

THE END OF SUMMER

Thirteen Tales of Halloween

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STINGY JACK

"It's well we cannot hear the screams we make in other people's dreams."

— Edward Gorey

After Jack passed out from the drink, a gurgling noise escaped his chapped lips and his head bounced heavily onto his shoulder. He remained deathly still for a moment before his bulky body toppled completely out of the wooden chair and crashed across his front porch floorboards. He awoke in shock, thinking he had been pummeled by yet *another* angry bar maiden, but seeing that he was actually alone on his porch he became content. That is until the clattering sound of his whiskey bottle alerted him to the growing danger that, unless he acted quickly, he would find himself sober by day's end. Through hazy eyes, Jack saw the auburn whiskey sloshing out of the bottle's spout and slowly seeping into the warped porch wood.

"No!" he said, lumbering rapidly on his hands and knees to the disappearing spirit. Attempting to grab at the leaking bottle, his clumsy hands instead sent it careening off the porch where it disappeared from sight. He loudly groaned at the sound of shattering glass and rolled over onto his back. The spilled lukewarm whiskey soaked into his hair and shoulders, and for a moment he was content to lie there, drunkenly hoping that his body would magically absorb the drink.

Then he had a better idea.

He rolled lazily over again, on his stomach now, and lapped at the spilled whiskey like a dying cat mere sips away from salvation. Again he groaned, this time at the overpowering

taste of rotted wood and the many seasons of dirt and dust which had littered his porch, his derelict shack, and his surrounding land. Defeated, his arms died at his sides. He prepared to pass out in his usual position – face down – as the swirling drunken carnival inside his head slowly faded into nothing, and he welcomed the dreamless sleep that was sure to follow.

A flamboyant voice suddenly extracted him from his looming unconscious world.

“Might you tell me the way to Perdition?”

Jack managed a guttural noise in response, but said nothing further.

“Sir?”

Jack remained still, this time not even groaning.

“Sir.”

Jack, sensing this stranger would persist until his inquiry was satisfied, slowly pivoted his throbbing head over his bleeding chin to look pathetically up at the man. “What say you?”

The stranger was peculiarly dressed in a long, flowing cape—black; over a fine shirt and stitched vest—black; with rich slacks screaming a heavy sheen—black; and completing his odd ensemble was a fur melusine top hat as long as a harsh winter.

Black.

The stranger flashed his yellow teeth in a grin Jack found instantly unnerving. The world reeked suddenly of rotten eggs and fetid human gas, the smell of which caused Jack’s stomach to lurch, his arced tongue to slide involuntarily out of his mouth like a dog retching up a recent meal gone curdled. He let out a single choked gag.

“Perdition, Stingy Jack. Where might I find Perdition?”

Jack gagged again and rolled over on his back, struggling for clean air.

The stranger checked his watch. "If you don't mind, Stingy Jack, I do have a schedule to keep."

"Ain't no town I know of called Perdition, mister," Jack said, forcing the words out of his dry and grated throat.

"Sure you do, Stingy Jack. You've never been there, but it's where you're going today. Now and for always."

"That's..." began Jack, and then stopped for a moment after catching another whiff of the stranger and letting another gag escape his throat, "...the third time you called me by a name I don't much care for. And I don't believe, mister, that we've ever made acquaintance."

"Oh, but we have, Mr. Jack!" said the stranger, almost gleefully. "We have! Ten years ago, it was!" His words were dynamic and painstakingly pronounced, and his delivery was that of a hammy stage actor.

"I think you're mistaken," Jack said, his stomach heaving at the newborn smell of burnt entrails and horse piles drifting into his nostrils. "I don't associate with too many folk. And you..." – a hacking cough – "...I think I'd remember."

"A history lesson, then?" asked the stranger, and as he bent to help the drunken man into a chair, Jack's battered thermal cotton shirt fell open, revealing the wooden rosary slung around his neck. The stranger withdrew and nearly gasped, as if burned, but then a smile slowly infected his sharp-featured face. "Something tells me you *do* remember." He reached back down, shielding his yellow eyes with one hand as he closed Jack's shirt with another, and then took a careful step back.

"I don't much care to be pawed at by strangers," Jack pathetically said, sloppily batting his hands in the air as if his visitor still stood uncomfortably close.

The stranger smiled and, introducing himself, stuck out his hand—a woman's; long curved nails colored black. Jack, too, noticed that the man habitually shuffled on hooved feet.

“All know me, Mr. Jack. And believe you me, we’ve met before.”

Jack considered the offered hand, but the stranger’s scent of abhorrent waste invaded his nostrils again, and he let loose a torrential stream of even fouler-smelling vomit. The stranger remained unfazed.

“At a bar it was, as I said, ten years ago. The Dunes Cantina, I believe. Just off the horseshoe trail down by the river. We drank together, do you not remember?”

Jack sniffed, his eyes closed again. “Are you...some kind of goat woman?” he dumbly managed.

“Do you need a refresher, Jack?”

Jack, his eyes still closed, waved a buzzing fly from his face.

“Twenty years ago, your land was dry and your bed was empty. You pledged your soul to me for ten years of a fruitful harvest and a woman with whom to share your days. Why you wanted only ten years was quite vexing, I must say—”

“Dyin’ young,” said Jack “is the only way to live.”

“Very well,” said the stranger, not impressed with Jack’s philosophy. “Regardless, I’d heard your offer and the agreement was forged. For ten long years, your land was plentiful, and your woman subservient and loving. Life for you wasn’t too objectionable, was it, Jack? And on that last day, I came for you. So sad and broken, you were. Our agreement had reached its end. Your turnip farm was dry, as were your accounts, and the missus was gone. And on that night at the Dunes Cantina when I came to collect what you owed me, your silver tongue convinced me to share a drink before our descent. And we drank and had us some mighty laughs. And when the bill came, you were a bit light. Is any of this ringing a bell?” The stranger spoke this last sentence at the tail end of the preceding one, as if he were growing impatient at Jack’s insubordination in

remembering the event. A sneer snuck into Jack's face, though his eyes remained closed and he spoke not a word.

"Yes, you rapsallion, you remember," said the devil and then spoke in Jack's voice. "I've a plan, Mr. Man,' you said. 'You being the devil – the master of trickery and all – you turn yourself into a coin so I may pay the barman. And when no one is looking, you turn back and we can go on our merry way with some free drink in our guts!' Sound about right, Mr. Jack?"

Jack's sneer turned into a wide grin and a dry chuckle escaped his mouth.

"Ah...the memory comes flooding back, does it not?" asked the devil. "Go on, finish. I'll fill in the missing parts, if need be."

"And you turned yourself right into a silver coin, you did," Jack continued, smiling proudly at the recollection. "I never seen a silver coin so shiny, and I decided to keep it. And I wrapped this here rosary around it and stuck it in my pocket, trapping you."

"But you wised up after a while, didn't you Mr. Jack?" the devil asked, urging his story to the most important detail.

"I did—I let you go. Thought it best not to be on the devil's bad side. I asked for ten more years of peace before you came back for me – ten years, that's what I allowed myself – to try and get my life back the way it was. Rebuild on my own, without the help of your wickedness."

"And you failed to do so, did you not?"

"I failed," Jack agreed.

"Ten years ago today," continued the devil.

"And Hell's bells is ringing for me, ain't they?"

"They are, Stingy Jack. Ringing loud and true."

"I don't much care for that name, Mr. Devil," Jack said harshly, his rueful smile vanishing from his face. "If my turnip field hadn't dried, I'd have me some money, and folks wouldn't have burdened me with such a name."

“Sorry, Mr. Jack, my eloquence was forgotten this moment. Manners are paramount, after all.”

Jack expelled some gas of his own and the devil very lightly covered his own nose, turning slightly away.

“I’ve been waiting impatiently for this day, Mr. Jack, and the man before me now is the man I expected to find: someone finished with their cursed life, correct? Someone who would come along without a fuss?”

Jack wore a look of petulance and seemed as if he were about to suggest the devil see himself off Jack’s land in the most direct of ways, lest he assist the devil in a manner much less cordial. But he looked past the devil to his desolate field of dead crops. He looked around at the nothingness which surrounded his longtime home—not a friend or neighbor to be seen. He looked down at his own hands, deeply withered and scarred from toiling in the fields where he had hoped to resurrect his crops, his fortune, and maybe her love for him.

Then again, Jack wasn’t one to respect a deal, no matter how justified. He’d been accused of unscrupulousness before, and he wouldn’t deny it. Honor was wasted on mankind, he’d always thought. And to keep one’s word with the devil, a demon lower than a snake? It didn’t seem right to him.

“Without a fuss is right,” Jack said, grabbing at his toppled wooden chair for support, trying to climb into a sitting position. “I’m about done here, I think. I loved who I had to love and grew what I had to grow. Course, that’s all dead now—all but my lone apple tree in the front yard, there.”

The devil cast a single look to the tree as if there was something of interest to see. “Apples,” he said, his voice dripping with irony. “The most deceptive of fruits.”

“Enough of your fancy poem talkin’,” Jack said. “Let’s get on with it.” He took only a single step forward before stumbling and falling back onto a different chair. Jack momentarily caught his balance on the seat before slipping off

and onto the porch, as the entire world spun on its axis so harshly he had to squeeze his eyes shut. Jack's gut felt empty, and his head was beginning to implode. He needed something to drink.

Anything.

Whiskey.

"Say, mister, you don't happen to have any drink on you, d'ya?" Jack asked and coughed once. "Only thing relieves my pain is the drink."

The devil smiled and reached into his coat. "Let me see, Mr. Jack, you just might be in luck." The devil made an "ah-ha!" face and withdrew a bottle from within his flowing coat. He held it out to Jack.

"This gonna cost me my eyes or something?" Jack asked, fidgeting with the bottle's cork.

The devil chuckled. "No, Jack. Your soul is already mine, and that's all I require. This one's on me."

Jack tore out the cork and slammed its contents down his throat. He relished the bitter burn as it slowly made its way into his gut. The whiskey tasted poor, and was nearly soup-hot, but it was whiskey all the same, and already his pain was subsiding. The devil hoarsely chuckled, amused at the disgusting dependence he witnessed before him. Jack removed the bottle from his lips and set it down next to him.

"Well, would you like to finish this here, or along the way?" the devil asked, crossing his arms as if speaking to a child. Another poof of foul and yellow-tinged air wafted from his coat. Jack's stomach gurgled again, but just faintly this time. He leaned back, eyes closed, resting his head against the side of his ramshackle home. He scratched his patchy, unshaved neck and raised the bottle to his lips again. The bottle felt strange in his hand, and he opened his eyes to see he was no longer holding whiskey, but a dead and gnarled turnip—likely acquired from his vast field of the dead root. Jack dropped the turnip in

surprise and looked at the devil, whose eyes were now entirely black.

“Let’s go,” said the devil, his voice now an unnatural and unsettling baritone. He whipped his coat away from him, freeing his arm to point to an unknown destination far off in the distance. Jack’s gaze followed the devil’s ancient, crooked finger to a door situated in the middle of the dead turnip field. The door looked finely carved, dark flint gray and forged from rock; it seemingly led to nothing at all. Regardless of that minor detail, the door swung open and shadows flickered across the heavy stone form, in spite of the bright clear shine of the early day. A chorus of blood-curdling anguished screams echoed from the unseen place within—a sea of damned and displaced voices, each bawling over one another, desperate to be heard and salvaged from the darkness and turmoil. The devil took a few steps toward it, his back to Jack, and then turned back to him, grinning.

“I’ll lead the way,” he said. He held up a hand and squeezed it shut in midair, grasping at nothing, and though he and Jack were separated by several feet of open air, he began impossibly pulling Jack along with him. As if Jack were caught in the midst of a violent windstorm, he was dragged off the porch and onto the sandy ground toward the stone door...and the great unknown that lay beyond. Jack clawed uselessly at the ground as he continued to slide across his barren farmland.

“What are you doing, devil?” cried Jack, his chin bumping harshly against the sand and rocks.

“Your soul is my rightful property,” he explained. “And I’ve finally got my hands on it.”

Hard as Jack fought, he could not cease nor even slow his imminent departure to the entrance to Hell. As the devil continued to pull him, Jack’s hands bumped over the gnarled root of his last living fruit tree, and beneath him he felt the

fallen corpses of the apples that had detached from their branches and plummeted to his dehydrated land.

“Wait a moment, please!”

The devil did not.

“Sir, please, I beg you!”

The devil stopped and turned to look at Jack’s dirty, crumpled form; a pathetic heap of a man.

“What is it, Mr. Jack?”

“Please, before you drag me to the bowels of your underworld, might I just have a taste of one more apple from my tree? It’s the only thing I’ve not managed to destroy with my indifference and carelessness.”

The devil scoffed, but his brief consideration of Jack’s request was obvious. “Would you then stop your bawling? And allow me some peace during our descent?”

“Yes!” Jack agreed. “Please, yes!”

The devil promptly let Jack’s suspended legs fall heavily to the ground and stepped on his forlorn, aching body as he retrieved the nearest fallen apple. He tossed it back to the ground in front of Jack’s face, which bounced off his nose, causing him to grimace.

“Child,” hissed the devil and began to continue the procession when Jack crawled quickly forward and grabbed onto the devil’s hairy animal leg with his sandy hand.

“No, sir,” said Jack. “Please...if you could pick a fresh one from a branch up top, I would be most appreciative.” The devil looked down at the apple clenched in Jack’s hand. “I can’t eat this, sir. The grubs would’ve gotten to it by now, I’m sure. Please...a fresh one...from the top.”

The devil groaned a single time and looked at the tree, then back at Jack. “If you’re looking for a way to escape, you’ve chosen your tactic poorly.”

“How could I escape the devil himself?” Jack asked, and received a very pleased look from his captor.

“Truer words were never spoken,” said the devil, and he stepped towards the tree. He grabbed the sides of the wide trunk and inhumanly hustled up the tree. Leaves and twigs rained down as he burrowed into the thicker branches where the fresh apples hung. Jack heard a moment of rustling and then flinched as a knotted woman’s hand clenching an apple burst through the thick leaves. “Will this suffice, Mr. Jack?” he asked from deep within the foliage.

“Yes, thank you!” Jack called back.

The devil began shimmying back down the tree trunk, but came to a dead stop a mere two feet from the bottom. He shrieked in pain, his cry panther-like in its ferociousness, and hastily climbed back up. “What on earth?” he demanded and looked to the spot that had caused his pain. Hanging loosely from an exposed and broken tree branch low to the ground was Jack’s wooden rosary.

Fires burned behind the devil’s eyes and he roared again, this time in pure fury. “Mr. Jack, you’ve certainly sealed your doom,” he hissed and flicked his forked tongue at the tree trunk he grasped; scalding hot spit burned a Y-shaped groove into the hard wood.

Jack, again pleased with himself, looked at the devil a moment before making his way back to his house.

“Mr. Jack!” called the devil again, this time with less hostility. “You can’t just leave me up here!”

“Why not?” asked Jack, his stride to the house unbroken. “To the demon that comes to take me to hell, I should show a courtesy?” He shook his head in proud amusement and stepped up on his porch.

“What do you want?” cried the devil, holding tighter to the tree now, as if he feared falling.

“You know what I want, devil,” said Jack. He sat in one of his chairs and crossed his arms over his chest. “I want to rescind our deal, posthaste.”