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Mojo

by Daniel J. Evans

The cold tonight is like a wild animal; it is something you sense before it attacks in full ferocity. It claws at the exposed flesh of your body, and rips with icy teeth. Nights like this can either be a curse or a blessing for someone who owns a tavern. Generally, people want to get out of the cold. When it is Godawful cold like it is tonight, either people are going to make it home or they're going to stop into places like mine to toss down a few bellywarmers to ward off the presence of the beast. I always have one or two who are here regardless - for them it is always colder at home.

A place like mine has a warm heart. I believe in mahogany, big mirrors, soft lights. My juke plays good rock and roll and country music people listen to, not laugh at. Consequently, there is almost nothing from the last fifteen years on it. My drafts are \$.75 and come in a frosted mug-damn the weather-and I pour a legitimate 2 ounce shot for \$1.50. I have one of the last remaining five ball pinball machines and it gives you two plays for a quarter, and the darts are still the kind that hurt if you miss. My place has been around longer than my father, and his father, and it has always been this way, I suppose.

People don't come here to meet each other, to dance, to celebrate their 21st birthdays. There aren't many folks sporting the latest fashions or talking about their portfolios. My people come here to drink, talk, play pinball. They come in after a day of sweat to unwind, relax and talk to me. Rarely do I have a full house; but those that do come in, some daily, some weekly, some every now and then -- well, they get a taste of the Mojo in this place and Saints be damned if every last one of them hasn't bettered himself because of it.

Mojo is Hank Buckman's word. He had his first woman in New Orleans when he was nineteen and on leave from Ft. Biloxi. He talked with her for most of his paid in advance hour, and he learned about Mojo because she was willing to talk, and he was scared to lay. Mojo is a voodoo term for good fortune and luck. Hank says his Mojo was high that night because he met a whore with a good ear, and a kind heart. She told him stories about growing up on the bayou and living and working the French Quarter and when it came time to do his duty, she leave him through like a mother to a pup.

The Mojo at my place doesn't have anything to do with voodoo, at least I don't think so. Hank first called it that so that's what it is, though if it were up to me and Jake, we'd just call it magic. We learned about the magic -- the Mojo, that is -- just over a year ago on a bitter night much like tonight. That night, a man came in from the cold.

Before that night was over, Jake Edwards had lost his eyes, I had lost my tongue, and good old Hank Buckman had been turned into a frog.

*

"Cold enough to sterilize the devil!" Jake yelled, pulling the mahogany door shut behind him.

Me and Hank looked up from our card game over the bar and laughed at he shook himself coming down the two steps from the door. Jake was always a flimsy sort of guy, looked like he was bolted together from spare parts. When he was cold and shivering, it looked like he could come apart at the seams. I left the game to set him up with the bellywarmer of the night; a shot of bourbon chased by a shot of bourbon. Then I gave him a beer.

As it was, Jake was only the second customer of the night. Hank was the first. I immediately bet Jake a five that he'd be the last person of the night. Jake shook on it and won; I still owe him that five spot.

Jake shot down the drinks and belched. "Once again you guys have scared all the normal people away," he said, spreading his arms and looking around the empty tavern.

"You should fit right in then," said Hank. He rose unsteadily from his stool, looming over Jake. "No funny stuff, Hank," I warned. Occasionally when Jake arrived late, Hank would be well on his way and lift the bony guy up in a bear hug.

"Aww, what do you take me for, a bully?" Hank grabbed Jake's hand, bowed in salute, and planted a kiss right on his knuckles.

Jake yanked his hand away. "Oh yeah, like you really need another drink."

Hank sat back down, grinning. "Uhh, one more, and I'll stay."

"If you two would like to be alone, the back room's empty," I said, setting them both up with fresh drafts.

The guys looked at each other in mock approval. "Whaddaya say, big boy," Jake said in a falsetto voice. "Game of five ball to see who pays for all this?"

"Okay, Jakey-boy, long as you don't touch my dick like the last time."

"Dream on, big queer--"

"Go play already!" I said to both, plunking down a couple of quarters. Hank's hand ate the quarters and Jake made way for him. "Lead on, MacDuff." said Jake.

"You know, I never understood that saying..." The men went into the back to the machine.

The two of them were my most regular regulars for

over three years. As any bartender worth his salt will tell you, you get to know these people and give a damn about them.

Jake Edwards was probably the worst truck salesman in Ford history. He had a this creepy feeling about him, like he was the kind of guy who would peek in your window to see you doing your girl. A nicer guy you'd never meet. Trouble was, you'd never want to meet him in the first place. He sold only enough trucks to keep his job, was rarely seen with a woman, and started drinking here for no other reason save I was someone that'd lend him an ear. Me? I just felt sorry for the guy. He didn't seem to have much going for him and I know from experience that a man's trouble is best taken with whiskey and a good ear.

Hank Buckman, on the other hand was always someone to be reckoned with. Hank had been a big man forever. He resembled a walking door, with arms and legs like knotty stumps. He was a friendly sort of guy, especially back in high school. Lord knows where he'd be now if he was as much a terror in class as he was a fullback. He couldn't make the grades in college. He couldn't play. He did four years with the Marines. Hated it. He did, however, manage to get Shelly Brock pregnant, marry her, and weasel a job from her father down at the hardware store. I think he came here because at my place, nobody is left out, no one's a failure. That, and the fact I'm one of the few people that can handle him when he is three sheets to the wind. I keep a bat handy behind the bar, you see.

So that cold night about a year ago those two are humping away over that machine, trying to beat each other's score to see who's buying. Then the door blew open, and everything changed.

A tall man stood in the doorway, the icy wind swirling around him and into the bar. He wore a long black overcoat over a black tuxedo with a bright pink bowtie and cummerbund. His face was long and lean and yellow; so were his hands. He was smiling an all-time toothy smile, like he was greeting a long lost friend.

He stood there for about twenty seconds, the wind howling behind him, around him, seemingly through him. He was waiting for something to happen. Something did.

"Hey, who opened the barn door?" Hank grumbled from the back. His footfalls were loud, uneven.

"Looks like you're buying," Jake screeched from the back. "While you're out there, shut the damn door and bring me another Bud."

Hank came from the back and stopped in the middle of the floor. He and the stranger stared one another down.

"You comin' in here, or you just admiring the view?"

The man lost his smile and peered at Hank curiously. "My good fellow, the show cannot begin without all the principal players present."

He had a subtle, gravelly English accent. A watered down Benny Hill.

"Hey pal, those of us with nuts are freezin' them solid," Hank's face flushed, "In...or...out."

I reached for the bat.

"Your club will not be necessary, sir. The show is about to begin." His smile returned as Jake emerged from the back. "Hey! A customer! You owe me five--"

The stranger whipped off his tophat and flung it toward Hank. It burst in the air, showering colorful feathers and ribbons of silk. In its place was a gaudy parrot. The bird squawked at Hank, flapping its wings furiously at his head. "Dolt!" it shrieked.

Hank swung at it, missed, swung again. He hit the bird and it disappeared in a puff of feathers. Then it was on the tall man's right shoulder, clucking in his ear.

"My thoughts exactly, Pyro," he said to the bird as he stroked it's feathers.

The man floated down the steps into the bar, the door slamming shut behind him against the wind. "I'll forgive your indiscretion for now," he said to Hank, not losing a trace of his cheer. He landed about three feet in front of Hank. We all stared.

"Oh, dear. I fear I've startled them, Pyro. Now I'll never have that Cognac." The parrot ruffled its wings in agreement.

Hank and Jake continued to gape stupidly at the man. I shook myself mentally and grabbed a snifter, never taking my eyes from him. His hair was thick and mussed, a tangled grey-black mop which sharply contrasted with his neat apparel. I found the Couvoisier and poured liberally. His eyes were penetrating, probing. They were slush grey with flecks of emerald throughout the irises. Judging from the lines around those eyes, he had either laughed or cried far too much for what was apparently about 40 years of lifetime.

"My good man, both," he said, reaching for the glass, "I've done enough of both in my lifetime."

I didn't give him the glass. Men can't read minds. Men can't float. Only crazy men embarrass Hank Buckman.

"Listen up you fuckin' weirdo." Hank's face was crimson. "I don't appreciate your entrance."

The tall man squared off with Hank. "And I don't appreciate your foul odor. Shall we call it even then?"

Hank relaxed and looked over his shoulder to Jake. "The man's obviously not too fond of his teeth."

Jake winced and nodded in agreement.

"How 'bout a round on me, guys. No hard feelings," I said. Seemed like the right thing at the time.

"Stow it, Evan. This is between me and Fred Astaire here."

"You boorish lout! I would advise against the violence you are contemplating." The man thrust the sides of his coat behind him like a gunfighter at high noon. The parrot squawked.

"Thanks for the advice," Hank lunged for the man.

The man crossed his arms into an "X". The parrot flapped its wings. Then Hank was gone.

"Oh, now I've done it," said the man, gazing at the floor. Down on the tile a large bullfrog leaped crazily about. It hopped over to the stranger's black boot and pissed all over it.

"Temper, temper," said the man, smiling cheerfully.

"What the fuck is going on?" Jake yelled, wide-eyed at the floor. "Breech!" said Hank as he hopped in circles.

The stranger bent and picked up Hank gently. The parrot eyed him with contempt. He looked at us both. His eyes sparkled with humor; the emerald flecks seemed to glow. "Gentlemen," he said, rubbing the struggling Hank between his eyes. "May I suggest we all have a seat and chat?"

Jake tried to say something; failed. He just mewled like an injured cat.

"Listen here, pal, I don't know what the hell--"

"I said SIT!" His face was foreboding in an instant, and before I could get to the bar, I was floating over the bar and onto a stool next to Jake, who had obeyed instantly. "Much better," he said, the maddening joviality returning with ease. He took a stool two away from me and placed Hank on the bar, where he hopped madly about and croaked his discontent.

"Pyro," he said to the parrot, "I think it's best I handle this alone." The colorful bird nodded its beak and beat its wings, squawking "Careful!" as it poofed into nothingness.

Jake and I stared dumbly at the man. Hank sat by the beer nuts and cocked a tympanum.

"Gents, a thousand pardons for the impropriety of our meeting. My name is Covington Brace. I've traveled long and hard for years I dare not count. For reasons of my own design, I have chosen to end my travels here, in this tavern,

on this night. Lend an ear and the world can be yours. Indeed, it may be the very world which is at stake."

He looked at us then with such a mixture of sorrow and glee that I absurdly felt like crying.

"Whadja do to Hank?" Jake blurted, ignoring Brace's introduction.

He looked at Jake wearily, brushing a tangle of hair out of his eyes. "Dear boy, there is nothing more beneficial to man than the occasional change in perspective." Raising his right index finger he said, "Don't you agree?" He wiggled his finger in a circular motion and Jake's eyes popped out of his head and did a bounce dance on the bar.

"Yaaaa!" he shrieked, because he could still see out of his rolling eyes and must have found himself a rather unsettling sight. And then stupid me lost his temper.

I lashed my fist towards Covington Brace's head. It rammed to a stop a centimeter from his nose, sending a bolt of pain up my arm. "Stop fucking with my friends right nouaugh--"

A wink and a grin from this devil in black brought my tongue from my mouth. It arched gracefully into the beer nuts and flopped around like a beached trout. Hank hopped around the bowl and peered inquisitively at the flapping muscle.

"Breech!" said Hank.

Jake held his hands over the empty sockets and whimpered because he could see how stupid he looked through eyes that rolled on the bar.

"auauaua." I tried to say "You win," but that's what it came out like.

Brace stood and summoned the Cognac from the bar. The bottle floated over and poured him a triple and I crazily thought that it would definitely be on the house if we all got out of this.



"Now gentlemen, where was I? Oh yes, the world was at stake." He looked at the three of us then, the emerald flecks flaring, the wry smile fading from his lips. "I have your undivided attention, I presume?"

We did our best to give him just that. Jake turned his head to Brace and his eyes rolled in unison to "look" at him. I held my hand over my tongue-less mouth and gave him a wide-eyed nod of assent. Hank settled beside the bowl of nuts, croaked his agreement and snapped up a nut with his new tongue.

Brace closed his eyes and took in a breath. There was pain on his face. His hair seemed more grey than black all of a sudden. "Lads, I have a tale that bears telling, and I have chosen you as the beneficiaries of my travels and knowledge. Open your minds and hearts to me now, revel in what you cannot deny as truth, and *be saved*. I am running out of time."

As if to confirm his statement, he stood and walked over to the juke. His steps were short and he stooped slightly in an almost pained posture. He plunked in several quarters and made selections, and when he turned to come back to the bar, we saw the lines in his face had deepened to mini-canyons and he seemed to have shrunk an inch or two.

"Would any of you object to being returned to normal?" he said, stepping back to the bar. "This is quite an effort as it is, and quite against the few rules I am bound to live by."

Jake's eyes rolled around in approval and he nodded vigorously. Hank hopped and croaked with glee, and I made positive grunting sounds. The parrot reappeared on Brace's shoulder and ruffled its feathers.

"Essence, it is done!" he boomed as he flourished his arms and the parrot flapped its rainbow wings.

Jake's eyes bounced into the air, waited dutifully for him to move his hands out of the way, and slipped back into their sockets. My tongue wavered in the air until I could summon the nerve to open my mouth. It popped right back in like it had never left. Hank hopped up and down on the bar, still like a frog.

Covington Brace looked at his parrot inquisitively. It squawked and shook its beak. "Pyro, it is necessary." "Craaat!" it squealed defiantly.

"I would imagine he doesn't fancy you, either."

"craaat?"

"Please, my old friend. Time grows shorter for me."

The parrot did its best to shrug and nodded its head. Hank appeared on the bar sitting indian style. He ran his hands over his body, unconsciously giving his crotch a pat.

We composed ourselves then, Jake swiveling his head and taking in all his eyes could see. Hank hopped off the bar and stamped his feet on the tile, breaking into an impromptu jig. I ran my tongue across my teeth and trolled "Rrruffles have rrrridges," over and over. We broke into inspired and relieved laughter and forgot about Brace momentarily.

Lynard Skynard's "Freebird" began its soulful whine from the jukebox. We stopped laughing and looked to Covington Brace.

He now seemed older, the tux was oversized and his mop of hair had stubborn wisps of black in a sea of grey. Sadness and resolution reflected from those piercing grey eyes with the emerald chips, and he motioned for us to sit.

Hank and Jake took seats to his right. I reached over and grabbed the bourbon and the cognac and drew a pitcher of beer. Then I switched out the outside lights and locked the big mahogany door. Brace sat and I joined him to his left and poured drinks all around. We raised our glasses in a silent, nervous toast to the unknown. The parrot disappeared without a sound, leaving three men and some kind of wizard to share the bar story of a lifetime.

*

I closed up early tonight because of the cold and because Jake and Hank are due in at midnight. It's funny, but the more I think about it (and obviously write about it), I find tonight marks the one year anniversary of the visit of Covington Brace. So much has happened on account of what we learned as we got drunk with that strange and wonderful man on a frigid evening a year ago.

Brace had the unique misfortune of being the last of his kind anywhere on Earth. Simply put, he was the last of the wizards. Throughout the rest of the night, he regaled us with stories and legends from around the world, from different centuries, different lives. He never told us how he came to be, how he learned to do the things he could do.

He did show us the way, though. You see, through the course of time and the natural progression of society, his kind became an anachronism, needed less and less as technology provided more and more and the hearts and minds of men became jaded to their abilities. Brace was the last man on Earth to believe in magic. Stubbornly he clung to what he knew to be true, and spread what knowledge he could throughout the centuries.

"Magic," he said in his mild English tone, "is nothing more than an extension of all that is good in the soul of man; it is graven into every corner of nature. There was a time when people lived and breathed according to this doctrine; a doctrine we called 'essence'. If you yield to it, it will make its presence felt in everything and everyone you encounter. I beseech you: believe."

I remember the tingling up my spine as he said the word "believe". I realized then the monumental burden he had carried throughout the centuries as the rest of his kind gave up.

One last thing I must tell you about that last night. When Brace had finished his tale, he was the oldest, most dignified looking man I feel I will ever encounter. I see him

clearly, stooped in front of that huge door, his tuxedo hanging from his frame like ill-fitted pajamas. He did his best to draw himself straight and he said:

"I am too old and too tired to go on in this, the dawn of a new age of man. I depart willingly from my travels, knowing I have been many things to many people over my lifetime. On this, the twilight of my wonderful, terrible life – I pray I have given three men the essence of my soul, the soul of the world. Gentlemen. One cannot survive without a soul. Believe."

He turned and faced the door, making a weak gesture with his right arm. The parrot materialized on his right shoulder. The garish bird had bowed its head and was cooing gently into the old man's ear.

"Yes, old friend, I shall never forget you...I'll regale them all with your legendary exploits...yes, even Merlin." The bird made a soft purr. Brace turned to the bird, eyes glistening, and kissed it gently on the beak. "I love you too, Pyro."

He looked to the door and opened it, the wind howling around and through him again. He began to disappear; one final trick. "Gentlemen," he said over the wind, "you hold the keys to the world. Please guard them...wisely." The parrot flapped into the air and shrieked "Remember!" It flew out the door against the wind, over its master's head. Soon after, only the wind remained.

Which brings me full circle to tonight. Very shortly I will be drinking a toast to that man with two of the finer gentlemen I have ever met. Jake Edwards has seen into the heart of the world and come away cleansed. He now sells a good many more Ford trucks and is the life of any party.

His wife Mary has something to do with it. His new son Covey had a hand in the new Jake as well. He is jovial and outgoing and a friend to all who enter here.

Hank Buckman has seen as well. He now curtails his drinking and is home more with his wife Shelley and their spanking new baby boy, Mojo. He has since gone back to school part time and is coaching midget football on the weekends. Hank has agreed to get out of the hardware business. Tonight he goes into the bar business.

Me? Well it's almost time for the boys to arrive so I'll be finishing this up. I'll leave it with Hank along with the keys to the bar and the juke and the pinball machine. Someday, he'll give this to someone who really needs it.

My bar isn't the most popular place in town. But with Jake and Hank and me here, together, united on the same magical page, there is a special energy that is felt by the guests that drop by. Something in them changes as they absorb the power of what we keep alive. And in this day and age, maybe that is enough. I cannot be sure, which is why I'm leaving after me and the boys down a bellywarmer in honor of Covington Brace.

You see, right after I closed up tonight I looked into the big mirror behind the bar. My eyes had flecks of emerald in them. It didn't surprise me. Nor did it surprise me when a large, multicolored parrot appeared on my right shoulder and squawked me a hearty greeting.

THE FIREBRINGER *by Joe R. Christopher*

Prometheus, the wily trickster, chose
to bring to man a self-sustaining fire,
uranium atoms in a shielded pyre,
burning as matrices quickly decompose.
In south Chicago first the heat arose,
tightly controlled; the Titan did thus inspire,
and man was happy that secret to acquire—
Prometheus laughed; no shield would long enclose.

Then Zeus in anger spoke: O blind Foresight,
knowing destruction is the end of art
when skill's divorced from conscience to discern;
may you be chained upon the mountain height
until your thoughts, like vultures, tear your heart,
for man is lost, and all the world shall burn.