

Bones

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## PROPOSAL

Hey friend, thank you for swinging by on such short notice. Please, please come in. Oh, and, don't mind the screaming from the garage. She'll quiet down eventually. She always does. I'll get to her in a moment, of course. But before, I wanted to talk to you about something. Chew your ear for a minute or two. About an idea I have. A little something that I've been noodling on for the past few months.

Tell me, what is it that you and I always talk about while we're bellied up to the bar, three or four shots deep? Other than the barmaid, I mean. What do we pine about? It's work, isn't it? The old goddamn nine to five. The boss. And how absolutely dreadful it is to do the same damn thing day in and day out. See the same damn people every morning. Say goodbye to the same damn people every evening. Sit in the same cube. Shit in the same stall. Answer the same emails. Kiss the same asses. Every day.

Every damn day.

And what do we always say, my friend? Every night at the bar, what do we say? We say that we need a way out, don't we? An exit strategy. An escape from the drudgery, the monotony, the *sameness*. No more bosses, we say. No more nine to five. Our own rules. Our own hours. Forge our own destiny. If only we could come up with a way to get out. If only we could come up with *The Next Best Thing*. It's what we always say, isn't it?

And how many nights have we spent racking our brains for some idea, some brilliant epiphany to fall from the ether and land in our laps? A message from God or the devil or whoever the fuck holds patent on the really great ideas. A message to appear right there in front of the bar mirror,

unwrap itself, unfold its goddamn self wide open to reveal those four wonderful, fateful words:

"Here I am, boys."

My friend, I do believe the message has arrived.

Hold on a sec. That screaming is becoming very distracting.

KEEP QUIET! SHUT YOUR MOUTH! THERE IS NO ONE WHO CAN HELP YOU NOW! STAY SILENT, OR I WILL CUT OUT YOUR TONGUE! NEED I DEMONSTRATE TO YOU AGAIN MY SERIOUSNESS?

Sorry about that. So where was I? Yes, the opportunity. The opportunity has indeed presented itself. And when an opportunity presents itself, what do you do? One of two things, am I right? You remain right where you are, frozen by fear and uncertainty, and you let it pass right on by. Or you grab hold of that opportunity, grasp tightly to its mane, and you ride it blindly into the sunset. Never looking back.

My friend, I'm tired of letting the good ones pass by. The calling has called, and I... we.. would be fools not to listen.

But anyway, lest I continue to drag on, here, please follow me. Allow me to show you something. I do promise that I am getting to the point.

So follow, won't you?

Oh, as you might recall, this room right here is my study. Step on in with me, take a good look.

What do you see in here?

Books, right? A desk. A globe. And a chair. A chair, yes? An old wooden high-backed desk chair. An antique, circa, what do you think? Early nineteen hundreds, maybe? Right.

Now, tell me, what do you feel?

It's cold in here, is it not?

A bit of a chill, you might say. Markedly chillier than the hallway from which we've just walked. Markedly chillier than the foyer in which we just stood.

Poor insulation, perhaps? Nope. Look around you. Not a single window in the room. Now

step over. Peer at the thermostat with me. What does it read? 78 degrees, yes? Does it feel like 78 degrees in this room? Oh hell no. So what is it? Is the thermostat wrong? Or are we wrong?

I'll tell you why it's cold in this room.

It's that chair.

Take a step closer to it, won't you? Don't worry, it won't bite. I don't think it will, anyway. Take a step closer. Take a good look at it. Take it all in. And then, observe the arm rests. The thin wooden limbs that protrude with such simple elegance from the back rest.

What do you see?

Do you see anything?

Do you see the slight indentation that rings around the end of each armrest? The way that each one is worn down, ever so slightly, right at the spot where one might rest his, or her, wrists? As the fingers would grip the curved end? Notice, there, how the chair has been stained and restained to obscure these faint damages. But, as you know, wood holds history with a stubborn accuracy.

Those armrests were worn down by leather straps. Belts. Belts that rubbed and twisted and banged against the wood, yet held strong, and ensured that the arms they confined, the arms of the struggling prisoner, the arms they gripped with such tight ferocity and unthinking loyalty, would have no opportunity for escape. The belts that strapped a woman to this chair.

Because, you see, a woman was tortured.

And subsequently murdered.

Right in this here chair.

But let me take a step back. Give you the brief history of my relationship with the chair. It all leads back to my original reason for calling you here, I ensure you. Bear with me.

I was driving back to work from lunch on one dismal, hungover Monday, when I passed an old cardboard sign tacked to a light pole. "Yard Sale Next Right," it read. Normally I'd not have given it a second thought, but on this particular day, I'd have taken any excuse to delay my inevitable return to work. Had the sign read, "Hell Next Right," I imagine I'd probably have

followed it. The hell you don't know is always better than the hell you do, as far as work is concerned, am I right? It's what our boss always says, isn't it? Regardless, the sign read "Yard Sale," and so it seemed I'd be taking an extended lunch to do a little impromptu antiquing.

As with all yard sales, the scene consisted of nothing more than a simple ranch house with a scattering of knick knacks and bullshit spread slapdash across the front lawn and driveway. A rack of old baby clothes, grayed cardboard boxes of old Nintendo cartridges, unfortunate artwork from the 70s. Everyday cliché yard sale trash.

And a chair.

An old, unremarkable wooden desk chair that stood over at the top of the driveway, alone, a proud soldier standing solitary in the shadow of the garage door. An antique, for sure. Something from the 1900s, probably built for modern, utilitarian purposes. A secretary's desk chair, maybe. A chair built for a job where it was acknowledged that sitting was perhaps a necessity, but comfort was not.

Anyway, something about that chair engaged me. Maybe the way it stood alone at the top of the driveway, far removed from the flotsam and jetsam, the yard sale detritus. Or maybe the way it looked so simple, so... to the point. Or maybe there was something else entirely that called it to me.

Nevertheless, it was forty bucks, and so I didn't think too deeply about it. I handed over the cash and tossed the chair into my trunk. When I returned home that night I threw it into the study absent-mindedly, thinking that it "would do for now." And that was that.

I was awakened in the middle of the night to the sounds of a woman's cries. Screams. Wailing "help me help me help me." The voice was so loud and so... close... that my initial reaction was to think a gunshot victim had somehow found her way into my home. I leapt out of bed and raced into the main room, following the screams, searching for the source. They led me to the study. Which was ice cold.

And there stood the chair.

Alone. Proud. Like it had stood at the yard sale.

The lonely soldier.

The cries had mellowed by now, had diminished to quiet whimpers, whispers.

Help me help me help help help me, it murmured.

Straight out of that chair.

The chair was haunted, I reasoned. Clearly. Never before had I experienced a single sign of paranormal activity in my house, but on the same night that I'd brought this foreign piece of furniture home, here I was awake, listening to the cries of some begging bitch from the otherworld. Certain things, even crazy things like this... well, you just know. You just understand.

And considering that I've never been a particularly creative person, I really didn't give it much pause. Hell, what did I have to fear? What's the worst thing it could do to me, right? Tip itself over, lie there stupid on the carpet? It's not like it was going to roll itself over to me, wrap its wooden legs around my throat, right? Right. Nah, it was a chair. A haunted chair, sure. But still a chair.

Plus, the cries that emanated from the chair - "help me help me help me" - were far from threatening. And since I couldn't do a good goddamn thing to actually help... Remember what our boss always says? What was it? Don't complicate your tasks with problems you have no power to solve... And so I didn't sweat it. I closed the door behind me and I went to bed.

But it got me thinking, as I'm sure you can understand.

I had carried a seemingly simple chair from a yard sale into my home, and by doing so, I had transported a ghost into my home. One pedestrian purchase later, and I was the proud owner of a *trapped human soul*.

I was intrigued, to say the least. And I needed to know more. I needed to understand how this chair came to be. The following morning I skipped work to race back to the house that hosted that fateful yard sale, knocked on the front door, and rattled off a series of inquiries to the homeowner as to the history of this artifact. The homeowner pointed me in the direction of an antiques dealer at the end of town. The dealer sent me to another dealer, who directed me to the

county clerk. And so on and so on. Eventually I got my hands on the address of an old widow who lived alone in a weather-beaten cottage home in a part of the city that was clearly at the tail end of its once thriving years. The widow, lonely as she was, was all too willing to sit me down and educate me on the sordid history of this special chair.

Her mother was a cook at an old plantation home not far from where the widow now lived . Her mother had packed the chair up in an old storage space, along with other pieces of assorted furniture, silverware, and anything else she was able to fit in the back of her husband's old truck before the old plantation home was boarded up. Before the government could come in and snatch up all remaining items of value under the roof. And it remained there in storage for years after the mother's death, until her daughter, the widow with whom I was now sipping tea while nodding politely when required, was forced to sell off everything in there to fend off the debt collectors that awaited her upon her husband's death.

The plantation home, the home of the chair, had been occupied by a rich playboy who spent his younger years squandering his far-from-modest inheritance on opium and whores until he was left with nothing to his name but the old house. Forced to give up the debauchery and sin after his income could no longer support such a lifestyle, he used his natural charisma to seduce the sweet daughter of the town pharmacist, and the two settled down into a comfortable, quiet existence. It didn't take long for the aging man to revert back to his old ways, however, and he developed quite an appetite for the pills and potions that made up the inventory of his father-in-law's business. Eventually the former playboy, now addict, grew so dependent on the chemicals that when the inventory dried up and the father-in-law lost his business, he was unable to cope with the stark reality that was forced so suddenly upon him. And he lost his mind. And on the eve of his and his wife's forth anniversary, fearing that she would no longer be willing to live with the increasingly eccentric man whose addiction had driven her own father to bankruptcy, he tied her to a chair - this chair right here - and, in a two-week tirade of perfect madness, proceeded to torture his wife. In the most unspeakable of ways. Terrible ways. Evil ways. Until he finally freed her from her nightmare, when he decapitated his poor bride, and left her headless

corpse still strapped to the chair.

Perhaps during that two week torture session the woman was able to to escape, not physically, but mentally, from her body, pushing her soul into this chair to free her self from the relentless brutality taking place upon her mortal vessel. Or perhaps it was the sheer pain and evil of it all that caused what is essentially a freeze-frame still-life memento embedded into that chair.

I don't know.

And frankly, my good friend, I don't care.

But what I do know, of course, is that if it can happen once, it can happen again.

With that in mind, why don't we remove ourselves from this chilly study so I can show you one last thing? Please, follow me, if you will, over to that door at the end of the hall. The door that leads into the garage.

I think you know what awaits us out there.

Now, before I open this door, I must warn you that the sight may be a tad unsettling. You will probably, and hopefully, not like what you see. Trust me, I don't like it either. Not one bit. But remember, the good ideas don't come for free. Success comes at a price. No entrepreneur who made his mark did so without being willing to make a few sacrifices.

Behind this door you will see our sacrifice.

You will see a chair. A sturdy, wooden high-backed chair. A chair constructed in the early 1900s. One not unlike the chair that stands in my study, the lonely soldier no more.

Do you know how long it took me to find a chair to match the original? How many days of prowling the yard sales and antique shops throughout the state to find this chair? Well, let's just say that it was easier to find a girl to put in it.

Oh yes, as I'm sure you've come to understand completely, there is a young woman strapped to that chair in the garage, her wrists bound to the armrests by leather straps. Belts.

The poor thing. She has no idea how bad it is about to get for her. Yet, her sacrifice will not be for naught, just as surely as it won't be for pleasure.

It will be for commerce.

My loyal friend, we are going to make another haunted chair.

We may not get it right the first time. I have no idea what level of brutality is necessary to accomplish this task. But what does our boss always say? Failure is only failure when you let it stop you.

Maybe we'll capture lighting in a bottle and implement this product successfully on the first swipe. Maybe we won't. Maybe it will require two tries, three tries. But we'll eventually get it.

And when we do, we'll have the secret recipe. The exact series of steps to allow us to do it again. And again. A repeatable process.

To churn out the chairs.

To manufacture ghosts.

And then we'll sell these things! These absolutely one-of-a-kind furniture pieces that come with an *actual human soul* attached.

When this idea first came to me, I figured that we could make a decent profit promoting our product to the freaks and occultists out there. But it quickly occurred to me that, oh no, there is a much much bigger market share than the goth chicks. I'm talking about the rich. I'm talking about the *super rich*.

If the super rich are willing to spend thousands and thousands on a fur coat for the sole satisfaction of knowing that a bunch of rare animals were slaughtered specifically for them, for something they absolutely do not need...

Well tell me...

At what price does one put a human?

This, my friend, will be for us to decide.

We'll corner the market. We'll manufacture these ghosts at almost no cost to us. Minimal overhead. We'll control profit. We'll dictate price. And we'll be richer than we've ever dreamed.

The two of us.

No strings attached.

Is it brilliant, or what?

All I need of you, my friend, is a simple contribution of effort. Sweat equity, if you will. I merely need you to implement. To open this door. To step into this garage. And to implement. Go in there and do what needs to be done to turn an ordinary chair into a ...

A gold mine.

What I'm asking you to do will not be pleasant. Oh no, the role that I offer you will most surely not be an easy one. But in return for your blood, sweat, and tears, I offer you what will amount to a major payoff. I offer you partnership.

My discovery. My idea. Your implementation.

Partners.

Split all profits right down the middle. 50 - 50. High risk, high reward.

Here it is.

*Here I am, boys*, she screams.

So what do you think?

The next big thing.

You in?

- Bones

01/02/2010