%. Every face, every goddamn face is a window into the past, or the future, or the lives they didn't pick. The only exceptions are drawings and dead people. There were years where I was a freakin' mega-voyeur, and other years where I tried to be Justice with her shining sword, but you can only do so much Wonder Woman crap before you start hemorrhaging humanity. Like a cop, you think everyone's bent. All you see are crooks and skulls.

So this year I figured I'd just cocoon myself, keep my head down, catch up on a few romantic mysteries, eat leftovers and leave the car in the garage. But I should've known that even when you have for-real Second Sight, the icy grip of future knowing, even with true and accurate prophecy life will find a way to fish hook your agenda.

For me, it was English Kate.

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English Kate lives on the first floor of my apartment building and the rest of us have sort of adopted her. She's older than dirt, losing her hair, liver spots so thick on her face they're starting to run together, but still has all her teeth. All the big, crooked, yellow teeth, the teeth with the starring role in English Kate's neighborhood legend.

Here it is. "About, ooh, nearly fifteen years ago now, this man got into the building somehow, got into Kate's apartment and started grabbing at her. She was old even then, I think she was in her seventies, and her attacker was sixteen maybe. And Kate bit off his ear."

It always ends right there because what else do you need to say? But there was a sequel, and that happened after I'd moved in. I saw this guy slouching down the street, stocking cap pulled low, didn't think anything of it until our door crashed open and Kate started yelling.

"Oi! You! Don't think I don't see yeh, y'ruddy bastid! Come back here an' I'll 'ave yer other ear, see if I don't! Yah, y'better run!" She said it was the same guy, out of jail and back in the old neighborhood. I don't know, but I never saw him again.

That was after I'd gotten the Sight, but it wasn't seeing anything that day. Nothing but an old woman shaking her fist and a man running with one hand by the side of his head.

So that's English Kate, a formidable individual and no one to take lightly. She hit my door buzzer and I didn't know it was her but somehow, from the aggressive length of the buzz, I suspected.

"Beat it," I said into the intercom.

"Anne? Ach, thank God yer 'ome."

"Sorry Kate, Anne can't come out to play right now." I hoped a gently sardonic reply would turn her aside. I imagine a butterfly might hope something similar right before a freight train clobbers it.

The Kate-train chugged on. "Don't play silly buggers, I've a crisis 'ere."

"I'll buzz you in," I said.

"Nah, I've a key but my icebox 'as gone off."

"You check the plug?"

"Yes I checked the sodding plug! The light inside won't switch on or nuffin', can I put some of my stuff in your fridge?"

“Sure,” I said.

“Right, I’ll leave the door unlocked, just let yourself in.”

This is something Kate does. Despite being tough as overcooked chicken, she shamelessly plays the ‘frail old lady’ angle for all it’s worth. So ten minutes later I’d traded pajamas for sweatpants and was down at her door with a cardboard box cradled in my arms.

“Anne? For pity’s sake, why’re you wearing sunglasses inside?”

Polarized glass breaks up reflections, but I wasn’t about to tell her that. I kept my gaze on her waist, face tilted up so she might think I was meeting her eyes.

“Hangover.”

“Not surprised. Y’look like you were up all night digging ditches.” She took my sleeve and pulled me in, past her shabby plaid couch. “Come along then.”

The groceries weren’t in bad shape, really. The ice cream was a mushy loss and the TV dinners were getting a little soft, but Kate said they were still good if I got them in my freezer soon enough. I was going through the condiments, surreptitiously checking dates, when I heard a piercing “Oi!”

It was a reflex. I glanced over just as she turned back.

“Bloody guttersnipes,” she started, but her rant about the youth of today was swept aside by a vision from the past.

You hear about a young guy attacking an old lady and it’s awful but it’s not like seeing, his elbow in her throat and the fear in her eyes. It can’t convey the sounds, God, the noises that come out of her, “Don’t don’t dont,” she says, her voice creaking, whining, straining to come through neck muscles tightened against his weight as he leans in, his hands fumbling with hers, pinning both her wrists and “Shut up bitch,” guttural and vicious. He has a patchy mustache and uneven sideburns. But he has to take his forearm off her windpipe to hike up her skirt and fumble at the fly of his acid-washed jeans and that’s when her eyes go wide and with an open-throated “Ueeee!” she leans in and chomps down on the side of his head.

“...get jobs, you lot!” She was yelling out the window towards our front stoop and I could see thin legs in track pants standing on the steps. But then the vision shifted.

Now, the present, but a different present. I saw the choice that put her here, I saw her past but all we are is the sum of our decisions. If Kate hadn’t bitten, she’d be remarried, I see a man on a nicer sofa smoking and trimming his toenails. “Honey, could you grab me an ice tea?” he asks, his voice distracted and peremptory. “Right away love,” chirps an alien Kate, one with a deferent posture and anxious eyes.

Then a click brought me to the present, a gun-click. Maybe you don't know this, but gunmetal has a different timbre than hedge clippers closing or a shifting bicycle gear or a toaster popping up.

"Kate, no!" I ran out the door. "Jesus, let me talk to them!"

"Hey, y'old bitch," said a voice from outside and before I heard Kate's answer, I was racing up the steps. I yanked open the door and a teenage jerk was right in front of it. My hight exactly, we locked eyes.

Nothing. No flashback, no *Sideways* life-stream and I realized this kid hadn't made any decisions. None with real meaning anyhow, no singular turning points to cleanly split his life into before and after. Maybe he was in the middle of one right now.

"Guys," I said, because there were three of them. "Move on. It's not worth it. Really."

"Just who the *fuck* are you, huh?" This was the one who'd come down the steps to peer at Kate's window and when he turned to me I froze.

Seeing the future makes you cold. It doesn't make you *feel* cold, it's a measurable temperature drop. I knew one medium who'd hooked a digital thermometer to her Ouija board and claimed that for every year the foresight had to traverse, it dropped the board's temperature ten degrees. Which is fun and interesting, but since I don't use a board or cards, it's my eyes and face and body and brain that suffer a sudden heat-crash every time I see the future.

It was the fucking trifacta, man. Psychometry, alternate present and now future, in the span of five minutes. Usually a vision once or twice a day is typical, and only then if I'm out and about. But this one was sudden and vivid and not nearly as chilly as most...

"...Aw Roy, Roy, my baby, my baby boy!" There's a strong family resemblance between the woman clutching the casket and the impassive body inside it. The body is absolutely identical to the smart-ass kid, right down to the haircut.

I blinked, hard. Shit, Kate was going to put this punk in the ground before he got a chance to look back on his teen years and blush.

"Roy," I said, "She has a gun. I've seen it."

"How you...?" Roy started, but the first one said, "What?" and I could hear Kate's cane thumping up the steps behind me.

"Gun, shit," said the third youth and I didn't make the mistake of looking at him. "Bitch, we just standin', we ain't doin' nothing wrong."

"Who do you think a court's going to believe? Three black high schoolers or a little old lady? Move it, go, she's armed and senile."

"Bullshit."

“Roy, listen, you know that purple-red dress your mom has, matching hat with a brim, little silk cherries and veil?”

“What’re you...”

“She wears that to your funeral unless you *go now*.”

“Little bastids!”

My hair felt stiff and dirty as I whipped my head around to look back, mostly because it was stiff and dirty. (If you shower when you’re planning to spend a day in bed, more power to you. I’d blown it off.) There was Kate, cane in her left hand, gun in the other, moving down the hall. Mike Tyson’s soul in Betty White’s body.

“*Put the gun down*.” I said it as forcefully as I could and heard the patter of rapid footsteps in the street. I didn’t turn back until Kate had reached me and by then, the boys were gone.

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“No,” I said, “I am not getting you any goddamn ice.”

“Oi, it’s not like I asked ter borrow your husband, just nip down the street to that Indian fellah’s shop and grab a bag of it, the fridge is insulated, it’ll be like a cooler...”

“*No!*” Jesus, the old bat could whine like a violin. “I’m saving your fish sticks, I saved you from being a *murderer*, your legs ain’t broke and you can get your own ice.”

“Fine then.”

I kept my eyes down as Kate lifted the box of groceries and put them into my hands.

“Call me when you get your fridge fixed,” I said

“I’ll probably just replace it. I’ve some money set by and it’s ancient.”

“Yeah.”

She went ahead of me to get the door. She looked pretty ancient herself. I wonder what the aftershocks of adrenaline are like when you’re in your late eighties.

“I wasn’t going to shoot those young buggers, y’know.”

Like hell she wasn’t. “They were just kids.”

“They’re old enough for trouble,” she replied, and I remembered the arm at her neck, the frightened eyes of her *Sideways* self, the voice of her attacker. Once, on the internet, I saw a video of a dog that had been trained to bark so that it sounded exactly like “I love you.” It freaked me right out, hearing words from something that should be too animal too talk. But that dog had sounded more human than the guy who tried to rape her.

“Does your phone work?” she asked. “I got an odd tone this morning.”

“Had it off the hook,” I said. “Take care of yourself, Kate.”

“You’re sure you can’t go fetch me a bit of ice?”

“Jesus.”

#

So maybe you're wondering how I got all these nifty psychic powers, what I did years ago that leaves me picking up everyone's radio station all at once on the anniversary. I'm not going to tell you.

Not today.

But I'll tell you what I saw the fourth year after, when I looked in a mirror. I saw *Sideways*, another me, an Anne who backed off and stepped down and didn't go through with it. Just for a minute.

That other Anne was probably ten pounds lighter and looked ten years younger, or maybe it was just mileage. She was humming as she put on makeup, careful not to get it on her ivory blouse or navy suit. She put a scarf around her neck into some elaborate knot and then winked at herself in the mirror.

Up to that point, I had never winked at myself. The me that I am, I mean. I tried it, later. It felt weird, unnatural, false.

Maybe for just one second, *Sideways* Anne looked uncertain. If it'd been any face but my own, I'd have missed it. Just one moment where she questioned her decision. Then she put on a confident face—not the face of being confident, but the one I *put on*—and the vision ended.

I've seen a lot of people *Sideways*. Some of 'em are better off. Some worse. Many are the same but different. A few I just see darkness and that's how I know that, with a different choice, they'd be dead.

But the anniversary, I think that's the only time I can see my other self.

#

I ate Chinese food and had most of a bottle of red, but I spread it out from lunch to dinner so I never got really buzzed. When you're experiencing unpredictable psychic phenomena, alcohol is not consoling.

I went to bed early and tossed and turned. I couldn't get Roy and Kate out of my mind, but they were all mixed up with that other Anne. Finally, around 10:30 I got up.

I went into the bathroom. I'd folded the edge of a bath towel over the top of the medicine cabinet's mirrored door. Now I tugged it down and looked into my grey, bagged, 58-year-old eyes. I looked for *Sideways* Anne.

Instead, I felt a chill, icy enough to really *hurt*, a cold ache all the way through. I saw the future.

I saw myself die.

"Great," I told the mirror. "A rerun. You're no help."

I went back to bed. Maybe I'll try again next year.