

The Only Frog You Get

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How he always got stuck waiting for the table, Sean did not know.

Never mind that everyone had once again insisted on meeting in the kitschy theme restaurant. Never mind that he'd been in at least a dozen of these restaurants across the country and their supposedly antique kitsch was always exactly the same, which lent some doubt to the credibility of the kitsch in question. Never mind that no one wanted to hear him rant about that.

Sean was prepared to suck up any and all of these insults and disappointments. What bothered him was that he was invariably the first to arrive, stuck by himself in the hysterically jovial lounge staring at a table beeper that stubbornly refused to go off.

Sean hunched closer to the bar just in time to avoid the crowd who swayed past him, flashing beeper held high in triumph.

Next to him, a gloved hand reached for a glass of beer. Sean had been splitting his time between staring at his beeper and staring at the glove because, first off, who wore gloves inside a restaurant lounge and, secondly, the guy on the stool next to his wasn't wearing gloves. He was wearing glove. One, on his left hand.

As Sean contemplated that mystery, the arm moved past him. Making a play, apparently, for the aluminum bucket of peanuts sitting in front of Sean.

Sean was about to protest, since he was using those peanuts to fill the gulf between him and dinner, but a flash of orange distracted him into silence. Orange skin, specifically. Glowing orange skin, revealed where his neighbour's jacket sleeve had pulled away from the cuff of his glove.

Instinctively, Sean leaned back. He couldn't think why skin might glow orange, but it implied... something bad. Didn't it? Radiation, maybe.

It wasn't a subtle flinch, so of course the Orange Hand noticed.

"It's not catching," he said. He had a pleasant voice, friendly but hesitant enough not to seem pushy. Sean turned to look at him and found an equally pleasant face turned his way. Hair and freckles nearly the colour of the hand, wide features and an open smile. Sean returned the smile, less openly.

"Sorry. Couldn't help noticing."

Orange Hand nodded.

"I bet. You wouldn't happen to know how to turn off Cagel's Spell of Luminescent Flesh, would you?"

Sean nearly laughed at that, but he managed to hold it in. He wasn't actually sure it was a joke.

"Uh... no."

Orange Hand sighed and crushed a peanut shell in his gloved hand. There was nothing inside.

"Just my luck." He looked at Sean again. "They say no one can undo this, but I always like to ask."

"Of course," Sean said amiably. He knew he should back away from this nutcase. Not right that second, because the ballplayers in the booth directly behind him were-

"Sorry, sorry, `scuse us..."

-heading to their table. But soon, and without further conversation, he should definitely back away.

He didn't, though. Moving to another seat would have put him back where he was two minutes ago, staring at the mute basketball game on television and listening to the hits of the 80s throbbing from the speakers and not getting much entertainment out of either.

This conversation, on the other hand... well, just look at that other hand.

"So," Sean said, stealing back a peanut, "you're telling me... what? Someone cast an evil orange spell on your hand?"

"Not someone," Orange Hand said. "Me."

Sean stared at him.

"You're serious. You said hocus pocus or whatever and your hand turned orange."

"Hocus pocus is not what I said. I'm gonna do you a favour and not repeat what I said."

Sean did laugh, then. Orange Hand didn't seem offended. He waved the bartender over and ordered another beer.

"Anything I can get you?" he asked Sean. Sean shook his head.

"No, thanks." He waited until the bartender had set up the beer and wandered off before continuing. "I'm sorry, but you can't expect me to believe that."

Orange Hand slipped the glove half off for a moment before tugging it back into place.

"Huh. I keep thinking, the next time someone just doesn't believe it, the orange will go away. Some kind of reverse Tinkerbell effect. Never works, though."

No suggestion of sarcasm in his tone or his eyes. Just mild disappointment.

"Sorry," Sean offered. "Maybe it's because I only have a problem with the spell part. I mean, your hand is obviously orange."

"You think I... painted it? And put a glove over it?"

"And went to a bar to convince a stranger and win some kind of bet," Sean said. "Maybe. Sure."

"Maybe," Orange Hand repeated, smiling a little. "Sure. You know what's funny?"

"I like to think so," Sean said. "What have you got for me?"

"A story. I think it's ironic. I'm never sure if I'm using that right."

"Tell it and we'll see."

"Good deal." Orange Hand took another peanut. This one paid off and he smiled. "Real good deal. Okay, once upon a time, there was a little girl who wanted to be a witch. She wanted to do funny spells like turning people to frogs and making people's hands turn orange, or... maybe not that one. But the kind of thing where you say hocus pocus and there's smoke and something just... happens. Right there in front of you. You know what I'm talking about?"

Sean figured he kind of did. He shrugged.

"Guess so."

"Right. So. Her parents thought it was just a phase. Probably still do. This girl, though, grew up and became a Wiccan. And she opened up a little store for Wiccans and other people in the not so mystical town of Red Deer. She called herself the Wicked Witch of Red Deer. The Wiccans didn't find that funny. She never did any of the hocus pocus stuff with them, either. I mean, they did some stuff, but it wasn't all smoke and ala-peanut-butter-sandwiches and some guy's hair is now earthworms. Or whatever. So this girl, Stella was her name, she started looking for different kinds of spells. The kind that would do what she wanted."

"But they don't exist," Sean said. Orange Hand laughed.

"Man, come on. Of course they do. Hand, right? But Stella was so bad with them. Just... had no talent. There's a knack. The Wiccans knew she didn't have it. I think she knew, too, but she wouldn't give up. Okay, so, one time she got this book of spells by some guy named Cagel. They were supposed to be easier to cast than a fishing line. Just say the words, don't screw up, and presto. But could Stella make them work?"

The peanut bucket was empty. Sean reached to his other side and took the one sitting there.

"Buddy, what do you think you-" was as far as his neighbour got before the guy's beeper went off. "Never mind."

Sean dropped the bucket between himself and the Orange Hand.

"I'm going to guess no."

"Nope. So she called up her buddy Ian and asked him to come try this spell book because it must be defective. Ian, being a real nice guy with two totally normal hands, went right on over and cast the first spell he saw which was... can you guess?"

Sean thought back.

"Cagel's Spell of Luminescent Flesh?"

"That's the one. Yeah. Turns out the book wasn't defective. Stel lost her cool, big time. Packed up the store. Took all the spell books she couldn't use, all the potions she couldn't mix, all the pretending she couldn't do in that town anymore and she moved to the West Coast. Brought this little frog with her. Not a real frog. It was a decoration. I'm bringing this up for a reason."

Sean was brushing peanut shells into a neat little pile on the bar. That would make a big difference when the next guy came along and swept them onto the floor, which seemed to be what everyone else did in this place.

"I'm sure you are," he said.

"People shoplifted some. She had a lot of jewelry, small stuff. Easy to pocket. She decided to be funny about it, for whatever reason. Took a little fake frog and put it in a little cage and stuck a sign on it that said, Our Last Shoplifter. Kept it by the cash register. Can you guess how many shoplifters she had after that?"

"Um... seven?"

Ian laughed.

"You know better than that. She didn't have any. That stupid little frog was a ward and it was the only real magic she ever did. And she never even realized it. She just did it as a joke."

"That might be ironic," Sean conceded. "I'd have to look it up to be sure."

"On second thought, I'd say apt. Instead of ironic. Because, seriously, why did the frog work when nothing else did?"

Sean breathed heavily, scattering the papery inner shells from his pile of ex-peanuts.

"She wasn't trying so hard?"

"She wasn't trying at all. She was a Jedi, man. She just did."

"I thought that was Nike's slogan," Sean said. "Goddamn... how long am I going to sit here? I mean, no offense, you tell a good yarn, but I'm getting seriously hungry."

"You're asking me how long you'll be sitting here?" Ian asked. "And you think you're all shaky on this irony thing? You own it."

Sean couldn't begin to guess what that was supposed to mean.

"I guess you've been here longer than I have," he ventured. Ian shook his head.

"No. I mean, yeah, by about ten minutes. So I've seen the whole thing. You lean forward. Beeper goes off behind you. You pull your coat in. Beeper goes off down the aisle and they brush your coat on the way past. You steal a guy's peanuts. Before he can do anything about it, his beeper goes off."

Sean didn't know exactly what his face looked like at that moment, which was too bad. He was curious about how gobsmacked would look on him.

"What are you... are you saying you think I'm setting off people's beepers somehow?"

"I try," Ian said, "not to confuse correlation with cause. Maybe you just... know."

"That's ridiculous," Sean said. Wasn't it?

Ian took a few swallows of his neglected beer.

"More ridiculous than explaining what I've seen in any other way? Please. Also, you're not the only one who knows things sometimes."

Sean realized he was drumming his fingers on the top of his beeper. He stopped.

"Know things?"

"Just, about people. About who to talk to. You think I ask everyone if they know how to turn off this Cagel spell? C'mon. They would think I was crazy."

Sean wasn't sure what he was going to say. His mouth opened and he started off with,

"You..."

Ian waited, head cocked.

"... have to go," Sean finished. He looked at Ian's beeper and, yes, sure enough. Red lights flashing around the edge of the disc, little electronic notes sounding almost soundlessly in the din of the bar. Ian nodded.

"Thanks." He stood. "If I were you... I would totally forget this ever happened. Because this might be the only frog you get, and it'd be a shame if you started trying."

Sean's late, great friends passed the departing Ian on their way into the bar. Good thing too, because they'd be getting a table sooner or later. Sometime. Whenever. And Sean was not in the mood to eat by himself.