

**PIECE BY PIECE**

**FORTUNE  
TELLER**



**RAST  
PRESENT  
FUTURE**

**A JASON MILLS SHORT STORY**

**JOHN McGUIRE**

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**JOHN MCGUIRE**

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**This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.**

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**Tiger Style**

“Do you actually see the future or is it all smoke and mirrors?”

Jason Mills tore his gaze from the crystal ball positioned at the circular table’s center. The prop’s reflective surface played with the distorted shapes the candle-lit room birthed. During the times between customers, Jason would sometimes use it as a way to help clear his mind from the day’s earlier readings. It was never as good a mental cleansing as his nightly ritual of white noise and snow on the television, but it helped to pass the time.

The man attached to the deep voice stepped through the royal red curtains, which separated Jason’s area from the larger bookstore just outside. A graying gentleman, mid-forties, dressed in a nice dark colored suit with the shirt underneath to match. If there had been a tie, the man had long since discarded it. The navy blue shirt’s top button stood loose revealing just a hint of black chest hair underneath. Various wrinkles now crisscrossed along his pants, with the shirt partially untucked.

All in all, this man looked like he might be at the end of an extremely shitty day.

“I’m sorry?” Jason asked.

“It’s fairly simple question. Is there something wrong with your hearing? Are you for real or not?”

Jason ignored the bite underlying the man’s response. Plenty of people came and went through his little cave, but these first moments were the most important, most decisive, for a potential customer. It was why Jason kept his hair slicked back and wore the black cloak with crimson lining the inside. It was why the little bit of lighting in the room appeared more to dance and hide things than reveal them. And it was why, in the center of a table covered in red felt, there sat the crystal ball.

It was always about the show, the magician’s trick. Pure theatrics. How else could Jason convince them he could predict their futures?

Jason forced a smile before motioning to the chair across from him. “Have a seat.”

“I think I’ll stand. I don’t have tons of time to waste. So which one is it?” The man leaned on the table in an effort to tower over Jason. However, Jason’s six foot four height made it a useless exercise, as he had at least a half foot on the smaller man.

*Perhaps if he stood on his tiptoes he might have a chance.*

“And what truth would you have me speak? How would you know if I was lying or not? Most people assume the lie and hope for the truth.”

The man shifted his weight from one leg to the other. “Whether I believe you? That’s my problem.”

“Very well then, what do you think? Do you think it’s possible I can see the future? Or that all of this pomp and circumstance is just one more aspect of a long con and I have nothing to

offer anyone who might come into this room.” Jason knew he was laying it on a bit thick, but such was the price that the image paid. Most people who came wanted to think they were true skeptics. It was easier to know that there was no mysticism, no gifts to allow someone to peer forward. Yet, those same people, *at least the ones who weren't doing it on a goof*, possessed just enough of a hope within them to grasp at anything. They wanted to really believe in something impossible. And like seeing David Copperfield perform his tricks, they were willing enough to suspend their disbelief for a short amount of time... if you could dress things up a little bit and put on a good show. Lucky for Jason, the preshow made his talent much more appealing.

The man's eyes darted around the room before refocusing on Jason. In his days as a cop, Jason was used to being the one on the other side of the table. Always questioning what he could and could not see. Focusing on an eye twitch, an upturned lip, or how someone's body shifted under examination, rather than the actual words pouring out of their mouth. Every other potential customer wanted to do a full eye check, just to make sure. After the better part of a minute, the man relented and sat in the chair.

“I asked around. Got some odd birds in my extended family as it turns out. Friends of friends kept dropping your name, saying you were the real deal, though they thought I was a bit crazy to even think about visiting.” He took a deep breath and exhaled. “What the Hell. I guess you'll do.”

Jason shifted in his seat, not knowing if the man's preamble was done, waiting for him to say something else, but he just stared at Jason.

“Are you doing it?” the man asked.

Jason shook his head. “Reading you? Not yet.”

“Well?”

“Do you have a name?”

“You mean you can't just read it from me?” When Jason shook his head, the man continued, “Robert Jennings.”

“If you want to find out your future then you-“

Robert held up his hand. “It's a little more complicated than that. I'm not here for...” He pointed around the room at the dim lighting, the muted colors, and then came to a rest on the crystal ball. “All of this crap.”

“Then it is I who am confused now. Why have you journeyed to this place?”

Robert took another deep breath. “I don't need the show. You can save that for the others who come here for...” He focused again on the crystal ball. “Comfort, I guess. No, all I need is for you to help me locate my poor dead mother's legal papers.”

Jason held up his hands. “Legal papers? I'm not sure... look, it doesn't work like that.”

Reaching into his pocket, Robert retrieved his money clip. On the outside, Jason recognized quite a few pictures comprised of Benjamin Franklin's wrinkled face. From the stack's size, the roll contained a couple of grand at least. "Let's make it work that way. I've given this a lot of thought. We do this until we find what I'm looking for. At that point, I hand you this stack and leave, but not a cent before we're done. Deal?"

"I'm--"

"Listen, she was crazy as a loon." There was a strain in Robert's voice, but Jason wasn't sure if it was due to grief or frustration. "Didn't trust anyone to know where she put her important documents. Paranoid woman. Could've buried them in the yard. Maybe under the house. Hell, there could be some secret panel in her closet. There's no telling with her. And since she didn't tell me the where, I'd rather not just dig up the entire yard, pull up the house, and tear down the walls if it is somewhere else. That's where you come into the picture."

"Let's say I agree. I still don't know how I can help you locate something you don't have the first clue about."

"Fair enough. I don't know how you do what you do... hell; you might be full of it. So I have a couple of questions to ask before we even start. Ok?" Robert asked.

Jason found himself nodding.

Robert slid the money back towards his edge of the table. "When you do whatever it is you do, you'll see my future, right?"

"Yes, but I'm--"

"Is that the end of it? Am I locked into whatever it is that you see? Can I change things? Or is this an absolute deal?"

Jason wasn't sure where they were headed with this conversation, nor was he sure how he might be able to help if the man wasn't supposed to find whatever papers were out there. *Still, if I could even get half it'll be worth it.* What the man suggested though... he'd never tried to use his gift like that before. Then again, *why not give it a try?* This was his job after all, using his ability to provide a picture of the future for paying customers.

"No, you have it mostly right. I see a potential future for you. The scenarios that are going to domino from the moment you leave here into your near future, but nothing is completely set in stone. Even knowledge of the events I provide may cause some changes."

Robert slapped his hands together. "Great. What I'm proposing is that I focus on a particular avenue of where I look. You do a reading, and we see I find what I'm looking for. If not, we try again. And so on until we get it to work." He tapped the money.

Jason fixated again on the bundle. In truth, he could barely keep his eyes off it. Ben Franklin stared back at him, speaking to him of child support, fixing the car, rent, and a full refrigerator.

"Alright, but to do this I need physical contact. Extend your hands."

If Robert was still skeptical, he didn't let on as he stretched out to grasp Jason's palms.

"Now focus on where you are going to look. Focus on what you want to find. Focus on the steps that you are going to have to take to execute this plan. In your mind there can be no other path."

"Ok."

Jason grasped hold of the man's hands and felt the familiar rush of his gift. The images of Robert's future flowed.

*Rusted gate. Back door. Sledgehammer. Brick debris all over the living room. Anger.*

It was always a jumble at first. In the beginning, it was more about zeroing in on the key bits from the connection. Focusing on those things and slowly a picture would form.

It was like watching a movie in fast forward. Everything Jason wanted to see was in there somewhere, he only needed to focus on the individual moments and slow things down. Get a grip on the story.

He saw Robert in front of a one-story red brick house. Bypassing the front door, he stalked around to the rear and entered a paint peeled wooden utility shack. Inside, a series of various tools lined the corkboard walls. At the far end, leaning against a workbench, sat a sledgehammer. Robert's knuckles turned white as he wrapped his hand around it.

"You are in a one-story house. Blue shutters and a red front door. Seems pleasant enough--"

"That's her house... or was her house. It's a hole, but the land is worth a bundle to the realtors."

Jason refocused on the reading. "You walk through--"

"Listen, I don't need the blow by blow, just tell me yes or no on whether I've found it."

Jason ignored Robert and refocused on the reading. Divided into three main sections, a long wall separated the living room from the dining room and kitchen. A hallway at the far end connected the pair of bedrooms with a bathroom in between them. Robert entered the home through the back door, passing through the kitchen. Inside the appliances within were mismatched collections. A newish refrigerator spotted with pages upon pages of art projects. Hand prints on some, crude drawings of the house with a stick figure version of Robert's mother holding court made up the rest. But where the icebox was new, the stove echoed from much deeper in the past. It was at least 20 years old, rusted along the edges. The original white paint wore away long ago. Robert ignored it and moved with a determination toward the small fireplace in the living room, the sledgehammer swaying at his side.

The tool crashed down upon the bricks delineating it from the remainder of the wall. Sheer brute force scattered them, sending up a small dust cloud with each impact. Repeatedly he lifted the instrument before thundering it down... until rubble remained. Sunlight trickled in through a small hole Robert managed to create. When only wreckage remained, Robert sank to his knees and began to rummage through.



“You destroy the fireplace but...” Jason paused for the images to finish. Only when the last one passed and the connection ended did Jason open his eyes. “Whatever it is you are looking for, they aren’t within the fireplace.”

Robert pulled away from Jason. He slammed a newly free hand on the table between them. “Damnit!”

“I told you just because I might see the future doesn’t mean it will work.”

Robert waved him off. “I wasn’t sure you were the real deal. I’m betting you hear that all the time, but after you described the house... well, I believe you have something. I may not know what, but I think you are going to be the solution to my problems.”

“Are you sure you want to keep at this?”

As an answer, Robert gripped Jason’s hand tighter and growled, “Do it. Let’s go again!”

\*

Jason almost felt the trickle of sweat rolling from Robert’s forehead onto his upper lip. Through intense eyes, he surveyed the upturned yard with a large heat lamp, but the spotlight did not reveal anything useful. All around were the wasted efforts of the man. Systematically he’d go through the enclosure from fencepost to fencepost. Still there was no magical chest waiting just under the topsoil. There was no time capsule waiting to be unearthed from its resting spot just under the runic rock sitting at the immense pine tree’s base.

“At least you don’t have to hire someone to till the yard now.” Jason snorted. He knew he shouldn’t poke the man who was paying him but couldn’t help himself. Not wanting the play by play was one thing, but this moment offered additional proof that even if the method of prediction worked, Robert just didn’t have a clue who his mother was.

After the first reading, Jason was sure it wouldn’t work again. Positive that all he would see is Robert shattering the fireplace, over and over. To his credit though, Robert focused himself through a series of deep breaths. That second reading showed Jason the destruction of the floorboard beneath the master bed. But aside from spider webs and dust bunnies, the result was the same. The images rolled on with each instance, but they appeared to get no closer to Robert’s goal.

In the third or fourth vision, a neighbor decided to talk over the fence, curiosity getting the best of him. A tall lanky man, tan skin hung off him. He barely seemed to recognize Robert, even after a prompting. When he saw the devastation in the back yard, he let out a long whistle.

“I gotta say... I didn’t know Patty had a son. I’ve been living here going on ten years, and she never talked about it. Never saw any pictures in the house of you. Until the funeral this morning, at least.”

Robert didn’t look up from the tilling. “We really didn’t get along.”

“Hmm... we all got our secrets, I suppose.”

Robert grunted his response.

“Well I know she wouldn’t have liked that you’ve dug up the yard. Every day, right up to the end, she was out there. Her yellow work gloves, straw hat to block the sun, and a song on her lips. Yessir, she loved working outside. Though I guess you left the flower garden alone. That’s something.”

For his answer, Robert slammed his shovel into the closest flowerbed, destroying the last remnants of tranquility. The old man frowned and ducked back into his own yard.

Still they continued the game. When destroying the back yard didn’t provide results, Robert turned his attention to the front yard. While he mangled the bushes along the perimeter, a group of local children would wander nearby. Sometimes they stood and stared while other times they’d ask after Robert’s mom, unaware of her recent passing. No matter the question, he dismissed them with a quick answer of “she’s dead” before returning to the next bit of obliteration.

The readings began to blur together as the session wore on throughout the day. It came to a head when Robert announced his intention to dig up every square inch of the flooring in the house... in excruciating detail. The visions transformed from early afternoon to late afternoon to early evening. Yet it was all for nothing. After the twentieth session, they were no closer to discovering the missing papers, but Jason discovered the beginnings of a migraine.

Jason pulled his hands away. “I’m not sure I can do another one.”

“Hey, a deal is a deal.”

Jason rubbed his temples, trying to keep the migraine at bay. “What if there are no secret papers? You said your mother was crazy. Maybe she never had any papers to begin with.”

Robert shook his head. “You didn’t know her. I knew her!”

Jason felt his face get flush. “I don’t know her? I’m beginning to wonder exactly how well you knew her. Her neighbor, Mr. Barkley, never recognizes you when he’s checking out your progress in the back yard. At least not at first.”

“So? How’s that any of your business? So what if I didn’t visit her that often?”

“I’m just saying-“

“How about this? You do two more for me and regardless of what you see or don’t see, we call it a night.”

Jason halted his forehead massage and focused on the cash still sitting on the table. “Two more?”

Robert nodded. “That’s all. And then we’re done.”

Jason extended his hands once more.

Robert paced through the house, pausing at various spots they eliminated earlier in the day. Almost like he performed mental math. He counted each site, every point he'd already destroyed in one of the myriad of possible futures. Behind the appliances in the kitchen, beneath the tub, sink, and toilette in the bathroom, and the upstairs attic area had almost cost him a leg when a rotten board gave way under Robert's weight. Still, the mythical papers never turned up.

Outside was more of the same. With the earlier attempt covering the back yard, there was no place left to reveal. Robert sat on the outside pair of concrete steps, which lead into the house, but housed no secrets themselves.

And that's when he saw it. The first place he went in most of the futures, but somehow the only place he had not thought to look. The wooden shed housed all the tools, the shovels, the sledgehammer, and a lawnmower long since rusted. Robert stood there in its open doorway and focused on where the best hiding place might be.

Jason decided to walk him through the images, whether he wanted the play by play or not. "There seems to be a spot in the shed. Behind the table opposite the sledgehammer. Maybe a small point alongside a toolbox tower. You slide the table out of the way and there is... something."

"Yes? What is it? What do you see?" Robert couldn't contain his excitement.

"There is a box. It has a design on it... I'm not--"

Before Jason could get a firm picture, Robert ripped his hands from Jason. Whatever symbol lay on the box was lost to him.

"Why'd you do that?"

"I think you've seen enough." Robert stood up from the table, but left the money where it lay. Without another word, he darted from the room. Jason snatched the money up and shoved it into his pants. He thought about chasing after Robert, but decided against it. The man had everything he wanted, and Jason had everything he needed in his pocket. Stretching his back, he stumbled a bit to the opening in the curtains, his right leg asleep. On the other side, he found himself face to face with Michael Seven, the owner of the bookstore and his landlord.

Much like Jason needed to go through some theatrics, so did Seven. When you ran a bookstore specializing in the occult, you could afford to be a little eccentric. It was expected. Still, Jason had no reason to complain. Seven was the best friend he had. He stood by Jason when everyone else turned their backs. He was the type of friend who would take a bullet for you.

"I didn't know you were even still in there. This place has been crazy all day. I'm not sure if it is the full moon or if something strange went down on this date, but I made out like a bandit. Did many of them stick their heads in?"

"No, but I didn't need the distractions. Was pretty much with the same client all day."

Seven threw a look back toward the front door. "Was that who lit out of here in such a hurry? Bad news?"

Jason shook his head. “No. I think he got the answer he was looking for... even if it took all day.” He took a glance toward the front of the bookstore and the windows. Outside night had long since replaced day. “I didn’t realize it was so late. What time is it?”

Seven reached into his front pocket and clicked his cell phone on. “A little after nine. Wait, how long were you back there with him?”

“Too long. Too many readings.”

“How many?”

“Try twenty.”

“Really?” Seven asked.

Jason shrugged. “Paid me for them, plus some, but I’m beginning to wonder if it was worth the raging headache I’m going to have for the rest of the night. And possibly tomorrow.”

Seven pointed at the empty store. “Well, I’d say go ahead and get home. Even if another person wanted a reading I doubt you’d be of much use to them tonight.”

Jason rubbed his head. “You’re probably right.”

\*

His apartment was not much to look at. A couch, a TV, a bed, and about thirty boxes of various shapes and sizes acted as the rest of the furniture. He flopped on the couch and felt another spring groan in protest at the rough treatment.

The television had only one purpose, for the purge. He learned that early on about his gift. The human mind was not supposed to be able to see the future at all, but to keep future possibilities in his head for too long... the headaches were a minor inconvenience compared to overload. There would be too much clutter, too many images fighting inside his brain. He developed, with Seven’s help, a way to rid those extra moments from his mind. It allowed him to be a clean slate for the next day’s clients.

The TV’s job was to show static. The snow on the screen set the mood, the singular sound of nothingness. White noise relaxed his mind, so he could reach that place where those alien thoughts would melt away. Jason leaned back in his chair and focused his mind on the images he wanted to retain and the ones he needed gone. Tonight, he replayed all the failed attempts through his brain one at a time. He willed them to disappear, as if he was erasing his mind’s hard drive so that nothing remained. Each time he saw the highlights and then released them back to the universe.

It continued that way until he arrived at the final image. Just because Robert had broken their contact didn’t mean the vision was incomplete, only Jason’s ability to communicate it aloud in the moment. Those instants were still there inside his mind, more than enough for Jason to get another look at the box if he wanted to.

Curiosity always managed to get the better of him.

He zeroed in on those last moments before Robert broke the connection. Sure enough he saw it again, an ornate box pulled from the cubbyhole behind the workbench.

Robert wasted no time in opening it. Along the smaller side, he unlocked the latch and lifted it. Jumbled inside were photos and hand-written thank you letters clearly written by children. Ranging from anywhere between around five and age fifteen, they seemed to be from a wide spectrum of races and backgrounds. The only consistent item within each picture was a school. Underneath the pictures, He uncovered various official looking papers stuffed inside a manila folder. Robert's hands shook as he opened it. This was going to be his golden ticket. He fanned through the paperwork until the will revealed itself. He scanned through the pages, slowly at first, increasing speed with each sighting of a singular name. Some pages ripped while he shuffled through them. Jason heard him cry out, a mixture of a laugh and the beginning of tears. Finally, Robert flipped back to the beginning and read aloud.

*I hereby give, devise and bequeath to the Trustees of Jacobson's Home for Underprivileged Children 1 million dollars, or 100% of my residuary estate, whichever is less, to be used for the benefit of Jacobson's Home as the Trustees thereof may direct.*

Robert sent the box and all the pictures flying across the room.

And much like a memory can change based on new information, so did his earlier visions. Even though he'd tried to excise them, they came back. Those little bits and pieces everywhere throughout the house made more sense now. He hadn't been paying attention because they weren't the important part of the reading. Hand drawn pictures covered the refrigerator. In the living room, beside the television, a pile of Legos sat in a bucket waiting for the next little kid to come and build. On the bookshelf were the various Harry Potter books, along with a handful of comics stacked there as well.

Jason held on to that, glad those moments weren't gone. Even better was that the house, their house now, hadn't been destroyed by an overeager son. There was a good chance somewhere Robert was living out this exact scenario, and Jason found he couldn't stop the smile crossing his lips. His whole face became involved in the motion. He lifted himself up from the chair and moved over to the television to turn it off. His headache lessened but was still not entirely gone. Those images lingered on. Rather than rid himself of these, he was content to let them swim throughout his dreams for this one night.

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Please check out [www.johnrmcguire.com](http://www.johnrmcguire.com) for updates and information about both my comic book and novel releases.

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If you enjoyed this story, you may want to check out [The Dark That Follows](#), which also features Jason Mills

## **The Dark That Follows**

**A disgraced cop with the ability to see the future...**

**A college student whose life has become entangled in black magic...**

**A woman no longer sure of who to trust...**

**A vision of the future that portends the end of all things...**

**...with only darkness to follow**