

Prompting

By Josiah Acosta-Ballard

You are a husk, well what's left of you is. You've lost your soul. Technically all that is left of you is an empty shell but from the outside, you look no different from a regular person. I know you can't remember anything about yourself but with my help, you'll start to feel like normal. Even if you're not.

Past experience has shown me that this process goes more smoothly when I start from the beginning. Not the very beginning-- I don't have time for that-- but I won't forget anything. I don't want you to end up like David. Making sure you understand what's happening is important to the process's success. Although to be honest I'm not sure I can give you all the information you need. You're very different from my usual subjects. I've never done this to someone like me before. There is so much I don't know about you. You are

The phone rang. I brought it up to my ear as I had many times before and said, "Hello, this is Bravo Bottles. How may I help you?" I checked my watch, but it had stopped ticking, again. Keeping a watch from 1985 working was proving more difficult than I had thought. A woman's voice spoke to me over the phone. I could tell it was Eva. She asked me if I had seen David recently.

"David, no, not for a few days now. Is everything ok?" I asked. Apparently, he had been missing for almost a week now. Which means that I did something wrong. When returning a husk back to its own life you must give it enough information to function properly. It will already remember basic functions, but you need to give it a purpose. If I had told David that he was a house husband, then he would have returned home and been just that. I call this process *prompting*. Since I hadn't even told David he was married that might be why he didn't return home.

Giving a husk a recap of their last few hours can help them a lot when they return to civilized life. If everything is done properly then a husk reenters normal life like nothing happened, but without a soul. Eva sounded worried but not sad. Elsie, who was *officially* the last person to see him, seemed pretty sad. I think she had really fallen for him.

You like Elise, you think she's funny; she isn't, but you'll laugh at anything.

You walked into the bar close to ten pm and took a seat up front. It was a Monday night; most of the customers had already gone home. The kitchen staff had closed up and left half an hour ago. Just the way you liked it. You weren't there for a party. You only showed up for one reason. Me. I already knew this, and to be honest I enjoyed your company. I had my side work finished already.

“Anna,” you called over with a bright smile, “can I get a beer?”

“I dunno,” I responded slyly, “can you afford a beer? Elise told me you didn't tip last week.” You looked back, confused. “Remember that party of five you came in with, on Tuesday.” I can see the apology forming in your mouth.

“I remember the night, I just -” I laughed. You're always so quick to buy into my stories. I once told you that you brought a girl home. Do you remember that? Of course, you don't! You flipped out trying to figure out who it was. No one else could convince you of such stories. Thomas tried to tell you he'd flirted with me. You didn't buy it, though he flirts with everyone. You just looked into his eyes and told him he was lying. Somehow you just know when people are lying, but not me. I think it's because you won't look me in the eyes. If others were to watch us talk, they would think that you're gullible. I don't think so, though.

“Clay, chill out. I'm just playing with you. You and your friends are great customers.” You let out a fake laugh. You were nervous but seemed to visibly relax after a moment. I began to make your favorite beer as we chatted. Sunshine City has been your beer of choice for almost a year now. I'm pretty sure Thomas put you onto it. He's an idiot-- we have so many better options, but if you like it; I'll pour it.

“You and David really know how to get together,” I said.

You laughed, real this time. I had made you think of good memories.

“Yeah, it was really all Thomas' idea. I can't believe we are all still friends.” I smiled as I handed you your beer, recalling the many stories you had told me about your friends. You told me when we met that the five of you had met in high school and worked on the same robotics team. Once you each went to college the group of five became three. You, David, and Thomas,

the three of you *were* inseparable. Thomas had never mentioned these same stories, but I never brought it up to him anyways.

“Last Tuesday was the first time the five of us had been together in years,” you said.

“Wish I could have seen it. Why didn’t you bring them while I was working?” I said.

“Oh, I thought about it. Our schedules just didn’t line up right.”

I eyed you as you took your first drink of the night.

“Claaaay,” I said slowly, stretching out the ‘a’ in your name, “Your friends don’t know you come here on Mondays, do they?”

You jumped to attention, almost choking on your drink.

“No, of course, they do. I’ve mentioned it a few times.” You lied to me……. You lied to me and up until recently I wasn’t even aware you were capable of doing so. I stepped away checking in with another customer at the other end of the bar. I didn’t really care about them, but I wanted to give you a moment of space. I thought you could use a second to cool off. If I had pressured you, you would have left. About a month back David told me that you never come here without him. He says that you don’t even like to drink. He thinks you just do it to be social. He’s probably right about that last one. By the time I returned you seemed sufficiently calmed down. I decided it was time to ask the important questions.

“Clay,” I said again, leaning over the bar to bring my head level with yours. Your eyes shifted away from mine as you looked at my neck. You have such pretty eyes. Do you know that? I’m sure you’ve heard it before, but do you *know* that? About a year ago there was a man in the bar who asked to sketch your face. He was an excellent artist. When he had finished

sketching you, he colored in your eyes. It was the only part of your face to gain color. I know he could see what I do. If there is anything to remember from my prompting, it's that you never acknowledge your own beauty, but everyone sees it. I rarely get to look into your eyes like I do now. They are an entrancing dull blue that gets lighter as it reaches your pupils but with a dark lining on the very edge of your iris. "Do you know what happened to David?" I asked. You stopped drinking, your glass now half empty.

"What do you mean?" you asked, smiling back at me.

"His wife called earlier asking if he was here. I heard he didn't come back home last week." Your smile faded as I continued on. "Have you seen or heard from him recently?"

"No, I haven't." You looked sad, but not worried.

"Oh, I thought you would know," I said. "Since you're like, his best friend." You don't say anything, bringing your view down to your glass. Your pretty eyes seemed lost in the sunshine city's golden-brown hue. I thought you would tell me, I really did. I just can't understand why you would protect someone like him. He cheated on her. He's been married for eight years and has two kids. And he would rather spend the night with Elise! He was willing to risk all that just for a roll in the hay. He got what he deserved. Don't look at me like that! The most important things in life are loyalty and stability. He gave up both just for some blond behind the bar. You wouldn't understand. Sure, you're loyal; and I like that, but to the wrong individuals. Most people simply don't exist long enough to recognize how important stability is. People like you and I need something greater. A system, something that could live as long as we do. I still don't understand why you wouldn't agree with me.

Thinking about David makes me feel less bad though. He wasn't a good person. I meant for his husk to return home but if he didn't then it doesn't seem that strange. In the end, taking his soul was the best choice. His family will grieve for him, but they won't have to know of his betrayal. They will lose him believing that he was the excellent father and husband the world thought him to be.

You stayed in the bar all night. I think you wanted to tell me. You wanted to but couldn't. I think if I pressed hard enough you would have caved, but that would have required me to give away information I shouldn't have had. I've seen so many people come through this bar over the years. Every one of them has a story to tell. You would be surprised how much people talk once they get a drink. There are so many horrible people in the world, and every day one of them comes in here and decides that I'm their therapist. And I have to hear it. But not you, you didn't say anything. It made me wonder if you were really as good as people believed you to be. David wasn't but you could have been.

"We close in fifteen," I said. The bar was now empty, just you and me. You sat there avoiding eye contact as usual. Your drink had been long empty, but you hadn't asked for a new one. You hadn't said *anything* in a while. "Do you need an uber?"

"No, I'm not drunk," you declared, standing up and putting on your coat. At this point, my curiosity got the best of me. I just couldn't understand why you behaved so well. You had been coming to my bar for over a year. A perfect customer. Maybe there are good people in this world. Perhaps I had just missed them. You deserved a chance. You still do.

“Would you walk me home then,” I asked. You looked up at me, eyes a little wider and a smile sneaking up on your face. “I live just down the road. It wouldn't be more than a few minutes.”

“Of course,” you said.

We walked out together around one a.m. While locking up I shivered as the cold air hit my arms. In almost an instant you had given me your coat. A little cliché but sweet. It was more than I had been given willingly in a long time. When we arrived at the door you didn't invite yourself in. You didn't ask to use my bathroom. You were content with this. Just a short walk was enough for you. You were already stepping away when I invited you in. When you turned back to me, your eyes were bright. I suspect mine were too.

Is this all starting to feel familiar to you? Good. Once inside I sat with you on my couch.

“Do you want another drink?” I asked. You shook your head.

“No, I've still got to drive back,” you said. You were planning on returning home because you're a gentleman and you expect nothing more than what you are given. You pointed at my watch. “Your watch is stopped.”

I looked down at my wrist.

“I know, it stopped earlier today.” I tapped the dial lightly with my nails. “This is the fourth time, it's pretty old.”

You asked if you could see it and I leaned over to your side of the couch to give you a proper view without taking it off.

"It's beautiful," you said softly. You're right, it is. I let you take a moment to examine the gold lining and the leather strap. There are no hour marks on the watch. I don't need them. The three gold hands spin and spin but I never pay them any attention. The only important part is the year.

"It looks like the date may have stopped working a long time ago. It says fifty-six."

That's another thing I like about you, you're very perceptive.

"It was my dad's," I said as I returned to my side of the couch bringing my knees up to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. "He gave it to me a few months before he died."

You seemed a bit taken aback.

"Oh, I'm sorry for your loss. I-I didn't know," you said, raising your hands up in defense.

"Don't be, I'm not sad," I said.

"You never talk about your parents much,"

"I was never very close with them."

"Still, they are your parents. It must be sad to lose one."

"No," I said, peeking my head out from between my knees.

"What about your mom?" you asked. I wished you hadn't. I didn't want to talk about them anymore.

“Have a drink with me,” I said, already seeing the decline forming in your mouth. “You can spend the night on the couch, so don't worry about driving home.” I don't think there was anything wrong with asking you to stay. Unlike David, you have no one to return to. No wife, no kids, not even a pet. I got off the couch and stepped into the kitchen, out of your view. I didn't hear you say no so I continued to talk. “My mom died with him. They were in a car accident in 2002. Drunk driving.”

“I'm so sorry, that must have been hard,” you called over.

“I keep telling you it wasn't,” I called back as I finished our drinks. “That was precisely how I expected them to die. They drank and drove all the time.”

“You expected your parents to die?” You seemed shocked. Like the idea of predicting someone's death was in a realm beyond you. “I'm still sorry-- no one should have to lose their parents at such a young age.”

“Don't be, they were bitter people,” I said as I stepped back into the room, handing you your drink. “They were never really in love. They married for legal reasons and spent the remainder of their lives arguing. They didn't know the first thing about being parents, just how to fight. With all that wasted time I'm not sure if they deserved to live any longer than they did. I've done more and will continue to do more than they ever did without them.”

“Then I'm sorry for that.” Your eyes looked darker as you took your first sip. “Everyone should be able to grow up with a role model they can look up to.” I sighed and sat back down on my end of the couch leaning my head back over the arm. Sometimes you're just exhausting.

You're overly apologetic and when things go wrong you think it's your job to fix them, whether you have the power to or not.

"Clay, I really think you're the only genuine person I've ever met." I said. You laughed.

"Ok now, don't say that" you exclaimed, "I'm sure you have some great friends."

"No, I don't," I said, a little colder than intended.

"Come on, you're twenty-seven years old," you said with a smile growing on your face. I couldn't quite tell but I thought I detected a hint of judgment in your voice. Ageism maybe, you'd told me you were thirty. If either of us was honest then you should have only been three years older than me. My body has remained in its twenties for three decades. Looking back, it's almost humorous, almost. "You've got to have someone in the world that you like. What about Elsie?"

"Elise and I are co-workers-- we are friendly because it's beneficial to our workplace environment."

"You don't really believe that, do you?" you said, laughing. "What about David? I know you two aren't friends, but you think he's a good person, right?" You were pressuring me, but you had a smile on your face. I think you were just happy to learn more about me. You are always happy to learn new things.

"David cheated on his wife," I said sharply. You went silent and your smile faded. We both drank quietly until finally, you spoke up.

“Did Elise tell you?”

I nodded and took another sip.

“I hope he comes home. David and Eva haven't been together for a long time.”

“So, he cheated on her,” I said, my annoyance rising. “Things weren't working out, so he just quit. Marriage is supposed to be the dedication of one's love and he just gave up.”

“It's not like that, they were going to counseling,” you stammered.

“And what? It didn't work so he went and banged the waitress.”

“Eva knew that he was going to sleep with her. They came to an agreement.” I stopped drinking-- this was something I didn't know. When I had claimed David's soul, I assumed I knew everything.

“Sometimes people fall out of love. They're only human.”

“I'm well aware of how human he is,” I said, finishing off my drink. “That doesn't make what he did ok. What *they* did. What about their kids? What are they supposed to tell them?”

“They tell their kids that maybe they're not in love anymore but it doesn't make them any less of a family. They love their kids and will always be there for them even if they aren't for each other.”

I felt a twinge of guilt. Perhaps I'd made a mistake. My uncertainty means that I probably did make a mistake. You always know how to look at something differently.

“Their kids would be happier with them together,” I said spitefully. “Sure, you can tell them all that crap, and to an extent, it will work, but what kids want most of all is to be normal. To have that TV show sitcom life where everything is perfect. They just took away any hope of that.”

I should listen to my own words. Losing a father will ruin these kids. While I can't give him his soul again, I will find his husk and make sure he comes back to his family.

“You're always so judgmental,” you said quietly.

“I expect a lot from people.”

“You expect them to be perfect.”

“I expect them to *try* to be perfect. Shouldn't we all try to be the best version of ourselves?”

“Who's to say that they aren't?” you said finishing off your drink. “I think if you stop expecting so much from people you might actually start to enjoy them.”

How could your view of people be so different from mine?

“Besides, nothing lasts forever. The best parts of life are the ones you haven't experienced yet.”

If I hadn't been so angry at the time, I probably would have listened to you.

“Don't patronize me. I know what people are like and I don't expect too much from them. You talk about human relationships like it's simple, but you don't even have many friends, do you? If the best parts in life are the ones you haven't experienced, then why do you come back

to the same bar every week? If you can accurately describe how marriage should be then why aren't you with anyone?" You fell silent. I started to think perhaps I'd gone too hard on you.

"I was married once," you said quietly.

I looked at you shocked. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

"It was a long time ago, but she was wonderful. We met at a carnival twenty-five years ago. I miss her every day. We were married for eleven years before she passed. Lilitana was truly the light of my life." A better person would have said I'm sorry. A better person would have asked you if you were ok. I decided to question you.

"Wait, you're thirty, right?" I only asked because I didn't believe you. "You're only thirty, were you married at nineteen?"

You laughed nervously and clutched your cup tighter.

"No actually, I'm a bit older than I seem." You started to play with your thumbs. I had never seen you fidget before.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"To be honest, I don't remember. I should have used something to keep track. I thought that no one could lose track of their age, but I guess I was young and stupid then," you said looking down into your glass. It was empty, the only thing you could have seen was a distortion of your own reflection. "You see, I do this thing every once and a while. You're going to laugh at me in a minute. Where I take a person's soul and add their lifespan to mine."

I laughed but there was nothing funny. There was no way. You had just been drinking, you were just being silly.

"I know, I know. It sounds stupid but I've been doing this for eons."

I laughed again; this time more clearly forced. *Eons*.

"My real name isn't even Clay, it's Kirk Vass. I just have to change names every once in a while to keep under the radar."

I tried not to panic. A regular person wouldn't panic, they would laugh. After all this was the most ridiculous thing I had ever heard.

"Ya ok. Clay the soul stealer," I said laughing. It was convincing this time. Even I started to feel confident you were joking.

"I'm serious," you said, looking up at me.

"Ok Kirk Vass," I said with heavy theatrics. "If you really take people's souls, and use their remaining lifespan then how do you do it?" I wiggled my fingers as I brought my hands in the air. "Do you have a magic wand to cast spells with?"

You looked at me dead in my eyes.

"Well firstly I don't take their remaining lifespan. I stop myself from ageing but that's dependent on how many years my subject has already lived. Not how many they have left."

My blood turned cold. Why did you tell me all of this? Were you planning on taking my soul too?

"Secondly, the process is quite simple. The subject and I make eye contact and I bring my dominant hand up like this." You brought your hand up with an open palm, but your ring finger pointed downwards. I did the same. "Then say -"

Well I can't repeat it now. We don't want to start over. It doesn't matter anyway, you never said it, I did. I never thought I would meet someone like me. Definitely not in my natural

lifespan. I'm still only fifty-six. I wonder how old you were. If you really have been alive for eons, then I guess it makes sense that you viewed the world so differently. Eventually I will too. With your extended lifespan added to mine, I have all the time I need. I won't let your soul go to waste. I promise.

Ok Husk, let's do this one more time. Your name is Clay. You tell people you are thirty years old. You like to learn and look at the world differently. You are loyal and perceptive and a gentleman. You'll laugh at any joke no matter how unfunny it is. Your best friends are Thomas and David, you go drinking with them every week. Not because you like to drink but because you love their company. You never acknowledge your own beauty. Sometimes you're exhausting. You try to fix every problem you encounter, which is dumb, but it never makes anyone love you any less. You come visit me every week, just to chat. It's our secret and I'm not sure what I would do without it. I need you to continue. Our Monday nights mean a lot to me-- this can't be the last one. What would I do without your awkward conversation and your weird lack of eye contact? I need you to come back next week, I can't spend an eternity without you. You're my rock. I need you to ground me, to remind me there are good things in life if I really look. You can't tell anyone, but your name is Kirk, and you're my only friend.