

IN DUE TIME

BY JASON M. RUBIN

It was a modest inheritance, one he wasn't initially sure he wanted. On the other hand, it represented something he didn't currently have: a source of income. "You have your whole life to work," a friend had advised him eight months prior. "There's nothing wrong with doing nothing for a little while." That was true enough, at least for the first three months following his self-termination as a paralegal in a small law firm north of Boston. He'd spent his newfound free time going on day trips around New England: from the ocean to the mountains; through noisy, fummy cities and unsullied, unhurried rural areas; driving past farms and factories; always thankful that he wasn't one of those who were laboring, spending most of their waking hours—and all of their daytime hours—in someone else's building helping someone else make a lot more money than he could.

After a while, however, he noticed that his bank account had far more debits than credits, and his days, frankly, had more hours than he had ways of filling them. He was almost twenty-nine years old, and he was bored. While he despised being a paralegal—just as he had despised being a cook in a diner, a shipping clerk at a furniture store, and a mail carrier—he missed getting those direct deposits. Not to mention simply having something predictable to do on a daily basis. He'd been looking for work the last few months but with no luck. It's not that there weren't jobs to be had, he just had no interest in them. He couldn't see himself as a waiter, an assembly line worker, or a political canvasser. Yet rent was still due on the first of the month, and gasoline for his car wasn't getting any cheaper, so he was becoming concerned.

And then, like a magician deftly plucking a rabbit out of his hat, came the solution to all his problems.

“To my grand-nephew, Ronnie Bale, I leave complete and sole ownership of my printing business, to do with as he pleases—though I fervently hope he will choose to run it, to keep it in the family, rather than sell it.”

Ronnie wasn't even in the room when the executor spoke the words granting him not just a job with a paycheck, but a career with long-term prospects—if he so chose that. If not, he'd still make out if he found the right buyer. Either way, it was an immense and surprising gesture by the recently deceased relative. Other than major family events such as weddings and funerals, Ronnie hadn't seen or spent time with his great-uncle Seymour since college days, when he would work at the print shop during summers and vacations. It was a reliable and somewhat interesting gig that Ronnie's father, Glen, had arranged for him. Glen, a marketing director for a regional supermarket chain, was one of Seymour's many loyal customers. Once, when taking possession of freshly printed promotional materials for his company, Glen hit on the idea: rather than have his son just lying around the house when he wasn't in school, he suggested to his uncle Seymour that maybe Ronnie could be of help. Seymour accepted enthusiastically.

“Truth be told, I'm backed up,” he told Glen. “I don't know, maybe I should say ‘No, I can't do it' more often, but I hate to turn away business. You never know but they might never come back when you need the work.” So he took on Ronnie and taught him the business. The kid proved to be an efficient and useful worker. “You can work here full-time after you graduate, if you want,” Seymour would say whenever it was time for Ronnie to go back to school. But it wasn't for Ronnie. He had affection for Seymour, thought he was a kind and genuine man, but he felt claustrophobic in this old, windowless shop with huge machines humming all the time, no natural light except what sneaked in through the glass front door, on which he could see the reversed lettering of the business' name, which to people passing by on the street was perfectly clear: Princetown Printing.

As for the executor, he was relieved that none of Seymour's survivors challenged Ronnie's inheritance and so he made a note to call the lad immediately after the reading of the will had concluded. In truth, no other member of the Bale family had ever taken any interest in the business. Seymour's two children became lawyers, and their kids were climbing the ranks in

corporate America. By contrast, the print shop seemed to be an old-world throwback to the times when immigrants to the country took on practical trades in order to build the foundation on which succeeding generations would launch themselves to greater levels of financial success. Seymour's own children had rarely ever stepped foot in the shop. So to give it to Ronnie was a win-win: he needed it and no one else wanted it.

But did Ronnie want it? At first, no. The only time he'd ever thought about owning a business was one night years ago while watching *The Godfather Part II*. He'd had a vision of owning a small, quaint restaurant, the kind that Michael Corleone would feel comfortable gunning down a police captain in. But it seemed like all too much work. Same with the print shop. Not that he'd ever disliked working here; in fact, he'd thought it pretty interesting to see how books and banners and pamphlets and posters were printed. Yet he also knew how hard Seymour worked, often staying late into the evening to ensure that all his projects were completed on time. "Deadlines are sacred," his great-uncle used to say, "and missing a customer's deadline is a mortal sin." Still, the business was his for the taking so, as he had no other offers, Ronnie Bale became the sole proprietor of Princetown Printing.

At first, it wasn't so bad. When news of Seymour's passing hit the streets, a number of his steady clients assumed the business would close and went elsewhere. Even his father, Glen, had recently left the supermarket chain and was no longer a customer. Other than Ronnie, Seymour had always been disinclined to hire additional help, preferring to do the work himself. This was his own assurance of quality and it simplified keeping the books. Likewise, Ronnie didn't hire anyone and had no need to because business was, at first, steady but manageable.

Good work has the habit of being rewarded, however, so business soon picked up. Ronnie felt proud that the shop was thriving in his hands, and he found fulfillment in the work he was doing. After all, he was doing it in his own building and all the money he earned was his. That was certainly nice! Surprisingly, Ronnie realized that he somehow had also inherited Seymour's work ethic. To his wonderment, he found it didn't bother him even a little to follow his great-uncle's practice of working into the evening to ensure he could deliver all his jobs when promised. That dedication fueled a marked uptick in customers, such that he began to consider hiring someone else. But no, then he would have to train that person, bring them up

to speed, pay them, and then the person would probably leave after a year anyway, this type of business being prone to employee turnover.

Ronnie didn't mind the extra work and the extra hours, but he grew to dislike whenever he would ask a customer when they needed their order, and heard "Yesterday" in response. "Well, I can't get it to you yesterday," he'd say, "but I'll do my best to get it to you tomorrow." That would placate most clients, but not all. It turned out that many really did need their printed goods before they even ordered them. That wasn't Ronnie's fault, of course. It was either poor planning on their part, or maybe just a sudden change in priorities or an eleventh-hour circumstance. Then there were the inevitable equipment malfunctions—be it a jam in the offset press, a dull blade in the cutter, or the laminator running at too high a temperature—which added to the time crunch and its attendant stress. Regardless, Ronnie worked as many hours as it took to get their jobs done as quickly as possible with the quality that Seymour had set as a standard.

* * *

It was a Sunday, the shop was closed. Ronnie was exhausted from a long week of work, yet the shop was a mess. He hadn't had time to straighten things up for several weeks. Too busy. So he decided to dedicate his day off to finally getting the shop back in order. There were boxes still stacked where they had been on Seymour's last day of work. Tackling one particular pile in the back of the building, he was stunned to find that underneath the last box was a trap door. Built into the floor, it was a wooden door with a recessed metal handle. He had never even been told there was a basement, so this unexpected discovery piqued his curiosity. Ronnie opened the door, the creaky hinges announcing his arrival to any rodents that he figured might be down there. As he reached the bottom of the steps, his face brushed up against a hanging string. At first Ronnie thought it was a spider so he madly slapped and swatted at his face. Then he realized it was just a string and was probably attached to a light fixture. He pulled it and a light bulb illuminated, helping Ronnie to orient himself. It was musty down there but orderly. There were a few mouse traps set out on the floor but they were vacant. Seymour had clearly taken care to keep the basement in good shape, though for some reason he had never mentioned it to Ronnie in all the time he'd worked there when younger.

There didn't appear to be anything particularly useful in the basement, until Ronnie came upon a box on which had been written in thick Sharpie letters, "NEVER PICKED UP." Curious, he took an x-acto knife from his pants pocket and cut the yellowed tape. Inside was one item. A book. He took it out and read the cover: *Everyday Spells*. He thumbed through the book and scanned it with some amusement. The cover was beautiful, textured, and its colors—purple, scarlet, and black—were still vibrant. Seeing nothing else in the basement worth looking into, he brought the book back up the stairs with him, and took it home that night.

Following a takeout dinner comprising three pieces of fried chicken with coleslaw and a biscuit, Ronnie settled on his couch with a bottle of beer and the book of spells. It was, he assumed, just a novelty book, something you'd find in the humor section of a bookstore. He was tickled to find there were spells for giving someone an itch that can't be relieved and for ridding one's home of vermin. *Surely these are not real, just meant to provide a smile*, he thought. Then he came to page 87: "How to Go Back in Time." *Perfect*, he thought with a bemused grin. *With this spell I could actually deliver a job on time to clients who tell me they need it yesterday. Then I wouldn't have to listen to them bitch when it's their own damn fault they're behind schedule before they even come into the shop.*

For kicks, Ronnie stood up, placed the book on his coffee table, and recited the spell (which, for obvious reasons, cannot be divulged here). He'd read it a few times to himself first to ensure he could do it correctly without looking—*off book*, his high school drama teacher would say. Instantly, a swirl of wind rushed around him and he felt dizzy and tingly. He closed his eyes and reached for the couch back to steady himself. In less than twenty seconds, the wind stopped. The tingly feeling had left him. *That was weird*, he thought. He opened his eyes and looked around. The book was gone, as was his beer and his dinner. *What the fuck?* He sat down on the couch and turned on the television. The local newscast. The weather just coming on. A perky woman in a magenta dinner dress, saying, "Well, we had a lovely Saturday with warmer than usual temperatures, which should last into Sunday."

Saturday??? *Sunday???* *Today is Sunday! What is going on?* Ronnie was confused, to say the least. He went over to the dining room table, where his laptop was. He opened the lid and looked at the date and time. The time was right, but the date.... *It's yesterday!* Ronnie closed

the lid and walked over to the mirror above his fireplace mantel. He looked the same, though he noticed that he wasn't in as much of a need of a shave as he'd been this morning.

Holy shit, the spell worked! Ronnie was energized with amazement. He had indeed traveled to the day before. *Thank God I didn't go farther back*, he thought. Then Ronnie remembered he had read in the book of spells how to return to the present: simply recite the spell backwards. Fortunately, he still remembered the spell and so was able to return to Sunday, with his bottle and his chicken reinstated. But Ronnie's eyes and mind had been stretched to the limits of openness, and he couldn't wait to get back to the shop in the morning. *If this works*, he thought, *I'll be the greatest printer in the world.*

The next morning, Ronnie drove to the shop with the book on the front seat beside him. When he arrived, he unlocked the front door and turned on the lights. In minutes, Tony Festa, a local restaurateur and regular customer of his, came bursting in.

"Ronnie, you gotta help me," he said. "We're supposed to be having a Lobsterfest promotion tonight but I just found out my supplier can't get us any lobsters because he was caught operating with an expired license. It's too late to find another source, so I'm doing wings instead, but I have to change my menus and banners."

"Okay," said Ronnie, "I suppose you need them ASAP."

"Last week would be ideal," said Tony, "before I ever started promoting this damn event." Laughing in desperation at the impossibility of such a thing, he continued, "Yes, by one o'clock today if you can."

"Let me see." With that, Ronnie turned his back to Tony, got out the book of spells, and opened it to page 87. *Is there a way to specify how far back in time you can go?* he wondered. *Yes, here it is. You just plug in the number, and then there's a different word for days, weeks, months, and years. You just have to memorize the right words so you can get back. I guess one day is the default but I can go back one week just as easily.* Facing his frantic customer again, Ronnie said assuringly, "No problem, Tony."

After Tony left, Ronnie uttered the spell and found himself standing in his shop seven days earlier. He went to his computer and opened the files he had for Tony's restaurant,

specifically the files for the Lobsterfest menu and banners. He made all the necessary changes, and printed everything out. It took three hours in total. Then he called Tony.

“Tony, it’s Ronnie. Can you come into the shop, please? I have some things for you.”

Shortly afterwards, Tony came in. “What’s up?” he asked. Ronnie gave him a box and said, “These are for you. Trust me, you’re going to need them next week.”

Tony opened the box and saw menus and banners promoting chicken wings.

“But we’re going to be having a Lobsterfest,” said Tony.

“Look, I can’t tell you why, or how, but just take these with you,” said Ronnie. “Hold onto them, and come back in a week to pay me.”

Tony did as he was told and then left the shop. Ronnie spelled himself forward a week. Just like clockwork, the door opened and Tony came in.

“How did you know?”

“Don’t worry about it, Tony. Here’s your invoice. Save some wings for me, I’ll come over after I close up tonight.”

* * *

After that, with every customer who came in grousing that they needed their job “yesterday” or anytime that had already passed, Ronnie did the same thing. All his customers who came to him with time-sensitive emergencies got their jobs when they needed them—before they even had ordered them—regardless of whether the emergency was fabricated or real, and whether or not they deserved such incredible service, given their proclivity for procrastination and disorganization. The buzz began to grow. Ronnie knew he couldn’t keep his magic spell a secret forever, so he told only his biggest customers about the book; still, within days it seemed everyone knew—even Ronnie’s father, who suggested a slogan: “Anyone can do your job on time; only Princetown Printing can do it before time.”

All the publicity drove enormous amounts of business to Ronnie’s shop. Soon, he was having to go back in time just to stay current with the volume of orders he was taking. He’d go back a day to do the work, then two days, then three days, then a week, then a month, then two months, all to keep the project pipeline moving. He was working hard in multiple time

periods yet still refused to hire additional help, even though he was making a ton of money. He was doing so well, in fact, that other print shops in the area were hurting.

Success took its toll, however. He wasn't eating well, some days not at all. A Red Bull and a muffin became to him like a Thanksgiving feast: rare and gluttonous. In addition to losing weight, Ronnie was losing sleep. Ordinary jet lag, it turned out, has nothing on time travel. He worked when sick and eventually it was hard for him to even tell if he was ill or well. It didn't matter to Ronnie. He was constantly coated with time travel dust that no laundering could remove; the taste in his mouth was metallic and bitter yet in his mind, being late with a customer's job was a worse affliction than anything that might be battling his immune system. It wasn't machismo that kept him going, just opportunism. There was work to be done and he had the means to do it, though certainly at a greater cost than he could have predicted.

After a year in business, however, Ronnie realized that to complete all his work "before time" he would need to go back in time to before he had even inherited the shop—to when Seymour was still alive and running it. But that was impossible. After all, Ronnie couldn't do print work in the past if he didn't yet own the print shop in that time period. *It's a paradox!* he thought. *How do I solve it?*

One thing Ronnie had already discovered is that when he spelled himself back and forth in time, he always appeared in the same location in which he'd disappeared. *So if I went back in time from the shop, back to when Seymour was still alive, I could still do the work from there. But what would Seymour think? How would I explain that to him?*

That's when Ronnie realized that Seymour must have known about the book of spells because who else would have printed it, boxed it up, and stored it in the basement? Ronnie could go back and ask Seymour all about it. Maybe he—or the book of spells itself—could provide a way through the paradox. So Ronnie went back eighteen months, when Seymour was still alive and well, and still working in the shop.

"Ronnie!" said Seymour, alerted by a swirl of wind as he noticed his grand-nephew suddenly standing by the front counter. "I didn't hear you come in. How are you?"

For Ronnie, it was startling to see his great-uncle alive again, moving and speaking to him after being dead for more than a year.

“Hey Seymour. Gee, it’s really good to see you.”

“And you. Finally ready to take up my job offer? I’m not getting any younger, you know.”

“Yes, I know. Believe me, I know. So listen, this might be hard for you to digest, but I came here just now from a year and a half in the future.”

“Excuse me?”

“Look, I don’t want to explain everything, but I found the book of spells you had hidden in the basement.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It’s called *Everyday Spells* and it was in a box labeled ‘never picked up.’ Don’t tell me you don’t know about it. I found it and I’ve been using it to go back into time.”

Seymour’s expression turned from confused to concerned.

“No, Ronnie. Look, I don’t know how you found that book, I never even told you there was a basement here, but that book is no good. You need to destroy it, like I should have many years ago.”

“Tell me about it, Seymour. Whose is it? Who asked you to print it?”

“It was, I don’t know, maybe twenty years ago,” said Seymour. “A woman comes into the shop. Pretty woman. Dark hair, dark eyes, dressed all in black. She could have been that dame in *The Addams Family*, Morticia. You know that show? Anyway, she has a stack of typewritten pages, says she’s having a party for a friend, this book is the present, and could I please print it, bind it, make it look nice. So I take the job, of course, and, you know, it’s not my business to read what people give me to print, but I noticed that each page was its own chapter, kind of like a cookbook. But instead of recipes, it’s magic spells. Now, I didn’t think any of it was real—just a game or a laugh, you know? So I do the job, I do a nice job on it. But she never comes back for it. I kept it on the shelf there, below the register, figuring one of these days she’d pick it up. Never did.

“After about a month, I decided I’d take it home and read it, you know, just for fun. And it *was* fun, the first few pages. Funny spells, like how to make people itch or how to make a barking dog shut up. Well, as a lark I decided to recite one of the spells. It was the barking dog

one. See, we had a neighbor whose dog they let out at night and the little bastard would bark his ass off. He was one of those stupid little dogs, never shut up. So, as I say, just for fun, not taking it seriously at all, I stand up in the bedroom, look out the window at the dog, and say the spell. Silence. I chalked it up to coincidence but still, I was happy the dog stopped barking. Then I heard screaming. The neighbor lady came out to check on the dog and found it lying dead on the grass. No wounds, no poison, no sickness. Just died. Right after I recited that spell.”

“And you think you caused its death? By using the spell?”

“At first, not totally,” said Seymour. “But I was curious. Any one thing can be a freak occurrence, but if it happened twice I’d know for sure. So in those days you’d see an occasional stray walking up and down the streets here. One dog was looking in rough shape, clearly hadn’t been eating a lot, looked old, I figured he wouldn’t last the winter anyway, you know? So he comes near the shop and I go out and say the spell, then rush back inside because I don’t want to be seen with it in case it dies. Sure enough, he falls down dead and I hear people screaming about the dead dog on the sidewalk. That’s when I knew it was real. After that, I put the book in a box, taped it up, and left it in the basement, where I hoped no one would ever find it.”

“Wow,” said Ronnie. “I’m glad I chose a more benign spell. But I can tell you that the book still works. I’ve been using it a lot the last few months.”

“Yeah? Why?”

* * *

At that point, Ronnie felt compelled to tell Seymour about the inheritance, how the business was growing, how (like Seymour) he couldn’t say no to his customers, and the constant requests from them for jobs to be done “yesterday” that prompted his use of the book. All of which led up to the main point: that now he didn’t know what to do because he’d gotten so busy that he had to go back to before he even owned the shop—to a time period such as the one they were currently sharing, in which Seymour was alive and in charge.

“I feel like I’m time traveling myself out of a job,” said Ronnie, “and in the future where I belong I’m going to have a lot of disappointed customers.”

Though still trying to digest the news that he would die in a year's time, Seymour laughed. He looked at Ronnie, who seemed pale, thin, and haggard. He looked around the store, then back at his grand-nephew.

"You know what, Ronnie? Things happen because of other things happening. Why did I put you in my will, give you this shop? You never wanted it. You said no every time I offered you a permanent job here. So why would I give it to you? Because you're here right now and I know that you're successful with it. This visit could be what inspired me to put you in my will in the first place, you know? Maybe not consciously, but maybe there were whispers, echoes of this day, this conversation, that made me do it. Your own success might have set in motion the forces that would give you the opportunity to be successful in this business. And now you're so busy you need to come back to when I was still alive. So come back."

"You mean I can come back here to the time when the business was still yours and do the work I have to do for the future?"

"Sure, it will be fun. Each time you get here, you might have to remind me how you got here, but look, it will be good for both of us. You get to do your work and I get to be alive again."

"That's true," said Ronnie. "You can be alive anytime I want you to be. That's amazing. I never thought of that before."

"Just don't abuse it," said Seymour. "After all, I have my own work to do—while I can still do it. But there's just one thing."

"What's that?"

"That book. We can't let that book get into the wrong hands. Have you memorized the spell for going back in time?"

"Yes, definitely."

"And you can get yourself back?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Then destroy the book when you get back."

"We could do it now."

“No, because if we destroy it in this time period, you never would have found it in the first place and you would never know how to time travel. You have to destroy it in your own time period because that’s where you got the knowledge from.”

“Got it. Okay, Seymour. Thanks. Thanks for everything. It’s good to see you again.”

“Good to see you, too. Pop in anytime.”

Just as he was about to recite the spell, Ronnie stopped and turned to face his great-uncle.

“Seymour?”

“Yes, Ronnie.”

“How come you never destroyed the book?”

Seymour paused, looked down at the floor, then back up at Ronnie.

“It’s a beautiful thing,” said Seymour. “It took a lot of work and I was pleased with how it turned out. I guess I couldn’t bring myself to trash such a beautiful object, evil though it may be. I guess I just hoped it would never be found.”

Ronnie nodded, recited the spell, and returned to his time period. He had his customary crappy dinner, then built a fire in his fireplace. He went to get the book of spells and browsed through it one last time. *It is beautiful*, he thought. *I would be proud to make something this stunning*. When the fire became raging, Ronnie placed the book directly on the flames. It slowly was consumed in the fire, the pages twisting and contorting as the paper turned black. The cover in particular gave off a dark, smelly smoke. In two minutes, it was gone.

That night, as Ronnie slept, he dreamed about going back in time. He found himself watching Babe Ruth play in Fenway Park, he rode a horse past a slave auction, he observed the battle of Lexington and Concord, he saw the pyramids in Egypt being built, he saw dinosaurs going about their business. But when he tried to get back home, the spell didn’t work. Had he forgotten it? Did the spell expire? Ronnie jerked himself awake, sweating, his heart racing. He pounded his bed to assure himself it was real, that he was indeed awake, safe, and in the proper time period. He went into the bathroom and splashed water on his face. He looked at himself in the mirror. *Jesus, I look like shit*. For one thing, Ronnie needed a shave. Also a decent meal. But that wasn’t all.

I can't do this anymore, he told his ragged reflection. It's not good for me. I'm fooling around with sorcery just to please and appease my customers. It's not worth it. And it's not fair to Seymour, either. Let the poor old man rest. He's earned it. So have I.

The next day at work, Ronnie began to tell all his customers that he was no longer working in the past to deliver projects that should have been brought to him sooner. He still promised to deliver projects on time, to the best of his ability, but he also said no to jobs when a customer's expectation was unrealistic or downright impossible to achieve by the laws of physics. He no longer offered a "before time" guarantee. On time would have to be good enough. And if it wasn't, then tough. It was his shop and he made the rules. If he lost some customers, so what? The playing field would be more level now, benefitting his competitors. There was enough work for everyone.

While driving home, Ronnie thought about his decision. He understood that it was the right thing to do, both for his professional life and his personal happiness. *You can't enable incompetent customers, he reasoned, and you can't go to such outrageous lengths to provide good service that it affects your health and impedes your ability to have a good life.* While it was true that he'd already memorized the spell, Ronnie felt certain that in time he would forget it. He began reading lots of books, to fill his brain with other words. Eventually it would then be gone forever. Of course, he realized that giving up time travel also meant that he would never see Seymour again. *But that's okay, he told himself. It was wrong—selfish of me—to use magic to penetrate the partition between the living and the dead. I was a fool to manipulate Seymour's mortality like that. If I could see him one more time, it would be only to apologize to him. But no. I have to leave him be.*

At the same time, Ronnie knew that the old man's fingerprints were everywhere in the shop—that Seymour's philosophies and work ethic had become his own. It was time now to close the door on the past, and look instead to the future—the store's, and also his own. Maybe it was finally time to hire additional help. How well it would all work out could not be known at present, but it would be known at some point, one day, all in due time.

— END —