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Mr Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore

Written by Robin Sloan

Published by Atlantic Books

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MR. PENUMBRA'S

24-HOUR



BOOKSTORE

ROBIN SLOAN



ATLANTIC BOOKS

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FOR BETTY ANN AND JIM

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THE BOOKSTORE



HELP WANTED

LOST IN THE SHADOWS of the shelves, I almost fall off the ladder. I am exactly halfway up. The floor of the bookstore is far below me, the surface of a planet I've left behind. The tops of the shelves loom high above, and it's dark up there—the books are packed in close, and they don't let any light through. The air might be thinner, too. I think I see a bat.

I am holding on for dear life, one hand on the ladder, the other on the lip of a shelf, fingers pressed white. My eyes trace a line above my knuckles, searching the spines—and there, I spot it. The book I'm looking for.

But let me back up.

My name is Clay Jannon and those were the days when I rarely touched paper.

I'd sit at my kitchen table and start scanning help-wanted ads on my laptop, but then a browser tab would blink and I'd

get distracted and follow a link to a long magazine article about genetically modified wine grapes. Too long, actually, so I'd add it to my reading list. Then I'd follow another link to a book review. I'd add the review to my reading list, too, then download the first chapter of the book—third in a series about vampire police. Then, help-wanted ads forgotten, I'd retreat to the living room, put my laptop on my belly, and read all day. I had a lot of free time.

I was unemployed, a result of the great food-chain contraction that swept through America in the early twenty-first century, leaving bankrupt burger chains and shuttered sushi empires in its wake.

The job I lost was at the corporate headquarters of NewBagel, which was based not in New York or anywhere else with a tradition of bagel-making but instead here in San Francisco. The company was very small and very new. It was founded by a pair of ex-Googlers who wrote software to design and bake the platonic bagel: smooth crunchy skin, soft doughy interior, all in a perfect circle. It was my first job out of art school, and I started as a designer, making marketing materials to explain and promote this tasty toroid: menus, coupons, diagrams, posters for store windows, and, once, an entire booth experience for a baked-goods trade show.

There was lots to do. First, one of the ex-Googlers asked me to take a crack at redesigning the company's logo. It had been big bouncy rainbow letters inside a pale brown circle; it looked pretty MS Paint. I redesigned it using a newish typeface with sharp black serifs that I thought sort of evoked the boxes and daggers of Hebrew letters. It gave NewBagel some gravitas and it won me an award from San Francisco's AIGA chapter. Then, when I mentioned to the other ex-Googler that I knew how to code (sort of), she put me in charge of the website. So I redesigned that, too, and then managed a small marketing budget keyed to search terms

like “bagel” and “breakfast” and “topology.” I was also the voice of @NewBagel on Twitter and attracted a few hundred followers with a mix of breakfast trivia and digital coupons.

None of this represented the glorious next stage of human evolution, but I was learning things. I was moving up. But then the economy took a dip, and it turns out that in a recession, people want good old-fashioned bubbly oblong bagels, not smooth alien-spaceship bagels, not even if they're sprinkled with precision-milled rock salt.

The ex-Googlers were accustomed to success and they would not go quietly. They quickly rebranded to become the Old Jerusalem Bagel Company and abandoned the algorithm entirely so the bagels started coming out blackened and irregular. They instructed me to make the website look old-timey, a task that burdened my soul and earned me zero AIGA awards. The marketing budget dwindled, then disappeared. There was less and less to do. I wasn't learning anything and I wasn't moving anywhere.

Finally, the ex-Googlers threw in the towel and moved to Costa Rica. The ovens went cold and the website went dark. There was no money for severance, but I got to keep my company-issued MacBook and the Twitter account.

So then, after less than a year of employment, I was jobless. It turned out it was more than just the food chains that had contracted. People were living in motels and tent cities. The whole economy suddenly felt like a game of musical chairs, and I was convinced I needed to grab a seat, any seat, as fast as I could.

That was a depressing scenario when I considered the competition. I had friends who were designers like me, but they had already designed world-famous websites or advanced touch-screen interfaces, not just the logo for an upstart bagel shop. I had friends who worked at Apple. My best friend, Neel, ran his own company.

Another year at NewBagel and I would have been in good shape, but I hadn't lasted long enough to build my portfolio, or even get particularly good at anything. I had an art-school thesis on Swiss typography (1957–1983) and I had a three-page website.

But I kept at it with the help-wanted ads. My standards were sliding swiftly. At first I had insisted I would only work at a company with a mission I believed in. Then I thought maybe it would be fine as long as I was learning something new. After that I decided it just couldn't be evil. Now I was carefully delineating my personal definition of evil.

It was paper that saved me. It turned out that I could stay focused on job hunting if I got myself away from the internet, so I would print out a ream of help-wanted ads, drop my phone in a drawer, and go for a walk. I'd crumple up the ads that required too much experience and deposit them in dented green trash cans along the way, and so by the time I'd exhausted myself and hopped on a bus back home, I'd have two or three promising prospectuses folded in my back pocket, ready for follow-up.

This routine did lead me to a job, though not in the way I'd expected.

San Francisco is a good place for walks if your legs are strong. The city is a tiny square punctuated by steep hills and bounded on three sides by water, and as a result, there are surprise vistas everywhere. You'll be walking along, minding your own business with a fistful of printouts, and suddenly the ground will fall away and you'll see straight down to the bay, with the buildings lit up orange and pink along the way. San Francisco's architectural style didn't really make inroads anywhere else in the country, and even when you live here and you're used to it, it lends the vistas a strangeness: all the tall narrow houses, the windows like eyes and teeth, the wedding-cake filigree. And looming behind it all, if you're

facing the right direction, you'll see the rusty ghost of the Golden Gate Bridge.

I had followed one strange vista down a line of steep stair-stepped sidewalks, then walked along the water, taking the very long way home. I had followed the line of old piers—carefully skirting the raucous chowder of Fisherman's Wharf—and watched seafood restaurants fade into nautical engineering firms and then social media startups. Finally, when my stomach rumbled, signaling its readiness for lunch, I had turned back in toward the city.

Whenever I walked the streets of San Francisco, I'd watch for HELP WANTED signs in windows—which is not something you really do, right? I should probably be more suspicious of those. Legitimate employers use Craigslist.

Sure enough, the 24-hour bookstore did not have the look of a legitimate employer:

HELP WANTED

Late Shift

Specific Requirements

Good Benefits

Now: I was pretty sure “24-hour bookstore” was a euphemism for something. It was on Broadway, in a euphemistic part of town. My help-wanted hike had taken me far from home; the place next door was called Booty's and it had a sign with neon legs that crossed and uncrossed.

I pushed the bookstore's glass door. It made a bell tinkle brightly up above, and I stepped slowly through. I did not realize at the time what an important threshold I had just crossed.

Inside: imagine the shape and volume of a normal bookstore turned up on its side. This place was absurdly narrow and dizzyingly

tall, and the shelves went all the way up—three stories of books, maybe more. I craned my neck back (why do bookstores always make you do uncomfortable things with your neck?) and the shelves faded smoothly into the shadows in a way that suggested they might just go on forever.

The shelves were packed close together, and it felt like I was standing at the border of a forest—not a friendly California forest, either, but an old Transylvanian forest, a forest full of wolves and witches and dagger-wielding bandits all waiting just beyond moonlight’s reach. There were ladders that clung to the shelves and rolled side to side. Usually those seem charming, but here, stretching up into the gloom, they were ominous. They whispered rumors of accidents in the dark.

So I stuck to the front half of the store, where bright midday light pressed in and presumably kept the wolves at bay. The wall around and above the door was glass, thick square panes set into a grid of black iron, and arched across them, in tall golden letters, it said (in reverse):

MR. PENUMBRA’S 24-HOUR BOOKSTORE

Below that, set in the hollow of the arch, there was a symbol—two hands, perfectly flat, rising out of an open book.

So who was Mr. Penumbra?

“Hello, there,” a quiet voice called from the stacks. A figure emerged—a man, tall and skinny like one of the ladders, draped in a light gray button-down and a blue cardigan. He tottered as he walked, running a long hand along the shelves for support. When he came out of the shadows, I saw that his sweater matched his eyes, which were also blue, riding low in nests of wrinkles. He was very old.

He nodded at me and gave a weak wave. “What do you seek in these shelves?”

That was a good line, and for some reason, it made me feel comfortable. I asked, "Am I speaking to Mr. Penumbra?"

"I am Penumbra"—he nodded—"and I am the custodian of this place."

I didn't quite realize I was going to say it until I did: "I'm looking for a job."

Penumbra blinked once, then nodded and tottered over to the desk set beside the front door. It was a massive block of dark-whorled wood, a solid fortress on the forest's edge. You could probably defend it for days in the event of a siege from the shelves.

"Employment." Penumbra nodded again. He slid up onto the chair behind the desk and regarded me across its bulk. "Have you ever worked at a bookstore before?"

"Well," I said, "when I was in school I waited tables at a seafood restaurant, and the owner sold his own cookbook." It was called *The Secret Cod* and it detailed thirty-one different ways to— You get it. "That probably doesn't count."

"No, it does not, but no matter," Penumbra said. "Prior experience in the book trade is of little use to you here."

Wait—maybe this place really was all erotica. I glanced down and around, but glimpsed no bodices, ripped or otherwise. In fact, just next to me there was a stack of dusty Dashiell Hammetts on a low table. That was a good sign.

"Tell me," Penumbra said, "about a book you love."

I knew my answer immediately. No competition. I told him, "Mr. Penumbra, it's not one book, but a series. It's not the best writing and it's probably too long and the ending is terrible, but I've read it three times, and I met my best friend because we were both obsessed with it back in sixth grade." I took a breath. "I love *The Dragon-Song Chronicles*."

Penumbra cocked an eyebrow, then smiled. "That is good, very good," he said, and his smile grew, showing jostling white teeth.

Then he squinted at me, and his gaze went up and down. “But can you climb a ladder?”

And that is how I find myself on this ladder, up on the third floor, minus the floor, of Mr. Penumbra’s 24-Hour Bookstore. The book I’ve been sent up to retrieve is called *AL-ASMARI* and it’s about 150 percent of one arm-length to my left. Obviously, I need to return to the floor and scoot the ladder over. But down below, Penumbra is shouting, “Lean, my boy! Lean!”

And wow, do I ever want this job.

COAT BUTTONS

SO THAT WAS A MONTH AGO. Now I'm the night clerk at Penumbra's, and I go up and down that ladder like a monkey. There's a real technique to it. You roll the ladder into place, lock its wheels, then bend your knees and leap directly to the third or fourth rung. You pull with your arms to keep your momentum going, and in a moment you're already five feet in the air. As you're climbing, you look straight ahead, not up or down; you keep your eyes focused about a foot in front of your face and you let the books zoom by in a blur of colorful spines. You count the rungs in your head, and finally, when you're at the right level, reaching for the book you've come up to retrieve . . . why, of course, you lean.

As a professional capability, this might not be as marketable as web design, but it's probably more fun, and at this point I'll take anything I can get.

I only wish I had to use my new skill more often. Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore does not operate around the clock due to an overwhelming number of customers. In fact, there are hardly

any, and sometimes I feel more like a night watchman than a clerk.

Penumbra sells used books, and they are in such uniformly excellent condition that they might as well be new. He buys them during the day—you can only sell to the man with his name on the windows—and he must be a tough customer. He doesn't seem to pay much attention to the bestseller lists. His inventory is eclectic; there's no evidence of pattern or purpose other than, I suppose, his own personal taste. So, no teenage wizards or vampire police here. That's a shame, because this is exactly the kind of store that makes you want to buy a book about a teenage wizard. This is the kind of store that makes you want to *be* a teenage wizard.

I've told my friends about Penumbra's, and a few of them have stopped in to ogle the shelves and watch me climb into the dusty heights. I'll usually cajole them into buying something: a Steinbeck novel, some Borges stories, a thick Tolkien tome—all of those authors evidently of interest to Penumbra, because he stocks the complete works of each. At the minimum, I'll send my friends packing with a postcard. There's a pile of them on the front desk. They show the front of the store in pen and ink—a fine-lined design so old and uncool that it's become cool again—and Penumbra sells them for a dollar each.

But a buck every few hours doesn't pay my salary. I can't figure out what does pay my salary. I can't figure out what keeps this bookstore in business at all.

There's a customer I've seen twice now, a woman who I am fairly certain works next door at Booty's. I am fairly certain about this because both times her eyes were ringed raccoon-like with mascara and she smelled like smoke. She has a bright smile and dusty blond-brown hair. I can't tell how old she is—she could be a tough twenty-three or a remarkable thirty-one—and I don't know her name, but I do know she likes biographies.

On her first visit, she browsed the front shelves in a slow circle, scuffing her feet and doing absentminded stretches, then came up to the front desk. "D'you have the one about Steve Jobs?" she asked. She was wearing a puffy North Face jacket over a pink tank top and jeans, and her voice had a little twang in it.

I frowned and said, "Probably not. But let's check."

Penumbra has a database that runs on a decrepit beige Mac Plus. I pecked its creator's name into the keyboard and the Mac made a low chime—the sound of success. She was in luck.

We tilted our heads to scan the BIOGRAPHY section and there it was: a single copy, shiny like new. Maybe it had been a Christmas present to a tech-executive dad who didn't actually read books. Or maybe Tech Dad wanted to read it on his Kindle instead. In any case, somebody sold it here, and it passed Penumbra's muster. Miraculous.

"He was so handsome," North Face said, holding the book at arm's length. Steve Jobs peered out of the white cover, hand on his chin, wearing round glasses that looked a bit like Penumbra's.

A week later, she came hopping through the front door, grinning and silently clapping her hands—it made her seem more twenty-three than thirty-one—and said, "Oh, it was just great! Now listen"—here she got serious—"he wrote another one, about Einstein." She held out her phone, which showed an Amazon product page for Walter Isaacson's biography of Einstein. "I saw it on the internet but I thought maybe I could buy it here?"

Let's be clear: This was incredible. This was a bookseller's dream. This was a stripper standing athwart history, yelling, *Stop!*—and then we discovered, heads tilted hopefully, that Penumbra's BIOGRAPHY section did not contain *Einstein: His Life and Universe*. There were five different books about Richard Feynman, but nothing at all about Albert Einstein. Thus spoke Penumbra.

“Really?” North Face pouted. “Shoot. Well, I guess I’ll buy it online. Thanks.” She wandered back out into the night, and so far she hasn’t returned.

Let me be candid. If I had to rank book-acquisition experiences in order of comfort, ease, and satisfaction, the list would go like this:

1. The perfect independent bookstore, like Pygmalion in Berkeley.
2. A big, bright Barnes & Noble. I know they’re corporate, but let’s face it—those stores are nice. Especially the ones with big couches.
3. The book aisle at Walmart. (It’s next to the potting soil.)
4. The lending library aboard the U.S.S. *West Virginia*, a nuclear submarine deep beneath the surface of the Pacific.
5. Mr. Penumbra’s 24-Hour Bookstore.

So I set myself to righting the ship. No, I do not know anything about bookstore management. No, I do not have my finger on the pulse of the post-strip-club shopping crowd. No, I have never really righted any ships, unless you count the time I saved the Rhode Island School of Design fencing club from bankruptcy by organizing a twenty-four-hour Errol Flynn movie marathon. But I do know there are things that Penumbra is obviously doing wrong—things he isn’t doing at all.

Like marketing.

I have a plan: First I’ll prove myself with some small successes, then ask for a budget to place some print ads, put a few signs in the window, maybe even go big with a banner on the bus shelter just up the street: WAITING FOR YOUR BUS? COME WAIT WITH US! Then I’ll keep the bus schedule open on my laptop so I can give custom-

ers a five-minute warning when the next one is coming. It will be brilliant.

But I have to start small, and with no customers to distract me, I work hard. First, I connect to the unprotected Wi-Fi network next door called *bootynet*. Then I go one by one through the local review sites, writing glowing reports of this hidden gem. I send friendly emails with winking emoticons to local blogs. I create a Facebook group with one member. I sign up for Google's hyper-targeted local advertising program—the same one we used at NewBagel—which allows you to identify your quarry with absurd precision. I choose characteristics from Google's long form:

- lives in San Francisco
- likes books
- night owl
- carries cash
- not allergic to dust
- enjoys Wes Anderson movies
- recent GPS ping within five blocks of here

I only have ten dollars to spend on this, so I have to be specific.

That's all the demand side. There's also supply to think about, and Penumbra's supply is capricious to say the least—but that's only part of the story. Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore is, I have learned, really two stores in one.

There's the more-or-less normal bookstore, which is up front, packed in tight around the desk. There are short shelves marked HISTORY and BIOGRAPHY and POETRY. There's Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Trevanian's *Shibumi*. This more-or-less normal bookstore is spotty and frustrating, but at least it's stocked with titles that you could find in a library or on the internet.

The other bookstore is stacked behind and above all that, on the tall laddered shelves, and it is comprised of volumes that, as far as Google knows, don't exist. Trust me, I've searched. Many of these have the look of antiquity—cracked leather, gold-leaf titles—but others are freshly bound with bright crisp covers. So they're not all ancient. They're just all . . . unique.

I think of this as the Waybacklist.

When I started working here, I assumed they were just all from tiny presses. Tiny Amish presses with no taste for digital record-keeping. Or I thought maybe it was all self-published work—a whole collection of hand-bound one-offs that never made it to the Library of Congress or anywhere else. Maybe Penumbra's was a kind of orphanage.

But now, a month into my clerkship, I'm starting to think it's more complicated than that. You see, to go with the second store, there's a second set of customers—a small community of people who orbit the store like strange moons. They are nothing like North Face. They are older. They arrive with algorithmic regularity. They never browse. They come wide awake, completely sober, and vibrating with need. For example:

The bell above the door will tinkle, and before it's done, Mr. Tyndall will be shouting, breathless, "Kingslake! I need Kingslake!" He'll take his hands off his head (has he really been running down the street with his hands on his head?) and clamp them down on the front desk. He will repeat it, as if he's already told me once that my shirt is on fire, and why am I not taking swift action:

"Kingslake! Quickly!"

The database on the Mac Plus encompasses the regular books and the Waybacklist alike. The latter aren't shelved according to title or subject (do they even have subjects?), so the computer assist is crucial. Now I will type K-I-N-G-S-L-A-K-E and the Mac will churn slowly—Tyndall bouncing on his heels—and then chime

and show its cryptic response. Not BIOGRAPHY or HISTORY or SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY, but: 3-13. That's the Waybacklist, aisle 3, shelf 13, which is only about ten feet up.

"Oh, thank goodness, thank you, yes, thank goodness," Tyndall will say, ecstatic. "Here is my book"—he will produce a very large book from somewhere, possibly his pants; it will be the one he's returning, exchanging for KINGSLAKE—"and here is my card." He will slide a prim laminated card across the table, marked with the same symbol that graces the front windows. It will bear a cryptic code, stamped hard into the heavy paper, which I will record. Tyndall will be, as always, lucky number 6WNJHY. I will mistype it twice.

After I do my monkey business on the ladder, I will wrap KINGSLAKE in brown paper. I will try to make small talk: "How's your night going, Mr. Tyndall?"

"Oh, very good, better now," he will breathe, taking the package with shaking hands. "Making progress, slow, steady, sure! *Festina lente*, thank you, thank you!" Then the bell will tinkle again as he hurries back out into the street. It will be three in the morning.

Is this a book club? How do they join? Do they ever pay?

These are the things I ask myself when I sit here alone, after Tyndall or Lapin or Fedorov has left. Tyndall is probably the weirdest, but they're all pretty weird: all graying, single-minded, seemingly imported from some other time or place. There are no iPhones. There's no mention of current events or pop culture or anything, really, other than the books. I definitely think of them as a club, though I have no evidence that they know one another. Each comes in alone and never says a word about anything other than the object of his or her current, frantic fascination.

I don't know what's inside those books—and it's part of my job not to know. After the ladder test, back on the day I was hired, Penumbra stood behind the front desk, gazed at me with bright blue eyes, and said:

“This job has three requirements, each very strict. Do not agree to them lightly. Clerks in this store have followed these rules for nearly a century, and I will not have them broken now. One: You must always be here from ten p.m. to six a.m. exactly. You must not be late. You cannot leave early. Two: You may not browse, read, or otherwise inspect the shelved volumes. Retrieve them for members. That is all.”

I know what you're thinking: dozens of nights alone, and you've never cracked a cover? No, I haven't. For all I know, Penumbra has a camera somewhere. If I sneak a peek and he finds out, I'm fired. My friends are dropping like flies out there; whole industries, whole parts of the country, are shutting down. I don't want to live in a tent. I need this job.

And besides, the third rule makes up for the second:

“You must keep precise records of all transactions. The time. The customer's appearance. His state of mind. How he asks for the book. How he receives it. Does he appear to be injured. Is he wearing a sprig of rosemary on his hat. And so on.”

I guess under normal circumstances this would feel like a creepy job requirement. Under the actual circumstances—lending strange books to stranger scholars in the middle of the night—it feels perfectly appropriate. So, rather than spend my time staring at the forbidden shelves, I spend it writing about the customers.

On my first night, Penumbra showed me a low shelf inside the front desk where, lined up, there was a set of oversized leather-bound tomes, all identical except for bright Roman numerals on their spines. “Our logbooks,” he said, running his finger down the line, “going back nearly a century.” He hauled up the rightmost

tome and laid it on the desk with a heavy *whump*. “You will help to keep them now.” The logbook’s cover bore the word *NARRATIO*, deeply embossed, and a symbol—the symbol from the front windows. Two hands, open like a book.

“Open it,” Penumbra said.

Inside, the pages were wide and gray, filled with dark handwriting. There were sketches, too: thumbnail portraits of bearded men, tight geometric doodles. Penumbra gave the pages a heave and found the place about halfway through, marked with an ivory bookmark, where the writing ran out. “You will note names, times, and titles,” he said, tapping the page, “but also, as I said, manner and appearance. We keep a record for every member, and for every customer who might yet become a member, in order to track their work.” He paused, then added, “Some of them are working very hard indeed.”

“What are they doing?”

“My boy!” he said, eyebrows raised. As if nothing could be more obvious: “They are reading.”

So, on the pages of the book labeled *NARRATIO*, numbered *IX*, I do my best to keep a clear, accurate record of what transpires during my shift, with only an occasional literary flourish. I guess you could say rule number two isn’t quite absolute. There’s one weird book I’m allowed to touch in Penumbra’s. It’s the one I’m writing.

When I see Penumbra in the morning, if there’s been a customer, he will ask me about it. I’ll read a bit out of the logbook, and he will nod at my record-keeping. But then he will probe even deeper: “A respectable rendering of Mr. Tyndall,” he’ll say. “But tell me, do you remember, were the buttons on his coat made of mother-of-pearl? Or were they horn? Some kind of metal? Copper?”

Yes, okay: it does seem strange that Penumbra keeps this dossier.

I can't imagine a purpose for it, not even a nefarious one. But when people are past a certain age, you sort of stop asking them why they do things. It feels dangerous. What if you say, *So, Mr. Penumbra, why do you want to know about Mr. Tyndall's coat buttons?* and he pauses, and scratches his chin, and there's an uncomfortable silence—and we both realize he can't remember?

Or what if he fires me on the spot?

Penumbra keeps his own counsel, and the message is clear: do your job, and don't ask questions. My friend Aaron just got laid off last week and now he's going to move back in with his parents in Sacramento. In this economic environment, I prefer not to test Penumbra's boundaries. I need this chair.

Mr. Tyndall's coat buttons were jade.