

Seven Teacups Full

Boris was an odd man. He liked things a certain way, though he tried not to bother anyone with his tendencies. He didn't want another incident like the time he'd fixed Mrs. Deloris's garden. He did not have six hundred dollars lying around for court fees. But really... who honestly believed tulips were alright to plant the day before a full moon? It was asking for awful things to happen to her, and by extension, her neighbors. He may have pulled them out, but he'd replaced them with lovely, innocent white roses. What was there to complain about?

Never mind that though. His point was that people believed him odd. He wasn't so odd though. Just a little... excessive, maybe a tad bit unconventional. Was that so bad? No, not at all. He found, in the company of himself, he was quite delightful. No one appreciated him though. It was rather sad. Rather... lonely.

Sad or not, there were things that needed to be done today. Groceries needed to be bought. Bills needed to be paid. There was a lovely stew that needed to be prepped for dinner. Never too early to start prepping for dinner. Mr. Boris nodded to himself as he adjusted his tie. It would be a good day. A fine day.

The tie was maroon, not red, never red, maroon. The white collar shirt had not a speck of dirt on it, nor wrinkle. He'd gotten up early, as he did every morning, to iron it. He had a rather fancy smancy little steamer that did marvelous work. He tied his shoes in a neat little bow. Then untied them. Tied them again. Untied them. Tied them again. Seven consecutive times. Seven was swell, it was swanky. There were days, seven of them in fact (he chuckled to himself), that he mourned the grievous structure design of

this world, coming in eights and threes and, he shuddered, sixes. Sevens made things easier.

Mr. Boris hands ached this morning, their wrinkled visage upset by the upcoming storm. He ignored their whims as he pulled his coat on, reached for his maroon scarf, and steadied his cane. My, my... his hands did have a mind of their own, didn't they? No matter. Today they would obey him.

He shimmied his pants up, they had a tendency to wander, he blamed his lack of appetite as of late. Hobbling down the street he decided to take the bus instead of drive. Oh, he was an exciting, adventuress old man, that was for certain, always so whimsical and daring. You just never knew what Boris J. Rollin would do next!

He tapped the tip of his leather boots against the first seven paved squares down his driveway, making sure his can only touched every other square. At the end of his homes property he finally looked up. A blistery wind caught his scarf, yanking playfully, bringing with it the smell of pumpkin spices.

Mrs. Mallory must be preparing for fall festival. I shall sneak by later today for a bite.

“Good morning Mr. Boris,” a voice called, out of breath.

Peter Williams waved, sweat soaked bangs sticking out at odd angles, feet jogging in place as the young man pauses to greet him.

“As to you, Amelia ask you to the festival yet?”

Peter smiled ruefully at him. Mr. Boris will never let the young man live down his gal, spitfire that she was, asking him to Prom. In his day it was disgraceful. Forcing the woman to ask. Times had changed though. Women demanded the demolition of

chivalry and male responsibility. It was acceptable behavior now. But that did not stop him from at least picking fun.

“I asked her,” Peter admonishes the teasing, though theirs a hint of resignation, if Mr. Boris wasn’t imagining it. “Will we see you there?”

He grins, his false teeth presenting a pearly white display.

“Of course, my boy, of course, someone has to bring a stew that won’t cause the county to barf through the night.”

“To be fair, Mrs. Grant didn’t know her kid put play dough in the stew,” Peter huffs, his feet have stopped jogging in place.

“To be fair,” Mr. Boris grinned, “I think the play dough made it taste better.”

Peter shakes his head, a forced chuckle filling the air between them.

“It was good seeing you again,” Peter tells him, waving as he takes off.

“Indeed.”

He makes it to the bus stop without any more encounters. That suits him alright, he’s a social creature, but the quiet is good too. That was why he never married. When you are a bachelor you can choose when to be involved with the crowd and when you can have peace. A man attached to a woman has no choice. There is always noise or there is always silence and in the end the silence is more deafening than all the years of noise.

A stray cat wanders his path. Its fur ruffles as it pauses in front of him, as if sensing his being. Big green eyes staring knowingly before it turns it’s back. Tail twitching.

He hates cats.

Back in his day, before he'd been forced into retirement for someone younger, whose hands didn't shake with arthritis and decaying bones, he'd been a veterinarian. Operated on thousands of animals, even a few bears, being in a small town surrounded by forest and all. It had been fine. Kept him busy, which was good. Things tended to be more in control when he was busy. Left less time for him to get adventuress. Mr. Boris tried leaving the cats to his fellow associates. The black cats in particular, he'd let them die before he crossed their path. He thought it no coincidence that two days after Dave operated on one of the devils, a car wreck ended his life. No one listened to him though, not old Mr. Boris.

The bus pulled up six minutes late. He tried not to allow his face to crease in anxiety as the doors opened. Greg was a decent fellow. Harried already by the rude passengers on his route. Still... he gathered his items up slowly. Pretending to struggle with his cane as he walked up to the bus. He checked the time. Still six minutes late. He sighed. Paused. Glanced up at Greg who quickly looked away at being caught staring. Checked his watch again. Seven minutes late. He sighed in relief.

He stepped on the bus, tapping the step seven times, up the next one, seven more taps. The next, seven taps again. The fourth step, seven more steps, this time when he looked up, Greg was openly staring. Staring at old odd Mr. Boris.

"Fer the love o' god Boris!" A voice called from further on the bus. "There's only five steps on this here bus, just like last week and the week before that! Get yer fecking arse up here before I rearrange it!"

His knuckles whitened on his cane. He took a deep breath, taking the last step and hurriedly tapping it seven more times. Greg gave him a sympathetic glance, but said

nothing. Mr. Boris understood. Greg was a shy creature. Mr. Boris was a creature of habit.

He doesn't show his bus pass, somewhere between the hundredth time and the thousandth time, Greg remembers that he does indeed have one, and it's renewed automatically each year without his need to do anything. It will probably continue to renew even after he dies.

He hobbled along the line, spotting the speaker. His hands tightened on the cane again. His muscles tensed. His features hardened. There was Mr. Bergs. Grey hair balding above a forehead forming inwards instead outwards with a nose spotted so heavily with age it was brown rather than the natural pearly white the rest of him appeared. Round exterior taking up the entirety of his seat. An ass inside *and* out. Mr. Bergs state of being was further reaffirmed as Mr. Boris counted out the seats to his usual spot. The seventh seat. He took a calming breath, glancing over to the second seventh seat. Directly across from Mr. Berg sat a young woman, legs spread out carelessly as she leafed through a book, oblivious to the world.

“What's o' matter, Boris?” Mr. Bergs questions in near glee. “Can't find a seat?”

There were, in fact, several seats available. But none of them were sevens. His heart leaps as he looks around. Greg's is turned, staring at him, hands on the wheel. The other patrons mumble to each other. Some of them glare. He breaths in and out. Suddenly he doesn't feel quite so adventuress anymore. What a terrible idea. What a terribly, dreadful idea.

“Can you just sit?” A woman demands, gesturing to the empty chairs. He gives a sharp nod to acknowledge he hears her, because honestly, he doesn't think he could

speak. He begins to walk to the empty seats, but his body shudders. He can't do this. He *needs* his seat. He turns back.

“Excuse me.”

His voice feels more like a squeak. Everyone is staring at him. He takes a deep breath. Clears his throat.

“Mr. Boris,” Greg finally calls.

“Yes, yes I understand,” Mr. Boris says, almost to himself, panic rising. He leans forward, closer to the young woman with her book. “Excuse me,” he says again.

Startled brown eyes blink up at him. Large lips moving out and eyebrows raising in an expression that clearly reads ‘me?’ She closes her book, looks around as if to see if she’s at her stop, then back at him. He clears his throat again.

“I know it’s awfully inconvenient for you, but would you mind, too terribly, if I could have your seat?”

The eyes around him are glaring now. Incredulous. Bewildered. Annoyed. But this young woman doesn’t bat an eye. She scans the bus, sees the open seats, and in one, two, three... she’s up and out of the seat, landing without grace into one of the other ones available, bag flopping without care. She doesn’t say a word, just flips her book back open.

He’s stunned, but too grateful to interrupt her with a petty ‘thank you’ she clearly doesn’t care to receive. So he sits and adjusts his cane. The bus starts moving and the disgruntled, unhappy patrons eventually stop staring. Mr. Bergs huffs unhappily, as if his day has been ruined, and Mr. Boris feels an inclination towards battery, but stills it. He’d decided long ago that Mr. Bergs is a cat person.

When the bus finally comes to his stop, he is surprised to find he is not the only one getting off. Habit makes him twitch at this change. No one gets off at his stop. There was only a rundown café and a gas station long since closed down and reopened as a liquor shop. But *she* does.

The young page turning book woman gets up with as much flippancy as she'd sat down. Short brown hair bouncing as she sweeps off the bus. He hobbles behind. Seven taps repeated down five steps. By time he steps off, the girl is nowhere in sight. He guesses she's going to the same place he is though, seeing as he's not sure she's even twenty-one.

Banshees Café is, thankfully, not a play on words. Despite being in the middle of nowhere and frequented by more rough looking biker types than he's strictly comfortable with, it has the best food he's ever tasted. *And* its quieter there than any city café. Seven days out of the month finds him here, eating breakfast before he finds himself on a late morning bus into the part of town that doesn't have a population of twenty. His home, even further into the countryside, probably only numbers ten or so people in a fifteen mile radius.

It is a mercy on his gas tank and wallet that the almost desolate town of Graham has a city not thirty miles away anywhere from 140,000 people to 200,000 people. He likes the small town. He likes the distance from humanity. The low crime rate. The fact that every single person is known and talked about. He likes knowing who he is to these people even if it's not all that great a reputation. Crazy old, odd Boris.

When the door opens for him, he knows it's Suzan before he sees her face. He knows his table is already set. The salt always kept to the left side, the plate placed

carefully in the center of the table, and a hot cup of British Breakfast tea still wafting evaporated water into the air, it's so hot. In a town like Graham, OCD simply translates to Old Coot Disorder. And *that* they've had plenty of experience with.

"Pies still cooling from the oven Mr. Boris," Suzan tells him.

He nods, he has time, plenty of time.

"I'll still have it first."

"In ten years you'll still have it first," Suzan gripes good naturedly, "I just meant you'll have to wait ten minutes."

"I'll wait seven," he tells her.

She rolls her eyes, but he knows that she'll place a timer on her watch and it will be out on his table four hundred and twenty seconds from now. He grabs a newspaper and sits down. Over the brim of the horror and tragedy bundled in black letters and gray paper, he notes that the young woman had, in fact, come into the café. There's a laptop on the counter and for the first time since he got on the bus this morning, the book is firmly closed. Her fingers flying over the keyboard as if her very life depended on its strokes.

As a thank you for this morning, he fights his habit. He does not go over to see what she's up to, nor does he allow his curiosity to question her. He avoids looking at her and when the pie arrives he carefully slices it into seven bites. Suzan is right, of course, it's too hot and he burns his tongue.

He arrives on his doorstep at 6:45 that night. He places the key in the lock, but doesn't turn it. It's not time yet. Far in the distance, with the last rays of the setting sun, he can see Mrs. Deloris hacking away at her garden. He hopes she's not planning to plant

more of those god awful tulips. He adjusts his own pots of Wolfsbane along his windowsill. Now here is a useful plant!

At 7:00 he turns the key and steps into his home. He puts his key on its hook first, then his coat. Carefully, systematically, he removes his maroon scarf and its matching tie, before taking off the white collar shirt. He replaces it with a plain black one. He unties his shoes before tying them again and untying them another six times before discarding them in the closet.

Traversing the kitchens dimly lit space, he sets about making two cups of tea. Only two, because it's two separate sets of seven. He's made two cups of tea each night, for the past three nights, and will continue for the next four. Normally he only makes one cup of tea a day. One set of sevens, but he makes two when he has a guest over for the week. All of his guests, upon his request, stay seven days. They could not possible stay one. It's not logical, you see.

Two lemons are placed in each teacup. He hums a little as he adds the honey. Drums his fingers merrily along the counter as he reaches for the milk. Just a splash. And then a dash of his special white powder into the right one. Always the right. Gosh it's been such a long time since he's had a guest. He's so excited. Not a lot happens when you are seventy six years old and retired. Especially living in the middle of nowhere.

Its times like these that he's so thankful he adopted a son who adored rock bands growing up. The racket he used to make with those damned drums of his. Nearly drove both him and Deloris to homicide he reckoned. Fifty years of living next door to one another and it is the one and only thing they've come to agree on in all that time. This thought makes him chuckle. It had been a blessed day when he moved his boys 'musical

expressions' to the basement. A grand or so to make it sound proof, but worth every penny. Happy, silent, days wandered restlessly back to his home.

Now he opened the door to the basement and noise of a different sort slammed into him. He descended, closing the door firmly behind him. He wobbled going down, his cane only just giving him the ability to travel the narrow staircase safely. He really should invest in one of those chairs for the elderly. It would ease the ache in his hands and back in spades. But no matter, he'd been keeping his guest long enough without bothering them about an old man's ailments.

Whistling merrily, he set the teacups down onto the table, rearranging them so they sat perfectly perpendicular to one another. Satisfied he eased himself into his chair across from his guest.

"It has been far too long Edith," Mr. Boris starts casually. "When was the last time we sat down to talk like this? Your last book signing wasn't it? Marvelous series, breathtaking."

Spit hits his cheek.

He touches it. The saliva sticks to his fingers and it's specked with flecks of blood. Such a lovely shade of maroon. Edith sits in her chair, short chains bolted to the floor around her ankles, long chains around her wrists. An electric dog collar sits around her neck, and burns circle her throat mirroring the collars placement. Her pinky finger was missing, black string closing the wound up and wrapped carefully, almost lovingly, in gauze.

"Your absolutely right, my dear, talk is cheap."

Mr. Boris stands unsteadily. Edith flinches, lips pressed tight together. There's regret there. In the tenseness of her shoulder's. In the avoidance of eye contact. In the way she brings her legs together and huddles in on herself. He eases his wrinkled hands onto her shoulder, gently messaging it.

"It's alright dear, no need to be so tense."

A strangled sob escapes Edith.

"Shhhh, it's alright. We're going to have a lovely time. I'm going to fix you up."

Oh, this was his favorite part.

He unscrewed the top of his cane, its hallowed out center glittering with the silver of brand new tools. He let them slide out onto the table. Each of the four instruments tapped against the wood seven times. Each resounding thwack broadening his smile and weakening Edith's visage.

Thwack.

The scalpel.

Thwack.

The shears.

Thwack.

The forcep.

Thwack.

And his favorite.

The neurosurgical scissors.

But those come later.

Edith bodily flinched. Sobs wracking her frame as she shook her head back and forth, screaming and tugging at her restraints. Poor dear. Her throat was so raw from last night that only a rasping whine escaped now. Well, it was her own fault. It was her second day here and she knew she was allowed to drink the tea if she wanted. The honey was supposed to help with sore throats.

“Now Edith, we can have a calm talk if you’ll just calm down. The tea is absolutely refreshing.”

To prove his point he lifts his own cup, sipping at the hot liquid and letting it slide down his throat. Why do all his guests think he’s poisoned the tea? Really, it makes no sense. He’s a good person. He wouldn’t just out right murder someone without fixing them first.

Edith thrashed, glaring at him, tears streaking down her face as she rasps out an attempt at a scream. She kicks the table, her teacup rattling before tipping, hot liquid splashing tea droplets everywhere. Including on her clothes. It doesn’t fall over though. The teacup remains full. As always.

“You’re making a mess,” he scolds.

And she’d wasted his gracious offering of pain killers in her drink. Such a pity. He didn’t want this to hurt them. Honestly. They just would not cooperate.

His hands put his teacup down on the tabletop. They reached for the scalpel, fingers caressing its edge, a bead of blood sliding down its length. Oh dear, they really did have a mind of their own. Hadn’t he just been lecturing Edith about being patient and pausing to smell the roses?

He forced them to obey him. To put the scalpel down. Now he and Edith would have a lovely talk and no one, not even his hands, would stop him. He was a little bit odd, a tiny bit unconventional, but he wasn't bad, just adventuress. This would be her choice, not his. He was a good person. Really.

“Edith,” he says.

Be gentle.

“Dear, there are nineteen appendixes on your body. Nine on your hands and ten on your feet. They're *wrong*, don't you see?”

He holds up his hands to demonstrate. Disgusted by the digits, by how wrong they are, but he long ago decided he would need to suffer it, in order to be able to help other people. That's all he ever wanted was to help. Edith's lips trembled. Her head lolling back and forth, the shadows of her resounding 'no, no, no' of yesterday. Her breathing finally evening out.

Be Kind.

“Now, I know it hurts, but everything is going to be okay. I'm a veterinarian, I know what I'm doing.”

He takes one of her hands in his, but she snatches it away, jerks against the chains, the red, angry rash along both wrists and ankles glistening with blood now.

“This is your choice, Edith. I want you to pick which appendix you're going to lose.”

“Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, fuck you!”

He pulls out the remote for the collar.

But be strict.

He presses the button seven times.