

REBIRTHDAY BOY

If one is to maintain the facade of being human, one must consider the details. Take, for example, birthday celebrations. I'm holding mine today. Happy fake birthday to me!

Technically, I do age, of course, seeing as how I remain within a linear timestream, but most of my kind don't consider "birthdays" to mean anything post-turning. Since I operate, both personally and professionally, under an assumed identity, I prefer not to use the date of my actual birth. Instead, I've adopted the date of the birth of the nation: the Fourth of July, Independence Day, when the American colonists threw off the monarchical yoke of the British oppressors to forge a new path of freedom and opportunity and oh I love fireworks so so much.

Anyway, it's a dual birthday party for me and the good old United States. May we both exist eternally.

The gathering is small, held in the upstairs room of the tavern in which I conduct my addict meetings. The room is very private - obviously an important consideration when undead teetotalers come together. Its soundproofing is excellent, only the one small staircase leads up to it, and this has a locking door at the bottom, so we're never bothered.

Tonight's group is different from the usual assortment of struggling bloodsuckers. My good friend, pen name "Mortimer Bleak," former lycanthrope, is attending, as is my thrall lawyer, Benjamin ben Benjamin. Bleak invited Kitten, a young woman we both aided last Christmas. (Since they've both been my patients, HIPAA prevents me from using either Bleak's or Kitten's real names. We're a nation of laws, after all.) Youth pastor-slash-exorcist Nathan Ha is seated beside Benjamin, and last, but certainly not least, is Bentley Jericho, accomplished houngan and bokor (which, I've come to learn, mean "voodoo priest" and "voodoo sorcerer," respectively).

Two blue-and-white-striped candles are set upright in a cake covered in thick swaths of blue buttercream icing. Benjamin lights the candles and the wicks burn like sparklers. I pass out the cake; it proves to be white with strawberry filling, so the colors match the occasion. To my surprise and appreciation, everyone has brought a present, so after most of the cake has been devoured, I continue the festivities with the opening of gifts.

Kitten hands me hers first. I tear open the thin package to reveal a bound notebook, its front flap covered with a pattern of cartoon cat skulls.

"I noticed your other one is old and lame," she explains. My current personal notebook is from a Florentine leather school, distinguished by age and use, and I've had it since residency. I have no plans to replace it.

"Thanks, Kitten. It's perfect." She smiles. Her lips are painted dark, dark red, but it's a step up from their usual black, in my opinion.

"Here, Pierce, open mine." Bleak hands me what I can tell is a thin tome of some kind. I open it and read the cover. "Whimsy, by Mortimer Bleak." Depicted on the cover is a raincloud in the shape of a sad-eyed skull (thus filling - nay, surpassing - my skull-related present quota for the night). I look up at him in surprise. "You're published!"

"Self-published!" He grins proudly. "Gone are the ancient gatekeepers, the agents and editors and middlemen. Now every writer is free to find his own audience. Print-on-

demand, e-readers, online retailers...it's a brave new world out there, and I've freed my poems into it."

"Read us one," says Ha, and everyone else follows with similar sentiment. Knowing the nature of Bleak's poetry, I attempt to steer the encouragement.

"Yes, maybe something about birthdays...or America, if you have it."

"You know, I think I have just the thing," says Bleak, turning the pages. "Here's one I call "Tis of Thee." I wince in anticipation.

"America the beautiful
America the brave
We wiped the Injuns out and made
The African our-"

"Nope!" I interrupt him. "No. Pick another one, will you?"

Bleak looks disappointed, but he obliges. "Let's try 'Terminal Condition.'" He clears his throat.

"Today ten thousand souls or more
Awoke to their last morn
Mankind's disease is fatal
And we call it 'being born'"

Everyone around the table is quiet, their faces a bit glum, except Kitten, who is tapping her phone's screen furiously.

"Bought it," she says, and holds the screen to face him.

Bleak gets his phone out as well. "Refresh, refresh...yes! That makes six sales total!" He's beaming. "Which takes my rank up to thirty-three in the 'tragic poetry, short-form' category!"

I'm happy that Bleak is happy. Maybe I can use his poetry to drive manic-depressives down from the "manic" phase. "Thanks, Bleak," I say. "And congratulations."

Benjamin slides his across the table next. He's visibly excited. I've let him cordon off a section of his mind so he could surprise me, and I truly have no idea what this might be. From its shape, it appears to be another book. I'm almost right: it's a photo album. I have very mixed emotions as I page through it. Every picture is of the same subject, and most appear to be taken from a distance with a high-zoom lens, with a few posed yearbook-type photos interspersed between these.

"Is that...Mona?" asks Bleak. I shut the book.

"She's pretty," says Kitten. "Who is she?"

"I barely know her," I say. "I only met her once." I can't very well explain to Kitten that Mona is a supernatural investigator who carries garlic spray and a cross-shaped warhammer, and that I've had a schoolboy crush on her for months now.

"But you think about her all the time!" Benjamin says in a whisper that everyone can hear. "And these photos weren't easy to get. She spends a lot of time at Fort Eisner, and that place is locked down like...like..."

"A fort?" offers Pastor Ha.

“Yeah, yeah, exactly!”

“Well, I’m not sure this woman would appreciate such a breach of her privacy,” I say, and place the book to the side. Mentally, I tell Benjamin “thank you,” though, and that I’ll send over a few frogs later by way of apology for my overreaction. He’s mildly miffed, but he’s satisfied.

Bentley gives me an unwrapped box. A polished flask lies inside. Despite our presence in a tavern, the only beverage at the table is a glass pitcher of water. Bentley and Bleak seldom drink, Ha abstains from alcohol entirely, Kitten is underage, and you’re already aware of my own tastes, so: no booze.

“Fill it up, man” Bentley tells me. I pour water from the pitcher. Bentley nods to continue. I’m wearing a period-authentic colonial-style shirt, in honor of the holiday; it’s reflected, empty of me, in the mirror finish of the metal as I raise the flask to my lips. I don’t know what to expect, and I’m pleasantly surprised when the sweet, metallic taste of fresh arterial blood touches my tongue. It’s cold, but it’s still very good. I keep myself from taking more than a few swallows, then I fasten the cap.

“I really don’t know what to say. Thank you. How...” I realize I can’t ask too many questions now; Kitten doesn’t know what I am, and Ha only suspects.

“Man, dat trick is as old as de pharaohs,” says Bentley. “Made dat flask special, wit’ you hair folded into de metal so it work only fo’ you.” I don’t ask why he has my hair. I suspect he collects hair samples from pretty much everyone he meets.

“You’re a metal worker?” asks Ha.

“Sho’ nuff. De best custom builder an’ restorer of fine auto-mobiles in all de gulf coast. Family bizness, you know - why my daddy give me de name ‘Bentley.’ Got my own machine shop, made dis on dere easy as pie.”

“It’s wonderful, truly,” I tell him. This is certainly the most useful present I’ve ever received.

“Here’s mine, Dr. Pierce,” says Ha. “I hope it’s the kind you wanted.”

I know what this is, and I reach for it with a certain amount of trepidation. I unwrap it with my eyes half-shut and pull it out, hands trembling. When Benjamin sees it, he gasps and tries to grab it from me. I stop him telepathically, but I appreciate his interest in my well-being. I place the present on the table.

“Thanks, Pastor Ha,” I say. “This is *exactly* the kind I wanted.” It’s a big bound Bible with an enormous cross taking up its front cover. I clench my fists, grit my teeth, and force myself to refrain from backing away from the table.

Bleak is drumming his fingers nervously. Bentley is grinning. He knows that I’m facing my fears. It’s been a project we’ve been working on for a little while. In his words, “it be good to have a little fear of de Lord.” For heaven’s sake, I was a psychiatrist first before I was undead; I ought to be able to deal with a simple phobia.

Kitten watches our reactions. I know they must be inexplicable to her, as she’s the only one not in “the know” besides Ha, who at least has an inkling.

“So is this, like, a special Bible?” she asks. She leans over the table; too late, I read the angles and move the polished flask. Oh, bollocks.

“No. No!”

Yes, yes. She’s seen that I lack a reflection and, not being an imbecile, has added up dual integers. She has a birthday-girl grin on her face. “You really are, aren’t you? You’re a-”

She doesn't finish. "No, you can say it," I tell her. "Don't worry, I won't hurt you. Ha, I'm sorry for not being forthright with you." He stares ahead and doesn't meet my eyes.

In fact, everyone at the table is staring ahead in statuesque fashion. I catch movement and look behind me, then spin back. Across the table stands a tall, well-groomed man in a suit of European cut. From a purely objective standpoint, he's possibly the most physically-attractive human being I've ever seen.

"Hello, Dr. Franklin! Or Pierce, rather. We have met before, though you do not remember it. I am Radim."

"Radim. Is that a first name, or a last?" I regret the tone. I doubt this fellow is here with birthday wishes. He laughs, though.

"Once one attains a certain cache, a single name is all one needs."

"Oh, I see. Like 'Cher.'"

"Don't mock, 'Pierce.'"

"Hey, I have a first name." Officially. On documents. That sometimes differ from one another.

"But no one calls you anything but 'Pierce,' do they?"

"They call me 'Doctor' too."

"Yes. 'Doctor.' Let's begin anew, shall we? I did not come to bicker over trivia." He circles the table, so I do too, keeping him opposite me. "*Doctor* Pierce. You have so much potential. I had hoped the demon I sent you would have convinced you, but I understand that ended unfortunately."

"For the demon." *Sent* a demon? I thought I was dealing with one of my own kind here, but now I'm not sure.

"Mmm. I hadn't intended that to be the case when I turned you." I stop cold. "Do you remember anything about it?" he asks. "Your turning? Your death?"

"No." That time was a blur. I had been practicing psychiatry for three years before I became sick from causes unknown. I can't recall details from the hazy span of time during which I was ill. I know I died, and my immediately subsequent memories I've repressed. If I try to recollect them, all I feel is a desperate, overwhelming hunger. Weeks, months, perhaps a year I existed in shadows, regaining myself bit by bit and reforging my identity in such a way as I could use the skills I had gained in life.

I believe him when he says he's the one who's responsible. "I don't believe anything you say."

"I can show you." His mind opens to me and images flood in: his nightly visits to drink my blood and feed me his; my eventual death from anemia; the anguish of my mother (and father!) at the loss of their only child; my burial, then my resurrection as a member of the undead.

"Now allow me to introduce myself," I hear him say in my mind. He was born in the thirteenth century Europe, the son of innkeepers; he trained in knowledge and magic with the Solomonari at the infernal academy of Scholomance, then with Hun warlocks, and later with Japanese *obake*; his thrall is a mob boss named Strehlow; he splits time between eastern Russia and Japan, overseeing a vast web of interests that honestly boggles my mind; he has a tattoo in Cyrillic across his chest that says "KROHF" and another depicting the kanji character "chi" between his shoulderblades, both meaning "blood."

Every thought he sends is imbued with inexorable grandeur. He means to overwhelm me, and he has a natural advantage in doing so as the one who turned me. I can't fight it, but I don't intend to. He wants me to know him? Fine. I push through to the other side of the door he's already opened.

In practicing as a psychiatrist for as long as I have, I've learned much about the human existence. Here's a fact that holds true, no matter how much legitimate authority, power, wealth, or gravitas a person has, and no matter how seriously a person presents oneself.

Everyone is a little bit ridiculous.

Radim enjoys playing an online multiplayer roleplaying game in which his avatar is a buxom blonde sorceress named "Seraphima66." He's fond of watching live performances of brightly-colored Japanese pop idols and has a collection of autographed memorabilia. His favorite film is "Blackula." Drinking type-A-positive blood gives him severe gas. He briefly tries to cover these facts, but he's the one who opened the box in the first place.

"Pleased to meet you, Mister McFartyfangs," I say, determined to mask how intimidated I am. (Yes, it's pointless, since he's in my head, but I ought to get credit for trying.) "If you'll excuse us, this is a private gathering. The toilet is downstairs and to the left, if you're feeling the squirts."

Cute, very cute. 'Humor is a mature defense mechanism' is a thing that you say, but that was quite juvenile, really. 'Down to business,' then. I come to offer you a position in the Scholomance. You're a good student with a quick mind. You will learn from the Prince of the Earth himself. No knowledge, no powers will be held from you."

He's serious. Scholomance is said to be the Devil's college, taking ten students every ten years, but always only graduating nine. "Golly, I don't know. Do they serve blood in the cafeteria?"

"You jest, but many of our alumni become undead simply so they have more time for studies. They often run into trouble with the thirst, you know, which sometimes turns out badly for them. But *you* already know how to cope with your thirst. You know how to conform, how to blend in, how the human mind works, how to navigate financial and governmental regulations in the shadows. You have resources we can use, and we can show you how to grow them into an empire."

"Learn from Lucifer."

"He goes by Satan now." He smiles. "You just proved that you're willing to struggle against your maker." He gestures to himself. "You are aware that you're damned, yes? If it's really true, why not join us? Don't go quietly, passively. We'll take as many down with us as we can. But, though...what if all the 'prophecies' are the products of wishful thinking by a fading Power and the ravings of an exiled madman? John of Patmos had 'visions.' In your profession, these are called 'hallucinations,' are they not? Either way: accept your lot and the power that comes with it."

He's following my thoughts even as he's speaking, but I vocalize them regardless. "I decline."

"I do not give you a choice," he says, and I experience the most disturbing sensation I have ever felt. The closest I can come to describing it is this: imagine if your mind were melted into a puddle, soaked up by a filthy sponge, and squeezed out and

reformed into a nightmare version of itself. My will is no longer my own. I'm truly horrified, especially as I realize what he intends to make me do.

Mesmerized Kitten doesn't budge as I draw closer. I feel the warmth of her pulse from a foot away. The worst part is that I feel a sense of relief that I won't need to count myself responsible for this, and I want it so badly. I sink my fangs into her neck, cleanly piercing her carotid artery. The rush of ichor doesn't sate me; the hunger that I've repressed for so long floods my senses to such a degree that if Radim had departed right then, I wouldn't have stopped. The flow of blood created by Kitten's beating heart isn't enough for me, so I create negative pressure inside the seal that my lips make around her slender neck. In short: I suck her blood.

While I'm doing so, I feel everything that Radim does: his satisfaction, his sense of control, his arousal. I catch a glimpse of the scene through his eyes: Kitten sitting straight up with glazed eyes, myself at her neck feeding like an animal, in my period shirt successfully fulfilling every stereotypical image of my kind created over the last few centuries, from European woodcarvings to Hammer films.

I also see Kitten's face turning paler on one side. I can't drink enough to kill her from blood loss, but I can certainly stroke out her cerebral hemisphere. My will to keep doing this recedes abruptly; it doesn't matter. Radim's remains, and I don't have the power to fight it.

In my mind - and I somehow know that Radim's doesn't see it - I flash back to one of my conversations with Nathan Ha.

"It's as simple as believing that George Washington was a Revolutionary War general," Ha had told me, "and that he crossed the Delaware on Christmas Eve. It's even better-supported than that, though."

"A historical figure and a historical event," I had said. "You make it sound so easy."

"That's because it is," said Ha. "and instead of that person, and that event, resulting in our home in the greatest nation on earth, you'll have a home in eternal paradise."

"I'm a bad person, Pastor. I've done some pretty terrible things."

"Join the rest of us," said Ha. "No one knows the depravity of humanity better than psychiatrists or the clergy, except for God Himself. There isn't a sin His death didn't pay for. So what's stopping you, I wonder?" I didn't give him an answer then.

I decide to embrace the foolishness that is, and has always been, my only hope.

The words I've memorized, on Ha's request, from chapter ten, verse nine of the book of Romans flow in my mind, and this time I acknowledge them. "I confess with my mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in my heart that God raised Him from the dead."

Radim's mental oppression doesn't subside, and neither does my physical thirst or the enjoyment I derive from filling it. Rather, I find I have the strength - just enough, mind you - to overcome them all. I pull myself away from the girl and face Radim, whose face, to my satisfaction, wears surprise that I hope he feels to his bones.

He takes a step towards me. I rip open the top few buttons from my colonial shirt, making a note to myself to send it to a tailor for mending if we get out of this, and pull out what's hanging underneath it. Radim sneers, but stops his progression.

"Immersion therapy," I say. I unfasten the clasp around my neck and hold the object out further.

It's a crude cross made from the hand-bones of my father. I've been wearing it around my neck as a stepping stone to overcoming my fear of crosses, which, up until now, I wasn't sure could actually be done in full. I know now, though. My fear is gone.

I sweep up the Bible from where it lies face-down on the table. In the split-second it takes me to do so, Radim retreats behind a mesmerized Nathan Ha, a hand at the youth pastor's throat. The undead Solomonar is still in my mind, so he knows about Ha, the exorcism last Thanksgiving, and our conversations together about the nature of salvation and redemption. I'm still in his mind, too, so I know he intends to rip a gaping hole in the front of Ha's neck. I extend both crosses toward Radim. "No! Leave!" I shout, and I wish this room didn't afford such privacy. He gives me a predator's snarl.

Radim's hand - the one at Ha's throat - bends back suddenly with the sound of a dry stick snapping, broken grotesquely mid-forearm. He's too shocked to scream. His eyes fly around the room. My focus is on him, so mine can't afford to, but in his mind I catch a glimpse of a dark-skinned man advancing from around the table. Jericho!

"Hey dere! Tink you gonna stupefy a prime-order bokor? Nah nah, man!" Jericho is clutching a crude cloth doll and pinching its arm back. "You ain't got de power great as my *ashe*, and de lord of you ain't not'ing next to mine!"

A guttural growl emanates from Radim, and he snaps his arm around straight, extending a clawed hand at Jericho. The cloth doll drops, and the voodoo priest curls into a defensive position, although I don't see what he's defending himself from. Jericho rises, in one continuous motion pulling a bead from one of his necklaces, crushing it between his fingers and dropping it in a glass of water on the table, and flinging the water toward Radim. The liquid hisses where it hits him. He leaps back; while still airborne, he twists and forms, clothes and all, into an enormous bat with a snout that's lengthened like a fox's. The animal flaps crookedly and crashes through a window, to where Jericho and I rush. The sky is empty.

"Look dere," says Jericho, pointing to the ground. A huge tiger, more conspicuous in these sharp urban angles than it would be in Asian jungles, runs limping around a corner.

"Should we follow?" I ask.

"Nah. He depleted. Ain't no spell fo' it. He got to find his coffin-dirt post-haste."

I feel wetness on my shirt. A little of Jericho's water hit me, and I tell him so. His eyebrow raises. "Dat's holy water, man. It didn't hurt you?"

"No." I suddenly smile. "No."

"Hey, what just happened?" I hear Benjamin ask. Ha, Bleak, Kitten are stirring too. I run to Kitten and check her neck. I touch two small white scars, already healed by virtue of my venom's properties.

"*What* are you doing?"

"You were bitten. Everything's fine, though." I see her previous train of thought remounting the tracks. Her wide, heavily-mascaraed eyes meet mine.

"You're a *vampire!*"

"Not anymore, I don't tink," says Bentley. "Look dere." He holds up the flask he gave me, and everyone crowds around behind me to see. My reflection is a translucent white light that defines my outline as if it were filling my body. I tell everyone about Radim's visit and my decision during it.

“So what am I now?” I don’t mean for the question to be answerable, but my friends do their best regardless.

“Un-undead?” asks Bleak.

“What about ‘re-alive?’” follows Ha. I shrug, looking at Bentley. If anyone knows, the voodoo priest would.

“A born-again vampire. I ain’t never heard of such a ting, but I be happy to see it.” He pats my shoulder and hands me the Bible cross-up.

I look at the blackened wicks on the candles lying on the table and think of the Declaration of Independence. Never before have I appreciated the Preamble’s “endowed by the Creator” language with such clarity.

“I know what I am.” I smile. “I’m free.” I have the last piece of cake.

I still feel thirst. I still have my mental connection to Benjamin, although I can’t feel Radim anymore. I’m still strong and fast, but I’m not bothered by sunlight, crosses, or holy water. I still can’t be near garlic. What comes next for me? I can’t say.

Epilogue

Okay, I couldn’t say before, because I obviously didn’t know at the time, but I can now. It’s been two days since the Independence Day party. I’m staying with Bleak, spending the night in a perfectly normal guest room and enjoying my freedom to walk around in daylight without feeling ill, when we hear a knock on the door. The uniform - dark grey, long coat, matte-black utility belt - is unfamiliar, but the face I recognize.

“Tango?”

“Agent Ferris now,” says Tango. Strike that. Says Agent Ferris, cleaned up nicely from the homeless creature who used to attend my meetings. “Hey, Bleak. Mind if I step inside? I don’t feel so great out here. Dr. Pierce, I have an invitation for you.” He hands me an envelope. The introduction is from Field Director Mona White (be still my heart! although the phrase remains inapplicable to my unbeating organ), but the letter itself is from a Professor Lazarus.

“What’s it say?” asks Bleak, as I finish reading.

“It’s an invitation for me to become a staff psychiatrist at a place called ‘Christ the Healer’s Missioner Hospital for Uncommon Maladies.’”

“At Fort Eisner, we just call it ‘The Mission,’” says Agent Ferris. “It’s a pretty interesting place, Doc. You’d like it there.”

“Why not?” says Bleak. “A new place for the new you.”

Why not, indeed. I take a swig from my flask.

Here’s to the future.

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