The Hour That Happens Twice

A Crossroads Saloon story
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Daylight Saving Time. Maybe you thought some sadistic bureaucrat or insomniac clerk was at work, fiddling with clocks and calendars, bent on making your night as sleepless as her own. Think again, my friend. Seconds crawl and hours run when the clock's undone. The hour between one and two happens twice this night, and the clocks do their best to keep up. But this hour has nothing to do with the ordinary kind of time, the kind your iPhone mutters about at one A.M. in the dark.

Most sensible people sleep through both of those hours. The unfortunates who don't are the night-shift nurses and the long-haul truckers, the drunks and the brand-new mothers, and the old men with regrets and bad knees who have given up on sleep and gone walking to ease the pain. If you’re one of those, and you find yourself at a crossroads when that second one o'clock begins, you may notice a door you haven't seen before, with a light glowing from it the color of a turnip lantern.

I noticed it the year my third wife died. I have noticed it every year since.

It's a pleasant room beyond that door, low of ceiling and subdued in the light. Cozy, you might think, this sipping side of an ebony bar that has never once been wiped completely dry. There’s a back-bar mirror, hazed and shifty, as if by smoke. A stove in the corner, a few tables, and a window that doesn't look out on the street you came from. The bartender has no name that anyone uses. He pours what you need, and that isn't always what you ordered.

And at the far end of the bar, on the stool nearest the stove, there is always the old storyteller. Blind, or nearly so, with a voice like a cello played with a rasp. He calls everyone friend and he has never once asked anyone their name, because, he says, names are a thing you lend, not a thing you give.

"Sit," he said to me that first year. "You've got an hour that doesn't belong to anybody. Might as well spend it on a story."

That night the room was fuller than usual. Halloween does that. Brings in the curious. The misaligned. There was a woman in a wet shawl who smelled of the sea and wouldn't say which. There were two brothers in old-fashioned coats with notebooks on their knees, writing down everything and understanding little of it. There was a girl just barely of age, or maybe not, with a dog that might have been a coyote, and a nurse in bloodstained scrubs with a skeleton on the pocket, who sat down hard and said, "Is this the break room?"

"It is now," the barkeep said, and slid her a coffee.

The crowd kept coming, by ones and by twos, and there was always a seat to spare. The room grew warm and a story got told, and answered and topped, and answered again. Sometimes two at once spilled out in the air and you had to

listen fast to keep up. The night stretched long and the whiskey flowed and the coy-dog yipped its high, wild laugh at every punch line.

Then the door blew open and a man came in carrying a light.

He was thin the way a fence rail is thin, knotted and stringy, baked dry by sun and wind. Hard wind. He wore a coat patched with other coats, and in his hand he carried a hollowed-out turnip with a coal burning inside it, a coal so bright it made the stove look like it was only pretending. He set his turnip on the bar. Everyone leaned away from it a little, the way you lean away from a too-hot stove or an impolite smell.

"Jack," said the storyteller, without turning his head. "You're late."

"I'm always late," said the man with the coal. "I'm the latest man there is. Late, and late, and later still. Six hundred years late, and the road no shorter for it."

The nurse looked at the glowing turnip, then at me. "Is that a jack-o'-lantern?"

"It's *the* jack-o'-lantern," I said. "Or so he says."

You know the story, or you think you do. Stingy Jack, the smith, the drinker, the cheat. He tricked the Devil up an apple tree and carved a cross in the bark so the Devil couldn't climb down, and he wouldn't let him go till the Devil swore never to take his soul. When Jack died, Heaven wouldn't have him, being Jack, and the Devil couldn't, having sworn. So the Devil threw him one coal from the fires of hell to light his way, and laughed, and slammed shut the big brass gate. And Jack has been walking ever since, with his coal in a turnip and his collar up, looking for a place to stop.

"Everybody tells it like I won," said Jack. He took the whiskey the bartender gave him and held it without drinking. "Like I got the better of him. I'll tell you what I got. I got exactly what I asked for. I asked not to be taken. Nobody takes me. Not the warm house, not the cold, cold ground. Nobody anywhere, ever, takes me. Alone, alone, and the road goes on, and every door I come to is the wrong one."

"That," said the storyteller, "is the trouble with bargains. You only get the words. You never get what you meant."

The two brothers wrote that down. One of them asked the other, in German, what *bargain* meant, and the other one guessed wrong. Jack went to sit alone at a table for one, hand cradling his whiskey glass, the turnip left glowing on the bar.

"Why do you come here if you know the door is wrong?" the nurse asked from the table beside me. She sounded like someone who asks hard questions of people in sick beds at four in the morning, expects prompt answers, and doesn't flinch when she gets them.

Jack turned the turnip a little so the coal faced her. “It’s not the place. It’s the time,” he said. “It's the only hour that isn't counted. Every other hour, somebody's keeping the books. Him downstairs. Them upstairs. The clock on the wall. The rest of the year the wind is my roof and the frost is my bed, and the walking keeps me warm. But this one, the hour between, the one they borrow every fall and pay back every spring, nobody's quite sure who it belongs to. So for one hour a year I'm not lost and I'm not banned. I'm just early for the next one."

Nobody said anything. The woman from the sea put her hand flat on the bar. It left a new wet spot. Knowing something of being an outcast, the girl's coy-dog laid its head

on Jack's boot.

"Six hundred years," said the storyteller, "and that's the first true thing you've said in here."

"It's the first year anybody asked," said Jack.

I don't know how long we sat. That's the thing about the hour that happens twice. It's an hour, and it's longer than an hour, and shorter too, and when you come back out of that crossroads saloon, it's been no time at all.

Toward the end of the evening the nurse stood and buttoned her coat. She looked at the coal for a long moment, then nodded her head once. She reached into her pocket and took out one of those little paper cups they use for pills, and she set it upside down on the bar, next to the turnip.

"For when you find somewhere," she said. "To put the fire out."

Jack picked it up and turned it in his hands like it was the strangest thing he'd been handed in six centuries, which, from the look on his face, it was.

"It won't work," he said.

"Probably not," she said. "Keep it anyway."

Jack shrugged and put it in his coat, and the nurse went back to work. The hour passed and it didn’t until the barkeep rang the bell. "Last call," he said. “Hurry up, please. It’s time.” And I sidestepped toward the door ahead of the crowd.

Outside in the cold and dark, my watch said one o'clock. The first one or the second, I couldn't tell you. The street was the regular street again. Farther down the block a porch pumpkin was guttering out, its candle wick drowning in its own wax, and for a second I thought I saw a dim glow pass it, small and red and bobbing, like a lantern carried on long, thin legs. Not in any hurry. It never is.

Then the town hall clock struck the hour, and it was one o'clock again. I followed that glow a ways, falling farther behind with every step, till it was gone.

Most people–the ones with good knees and no regrets–sleep right through that twice-told hour. Good for them. Me, I don’t sleep much, and I think a lot. And what I think is I’m glad to have a door that lets me in at the tired end of a walk.