

RAISE THE DAD

Easter. Oh, I hate it. If ever there were a “holiday” I wish would be secularized in its entirety, Easter is it. Society has made some steps, but not enough, or as quickly as I’d prefer. If you celebrate the resurrection of Jesus by collecting colored eggs (laid by some sort of...rabbit-looking monotreme?) and mass-produced candy, and especially if you do such things at your Christian church: thank you, from the bottom of my unbeating heart.

Fine, I admit it: I’m scared of Easter. Perhaps “terrified” is more accurate - “perhaps,” as in “definitely.” Imagine how you might feel about Halloween if the decorations and costumes were real. Crosses. So many crosses. Every year I take a “vacation” from my work at the asylum, but what I actually do is spend Friday straight through to Monday in my coffin in the family mausoleum, safe with the entombed corpses of my mother and father.

“But doctor,” you say. “That mausoleum must lie within a cemetery, and surely crosses abound in the cemetery!” Really, you assume so very much, and you’re so often wrong. Not every person wants their tombstone to be shaped as Christian symbolism, and sometimes those people are buried together *en masse* in the same geographical location. Arlington National Cemetery, with its rows and rows of rounded white headstones, has the right idea (minus the small cross engravings that ruin so many of them). Of course, my family’s mausoleum was never hallowed - my father was not a religious man - and it was built on the edge of the cemetery, so I don’t have to cross any hallowed graves to enter.

It’s a nice mausoleum, though. My father, Edgar Franklin, was an obscenely rich man, and he had it built before any of the three of us had yet died. He didn’t trust anyone in life, and I’m sure it never occurred to him to posthumously place his burial site in anyone else’s hands. As it turns out, his insistence on including a tomb for his only child - me - inside has worked out quite nicely for my existence in my current state. The one truly useful thing he ever gave me required my death to be able to use it. Yes, that’s par for the course for my father.

So here I am, feeling sorry for myself because Easter morning is here. I’m sucking on one of the units of whole blood that I stored away for my extended stay. I have no enjoyment in it. The blood is packed with preservatives, venous, old, and cold: sustenance only.

I hear a scratching from outside the tomb, but inside the mausoleum. I freeze. A wave of terror washes over me, but I tell myself the sound is nothing. Nobody knows where I am - certainly nobody who wants to destroy me. Maybe it’s a rat, I tell myself. No, I’ve never seen one in the mausoleum, and yes, I have a measure of control over creeping creatures that would alert me to the presence of such, and no, I don’t feel anything like that, but it’s a happy fantasy for half-a-minute.

The scratching continues, and finally I can’t stand it anymore. I suck the last bit of blood from the plastic container, gather my strength, and lift the top of my stone coffin.

The small marble room is empty. It’s a large enough space for the scratching sound to echo about, just enough so it takes me a second to pinpoint its source. I’m surprised to realize that it’s coming from inside my father’s coffin. Mine is opposite Mother, and Father’s is set on the wall in between, facing the stone staircase. Now I hear something

else: a whispered sort of chanting unfamiliar to me, coming through the iron doors from outside. As it rises and falls, so does the intensity of the scratching. I frown. There's only one thing inside my father's coffin, and that's Edgar Franklin, dead for forty-odd years. "Oh, bollocks."

"Stay put, you," I say to my father's sculpted effigy on the heavy stone lid. I go up the stairs, my annoyance pushing my fear to the side. I push open the doors.

I squint at the sudden daylight, putting my hand up to block the sun. "But why aren't you turning to ash?" Because I can walk just fine in the sun, that's why. Any sunlight, except at noon, saps my strength and makes me rather nauseated, but I don't burn to dust, and I most definitely do not sparkle.

A man is sitting cross-legged on the marble walkway. A scattering of cowrie shells lies before him, some having skidded through a puddle of blood coming from the lifeless, headless corpse of a decapitated rabbit. The man is dark-skinned, with wiry black hair, and a thick grouping of necklaces hangs from his neck. He's dressed in his Easter Sunday best. He looks up at me, and I at him, still halfway inside the mausoleum door.

"May I help you?" I say.

"Ah," he says. "Mistah Franklin. At last we meet."

"That's 'Doctor Franklin.' Perhaps you're looking for my father," I say sarcastically. I feel ebullient, now that my nonspecific fear has been replaced by particular annoyance. "I'm sorry, he's dead." My eyes shift down to the animal's corpse. "I hope that's not the Easter Bunny."

Now the man is confused, which is itself confusing. He should be fleeing in terror. The very fact that he expected anyone at all meant...oh, surely not.

The man's eyes widen, but not in fright. "You de son, ain't you? Ah ha ha, child. Now it makes mo' sense."

"My apologies. You seem to have me at a disadvantage. Who might you be, and why haven't you run off screaming?"

"Run an' scream? Me? I am Bentley Jericho. I am de houngan an' de bokor. I do de hoodoo an' de voodoo. I know how to work de roots, and I know how to help myself. Ain't nobody scare me - 'specially on dis holy day."

I don't really know what several of those words mean, but I do know that classical "voodoo" is most notorious for reanimism of the "dead." I've never researched the topic or any documented cases in detail, but I had always leaned toward the more mundane explanation of "deep sedation," or something similar, of the supposed decedent, with subsequent reawakening. However, I do realize that my present condition makes such a thing as "raising the dead" less outlandish than it might have seemed in medical school.

The question sounds ridiculous even as I ask it. "Have you turned the corpse of my father into a zombie?"

This Bentley Jericho fellow rises, passes a hand over the rabbit and the shells, and strides past me into the mausoleum.

"Let's go find out, eh?"

"Hey, wait a second." I dart ahead of the man and stop him halfway down the steps. "You can't just walk in here like you own the place."

"Why not? Ain't like nobody lives..." He looks at me and furrows his brow, then shakes a necklace and mumbles something that even my hearing can't make out

distinctly. He raises his eyebrows in surprise. I feel a wave of warmth pass over me and dissipate. I think he just...*magicked* me! I feel rather violated.

"Hunh," he says. "Right de first time. Nobody *lives* here, do dey? Just dead tings." He shakes his head. I don't know how to respond, which is not a common occurrence for me. He walks down the steps around me. I let him.

At the bottom of the steps, he looks back at me. "Come if you coming, man." He motions his head and stands at the foot of my father's tomb. My earlier fear is gone; a feeling that I'll generously describe as "curiosity" has taken its place.

Part of me wonders what I'm doing, but as I had no other plans today, and since technically I'm staying where I intended - safe in my mausoleum - I take my place opposite him, at the head of the sepulcher. The scratching has become a dull pounding.

"Just so you know, this lid weighs a ton," I say to Jericho. I mean that figuratively. It weighs around six hundred pounds. "I don't think you'll be able to support your end."

He winks at me, makes three vocalizations that might be words, and shakes his arms. "I tink I be okay now."

I count to three and we lift the lid, carefully placing it on the floor. I hear definite movement from above me, but I'm not eager to see. This whole experience is so entirely bizarre, even for me. I rise slowly.

I follow the glassy, not-quite-round-anymore eyes of my father's corpse as it sits up. It's still recognizable as the person it once was, and the expensive suit it wears looks fresh from the haberdasher. The mausoleum's light is poor, but my night vision is excellent, naturally: my father's corpse's skin is colored in shades of mottled yellow and pallored grey that would be the pride of any movie makeup artist. It rasps through a decrepit windpipe that I'm quite sure is unable to produce recognizable sounds.

"Dere, dere, Mistah Franklin." While I stand there, rather dumbstruck, Jericho helps the zombie to its feet. It promptly tilts over the side of the coffin. Jericho hauls it out, with my belated help, and sets it on its feet. Its skin is cold. (I'm tempted to add something like, "As cold as the heart of the man it used to be," but who am I to talk? I'm only room temperature on my best day.)

"Now den," says Jericho. "Show me where de cat'olicon reside."

I've spent most days for the last several decades inside this mausoleum. The space is the size of your average apartment kitchen. The response to "Show me where..." while standing inside, unless you're looking for one of three specific stone coffins, must necessarily be "somewhere outside." Imagine my surprise when my father the zombie stiffly walks to *my coffin*.

"Oh, yes. Oh, yes." Jericho takes a small brown bead from a necklace, crushes it between his fingers, and flicks it in the direction of my coffin.

"Hey, what exactly-" I start to say, and he *shushes* me! Doesn't he realize what I am? I'm a medical doctor! (What did you think I was going to say?) I'm not accustomed to being shushed.

Anyway, he doesn't even open his eyes. After a few seconds of silence, he holds up a finger to me in that infuriating way that says, "I'll be with you in a moment." He strides up to the marble side of my personal sleeping space and kicks the base, hard.

At this point, I've had enough. No, I obviously have no objection to this fellow's actions for reasons like "desecrating a sacred place." I believe in sacred spaces. The very fact that I can rest here means this is *not* one. However, I value my privacy; my

feeling is more akin to a surly teenager yelling at his father to get out of his room. (Yes, I was that teenager, and yes, that happened often.)

The grind of stone on stone cuts my outrage short. Four tiles that abut my coffin drop away, each lowering a bit further than its predecessor to make a steep staircase.

“Show us de way,” says Jericho, and the zombie shambles down a step at a time. “Aftah you,” he says to me.

What else I am supposed to do?

The staircase spirals down, fifty feet at least. The going is slow: the passage is narrow, the only light comes from a glowstick Jericho holds behind me, and my zombie father descends in front of us with the rapidity of a dead body set in rigor mortis. I fight the urge to complain to it to speed up, but I know that it’s not really my father, and it can’t understand speech.

Wait a second. I don’t know that at all. I literally have no idea what’s happening here.

“Is that really my father?” I ask Jericho. “Can it understand speech?” I turn to look at him and do a double-take. “And where is that light coming from? I thought you had a glowstick or something.”

Jericho grins. “Were-light, man. No, dat ain’t you daddy - just someting he had, once upon a time.” He whistles a tune. We take one step down. “But it can undahstand you, yes. It know some tings you daddy knew.”

“Good. That’s good.” We finally reach the end of the stairs, which opens up into a brick-lined tunnel, damp and smelling of mildew. There’s room here to walk all three abreast, Jericho to the right of the zombie and myself to the left.

“So tell me, Father,” I say.

“I told you, dis ain’t-”

“Please,” I say. “This will be therapeutic for me.” Jericho holds up his hand, eyebrows raised in an “I’ll mind my business, carry on” expression.

“Tell me, Father. I graduate from medical school, and instead of attending, you break ground at the Edgar Franklin Memorial Hospital. I became a doctor, and *you built a new hospital*. Even when I succeed, you find a way to belittle me. How do you think that made me feel?”

The zombie turns its head slightly to me, the rigid muscles in its neck unable to move naturally.

“Right, right. You’re clueless, as always. More like *thoughtless*. You know, a normal dad buys his son a car for his sixteenth birthday. You built a grave for me. A grave! And for Mother, too.” I lean forward to look at Jericho as we walk. “He built the mausoleum when I was sixteen.”

“I got dat.”

“Okay.” Back to my zombified father. “Speaking of Mother: with how many women did you cheat on her?”

A rattling sound emerges from lips the color of an old bruise.

“No, I didn’t ask you for excuses. I just want a number.”

To my mild surprise, the zombie stops and raises his hands. It can’t bend its stiffened fingers to their full extent, but it’s clearly holding up five fingers on one hand and two on the other.

“Seven. That’s lovely, Snow White. What a lucky number. I’m sure they were worth Mother crying herself to sleep every third night for thirty years of her poor life.”

The zombie’s head turns so haltingly that it takes me a moment to realize it’s shaking its head “no.” It jerks up the “two” hand, then the “five” hand in turn, with audible creaking.

“Twenty-five? *Twenty-five?*” I have a hard time telling, but I think it hangs its head as much as its dried skin allows it. “You,” I say in a twisted sneer, “disgust me.”

“Dat’s enough, now,” says Jericho. “We got bizness, man.”

Business. “What *is* your business, Mr. Jericho?”

“Hey, now. Dat’s de question you ought to ask you daddy.”

“I’m asking you. What’s this ‘catholicon?’”

“De cure to all ills. One a’ dem can do much good, and dis one ain’t being used, so why not get ahold it?”

I’m extremely skeptical about this claim. I’m familiar with historical catholicons, which were traditionally concoctions of roots, leaves, and sugars said to be panaceas, cure-alls. They fell into disuse with the advent of modern western medicine, of the kind that actually cures specific diseases. I have a feeling, though, that whatever this fellow is looking for has a bit more to it than plant ingredients.

“And why would my father know where one is?”

Jericho clicked his tongue. “Because he made one fo’ you.”

“That’s impossible.”

“An’ you say dat ‘cause you know him so well, yes?”

“Psh. As if you did.” I hear myself sounding like the bratty, petulant teenager my father created. Jericho winks again and takes up his whistling.

“Seriously, did you know my father?” I ask.

“De man what taught me did. You daddy ain’t gonna make dat kinda big magic hisself, now. Got lots of folks helping him. Loved his son lots and bunches, dat man.”

“Magic? My father was a...” I’m going to say “businessman,” but that’s not very specific.

“Biznessman?”

I’m feeling rather...”creeped out” isn’t a professional term, but I find it most apt right now. For one thing, I’m tending towards believing this man. “What kind of work did my father do?”

“What kinda work did you daddy not do?”

Thank you so much for that non-answer. I’ll try something else that might be more in his wheelhouse.

“You know what I am.” I stare over at him. This time he stares back.

“True, dat.”

“Can this ‘catholicon’ cure me?”

Jericho loses his amused bearing and frowns. “Only works on living people, an’ you ain’t alive. Don’t get sick though, do you? ‘Death is de cure for all diseases.’”

He can quote Sir Thomas Browne.

“You’re quoting Thomas Browne.”

Jericho chuckles. “*Religio Medici*. Dat is a good book. Not de best book, but good. No, man, dere’s only one cure fo’ you.”

I humor him. “Do tell.”

His voice drops. "Man, you got to be reborn."

Now I laugh. There's only one religion that uses that terminology, and it happens to be the one that's anathema to me.

"Come on. Are you serious? You can't be serious."

"Why not? You ever tried?"

"Being a..." I can't say "Christian." "...born-again Bible-thumper?"

"Ain't hard. Anybody can do it."

"Oh, yes. Even a zombie-making magic man like you, is that it?"

Jericho raises a brow. "I raise de dead to serve me, like my God Jesus raised me to serve him."

This will be a fun game. "You know, of course, that I'm terrified of crosses."

"Ah, but you like graves, and dat's where de real work was accomplished."

"And I thirst for the blood of unwilling victims."

"Listen," says Jericho, "I got my woman at home an' I made her vows, but if a fine lady walk by me, it take all I got to not stare. Temptation, man. We all face it. Besides, I drink blood of my Jesus every week - it's called communion."

"Uh-huh. Communion wafers are how van Helsing denied Dracula safe harbor in all of his coffins."

"But I ain't got none here, so why worry?"

This man is more than a little infuriating. "I've done bad things. Pretty terrible, actually." I say it nonchalantly, but I do carry quite a bit of remorse for more than a few nocturnal transgressions over the years.

"Join de crowd. Dat's what de Easter resurrection is all about."

"And I'm soulless, or so they say."

"Den you de perfect vessel to be filled with de fire of de Holy Spirit. Hold up, now!"

The were-light illuminating the next few feet of tunnel shows it widening into an arched opening, only blackness ahead. Jericho makes a pushing motion, and the light floats past us, showing us a bare, circular room, perhaps a dozen yards in circumference. The only aberration in the homogeneity of the room is a small, dark square in the wall directly across from us.

"It must be in that alcove, correct?" I ask. Obviously, I know the answer to the question. There's nowhere else the catholicon could be.

"Stop, man!" Jericho holds an arm out before me. "Dis room is warded, and I don't know who done it."

"Can't you ask *him*?" I thumb at the zombie.

"Mm-hmm." He does. The only response is a scratchy rasp, and I realize what a stupid question it was.

"Perhaps you should handle this how you will," I say.

"Dat's a good idea." Jericho sits down cross-legged. I'm left standing with the zombie, which stares at me with dead eyes that once belonged to my father.

"What are you looking at?" I say.

The zombie doesn't reply.

Ten minutes later, Jericho is still sitting.

"What's the problem?" I ask.

"De problem," says Jericho, "is dat only you daddy can pass into dis room wit'out de magic doing its ting."

“Okay. So what’s the problem?” I ask again. “We have him right here.”

“I already tell you - dis ain’t you daddy.”

“Then I’ll go. It’s pretty tough to hurt me, and I’ll be quick about it.”

Jericho frowns. “I don’t tink you want to do dat. Here, see.” He takes a bead from his necklace. It’s a dull gray sphere. He cups it in his hand and whispers a few words. He makes a releasing motion, and out comes a dove that looks like it’s made of clay. The clay dove flies into the room, but it doesn’t go more than a few feet before it’s wreathed in a reddish fog. By the time it gets to the center of the circular space, it’s disintegrated to such an extent that it can’t stay aloft. It crashes to the ground and breaks into pieces; in a few more seconds, those pieces have disappeared, along with the fog.

“Dissolution spell. Nasty,” says Jericho. “An’ if it gets a person, it doesn’t leave behind no warning for de next poor soul, neither.” He shows slight signs of frustration.

“Listen, can’t you do a spell or something that will let my father give you an intelligible answer?”

“I tell you dis already!” I can tell when a man’s professional skills have met their match. Jericho’s have, and he doesn’t like the fact. “Dis is just a servant, not de real ting. It ain’t got no autonomy, no initiative. It ain’t gonna help us wit’ dis.”

I feel zombie Edgar staring at me again. More quickly than it’s moved thus far, it shambles away into the room.

“What’d you tell it to do?”

“Nut’ing!” The other man is more surprised than I am.

The zombie makes it a few steps into the round room before the red fog coalesces around it. “Get back, man,” says Jericho, and I comply. The funeral suit dissolves, and its skin starts to peel away, but the zombie gets to the alcove. It turns around, almost toppling over but regaining its precarious balance. I can see a small box in its hand.

Jericho is mumbling. I can’t tell exactly, but the mist seems to thin out. The body of my father gets wobbly regardless and falters ten feet from us. It falls, but pulls its bony torso along on its elbows, continuing to disappear as we watch. It reaches out past the boundary, even as its half-gone skull raises to us, then collapses. A few seconds later, the only thing left of my father is a pitted skeletal hand, but in it sits a small silver box. Jericho takes the box, and I - for a reason I don’t entirely understand - take what’s left of my father’s hand.

Jericho opens the box, and we both look inside.

“It’s just a pill,” I say. It looks similar to an over-the-counter acetaminophen tablet, eggshell-white and elongated.

“Not a pill,” corrects Jericho. “You got to put it up you rump. It draws de sickness to itself, an’ den it all comes out wit’ de rest of de bad tings.” He holds it out to me. “You take it. It be meant fo’ you.”

I do take it. “Does it work on curses?”

Jericho answers in the affirmative, and I smile. I know just who to give it to.

Enjoy your chocolate bunnies and jelly beans, people. The only treat I get for Easter is a magical suppository.

I visit my friend Bleak, who suffers from lycanthropy, at his home that night. This is a moment he needs to have alone, so I leave him reading the instructions I’ve written down for him.

The last thing I hear as I walk out the door is Bleak yelling, "I have to put it *where?*"

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