

# DON'T SPILL YOUR TEA

BY JOSH ROBY

**I FLING OUT A DESPERATE HAND**, none too coordinated, and feel it make contact with something hard. Things clatter, fall to the ground. The lights jiggle around me, and I squeeze my eyes shut to make it stop. The blaring klaxons keep wailing, sending hot pokers into my temples. I flail again, and this time my fingers find purchase, groping blindly, until they reach their target. The alarm suddenly squelches silent, but I know it's only a short reprieve.

The snooze button only quiets my alarm clock for nine minutes.

Bleary-faced, I poke my head up over my pillow to see how many times I've already hit snooze. The red readout tries to hide behind the bottles of prescription sleep aids (as close to horse tranquilizers you can get while still being intended for human consumption), but my sleep-addled brain is still able to put the digits together. 6:57. With a mutter and groan, I swing my heavy arms under me and push. Time to get up.

Adelaide is of course already awake and waiting for me, sitting on the edge of her bed and playing tea party with Pooh Bear, Off-Brand Barbie, and Optimus Prime. Sometimes I worry about her toys giving her body image issues: when she grows up, will she be disappointed

that she isn't a truck? But this early in the morning, I'm going on auto-pilot and with the lingering effects of the sleeping pills I mostly just register excited morning hugs and the need to make breakfast.

The next half-hour is mostly a blur that ends with me watching her board the school bus, lunch box in hand, and waving. I wave to her through the window and I wave to the woman holding on to the top of the bus, dressed in a trenchcoat and holding a katana in her hand. She gives me a short nod, and I turn to head back to the house. Everything is right with the world.

On the way, my phone buzzes in the pocket of my bathrobe and I fish it out. The calendar is telling me that the First Client of the Day is at 8am. Why are all the words capitalized, I think as I thumb open the appointment. But there are no details. Just First Client of the Day. And that's when I start to wonder what I do for a living.

There's a woman at my front door, rapping on the metal screen and making it rumble like tinny thunder. I cast a quick glance across the street, where a bum is leaning against a fence. He indicates her with a dip of his head and gives me a thumbs-up, which is somewhat reassuring.

I scuff my feet on the walk so my visitor hears me coming, and she whirls around, eyes crazy. "Are you Joe Fix?"

I scowl. "What?"

"Droop-Eyed Joe. Joe Fix," she insists. "I... I have an appointment?" She's somewhere in her 20s but she talks and moves like a teenager: all hurry and insistence. Asian, with close-cropped hair that she might have cut herself with kitchen scissors. Buttoned up in a battered old coat against the morning chill, but showing a black collar creeping up her throat and black leggings and boots beneath the hem.

I rub my face. "You must be my first client of the day."

She snaps her fingers. "That's what I was supposed to say."

"I do business over here," I say automatically, pointing around the house towards the garage. There's a side door over here, which opens into the laundry room, except when I open the door there's a desk and the walls are covered with paper-stuffed shelves. I stop in the doorway, hand still on the knob, and for the life of me the first question that comes to mind is how I'm going to get the day's laundry done.

A moment later, though, it all starts coming back, and I start to curse.

"What?" the woman asks, standing on tip-toe to look inside. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong," I say, stepping inside and gesturing her towards the chair on the client side of the desk. "I just remembered what I do for a living. I deal with you people."

"Us people?"

I drop myself into the other chair. "You people. How long since you've slept?"

She shrugs, but it's so sudden and violent it might be one big twitch. "I don't know. A few weeks?"

I nod, opening up a manila folder. It's the only one on the desk, set directly in the center as if waiting. Inside is a home-made form with blanks and spaces for notes. At the top is a trio of short paragraphs labeled, "Read This First." I frown, scan a line or two, and realize I'm supposed to read it out loud to her.

"So this is how this works," I read to her. "You're a Waker, I'm a Sleeper. I used to be a Waker, though, and I can get you things."

"I need—" she starts, but I hold up a hand.

“In return, I need some favors from you. First and foremost, I need protection from the things in... Mad City.” I pause for a moment at that, but then it feels right. I continue on. “I’m sure you already met my friend across the street when you arrived today. One thing you can do for me is take a shift being my friend across the street. Or something else: I always have things that need doing. Is this your first time here?”

She bobs her head, and so I read her the *If It’s Their First Time* paragraph: “For first-timers, I need payment up front. You tend not to come back. Once we establish a relationship, and I’m moderately sure you won’t get yourself killed or eaten, you can owe me and I’ll call you when I need you. Do you understand?”

She bobs her head again, and then sees that I’m done, so she says, “Yes. I understand. They told me you could get me what I need.”

I fold my hands over the form. “What do you need?”

“I need some T-E-A,” she says, spelling out the letters. I wait for her to explain. “That is... Triethylaluminum.”

I nod, and a tickle of memory at the back of my brain suggests that I have had stranger-sounding requests. “And what is this... tri-etha... TEA?”

“It’s an industrial compound used in... I’m a chemist,” she says suddenly, switching tracks. “That is, I’m trained as one. I almost got my doctorate, and then...”

“And then the Mad City,” I nod. “There was... some embarrassment at your school, I assume?”

“They think I’m crazy!” she spits suddenly. “Doctor Fattah had a parasite boring into her neck and everyone ignored it. I tried to help—I did help—but the only way to get it off was hydrochloric acid...”

I write “chemist” down in the space on the form labeled, “Other Skills:” until she winds down. “What is TEA?” I ask again, with all the patience of a cat-herder.

“It’s a catalyst, you use it to make plastics,” she tells me as if this was obvious.

“And you’re looking to make plastic?”

“No, no,” she answers too quickly, then laughs. “No, I need it to end Mad City. I’m going to bring it all down, Joe. Should I call you Joe? There’s a pillar, you see. The Wax King has it, in his castle. The pillar is his castle, really. Or at least it’s the center of it. And it holds up everything. If it comes down, so does Mad City.”

I maintain eye contact and nod as if I’m listening. This is why first-timers pay up front. If I got her this TEA, she’d go haring off to throw herself in front of the Wax King, and even with my fog-dimmed memory, I know she’s not coming back. The King is powerful, dangerous, and jealous of his own power and position. Threatening the King is a one-way ticket to getting your face and soul melted off. And he has uses for half-melted, half-forgotten half-people. I shudder a little, and that brings her monologue to an end.

“Are you all right?”

I straighten the form and folder against the corners of the desk blotter. “I’m fine. Can you tell me what TEA is?”

“Didn’t I already?” she blinks, frowns, then beams. “I suppose I didn’t, did I? It will melt the pillar.”

“Through some chemical reaction?”

Now she guffaws, eye glinting and lips stretched wide. Perfect teeth. She shakes her head and breathes deep to stop herself from laughing. “No, no, of course not. TEA ignites when exposed to air. You... you can’t put it out.”

I tick the boxes labeled Dangerous and Probably Illegal. “Let’s shift gears, then. What can you do?”

By happy coincidence, she can walk through walls, and I have a message that needs delivering to somebody in the state penitentiary. She asks why, as first-timers often do, and I tell her that I don’t ask questions. The answers I get rarely make much sense, anyway. “What’s important,” I tell her, “is that you deliver this message and I get you your TEA.”

She stands and I see her to the door. Before she goes, she turns and gets a funny smile on her face. “You used to be like me. Like us people.”

I bob my head. “I did. A few years ago my daughter went missing. I couldn’t sleep for worry, and after a few days I started to see things. Hallucinations, at least that’s what they all seem to be at first, but the things they did and said started to make too much sense when you put them all together. Long story short, they’d taken my daughter to Mad City. I had to go fetch her.”

“They say you’re the one who put the crater in the Bazaar.”

“I figured they would have paved over it by now.”

She shakes her head. “No, they just built new stalls on top of it. But the ground dips like crazy there.” She squeezes the scrap of paper I’d given her in her hand, then licks her lips. “Listen, I’m going to go do this now, but... tonight when my friends and I hit the Wax Castle, we could use your help.”

I put a hand on the door, hoping she’ll take the hint and leave. “I don’t do that anymore.”

“Joe, it’s the last battle,” she says, not taking the hint. “I mean, this is it. This is the end. Don’t you want to be there?”

“I want to be home when my daughter is home,” I tell her simply. “If I’m not, there wasn’t much sense in me going to get her in the first place, was there?” I don’t say, I’d rather scrape out a life with Adelaide than be a whacked-out nutjob fighting a holy war against bad guys who are probably more than half imaginary. A bit of that emotion creeps into what I do say, though, and a cloud crosses her face. She waves the scrap of paper, gives me a short nod, and leaves.

My next client is already waiting outside.

He needs a “doctor’s note” to get extended leave from his job while he “solves” his current crop of problems. I’m not a doctor, but I have some believable stationary that says I am. The next one needs money delivered to her family; I don’t ask where the money comes from. I conduct another client into my showroom, the garage, in which I have two display racks that fold down from the ceiling. They’re full of guns, but it’s actually a rare Waker who comes to me for a gun. And those that do are rarely repeat customers. The Mad City doesn’t respond well to the obvious, and it angers easily. More come and go, and I log all their needs and their potential services in my files.

A little after lunch, Nyx comes by bearing gifts. Nyx isn’t a Waker, but he does know about the Mad City—mostly because he’s from there. I met him when I rescued Adelaide. He was, in fact, rather helpful. Back then, he was a dissatisfied minion of the monster that took Adelaide: a big brute on a demonic horse with a factory full of little girls... I don’t like to think about it for obvious reasons. Anyway, with the Horseman gone, Nyx moved up the ladder and took control of the factory himself. No more child labor—and no more manufacturing little girls, either. Everybody came out a winner.

These days, Nyx has a habit of arriving at my door with very good Scotch and we talk shop. Admittedly, I’m never very good at

remembering the details once I hit the pillow, but I enjoy our talks, if only because it's nice to deal with somebody who doesn't need something from me. In my line of work, it's a rare thing to win respect from somebody who doesn't have cause to be grateful at the same time.

This time, he's bitching about the cost of doing business in the Bazaar. The widgets he makes are undervalued because of the recent influx by lucid dreams of similar widgets. "And of course I can't prove anything, old man, but it seems deliberate to me," he says, and absently smooths the line of his slate grey suit jacket. "Somebody out there is getting people to daydream about my widgets, and then using those dreams to undercut my bottom line."

"Can you diversify?" I ask, hoping this sounds like a reasonable response. I'm no businessman, so I have to masquerade as one to keep up my end of the conversation. Of course, Nyx isn't a businessman either, just a nightmare about businessmen, and so my faking it doesn't usually matter.

"Widgets are widgets," he shrugs, waving his tumbler lazily. "They used to be precision goods, but with recent advances in production, they're really just commodities, at this point. Interchangeable." He shrugs again, this time more 'could be worse' than 'it doesn't matter.' "Same thing is happening to a lot of markets. Tears, pig iron, personality quirks, fiber optic cable, tea..."

"Tea leaves and not TEA," I put in with a smirk, happy to have an iota of interesting data to contribute to the conversation.

"Triethylaluminum?" he asks immediately, and my hopes of explaining what it is and sounding authoritative dissipate.

"Not exactly a commodity, is it?" I try, forcing a slight smile.

"Hard to come by," he nods his head. "That's why the plant abandoned plastics and shifted production to a moral indignation supply

pipeline." A slow smile creeps across his pencil-thin lips. "Industrial chemicals fall a little outside your bailiwick, old man. What brings TEA bubbling up to the surface of your mind, today?"

I shrug. "A client came looking for it. Out here in the Slumber, it's easy enough to get hold of some with the proper papers." I allow myself a triumphant smile. "According to the documents another client forged for me a while back, I've been a licensed manufacturer of handheld electronics for fifteen years."

"Factory floor out in the backyard?" Nyx asks with a conspiratorial grin. We share a chuckle and sip Scotch. A few moments later, he asks, "What's one of your clients want with TEA? The Awake are not, as a rule, known for making things."

I wave my own tumbler. "Your typical save-the-world scheme. Wants to burn down some pillar in the Wax King's castle."

"Oh, so somebody from your side finally found the pillar, eh?" Nyx asks, nodding to himself.

I raise an eyebrow, feigning nonchalance. "I never know if what my clients tell me is real or imaginary... or if they're fixating on some crazy unimportant detail as if it's the meaning of existence."

"Oh, the axis mundi is real."

I settle back into my chair and eye the clock. I have another appointment soon, and will have to make my excuses. "What's it do?"

"It holds up everything," he shrugs, and polishes off his drink. He considers what's left in his glass. "Her crazy scheme might work, actually," he allows, and then chuckles. "If she could get into the castle, but it's... well, it's a fortress, isn't it? Getting past all those knights, dealing with the gates and walls... it'd take an army. And I don't think you're selling armies as well as obscure chemicals, eh?"

He surges up to his feet and I follow suit. He nods at the clock and I give him the tight, apologetic smile of two peers who understand that our time is up without needing to resort to words. I almost mention, by way of conversation, that the client in question can walk through walls, but he talks and I listen as he heads for my front door.

“Tell me something, Joe. Why is that the Awake always assume that theirs is the real world, and our city is some sort of fake shadow?” He finds his coat, hat, and scarf on the pegs by the door and dons them. “Who says that the City Slumbering isn’t just the tip of the iceberg, and our world is what’s really real, down under the surface?”

Metaphysics is one of Nyx’ favorites, and one of my weaker subjects. I just shrug. “Bias, I guess. Your hometown is always what’s normal and honest and good. It’s other people from other places that you’ve got to worry about.”

Nyx nods with approval. “I suppose you’re right, for most people.” He thrusts forward his hand for a goodbye shake. “I’m glad some of us are able to rise above such small-minded assumptions.”

I shake vigorously and smile. “Me, too, Nyx. See you sometime next week?”

“Absolutely.” He tips his hat and steps out into the balmy afternoon. I watch him go until he passes behind a tree and doesn’t come out the other side.

The next client needs bolt cutters, which sounds pretty prosaic until he tells me he needs two hundred of them and they have to be a certain model from a certain manufacturer. I have a wholesaler’s license, too, so that isn’t much of a problem, especially since he’s also a reliably successful bank robber. He leaves two duffel bags of cash with me and I tell him the bolt cutters will be here in a couple days. Then it’s time to go pick up Adelaide at the bus stop.

The afternoon passes in a blur, as most afternoons do. I juggle seeing Adelaide home, feeding her a healthy snack, and prodding her into doing some homework while at the same time I am arranging for a garbage pickup across town (inside the fridge is either a body or a pile of push-pins, or both), ordering hardware in bulk, and receiving a 60-gallon drum full of a volatile chemical. I don't generally take appointments once Adelaide is home—sleepless crazy is contagious, sometimes—so mostly I do phone-errands until dinner and a TV show and bedtime.

The chemist returns long after the night has gone full dark. The hollows under her eyes seem deeper in the neon lighting inside my garage, but her frenetic energy bubbles over when she sees the drum and its OSHA warning label. She has a shopping bag from Beer&More, and from it she produces a tangle of aluminum pipes and hoses.

"I haven't seen one of those since the keggers of my college years," I say, and eye the thick metal drum skeptically. "Will that work?"

"I've got a friend who can make it work," she says, and sets the party pump on top of the drum. It makes a deep bwong, sounding very heavy. She looks to the hand truck sitting against the wall. "I didn't think about moving it once I had it..."

I expected this, so I slide the hand truck under the drum and tip it back onto the wheels. "I happened to be making a hardware order today and I already got myself a replacement. This one's yours."

"That's very thoughtful of you," she says, looking me up and down. Here comes the gratitude.

"We're a full-service operation here," I say for lack of anything better.

"Have you thought any more about coming along?" she asks, still staring at me. Her hips cant to the side and she smiles. This is the

hard sell. Her sagging eyes and her ragged hair ruin any allure she might have been capable of directing my way. She doesn't look bold or daring or exciting. She looks like a crazy person with a drum of toxic chemicals.

"I don't do that anymore," I tell her again.

"But Joe, we're going to bring it all down," she insists, stepping towards me. She gestures behind her at the TEA. "I can wheel this right into the middle of the Wax Castle and spray it all over the pillar. Fwoom. That pillar is the only thing holding the Mad City apart from the real world, Joe. When it melts, the two worlds will be reunited. No more nightmares. No more insomnia-powered hijinks."

It's a moment before I shake my head, but it's not hesitation like she thinks. She waves her hands at the garage and the minivan. "No more living in this fortified outpost in suburbia, Joe, no more having to deal with Us People and our crazy requests. It'll all be over. Everything will go back to normal."

"Will it? And you know this how?"

"Because it's not natural," she tells me. "The place where you sleep and the place where dreams live... they shouldn't be different places. You don't... you don't go anywhere when you sleep, or at least you shouldn't. You should stay where you are and your dreams should be your own, not hitched up to some crazy Jungian train wreck."

"Us living our lives, sleeping and dreaming," I lead her along. "That's what's natural. That's what's... really real, right? Or should be."

"Exactly!" she grins a mile wide.

"Who told you that melting the axis mundi would end the Mad City?"

The grin falters. "The what?"

"The axis... the wax pillar inside the castle."

She shakes her head. "The King himself told us that it kept the worlds separate. We worked out the rest ourselves."

"So you don't know," I insist. "You don't know for certain what happens. You don't even have a good guess. You have a hope."

"Hope's enough," she tells me fiercely. "Hope's all I've got left, Joe. And whatever happens, it's got to be better than the way things are now."

I look past her, to the parked minivan, to the sun-faded outdoor toys stashed up on a shelf, to the trampoline in the corner. "I like the way things are now," I hear myself say.

"What?"

"Did it ever occur to you," I ask, "that maybe instead of destroying the Mad City you'd just drop our world into that... mess? Maybe our world isn't the real world. Maybe our world only exists because it's not drowning in the Mad City."

"That's just crazy," she says, and I laugh at that coming out of her. She doesn't take this as a good sign, though, and hefts the hand truck backwards as if to go. "Listen, thanks for this stuff. Once everything is over, I'll come back and we can laugh about—"

By that point I've crossed the garage and pulled down the display rack. I grab the handgun at the top, the one I keep loaded and fixed with a silencer, and swing it around to bear on her. Her eyes go wide and she yanks the hand truck hard, wheeling it towards the closed garage door. Her right hand swings forward for balance, and when it reaches the aluminum door it passes right through. Her whole body strains to follow.

I squeeze off three shots, but at this range the last two aren't necessary. The inside of my garage door gets painted sudden crimson. Her right arm falls back to her side minus a hand, and then she crumples to the floor. The drum totters on the wheels of the hand truck, then falls forward. The seal around the edge of the drum breaks, and out pours what looks like water, but the air is suddenly redolent with chemical reek. A moment later the TEA bursts into flame, and I dash for the garage's side door.

I cross over to the house, pull open the door to the laundry room, and grab the phone. I push one of the auto-dial numbers and step back outside. The garage is lighting up quickly, the door already a sheet of flame. A pool of TEA seeps out onto the driveway beyond, followed by wheeling fire. The puddle finds its way to the severed hand sitting on the driveway. A moment later it's blistered and blackened and then it's barely recognizable... much like the garage.

Somebody on the other end of the line picks up. "Joe?"

"Hey Sam," I say, wincing at the heat and retreating into the laundry room. "I've got a little problem over at my house. I need a crime scene covered up."

The voice sniffs. "And then you and I are clear?"

"Oh hell yes," I nod, even though Sam can't see it. "Somebody's going to call 911 in a minute—there's a fire—so the first responders will be here real soon."

"I'll be there first," comes the response, followed by a click.

I return the phone to its charging cradle in the laundry room, then make my way through the house to Adelaide's room. I crack open the door slowly and quietly, then creep inside to her bedside. Her breathing is even and shallow, and she twitches just slightly. Dreams. I bend over and brush a light kiss on her temple, then beat my silent retreat.

In my room, I shuck out of my clothes and grab a handful of sleep aids. I munch them down and crawl into bed.

Tomorrow's a big day.

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