

MR. PENUMBRA'S 24-HOUR  
BOOKSTORE

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24-HOUR



BOOKSTORE

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ROBIN SLOAN



ATLANTIC BOOKS

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FOR BETTY ANN AND JIM

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THE BOOKSTORE



## HELP WANTED

**L**OST 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.