



MR  
PENUMBRA'S  
24-HOUR  
BOOK  
STORE

ROBIN  
SLOAN

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Robin Sloan grew up near Detroit and has worked at Poynter, Current TV and Twitter in jobs that have generally had ‘something to do with figuring out the future of media’. He has previously published short fiction in Kindle-only editions (*Mr Penumbra* started out as a 6000-word ebook). He lives in San Francisco.

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**ROBIN  
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FOR BETTY ANN AND JIM

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# THE BOOKSTORE



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# HELP WANTED

**L**OST IN THE SHADOWS of the shelves, I almost fall off the ladder. I am exactly halfway up. The floor of the bookstore is far below me, the surface of a planet I've left behind. The tops of the shelves loom high above, and it's dark up there—the books are packed in close, and they don't let any light through. The air might be thinner, too. I think I see a bat.

I am holding on for dear life, one hand on the ladder, the other on the lip of a shelf, fingers pressed white. My eyes trace a line above my knuckles, searching the spines—and there, I spot it. The book I'm looking for.

But let me back up.

My name is Clay Jannon and those were the days when I rarely touched paper.

I'd sit at my kitchen table and start scanning help-wanted ads on my laptop, but then a browser tab would blink and I'd get distracted and follow a link to a long magazine article about genetically modified wine grapes. Too long, actually, so I'd add it to my reading list. Then I'd follow another link to a book review. I'd add the review to my reading list, too, then download the first chapter of the book—third in a series about vampire police. Then, help-wanted ads forgotten, I'd retreat to the living room, put my laptop on my belly, and read all day. I had a lot of free time.

I was unemployed, a result of the great food-chain contraction that swept through America in the early twenty-first century, leaving bankrupt burger chains and shuttered sushi empires in its wake.

The job I lost was at the corporate headquarters of NewBagel, which was based not in New York or anywhere else with a tradition of bagel-making but instead here in San Francisco. The company was very small and very new. It was founded by a pair of ex-Googlers who wrote software to design and bake the platonic bagel: smooth crunchy skin, soft doughy interior, all in a perfect circle. It was my first job out of art school, and I started as a designer, making marketing materials to explain and promote this tasty toroid: menus, coupons, diagrams, posters for store windows, and, once, an entire booth experience for a baked-goods trade show.

There was lots to do. First, one of the ex-Googlers asked me to take a crack at redesigning the company's logo. It had been big bouncy rainbow letters inside a pale brown circle; it looked pretty Microsoft Paint. I redesigned it using a newish typeface with sharp black serifs that I thought sort of evoked the boxes and daggers of Hebrew letters. It gave NewBagel some gravitas and it won me an award from San Francisco's AIGA chapter. Then, when I mentioned to the other ex-Googler that I knew how to code (sort of), she put me in charge of the website. So I redesigned that, too, and then managed a small marketing budget keyed to search terms like "bagel" and "breakfast" and "topology." I was also the voice of @NewBagel on Twitter and attracted a few hundred followers with a mix of breakfast trivia and digital coupons.

None of this represented the glorious next stage of human evolution, but I was learning things



was moving up. But then the economy took a dip, and it turns out that in a recession, people want good old-fashioned bubbly oblong bagels, not smooth alien-spaceship bagels, not even if they're sprinkled with precision-milled rock salt.

The ex-Googlers were accustomed to success and they would not go quietly. They quickly rebranded to become the Old Jerusalem Bagel Company and abandoned the algorithm entirely so that the bagels started coming out blackened and irregular. They instructed me to make the website look old-timey, a task that burdened my soul and earned me zero AIGA awards. The marketing budget dwindled, then disappeared. There was less and less to do. I wasn't learning anything and I wasn't moving anywhere.

Finally, the ex-Googlers threw in the towel and moved to Costa Rica. The ovens went cold and the website went dark. There was no money for severance, but I got to keep my company-issued MacBook and the Twitter account.

So then, after less than a year of employment, I was jobless. It turned out it was more than just the food chains that had contracted. People were living in motels and tent cities. The whole economy suddenly felt like a game of musical chairs, and I was convinced I needed to grab a seat, any seat, as fast as I could.

That was a depressing scenario when I considered the competition. I had friends who were designers like me, but they had already designed world-famous websites or advanced touch-screen interfaces, not just the logo for an upstart bagel shop. I had friends who worked at Apple. My best friend, Neel, ran his own company. Another year at NewBagel and I would have been in good shape, but I hadn't lasted long enough to build my portfolio, or even get particularly good at anything. I had an art-school thesis on Swiss typography (1957-1983) and I had a three-page website.

But I kept at it with the help-wanted ads. My standards were sliding swiftly. At first I had insisted I would only work at a company with a mission I believed in. Then I thought maybe it would be fine as long as I was learning something new. After that I decided it just couldn't be evil. Now I was carefully delineating my personal definition of evil.

It was paper that saved me. It turned out that I could stay focused on job hunting if I got myself away from the internet, so I would print out a ream of help-wanted ads, drop my phone in a drawer and go for a walk. I'd crumple up the ads that required too much experience and deposit them in the redented green trash cans along the way, and so by the time I'd exhausted myself and hopped on a bus back home, I'd have two or three promising prospectuses folded in my back pocket, ready for follow-up.

This routine did lead me to a job, though not in the way I'd expected.

San Francisco is a good place for walks if your legs are strong. The city is a tiny square punctuated by steep hills and bounded on three sides by water, and as a result, there are surprise vistas everywhere. You'll be walking along, minding your own business with a fistful of printouts, and suddenly the ground will fall away and you'll see straight down to the bay, with the buildings lit up in orange and pink along the way. San Francisco's architectural style didn't really make inroads anywhere else in the country, and even when you live here and you're used to it, it lends the vistas a strangeness: all the tall narrow houses, the windows like eyes and teeth, the wedding-cake filigree. And looming behind it all, if you're facing the right direction, you'll see the rusty ghost of the Golden Gate Bridge.

I had followed one strange vista down a line of steep stairstepped sidewalks, then walked along the water, taking the very long way home. I had followed the line of old piers—carefully skirting the raucous chowder of Fisherman's Wharf—and watched seafood restaurants fade into nautic

engineering firms and then social media startups. Finally, when my stomach rumbled, signaling my readiness for lunch, I had turned back in toward the city.

Whenever I walked the streets of San Francisco, I'd watch for HELP WANTED signs in windows—which is not something you really do, right? I should probably be more suspicious of those. Legitimate employers use Craigslist.

Sure enough, the 24-hour bookstore did not have the look of a legitimate employer:

HELP WANTED  
*Late Shift*  
*Specific Requirements*  
*Good Benefits*

Now: I was pretty sure “24-hour bookstore” was a euphemism for something. It was on Broadway, in a euphemistic part of town. My help-wanted hike had taken me far from home; the place next door was called Booty's and it had a sign with neon legs that crossed and uncrossed.

I pushed the bookstore's glass door. It made a bell tinkle brightly up above, and I stepped slowly through. I did not realize at the time what an important threshold I had just crossed.

Inside: imagine the shape and volume of a normal bookstore turned up on its side. This place was absurdly narrow and dizzyingly tall, and the shelves went all the way up—three stories of books, maybe more. I craned my neck back (why do bookstores always make you do uncomfortable things with your neck?) and the shelves faded smoothly into the shadows in a way that suggested they might just go on forever.

The shelves were packed close together, and it felt like I was standing at the border of a forest—not a friendly California forest, either, but an old Transylvanian forest, a forest full of wolves and witches and dagger-wielding bandits all waiting just beyond moonlight's reach. There were ladders that clung to the shelves and rolled side to side. Usually those seem charming, but here, stretching up into the gloom, they were ominous. They whispered rumors of accidents in the dark.

So I stuck to the front half of the store, where bright midday light pressed in and presumably kept the wolves at bay. The wall around and above the door was glass, thick square panes set into a grid of black iron, and arched across them, in tall golden letters, it said (in reverse):

MR. PENUMBRA'S 24-HOUR BOOKSTORE

Below that, set in the hollow of the arch, there was a symbol—two hands, perfectly flat, rising out of an open book.

So who was Mr. Penumbra?

“Hello, there,” a quiet voice called from the stacks. A figure emerged—a man, tall and skinnier than I, like one of the ladders, draped in a light gray button-down and a blue cardigan. He tottered as I walked, running a long hand along the shelves for support. When he came out of the shadows, I saw that his sweater matched his eyes, which were also blue, riding low in nests of wrinkles. He was very old.

He nodded at me and gave a weak wave. “What do you seek in these shelves?”

That was a good line, and for some reason, it made me feel comfortable. I asked, “Am I speaking to Mr. Penumbra?”

“I am Penumbra”—he nodded—“and I am the custodian of this place.”

~~I didn't quite realize I was going to say it until I did: “I'm looking for a job.”~~

Penumbra blinked once, then nodded and tottered over to the desk set beside the front door. It was a massive block of dark-whorled wood, a solid fortress on the forest's edge. You could probably defend it for days in the event of a siege from the shelves.

“Employment.” Penumbra nodded again. He slid up onto the chair behind the desk and regarded me across its bulk. “Have you ever worked at a bookstore before?”

“Well,” I said, “when I was in school I waited tables at a seafood restaurant, and the owner so I wrote his own cookbook.” It was called *The Secret Cod* and it detailed thirty-one different ways to— You know how to get it. “That probably doesn't count.”

“No, it does not, but no matter,” Penumbra said. “Prior experience in the book trade is of little use to you here.”

Wait—maybe this place really was all erotica. I glanced down and around, but glimpsed no pornographic bodices, ripped or otherwise. In fact, just next to me there was a stack of dusty Dashiell Hammetts on a low table. That was a good sign.

“Tell me,” Penumbra said, “about a book you love.”

I knew my answer immediately. No competition. I told him, “Mr. Penumbra, it's not one book but a series. It's not the best writing and it's probably too long and the ending is terrible, but I've read it three times, and I met my best friend because we were both obsessed with it back in sixth grade.” I took a breath. “I love *The Dragon-Song Chronicles*.”

Penumbra cocked an eyebrow, then smiled. “That is good, very good,” he said, and his smile grew, showing jostling white teeth. Then he squinted at me, and his gaze went up and down. “But can you climb a ladder?”

And that is how I find myself on this ladder, up on the third floor, minus the floor, of Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore. The book I've been sent up to retrieve is called AL-ASMARI and it's about 15 percent of one arm-length to my left. Obviously, I need to return to the floor and scoot the ladder over. But down below, Penumbra is shouting, “Lean, my boy! Lean!”

And wow, do I ever want this job.

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# COAT BUTTONS

**S**O THAT WAS A MONTH AGO . Now I'm the night clerk at Penumbra's, and I go up and down that ladder like a monkey. There's a real technique to it. You roll the ladder into place, lock its wheels, then bend your knees and leap directly to the third or fourth rung. You pull with your arms to keep your momentum going, and in a moment you're already five feet in the air. As you're climbing, you look straight ahead, not up or down; you keep your eyes focused about a foot in front of your face and you let the books zoom by in a blur of colorful spines. You count the rungs in your head, and finally, when you're at the right level, reaching for the book you've come up to retrieve ... why, of course, you leap.

As a professional capability, this might not be as marketable as web design, but it's probably more fun, and at this point I'll take anything I can get.

I only wish I had to use my new skill more often. Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore does not operate around the clock due to an overwhelming number of customers. In fact, there are hardly any customers and sometimes I feel more like a night watchman than a clerk.

Penumbra sells used books, and they are in such uniformly excellent condition that they might as well be new. He buys them during the day—you can only sell to the man with his name on the store's windows—and he must be a tough customer. He doesn't seem to pay much attention to the bestseller lists. His inventory is eclectic; there's no evidence of pattern or purpose other than, I suppose, his own personal taste. So, no teenage wizards or vampire police here. That's a shame, because this is exactly the kind of store that makes you want to buy a book about a teenage wizard. This is the kind of store that makes you want to *be* a teenage wizard.

I've told my friends about Penumbra's, and a few of them have stopped in to ogle the shelves and watch me climb into the dusty heights. I'll usually cajole them into buying something: a Steinbeck novel, some Borges stories, a thick Tolkien tome—all of those authors evidently of interest to Penumbra, because he stocks the complete works of each. At the minimum, I'll send my friends home packing with a postcard. There's a pile of them on the front desk. They show the front of the store in black pen and ink—a fine-lined design so old and uncool that it's become cool again—and Penumbra sells them for a dollar each.

But a buck every few hours doesn't pay my salary. I can't figure out what does pay my salary. I can't figure out what keeps this bookstore in business at all.

There's a customer I've seen twice now, a woman who I am fairly certain works next door at Booty's. I am fairly certain about this because both times her eyes were ringed raccoon-like with mascara and she smelled like smoke. She has a bright smile and dusty blond-brown hair. I can't tell how old she is—she could be a tough twenty-three or a remarkable thirty-one—and I don't know her name, but I do know she likes biographies.

On her first visit, she browsed the front shelves in a slow circle, scuffing her feet and doing absentminded stretches, then came up to the front desk. "D'you have the one about Steve Jobs?" she asked. She was wearing a puffy North Face jacket over a pink tank top and jeans, and her voice had

little twang in it.

I frowned and said, “Probably not. But let’s check.”

Penumbra has a database that runs on a decrepit beige Mac Plus. I pecked its creator’s name in on the keyboard and the Mac made a low chime—the sound of success. She was in luck.

We tilted our heads to scan the BIOGRAPHY section and there it was: a single copy, shiny like new. Maybe it had been a Christmas present to a tech-executive dad who didn’t actually read books. Or maybe Tech Dad wanted to read it on his Kindle instead. In any case, somebody sold it here, and it passed Penumbra’s muster. Miraculous.

“He was so handsome,” North Face said, holding the book at arm’s length. Steve Jobs peered over the top of the white cover, hand on his chin, wearing round glasses that looked a bit like Penumbra’s.

A week later, she came hopping through the front door, grinning and silently clapping her hands—*it made her seem more twenty-three than thirty-one*—and said, “Oh, it was just great! No more to listen”—here she got serious—“he wrote another one, about Einstein.” She held out her phone, which showed an Amazon product page for Walter Isaacson’s biography of Einstein. “I saw it on the internet but I thought maybe I could buy it here?”

Let’s be clear: This was incredible. This was a bookseller’s dream. This was a stripper standing athwart history, yelling, *Stop!*—and then we discovered, heads tilted hopefully, that Penumbra’s BIOGRAPHY section did not contain *Einstein: His Life and Universe*. There were five different books about Richard Feynman, but nothing at all about Albert Einstein. Thus spoke Penumbra.

“Really?” North Face pouted. “Shoot. Well, I guess I’ll buy it online. Thanks.” She wandered back out into the night, and so far she hasn’t returned.

Let me be candid. If I had to rank book-acquisition experiences in order of comfort, ease, and satisfaction, the list would go like this:

1. The perfect independent bookstore, like Pygmalion in Berkeley.
2. A big, bright Barnes & Noble. I know they’re corporate, but let’s face it—those stores are nice. Especially the ones with big couches.
3. The book aisle at Walmart. (It’s next to the potting soil.)
4. The lending library aboard the U.S.S. *West Virginia*, a nuclear submarine deep beneath the surface of the Pacific.
5. Mr. Penumbra’s 24-Hour Bookstore.

So I set myself to righting the ship. No, I do not know anything about bookstore management. No, I do not have my finger on the pulse of the post-strip-club shopping crowd. No, I have never really righted any ships, unless you count the time I saved the Rhode Island School of Design fencing club from bankruptcy by organizing a twenty-four-hour Errol Flynn movie marathon. But I do know there are things that Penumbra is obviously doing wrong—things he isn’t doing at all.

Like marketing.

I have a plan: First I’ll prove myself with some small successes, then ask for a budget to place some print ads, put a few signs in the window, maybe even go big with a banner on the bus shelter just up the street: WAITING FOR YOUR BUS? COME WAIT WITH US ! Then I’ll keep the bus schedule open on my laptop so I can give customers a five-minute warning when the next one is coming. It will be brilliant.

But I have to start small, and with no customers to distract me, I work hard. First, I connect to the unprotected Wi-Fi network next door called *bootynet*. Then I go one by one through the local review sites, writing glowing reports of this hidden gem. I send friendly emails with winking emoticons

local blogs. I create a Facebook group with one member. I sign up for Google's hyper-targeted local advertising program—the same one we used at NewBagel—which allows you to identify your quarry with absurd precision. I choose characteristics from Google's long form:

- lives in San Francisco
- likes books
- night owl
- carries cash
- not allergic to dust
- enjoys Wes Anderson movies
- recent GPS ping within five blocks of here

I only have ten dollars to spend on this, so I have to be specific.

That's all the demand side. There's also supply to think about, and Penumbra's supply is capricious to say the least—but that's only part of the story. Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore is, we have learned, really two stores in one.

There's the more-or-less normal bookstore, which is up front, packed in tight around the desk. There are short shelves marked HISTORY and BIOGRAPHY and POETRY. There's Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Trevanian's *Shibumi*. This more-or-less normal bookstore is spotty and frustrating, but at least it's stocked with titles that you could find in a library or on the internet.

The other bookstore is stacked behind and above all that, on the tall laddered shelves, and it's comprised of volumes that, as far as Google knows, don't exist. Trust me, I've searched. Many of these have the look of antiquity—cracked leather, gold-leaf titles—but others are freshly bound with bright crisp covers. So they're not all ancient. They're just all ... unique.

I think of this as the Waybacklist.

When I started working here, I assumed they were just all from tiny presses. Tiny Amish presses with no taste for digital record-keeping. Or I thought maybe it was all self-published work—a who's-who collection of hand-bound one-offs that never made it to the Library of Congress or anywhere else. Maybe Penumbra's was a kind of orphanage.

But now, a month into my clerkship, I'm starting to think it's more complicated than that. You see, to go with the second store, there's a second set of customers—a small community of people who orbit the store like strange moons. They are nothing like North Face. They are older. They arrive with algorithmic regularity. They never browse. They come wide awake, completely sober, and vibrating with need. For example:

The bell above the door will tinkle, and before it's done, Mr. Tyndall will be shouting, breathless, “Kingslake! I need Kingslake!” He'll take his hands off his head (has he really been running down the street with his hands on his head?) and clamp them down on the front desk. He will repeat it, as if he's already told me once that my shirt is on fire, and why am I not taking swift action:

“Kingslake! Quickly!”

The database on the Mac Plus encompasses the regular books and the Waybacklist alike. The latter aren't shelved according to title or subject (do they even have subjects?), so the computer assistance is crucial. Now I will type K-I-N-G-S-L-A-K-E and the Mac will churn slowly—Tyndall bouncing on his heels—and then chime and show its cryptic response. Not BIOGRAPHY or HISTORY or SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY, but: 3-13. That's the Waybacklist, aisle 3, shelf 13, which is only about ten feet up.

“Oh, thank goodness, thank you, yes, thank goodness,” Tyndall will say, ecstatic. “Here is my book”—he will produce a very large book from somewhere, possibly his pants; it will be the one he is returning, exchanging for KINGSLAKE—“and here is my card.” He will slide a prim laminated card across the table, marked with the same symbol that graces the front windows. It will bear a cryptic code, stamped hard into the heavy paper, which I will record. Tyndall will be, as always, lucky number 6WNJHY. I will mistype it twice.

After I do my monkey business on the ladder, I will wrap KINGSLAKE in brown paper. I will try to make small talk: “How’s your night going, Mr. Tyndall?”

“Oh, very good, better now,” he will breathe, taking the package with shaking hands. “Making progress, slow, steady, sure! *Festina lente*, thank you, thank you!” Then the bell will tinkle again as he hurries back out into the street. It will be three in the morning.

Is this a book club? How do they join? Do they ever pay?

These are the things I ask myself when I sit here alone, after Tyndall or Lapin or Fedorov has left. Tyndall is probably the weirdest, but they’re all pretty weird: all graying, single-minded, seemingly imported from some other time or place. There are no iPhones. There’s no mention of current events or pop culture or anything, really, other than the books. I definitely think of them as a club, though I have no evidence that they know one another. Each comes in alone and never says a word about anything other than the object of his or her current, frantic fascination.

I don’t know what’s inside those books—and it’s part of my job not to know. After the ladder test, back on the day I was hired, Penumbra stood behind the front desk, gazed at me with bright blue eyes, and said:

“This job has three requirements, each very strict. Do not agree to them lightly. Clerks in this store have followed these rules for nearly a century, and I will not have them broken now. One: You must always be here from ten p.m. to six a.m. exactly. You must not be late. You cannot leave early. Two: You may not browse, read, or otherwise inspect the shelved volumes. Retrieve them for our members. That is all.”

I know what you’re thinking: dozens of nights alone, and you’ve never cracked a cover? No, I haven’t. For all I know, Penumbra has a camera somewhere. If I sneak a peek and he finds out, I’ll be fired. My friends are dropping like flies out there; whole industries, whole parts of the country, are shutting down. I don’t want to live in a tent. I need this job.

And besides, the third rule makes up for the second:

“You must keep precise records of all transactions. The time. The customer’s appearance. His state of mind. How he asks for the book. How he receives it. Does he appear to be injured. Is he wearing a sprig of rosemary on his hat. And so on.”

I guess under normal circumstances this would feel like a creepy job requirement. Under the actual circumstances—lending strange books to stranger scholars in the middle of the night—it feels perfectly appropriate. So, rather than spend my time staring at the forbidden shelves, I spend it writing about the customers.

On my first night, Penumbra showed me a low shelf inside the front desk where, lined up, there was a set of oversized leatherbound tomes, all identical except for bright Roman numerals on the spines. “Our logbooks,” he said, running his finger down the line, “going back nearly a century.” He hauled up the rightmost tome and laid it on the desk with a heavy *whump*. “You will help to keep them now.” The logbook’s cover bore the word NARRATIO, deeply embossed, and a symbol—the symbol

from the front windows. Two hands, open like a book.

“Open it,” Penumbra said.

Inside, the pages were wide and gray, filled with dark handwriting. There were sketches, too, thumbnail portraits of bearded men, tight geometric doodles. Penumbra gave the pages a heave and found the place about halfway through, marked with an ivory bookmark, where the writing ran out. “You will note names, times, and titles,” he said, tapping the page, “but also, as I said, manner and appearance. We keep a record for every member, and for every customer who might yet become a member, in order to track their work.” He paused, then added, “Some of them are working very hard indeed.”

“What are they doing?”

“My boy!” he said, eyebrows raised. As if nothing could be more obvious: “They are reading.”

So, on the pages of the book labeled *NARRATIO*, numbered *IX*, I do my best to keep a clear and accurate record of what transpires during my shift, with only an occasional literary flourish. I guess you could say rule number two isn’t quite absolute. There’s one weird book I’m allowed to touch in Penumbra’s. It’s the one I’m writing.

When I see Penumbra in the morning, if there’s been a customer, he will ask me about it. I’ll read a bit out of the logbook, and he will nod at my record-keeping. But then he will probe even deeper: “A respectable rendering of Mr. Tyndall,” he’ll say. “But tell me, do you remember, were the buttons on his coat made of mother-of-pearl? Or were they horn? Some kind of metal? Copper?”

Yes, okay: it does seem strange that Penumbra keeps this dossier. I can’t imagine a purpose for it, not even a nefarious one. But when people are past a certain age, you sort of stop asking them why they do things. It feels dangerous. What if you say, *So, Mr. Penumbra, why do you want to know about Mr. Tyndall’s coat buttons?* and he pauses, and scratches his chin, and there’s an uncomfortable silence—and we both realize he can’t remember?

Or what if he fires me on the spot?

Penumbra keeps his own counsel, and the message is clear: do your job, and don’t ask questions. My friend Aaron just got laid off last week and now he’s going to move back in with his parents in Sacramento. In this economic environment, I prefer not to test Penumbra’s boundaries. I need that chair.

Mr. Tyndall’s coat buttons were jade.



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# MATROPOLIS

**T**O RUN MR. PENUMBRA'S 24-Hour Bookstore around the clock, one owner and two clerks divide the circle of the sun into thirds, and I get the darkest slice. Penumbra himself takes the mornings—I guess you'd call it prime time, except that this store doesn't really have one of those. I mean, a single customer is a major event, and a single customer is as likely to show up at midnight as at half-past noon.

So I pass the bookstore baton to Penumbra, but I receive it from Oliver Grone, the quiet soul who carries it through the evening.

Oliver is tall and solid, with thick limbs and huge feet. He has curly, coppery hair and ears that stick out perpendicular to his head. In another life, he might have played football or rowed crew and kept low-class gentlemen out of the club next door. In this life, Oliver is a graduate student at Berkeley, studying archaeology. Oliver is training to be a museum curator.

He's quiet—too quiet for his size. He speaks in short, simple sentences and always seems to be thinking about something else, something long ago and/or far away. Oliver daydreams about Ionic columns.

His knowledge runs deep. One night I quizzed him using a book called *The Stuff of Legends* I snagged from the bottom of Penumbra's tiny HISTORY section. I covered the headings with my hands and showed him the photos alone:

“Minoan bull totem, 1700 B.C.,” he called out. Correct.

“Basse Yutz flagon, 450 B.C. Maybe 500.” Yes.

“Roof tile, A.D. 600. Gotta be Korean.” Also yes.

At the end of the quiz, Oliver was ten for ten. I'm convinced his brain simply works on a different time scale. I can barely remember what I ate for lunch yesterday; Oliver, on the other hand, is casually aware of what was happening in 1000 B.C. and what it all looked like.

This makes me jealous. Right now, Oliver Grone and I are peers: we have exactly the same job and sit in exactly the same chair. But soon, very soon, he will advance by one very significant degree and accelerate away from me. He will find a place in the real world, because he's good at something—something other than climbing ladders in a lonely bookstore.

Every night I show up at 10:00 p.m. and find Oliver behind the front desk, always reading a book, always with a title like *The Care and Feeding of Terra-Cotta* or *Arrowhead Atlas of Pre-Columbian America*. Every night I rap my fingers on the dark wood. He looks up and says, “Hey, Clay.” Every night I take his place, and we nod farewell like soldiers—like men who uniquely understand each other's circumstances.

When I'm done with my shift, it's six in the morning, which is an awkward time to be set loose in the world. Generally I go home and read or play video games. I'd say it was to unwind except that the

night shift at Penumbra's doesn't really wind a person up. So mostly I'm just killing time until my roommates rise to meet me.

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Mathew Mittelbrand is our artist-in-residence. He's rail-thin, pale-skinned, and keeps strange hours—even stranger than mine, because they're less predictable. Many mornings I don't have to wait for Mat; instead, I come home to discover that he's been up all night toiling on his latest project.

During the day (more or less) Mat works on special effects at Industrial Light and Magic in the Presidio, making props and sets for movies. He gets paid to design and build laser rifles and haunted castles. But—I find this very impressive—he doesn't use computers. Mat is part of the dwindling tribe of special-effects artists who still make things with knives and glue.

Whenever he's not at ILM, Mat is working on some project of his own. He works with crazy intensity, feeding hours like dry twigs into the fire, just absolutely consuming them, burning them up. He sleeps lightly and briefly, often sitting up straight in a chair or lying pharaoh-like on the couch. He's like a storybook spirit, a little djinn or something, except instead of air or water his element is imagination.

Mat's latest project is his biggest yet, and soon there won't be room for me or the couch anymore. Mat's latest project is taking over the living room.

He calls it Matropolis, and it's made out of boxes and cans, paper and foam. It's a model railroad with no railroad. The underlying topography is all steep hills made from packing peanuts held in place with wire mesh. It started on one card table, but Mat has added two more, both at different levels, like tectonic plates. Spreading across the tabletop terrain there's a city.

It's a scaled-down dreamscape, a bright glittering hyper-city made with scraps of the familiar. There are Gehry-esque curves made from smooth tinfoil. There are Gothic spikes and crenellations made from dry macaroni. There is an Empire State Building made from shards of green glass.

Taped to the wall behind the card tables there are Mat's photo references: printed-out images of museums, cathedrals, office towers, and row houses. Some are skyline shots, but more are close-up, zoomed-in photos of surfaces and textures taken by Mat himself. Often he stands and stares at them, rubbing his chin, processing the grit and glint, breaking it down and reassembling it with his own bespoke LEGO set. Mat uses everyday materials so ingeniously that their original provenance fades away and you can only see them as the tiny buildings they've become.

On the couch there's a black plastic radio remote; I pick it up and click one of the knobs. A toy-sized airship dozing near the doorway buzzes to life and scoots toward Matropolis. Its master can maneuver it so it docks at the top of the Empire State Building, but I can only make it bump against the windows.

Just up the hall from Matropolis is my bedroom. There are three rooms here for three roommates. Mine is the smallest, just a little white cube with Edwardian filigree in the ceiling. Mat's room is the biggest by far, but it's drafty—it's up in the attic, at the top of a steep narrow staircase. And the third room, a perfect balance between size and comfort, belongs to our third roommate, Ashley Adams. She's currently asleep but will not be for long. Ashley rises at precisely six forty-five every morning.

Ashley is beautiful. Probably too beautiful—too shiny and clean-lined, like a 3-D model. Her hair is blond and straight, cropped clean at her shoulders. Her arms are toned from twice-weekly rock climbing sessions. Her skin is perpetually sun-kissed. Ashley is an account executive at a PR agency and in that capacity she ran PR for NewBagel, which is how we met. She liked my logo. At first I thought I had a crush on her, but then I realized she's an android.

I don't mean that in a bad way! I mean, when we figure them out, androids are going to be total great, right? Smart and strong and organized and thoughtful. Ashley is all of those things. And she's our patron: the apartment is hers. She's been living here for years, and our low rent reflects her long tenure.

I for one welcome our new android overlords.

After I'd been here for about nine months, our then-roommate Vanessa moved to Canada to get an eco-MBA, and it was me who found Mat to replace her. He was a friend of a friend from art school. I'd seen his show at a tiny white-walled gallery, all miniature neighborhoods built inside wine bottles and lightbulbs. When it came to pass that we were looking for a roommate and he was looking for an apartment, I was excited about living side by side with an artist, but I wasn't sure Ashley would go for it.

Mat came to visit, wearing a snug blue blazer over sharp-creased slacks. We sat in the living room (then dominated by a flat-screen TV, with no tabletop cities even dreamt of) and he told us about his current task at ILM: the design and construction of a bloodthirsty demon with blue-denim skin. It was part of a horror movie set inside an Abercrombie & Fitch.

"I'm learning how to sew," he explained. Then he pointed to one of Ashley's cuffs: "Those are really good seams."

Later, after Mat left, Ashley told me she appreciated his neatness. "So if you think he'll be a good fit, I'm fine with him," she said.

This is the key to our harmonious cohabitation: although their objectives are different, Mat and Ashley share a deep appreciation for details. For Mat, it's a tiny graffiti tag on a tiny subway stop. For Ashley, it's underwear that matches her twinset.

But the true test came early, with Mat's first project. It happened in the kitchen.

The kitchen: Ashley's sanctum sanctorum. I tread lightly in the kitchen; I prepare meals that are easy to clean up, like pasta and Pop-Tarts. I do not use her fancy Microplane or her complicated garlic press. I know how to turn the burners on and off, but not how to activate the oven's convection chamber, which I suspect requires two keys, like the launch mechanism on a nuclear missile.

Ashley loves the kitchen. She's a foodie, an epicurean, and she's never prettier, or more androidic, than on weekends, cooking a fragrant risotto in a color-coordinated apron with her hair tied in a blond knot on top of her head.

Mat could have done his first project up in the attic, or in the small scrubby backyard. But no. He chose the kitchen.

This was during my post-NewBagel period of unemployment, so I was there to watch it happen. In fact, I was leaning in close, inspecting Mat's handiwork, when Ashley appeared. She was just home from work, still dressed in J.Crew carbon and cream. She gasped.

Mat had a huge Pyrex cauldron set up on the stove, and inside there was a slow-churning mixture of oil and dye. It was heavy and highly viscous, and with the slow application of heat from below, it was curling and blooming in slow motion. The kitchen lights were all turned off, and Mat had two bright arc lamps set up behind the cauldron; they shone through and cast red and purple shadows that spun across the granite and travertine.

I straightened and stood, silent. The last time I'd been caught like this, I was nine, making vinegar-and-baking-soda volcanoes on the kitchen table after school. My mom wore pants just like Ashley's.

Mat's eyes rose slowly. His sleeves were rolled up around his elbows. His dark leather shoes were shiny in the gloom, and so were the tips of his fingers, coated in oil.

“It’s a simulation of the Horsehead Nebula,” he said. Obviously.

~~Ashley was silent, staring. Her mouth hung open a little bit. Her keys were dangling on her finger, arrested in midflight toward the tidy peg where they lived, just above the chore checklist.~~

Mat had been living with us for three days.

Ashley took two steps forward and leaned in close, just as I had, and peered into the cosmic depths. A saffron blob was pushing its way up through a roiling layer of green and gold.

“Holy shit, Mat,” she breathed. “That’s beautiful.”

So Mat’s astrophysical stew simmered on, and his other projects continued in sequence, getting bigger and messier and taking up more space. Ashley took an interest in his progress; she’d wander into the room, put a hand on one hip, scrunch her nose, and make a deftly constructive comment. She moved the TV herself.

This is Mat’s secret weapon, his passport, his get-out-of-jail-free card: Mat makes things that are beautiful.

So of course I told Mat he should come visit the bookstore, and tonight he does, at half-past two. The bell over the door tinkles to announce his arrival, and before he says a word, his neck bends back to follow the shelves up into the shadowy reaches. He turns toward me, points a plaid-jacketed arm straight to the ceiling, and says: “I want to go up there.”

I’ve only been working here for a month and don’t quite have the confidence for mischief yet, but Mat’s curiosity is infectious. He stalks straight over to the Waybacklist and stands between the shelves, leaning in close, examining the grain of the wood, the texture of the spines.

I concede: “Okay, but you have to hold on tight. And don’t touch any of the books.”

“Don’t touch them?” he says, testing the ladder. “What if I want to buy one?”

“You can’t buy them—they’re for borrowing. You have to be a member of the club.”

“Rare books? First editions?” He’s already in midair. He moves fast.

“More like only editions,” I say. No ISBNs here.

“What are they about?”

“I don’t know,” I say quietly.

“What?”

Saying it louder, I realize how lame it sounds: “I don’t know.”

“You’ve never looked at one?” He’s paused on the ladder, looking back down. Incredulous.

Now I’m getting nervous. I know where this is going.

“Seriously, never?” He’s reaching for the shelves.

I consider shaking the ladder to signal my displeasure, but the only thing more problematic than Mat looking at one of the books would be Mat plunging to his death. Probably. He has one in his hands, a fat black-bound volume that threatens to unbalance him. He teeters on the ladder and I grit my teeth.

“Hey, Mat,” I say, my voice suddenly high-pitched and whiny, “why don’t you just leave it—”

“This is amazing.”

“You should—”

“Seriously amazing, Jannon. You’ve never seen this?” He clutches the book to his chest and takes a step back down.

“Wait!” Somehow it feels less transgressive to keep it closer to the place where it belongs. “I’ll come up.” I pull another ladder into position opposite his and leap up the rungs. In a moment, Mat and

I are level, having a hushed conference at thirty feet.

~~The truth, of course, is that I am desperately curious. I'm annoyed at Mat, but also grateful that he's playing the part of the devil on my shoulder. He balances the thick volume against his chest and tilts it my way. It's dark up here, so I lean across the space between the shelves to see the page clearly.~~

For this, Tyndall and the rest come running in the middle of the night?

"I was hoping it would be an encyclopedia of dark rituals," Mat says.

The two-page spread shows a solid matrix of letters, a blanket of glyphs with hardly a trace of white space. The letters are big and bold, punched onto the paper in a sharp serif. I recognize the alphabet—it's roman, which is to say, normal—but not the words. Actually, there aren't really words at all. The pages are just long runs of letters—an undifferentiated jumble.

"Then again," Mat says, "we have no way of knowing it's *not* an encyclopedia of dark rituals ..."

I pull another book from the shelf, this one tall and flat with a bright green cover and a brown spine that says KRESIMIR. Inside, it's just the same.

"Maybe they're recreational puzzles," Mat says. "Like, super-advanced sudoku."

Penumbra's customers are, in fact, exactly the kind of people you'd see in coffee shops, working through one-sided chess problems or solving Saturday crosswords with blue ballpoints pressed perilously hard into the newsprint.

Down below, the bell tinkles. A jangle of cold fear makes a quick round-trip from my brain to my fingertips and back. From the front of the store, a low voice calls out, "Is anyone der?"

I hiss at Mat: "Put it back." Then I hustle down the ladder.

When I step wheezing from the stacks, it is Fedorov at the door. Of all the customers I've met, he's the oldest—his beard is snowy white and the skin on his hands is papery-thin—but also probably the most clear-eyed. He seems a lot like Penumbra, actually. Now he slides a book across the desk—he's returning CLOVTIER—then taps two fingers sharply and says, "I vill need Murao next."

Here we go. I find MVRAO in the database and send Mat back up the ladder. Fedorov eyes him curiously. "Anudder clerk?"

"A friend," I say. "Just helping out."

Fedorov nods. It occurs to me that Mat could pass muster as a very young member of this club. He and Fedorov are both wearing brown corduroys tonight.

"You hev been here, vat, tirty-seven days?"

I couldn't have told you that, but yes, I'm sure it's thirty-seven days exactly. These guys tend to be very precise. "That's right, Mr. Fedorov," I say cheerily.

"End vat do you tink?"

"I like it," I say. "It's better than working in an office."

Fedorov nods at that and passes over his card. He's 6KZVCY, naturally. "I vorked at HP"—he says it *Heych-Pee*—"for tirty years. Now, det vas an office." Then he ventures: "You hev used a HP calculator?"

Mat returns with MVRAO. It's a big one, thick and wide, bound in mottled leather.

"Oh, yeah, definitely," I say, wrapping the book in brown paper. "I had one of the graphing calculators all through high school. It was an HP-38."

Fedorov beams like a proud grandparent. "I vorked on de twenty-eight, which vas de precursor!"

That makes me smile. "I probably still have it somewhere," I tell him, and pass MVRAO across the front desk.

Fedorov scoops it up in both hands. "Tenk you," he says. "You know, de tirty-eight did not he

Reverse Polish Notation”—he gives his book (of dark rituals?) a meaningful tap—“end I should tell you, RPN is handy for this kind of work.”

---

I think Mat’s right: sudoku. “I’ll keep that in mind,” I say.

“Okay, thank you again.” The bell tinkles and we watch Fedorov go slowly up the sidewalk toward the bus stop.

“I looked at his book,” Mat says. “Same as the others.”

What seemed strange before now seems even stranger.

“Jannon,” Mat says, turning to face me squarely. “There’s something I have to ask you.”

“Let me guess,” I say. “Why haven’t I ever looked at the—”

“Do you have a thing for Ashley?”

Well, that’s not what I expected. “What? No.”

“Okay, good. Because I do.”

I blink and stare blankly at Mat Mittelbrand standing there in his tiny, perfectly tailored suit jacket. It’s like Jimmy Olsen confessing that he has a thing for Wonder Woman. The contrast is just too much. And yet—

“I’m going to put the moves on her,” he says gravely. “Things might get weird.” He says it like a commando setting up a midnight raid. Like: *Sure, this is going to be extraordinarily dangerous, but don’t worry. I’ve done it before.*

My vision shifts. Maybe Mat isn’t Jimmy Olsen but Clark Kent, and underneath there’s Superman. He would have to be a five-foot-four Superman, but still.

“I mean, technically, we already made out once.”

Wait, what—

“Two weeks ago. You weren’t home. You were here. We drank a bunch of wine.”

My head spins a little, not with the dissonance of Mat and Ashley together, but with the realization that this thread of attraction has been twisting under my nose and I had no idea. I hate when that happens.

Mat nods, as if that’s all settled now. “Okay, Jannon. This place is awesome. But I gotta go.”

“Back to the apartment?”

“No, the office. Pulling an all-nighter. Jungle monster.”

“Jungle monster.” “Made from living plants. We have to keep the studio really hot. I might come back for another break. This place is cool and dry.”

Mat leaves. Later, in the logbook, I write:

A cool night with no clouds. The bookstore is visited by the youngest customer it has seen in (this clerk believes) many years. He wears corduroys, a tailored suit jacket, and, under it, a sweater-vest stitched with tiny tigers. The customer purchases one postcard (under duress), then makes his exit to resume work on a jungle monster.

It’s very quiet. I set my chin in my palm and count my friends and wonder what else is hiding in plain sight.

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# THE DRAGON-SONG CHRONICLES, VOLUME I

THE NEXT NIGHT, another friend visits the store, and not just any friend: my oldest.

Neel Shah and I have been best friends since sixth grade. In the unpredictable fluid dynamics of middle school, I found myself somehow floating near the top, an inoffensive everyman who was just good enough at basketball and not cripplingly afraid of girls. Neel, by contrast, sank straight to the bottom, shunned by jock and nerd alike. My cafeteria tablemates snorted that he looked funny, talked funny, smelled funny.

But we bonded that spring over a shared obsession with books about singing dragons, and we ended up best friends. I stood up for him, defended him, expended prepubescent political capital on his behalf. I got him invited to pizza parties and lured members of the basketball team into our Rockets & Warlocks role-playing group. (They didn't last long. Neel was always the dungeon master, and he always sent single-minded droids and undead orcs after them.) In seventh grade, I suggested Amy Torgensen, a pretty straw-haired girl who loved horses, that Neel's father was an exiled prince rich beyond measure, and that Neel might therefore make an excellent escort to the winter formal. It was his first date.

So I guess you could say Neel owes me a few favors, except that so many favors have passed between us now that they are no longer distinguishable as individual acts, just a bright haze of loyalty. Our friendship is a nebula.

Now Neel Shah appears framed in the front door, tall and solid, wearing a snug black track jacket, and he ignores the tall dusty Waybacklist completely. Instead he zeroes in on the short shelf labeled SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY.

"Dude, you've got Moffat!" he says, holding up a fat paperback. It's *The Dragon-Song Chronicles, Volume I*—the very book we bonded over back in sixth grade, and still our mutual favorite. I've read it three times. Neel has probably read it six.

"This is like an old copy, too," he says, riffling the pages. He's right. The newest edition of the trilogy, published after Clark Moffat died, features stark geometric covers that make a single continuous pattern when you line all three books up on the shelf. This one has an airbrushed rendering of a fat blue dragon wreathed in sea foam.

I tell Neel he ought to buy it, because it's a collector's edition and it's probably worth more than whatever Penumbra is charging. And because I haven't sold more than a postcard in six days. Normally I'd feel bad pressuring one of my friends to buy a book, but Neel Shah is now, if not quite rich beyond measure, then definitely competitive with some low-level princes. At around the same time I was struggling to make minimum wage at Oh My Cod! in Providence, Neel was starting his own company. Fast-forward five years and see the magic of compound effort: Neel has, to my best approximation, a few hundred thousand dollars in the bank, and his company is worth millions more.

By contrast, I have exactly \$2,357 in the bank and the company I work for—if you can call it a company—exists in the extrafinancial space inhabited by money launderers and fringe churches.

Anyway, I figure Neel can spring for an old paperback, even if he doesn't really have time to read anymore. While I'm digging for change in the front desk's dark drawers, his attention turns, at last, to the shadowy shelves dominating the back half of the store.

"What's all that?" he says. He's not sure if he's interested or not. As a rule, Neel prefers the new and shiny to the old and dusty.

"That," I say, "is the real store."

Mat's intervention has made me a bit bolder with the Waybacklist.

"What if I told you," I say, leading Neel back toward the shelves, "that this bookstore was frequented by a group of strange scholars?"

"Awesome," Neel says, nodding. He smells warlocks.

"And what if I told you"—I pick a black-bound book from a low shelf—"that every one of the books is written in code?" I open it wide to show a field of jumbled letters.

"That's crazy," Neel says. He traces a finger down the page, through the maze of serifs. "I've got a guy from Belarus who breaks codes. Copy protection, stuff like that."

Embedded in that sentence is the difference between Neel's life, post-middle school, and mine. Neel has guys—guys who do things for him. I don't have guys. I barely have a laptop.

"I could have him take a look at this," Neel continues.

"Well, I don't know for sure that they're in code," I admit. I close the book and slide it back onto the shelf. "And even if they are, I'm not sure it's, like, worth cracking. The guys who borrow these books are pretty weird."

"That's always how it starts!" Neel says, thumping my shoulder. "Think of *The Dragon-Song Chronicles*. Do you meet Telemach Half-Blood on the first page? No, dude. You meet Fernwen."

The main character of *The Dragon-Song Chronicles* is Fernwen the scholarly dwarf, who is small even by dwarven standards. He was cast out of his warrior clan at an early age and—anyway, yeah, maybe Neel has a point.

"We gotta figure this out," he says. "How much?"

I explain how it works, how the members all have cards—but now it's not just idle talk. Whatever the cost to join Penumbra's lending club, Neel can pay it.

"Find out how much it costs," Neel says. "You're sitting on a Rockets & Warlocks scenario here, I swear." He's grinning. He switches to his low dungeon-master voice: "Do not wuss out now, Claymore Redhands."

Oof. He's deployed my Rockets & Warlocks name against me. It is a spell with ancient power. I concede. I'll ask Penumbra.

We return to the short shelves and the airbrushed covers. Neel flips through another of our old favorites, a story about a huge cylindrical spaceship slowly approaching the earth. I tell him about Mat's plan to woo Ashley. Then I ask him how his company is doing. He unzips his track jacket and points proudly to the gunmetal-gray T-shirt underneath.

"We made these," he says. "Rented a 3-D body scanner, custom-tailored each shirt. They fit perfectly. Like, *perfectly*."

Neel is in amazing shape. Every time I see him, I cannot help but superimpose my memory of the chubby sixth-grader, because he has now somehow attained the preposterous V-shape of a comic book superhero.

"It's good branding, you know?" he says.



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