

Curse Registration And Upkeep Department

By Robert V Aldrich

Copyright: Robert V Aldrich, 2019

Published: 2019/04/05

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

This ebook is licensed for the personal entertainment of the reader. It is copyrighted property of the author and may not be reproduced, copied, or distributed without the express written consent of the author.

FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

The elevator doors rattled apart in the store-brand knock-off version of mechanical precision. They emptied out into an office lobby, directly before a pair of vending machines. The left vending machine held the usual array of sodas and bottled refreshments. The right vending machine, holding munchable snacks of all delectable types, included a tasty variety of cookies and crackers.

Simon Miller exited the elevator, for a moment forgetting all about the first day on the job and instead was transfixed on the well-stocked vending machine. This was no mere collection of over-priced food stuffs one could get at any store, and usually for cheaper. The rows of food were unique and charmingly captivating snacks. Peanut butter paired with chocolate crackers. Peach and cantaloupe-flavored fruit snacks. Toaster pastries of flavors far beyond the usual strawberry and blueberry. All waiting for only a few easy coins.

Simon looked up and down the vending machine, practically salivating at the very thought of some of the culinary experiences just a pane of transparency away. But in looking at the food, he also caught himself. His reflection was mostly solid thanks to the light directly above him. He saw a young professional in the best suit his money could buy. His three buttons were all done, which had been a point of contention earlier in the morning. He undid one button, then all three, then tried two, then experimented with different poses. Nothing looked normal for the t-shirt and jeans kind of guy.

Remembering his place and the time, Simon turned and faced the office doors to the left of the elevators. Written in flashy and professional lettering was a door announcing 'Dr. Eugene Valencio, DDS'. Simon froze for a half-second, eyes wide. He did a quick 180 and faced the other door. In big stenciled letters read 'Curse Registration and Upkeep Department'. Simon exhaled and looked at the vending machine full of food. "Not today," he told the delectable temptations. Resolved and determined, Simon strode through the doors with his best commanding presence and was promptly bowled over by the noise.

The reception office was packed with people standing in tight lines. Barely contained by the aged ropes, the lines wound in asymmetrical and confusing patterns. They emptied out before six customer service windows, each separated by plexiglass panels not unlike the barrier separating Simon from the food he now felt imperative for his own mental health. An irritating and irritated voice shouted, "Next," from one of the windows and one of the lines took a collective step forward. The footfalls were so in-sync, Simon was certain he felt the floor shake.

The office itself was unremarkable and ugly. As if constructed out of some fragment of the 1970s, the poorly-lit professional space had wood-

paneled walls and hard gray carpeting beneath their feet. Lights designed to artificially yellow plastics rather than actually illuminate anything dotted the tiles overhead. Generic plastic-and-simulated-metal seats lined the walls beneath government posters from campaigns dating back decades. A marquee rope set defined the crowded line that clogged the majority of the office's floorspace. Angry and impatient people waited in various states of silent fuming.

Simon began to shuffle around the people waiting to get in line, an awkward miasma of ill-tempered people. He slid around the far wall, garnering the attention of several people. Scowls and evil eyes were settled on him, and more than one voice was heard whispering, "Line cutter". Fearful of a riot, Simon had to bury fears of a thousand, million angry customers rushing him all at once. He was certain they somehow, some way had pitchforks and torches ready somewhere out of sight.

He made it to the counter, near to the woman helping one of the customers. "Hey," he said nervously. The customer with cigarette lips and a nose piercing glared at him, ready to throw hands if Simon tried to cut in line. "I'm—"

"Back of the line, pal," the woman barked at him. She didn't even look up from the hurricane of paperwork she was managing.

"Yeah," said the next person waiting in line. That sentiment was echoed down the line like the world's least harmonious barbershop quartet.

"No, I'm, uh, I-I'm Simon Miller," he told her.

The blue-haired woman at the desk looked up from the paperwork and settled a single mom's irritated glare right at him. "That supposed to mean something to me?" she asked.

"Today's my first day?" squeaked Simon, like he genuinely wasn't sure. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at the crowd and genuinely wasn't sure of anything.

"Well get back here," said the woman two windows down. She was an older woman who looked like the leader of a church choir or the boss enforcer at a gambling den. She went right back to the paperwork she was reviewing. A squeeze toy sat on her space, the eyes ruptured out of its skull from use and abuse.

Simon looked up and down the line, trying not to make eye contact with any of the customers who were glaring at him for either jumping ahead in line, gross incompetence, or some combination thereof. "I-is there..." he began to ask the woman with the blue hair. Just about to ask for help on how to get over the window barricade, he heard a door open.

Behind him, just off the corner of the office, a segment of the wall pulled away and a woman in a red business dress gestured to him. She gave him a very polite and professional, if exceptionally tired smile. Shaking his hand as he entered, she shut the door behind him. "Good morning, Mister Miller." He returned the greeting out of habit more than cognizance. "I'm Dana Hasbrook."

"Oh. Oh!" he said, finally placing the name of the office manager. He re-shook her hand eagerly. "Thank you so much. It's finally nice to meet you in person."

"Yeah, phone interviews are a little tricky, aren't they?" Dana gave a pleasant laugh. "I always struggle because I'm talking to the air and if somebody walks by, I have to think they think I'm crazy." She gestured for Simon to follow her into her office. Directly across from the door they'd just passed through, her office was a simple room, tiled walls like the waiting room and a carpet that looked like the best efforts had been made to minimize future decay at the hands of time and use. "So, welcome to the first day at the Curse Registration and Upkeep Department," she told him as they stopped before her office door. "We're part of Health and Human Services, as you know."

"I do," Simon said. He paused, expecting to be offered a chair, but Dana remained right at the doorway.

"At this office, most of what we do is process claims and file them for addressing at the central office at the state capitol," she explained. "It's for that reason that we have had such a hard time getting the facilities upgraded and the staffing filled. You applied at just the right time."

Simon smiled and laughed, snapping his fingers awkwardly and popping his hands. Dana watched the sequence, tight-lipped. "Hey, you know," he said, trying to be less awkward, "happy to be a...to do my part for the...you know..."

She didn't seem sure what he meant. "As I recall, you have no experience with curse-work or any of the supra-natural affairs departments?" Dana asked, her nod causing her frizzy black hair to shake a bit.

"Yeah," Simon admitted. "I spent some time at my uncle's garage, a few semesters of junior college, and then some summers interning IT for the school system. I was studying to be a personal trainer, but..." He shrugged.

"Yeah, I know that," Dana said, with a very sympathetic and casual tone. "Well, if you'll follow me, we'll get you started."

"No problem," Simon said as he followed behind her. She walked right around the corner and Simon realized she was leading him to one of the vacant windows on the line. "Wait, I'm starting today? I mean, starting-starting?" He realized how terrible that sounded and tried to recover. "There's not, like, a training video or HR paperwork to fill out or...something?" he asked, almost hopefully.

"Nope, we like to dive right in," Dana told him, like she was making a light-hearted little joke.

He glanced at the lobby full of people. "What's causing the rush?" he asked.

"No rush; this is just a regular morning," Dana assured him simply. She sat him down at one of the open windows and told him, "Just accept requests. This cheat sheet will walk you through the process." She produced from a drawer on the right-hand side a laminated page. Simon looked at the light red sheet of pure text, formatted in a word processor. Twice on the page, standing out among the text, was the statement: IT ISN'T YOUR JOB TO JUDGE CURSES, ONLY TO PROCESS THEM. "Process the requests as quickly as you can," Dana explained to him. "And keep them stacked here." She patted a wooden Inbox on the left side of his desk. "We'll deal with them later."

"W-we will?" Simon stammered.

"Sure we will," said his neighbor, the cheerfully sardonic woman with bright blue hair that clashed with her deep black skin. "As soon as the budget increase comes through." Dana smirked, not only not angry about the sass but apparently amused by it.

"When's that?" Simon asked obtusely.

"No later than the Spring of 1977," the woman promised him before shouting, "Next!" at the crowd. A person rushed to her window and the whole line took one stamp forward.

"You'll be working with Lassie," Dana told Simon. "If you've got any questions ask her." She leaned down and patted Simon on the shoulder. "Just take any answer with a grain of salt."

"That is true," Lassie confirmed with a nod at the boss. The two fist-bumped as Dana departed.

Simon faced the desk he would be working at. He exhaled like he was about to go for a major lift in the gym. He slipped forward in the contoured computer chair and set his hands at his desk. He looked over the generic office supplies, then at the crowd of people. More than a few of them were

staring at him, waiting for him to finally call them over. Timidly, fearfully, Simon's hand began to lift and he opened his mouth.

The peanut butter and chocolate wafer snack hit the bottom of the vending machine and Simon couldn't snatch it out fast enough. He tore open the plastic wrapping and bit into the pair of snack sticks, not even bothering to separate them. The comfort of chocolate and sweet sugar had him close his eyes and he relished the taste for a moment. He swallowed dryly and looked about for a water fountain.

He found a metal basin more or less sticking out of the wall next to the door into Dr Valencio's office. Simon took a quick sip and looked at the dental door and wondered what their workload was like. He rubbed his face vigorously, then went back for more water.

A few gulps later and Simon walked back into the office. He finished off the wafers as he walked around the edge of the room, tossing the plastic wrapping in a trash bin as he did. He slipped back through the door, around to the business side of the desks, and sat down again. "Next," he called in the air, determined to get his day and his job and his life moving in the right direction.

"Don't let 'em scare ya," said his blue-haired neighbor. "They can smell fear."

"Yeah," was all Simon could think to say. "Lassie, right?" he asked.

"Lassie," she corrected as she stamped a receipt.

Simon froze. "Th-that's what I said."

"No, you said Lassie. It's Lassie," she told him, glancing over at him for once. He was petrified with confusion. "There's Lassie like the Scottish girl and there's Lassie like the dog." Simon was perfectly still. Lassie seemed confident she'd made her point so she resumed working with her patron.

Simon turned and called again, "Next." A man approached in a flannel shirt and a demeanor as prickly as his face. He didn't say anything. He slid a form across the wide slit in the plexiglass screen. Simon accepted the form and looked it over. "You..." He squinted and tried to make sure he could read the scrawled letters. "Uh...you want to renew your...your family's curse on..."

"On our neighbors," said the man. "We set that curse on them four generations ago and I'll be damned if we ain't going to keep it going."

Simon exhaled, trying to keep his order of operations in order. He took out the laminate sheet that Dana had showed him and began to go down the list to process the renewal request. "Do you have the \$16.50 to..." He looked around, then flipped over the laminate sheet. "Do you have the \$16.50 for processing?" Simon asked.

"I do not," said the man with some strange pride.

Simon nodded, then realized the man had declined, and he started. "Wait, what?"

"I don't got \$16.50," the man repeated. "It's been a rough year and we don't have that kind of money."

"What?" Simon gawked. "You don't have \$16.50 to renew a curse that you..." He looked again at the laminate sheet. "Um...sir, I can't process the..." He began to search all over his desk. "If you don't pay the fee..."

"Isn't there some system that I can put a loan on it or something?" asked the man. "Thought my daddy did something like that that one time."

Simon stared for a second. "A loan." He consulted the laminate sheet but saw nothing relevant. He began to turn slowly towards his blue-haired coworker. "Is there a..." He realized she wasn't listening. He meekly tapped on the glass divider, getting a scowl in return. "This guy wants to renew a family curse."

"Came to the right place then, didn't he?" she said. She began to get back to work.

"But he doesn't have the money," said Simon.

"Then that'd be a no, now wouldn't it?" She began to get back to work.

"What should I do?" asked Simon.

"Tell him no." She began to get back to work.

"He said there's a form to get a loan," Simon asked.

"Do you know if there's such a form?" the woman asked. Simon shook his head. "That's because there isn't. Tell him to buzz off and get to the next person in line."

"I can hear you," said the man on the far side of the desk.

Simon's coworker looked right at the man, totally unbothered. "I am aware," she assured him without worry.

Unsure what else to do, Simon returned the man's form. "I'm sorry, sir, but I can't accept this without the appropriate payment."

"But the family curse!" the man exclaimed.

Simon gestured powerlessly, lips tight. "Maybe try our website?"

"I can't believe this!" the man yelled. "I want to talk to your manager right away!"

Again, Simon gestured powerlessly. "I..." He looked to his left and right and saw no indication of what to do or who to even ask for help. His head swung back and forth a few times, barely able to process how anybody was getting anything done. And yet the workday was clearly powering on without him. "Uh...Dana?" he called helplessly.

By the second time Simon called, Dana appeared through the door. She crossed right through the waiting line, people parting as if magically. "Hello, can I help you?" Dana asked the man, very subtly taking his form and guiding him away. His anger and vitriol were defused rapidly and by the time he was out of earshot, Dana had calmed him noticeably.

Simon looked at the line of people like it was an ocean about to swallow him up. "Next?" he called weakly.

A portly man approached with a form similar to the previous man's. "Can't let the Browns win the big one," said the man, pushing the form and some wadded-up bills through the slit in the glass.

Simon looked over the form. It wasn't much easier to read but at least the letters were larger. He looked it over and made sure a name was on the Name line, the date was correct. As he inspected the form, he wasn't entirely sure what constituted a properly filled out form, and what was incomplete, but it LOOKED complete.

"Right," Simon said, assuming he was on the right track. He looked at his cheat sheet. He compared the lines on the form to the lines on the cheat sheet and made sure everything synced up. "Right," he repeated. He tallied up the money and, following the instructions on the laminate sheet, confirmed it covered the total amount. "Right," he said lowly, under his breath. He glanced up at the man across the counter from him. The man looked worried.

Simon looked over the form, the cheat sheet, the money, and then tried to figure out what came next. He picked up one of his stamps and set it on the page. He followed the example of his coworkers, slamming the handle down. The whole desk rattled and several of the women in the line

looked down at him, wondering if their active shooter training was finally going to be justified.

Simon smiled apologetically and stammered several weak "Sorry"s at everyone. He looked around his desk and found an ink pad next to his inbox. "Right," he said. He stamped the ink pad, considerably gentler. He stamped the form and set it into the wooden box. "Um...thank you?" The man remained standing there. "Thank you, sir," Simon repeated.

"I get change, son," said the portly man with his stomach as much as his mouth. "And don't I get a receipt or some confirmation that the curse is going forward?"

Back to the laminate sheet. Simon frantically looked around his desk. It was only by trying to pull out a shelf that he realized he had a change tray right above his lap. He put away the cash he had assumed was stuffed in the inbox. He did some quick math in his head, suddenly struggling with even basic arithmetic. Change counted, he pushed it across to the man. "Receipt," he said aloud. "Um..." He checked the laminate sheet. "It says here a receipt will be mailed, or emailed, to you within two weeks of processing..." He turned the page over, hoping there was more. There wasn't.

"But what if it doesn't go through?" asked the man. "I want confirmation that I just handed over that money." Simon turned the laminate page over multiple times, scanning it fast, certain there had to be some indication. At a loss for what else to do, he turned and looked towards Dana again.

A second set of chocolate wafers fell in the vending machine. The movement passed, only momentarily disrupting Simon's reflection. His face was buried in his hand as he stood before the comfort food, barely able to even process where he was.

He fished the wafers out and tore open the plastic bag. Rather than scarf them down ravenously, he removed one of the snack sticks and took a bite. He checked the time on the clock in the corner of the office vestibule. He wasn't even an hour into his work shift. He wasn't even half an hour into his work shift. He looked at the vending machine and worried if it would give out first, or him.

"I don't understand," Simon said as he reviewed the form. "You're cursing...yourself?"

"That's right," said the lovely woman on the other side of the window. "My mother insists I play the piano, but if I can keep suffering catastrophic experiences, she'll give up on it eventually."

Simon didn't know what to think. His eyes drifted to the laminated sheet and he noticed in big bold letters at the bottom 'IT ISN'T YOUR JOB TO JUDGE CURSES, ONLY TO PROCESS THEM'. He sighed and nodded to the woman, accepting the fee for processing the renewal.

His blue-haired neighbor rose from her seat. "I'm getting lunch," she told Simon.

"Yeah, no pro—YOU'RE WHAT?!" he balked, frantically trying to shift mental gears.

"Lunch," Lassie repeated, swinging her purse over her shoulder. "It's the mid-day meal, equidistance between breakfast and dinner." She walked passed him, departing the office without a look at the crowd of people whom had in no way dwindled since the morning.

Simon faced the crowd, slowly lifted his hand and opened his mouth.

Another package of chocolate wafers fell in the vending machine.

The falling package passed right through Simon's exhausted reflection and dead eyes.

Take form.

If form wasn't filled out properly, return it.

If form wasn't present, tell them to check the website.

If form was filled out appropriately, take money.

If money wasn't present or too little, return the form.

If the money was correct, stamp form (and give change when necessary).

Repeat.

Simon got into a groove. Not quite comfortable, not quite improving, but he managed to find some semblance of a rhythm. He began to process forms with just a touch of speed. He had little idea what he was doing aside from moving paper and taking & giving money. Back and forth. One after another. "Next," he called through the screen, not unlike the couple of

counterparts at their own windows along the counter. "Next," he called to the crowd. Again and again. One after another.

"Next."

"Next."

"Next."

Family curses. Vehicle curses. Property curses. Sports curses. Performance curses. There were so many different types of curses. Short-term temporary curses that would evaporate with the next cycle of the moon. Longer curses that would last a whole season. Annual curses. Triennium curses. Lustrum curses. A decade curse even came across his desk. He felt like he should have treated such a thing with gravitas but the line that wound from one side of the office to the other, and back again, again and again, on again, all the way to the door, didn't allow for such a luxury.

Serious curses. Silly curses. Curses on which life-and-death hung in the balance. Curses that would guarantee a chiggers infestation. Curses to keep all parking spaces full. Curses of infertility. Curses barring success. Curses guaranteeing failure. Good curses. Bad curses. Simon felt like, with each curse, he was stacking weights on either side of the cosmic scales. Which side was heavier, he couldn't speculate. And at the speed the line refreshed, he knew that wasn't likely to change while on the clock.

It wasn't long before Simon was accepting a renewal on a pet shelter curse when Lassie returned. She and two of the other women walked in like they'd just come back from a successful and perfect bank heist. "Hey," she said, with a bit of renewed luster to her smile. She sat down and opened her window, asking "Everything go okay?"

"Yeah, I think so," he said, not sure if he was being honest or not.

"That's a first," she teased him before she called to the crowd, "Next!" Simon took the payment for the pet shelter curse when Lassie asked, "You want to go to lunch now?"

He looked up at the crowd, then his eyes jerked to the clock on the wall. Surprise hit him like a brick. "Go on, I got you," his coworker assured him.

He began to stand up when the woman opposite him exclaimed, "Hey!"

"Go AFTER you finish your client, dufus," Lassie snapped with a giggle.

"Right," Simon said, in a daze, returning to his seat. Change. Stamp. He handed the page back, then he rose again. "I'll..." He turned and walked away, unsure what he was doing. He got only a few steps before he returned. "How much time do we get for lunch?"

"Not enough," Lassie promised him. "Next!"

He left her to work and he started out.

As Simon slipped behind the wall dividing the desks from the offices, he spotted Dana with the door open. The office manager was on the phone, pacing commandingly in her office. She seemed totally nonplussed and unbothered by the work that was clearly going into and out of her office. Stacks of papers filled her desk, and were now being stacked on her floor as well as the accessory table in the corner. Her wall was decorated with awards and accreditations. There were a few pictures of her, who she was with he couldn't place but he thought he saw the governor in at least one of the pictures. Simon felt a pang of guilt for his inability to handle the workload. Head down, he headed out.

When he exited the side door, eyes turned to him. The crowd of people glared at him, seemingly as one, condemning him for abandoning his post. He walked out briskly, eyes averted. Out in the vestibule, he summoned the elevator. He glanced at the vending machine that already had too much of his money. The chocolate and peanut butter wafer sandwiches called to him but he resolved to get a real lunch instead. The elevator chimed and the doors opened and Simon escaped.

The office park cafeteria wasn't so much a restaurant as a storage space with heating trays. While many workers bypassed the windowless grease spoon to head to the parking lot and the wide world beyond, Simon followed his nose and other employees to the glass door. Inside, he smelled fried everything and a wide variety of deliciousness.

At the door, Simon found yellowed tiles for a floor and mismatched bookshelves on the immediate left that held candy, chips, and packaged cookies. The roof was missing a few tiles that had been installed sometime in the 80s. The workers of the cafeteria wore mostly light blue uniforms, a few shirts and pants mismatched from either apathy or tremendous apathy. The line headed to the far end where the world's most indifferent worker rang up customers and sent them rushing back through the cramped restaurant to the only way in or out.

Simon was quickly subsumed by the people piling in. The room was long and narrow, with barely space for a single person to walk between the railing of the cafeteria and the shelves of packaged goods. Hot lamps hung

over metal trays and hairnet-clad workers shoveled food onto plastic takeout trays and handed them over at the register. The room bustled with energy, not from vitality but nervousness and rush, like a caffeine spike that could end at any moment or a sugar rush that was going too long.

Behind the food workers, Simon saw the prices. Laid out in clearly written colorful dry erase markers, he began to do quick arithmetic. And slowly, the ugly numbers caught up with him. In his mind, he flashed back to every set of coins and bills he'd slid into the vending machine upstairs. So much had gone in there, he'd purged himself of enough for a decent meal.

Not less than a minute later, another package of wafers fell in the vending machine.

Less post-lunch and more running on the fumes of a sugar rush, Simon returned to his desk and called "Next." The woman came up to him and handed over a form for curse formation. Simon was a little surprised to see the new request. He glanced up at the woman, about to ask for the fee, and saw a badly bruised face. Her left eye was swollen shut and her right eye was bloodshot. Makeup hid some of her state but the look in her eyes told Simon how much worse things were internally.

He looked away, genuinely humbled. He turned over the laminate sheet, consulting it for the details of a new curse formation. "Um...have you...have you submitted the approval form?" he asked her. She didn't speak, only shook her head. Simon wheeled over to his coworker's space and asked, "Hey, do you have a new curse formation form?"

Lassie didn't even smirk. "You can't get through a single..." When she glanced at Simon's client, her words fell sharply quiet. Her caustic tone likewise disappeared and she quickly produced the form from beneath her desk.

From her to Simon, Simon slid the form through the plexiglass divider to the customer. "If you'll go over to that table and fill this out real quick," he said gesturing. "Don't worry about waiting in line," he added.

"Ooh, don't do that," quietly warned his other neighbor. He turned to her and she tsk-tsk-tsk-ed him as she shook her head.

Simon gave the older woman a look and weighed her observation, then told the woman before his window, "Just wave to me when you get it filled out." His window vacant, Simon called, "Next."

An old woman arrived, barely tall enough to see over the bottom edge of the Simon's desk. "Here you are, dear," said the Baba Yaga-looking woman. She slipped a page across the slit, scribbles all over it. With it, she set down a large bag of change. Simon did a double-take, not sure if he was seeing properly. He checked the crowd and confirmed they were all seeing her, only with the desire to see the line move on.

Simon pulled the bag to him and began to count out mostly dimes and pennies. He glanced up and noticed the previous client standing at the finished mouth of the line, a dozen people scowling at her. "Come on," said Simon's blue-haired coworker to his right. She waved the woman to her and set about processing the request.

Simon counted out the money and slid the change back across to the old woman. He stamped the request and said, "That should do it."

The woman cackled and disappeared into a flash of smoke.

Simon once again checked the crowd and confirmed they'd all seen it. Their reaction was one of relief that one more person had finished so the line could progress another client forward. Terrified awe of the office's clientele hit Simon hard.

Another package of wafers fell in the vending machine.

Curses came and went. Stamp, money, change, receive, "Next". One after another. Simon made it almost an hour before he needed the support of the vending machine again. Client after client, Simon helped the others on the line process curses at almost a breakneck pace. And still, more people waited in line. There was always someone wanting to exact indirect ill on their world and the people who inhabited it.

Religious curses. Secular curses. Petty curses. Noble curses. Personal curses. Professional curses. Always, there was some person who wanted to block good from coming to someone or something. Always, there was some perceived need to tilt the scales away from fortune and towards sorrow. Always, there was someone who needed to exert effort towards undoing the work of others.

Mid-afternoon a curse was slid into Simon's hands with the name of a child at the top. Simon studied the curse application and looked up at the woman across from him. She had kind eyes and a gentle face, but the application was an act of cruelty. "Uh..." he hedged. He rolled back with a gesture for patience, then leaned around to Lassie. "Hey."

"Yes, newbie?" she asked as she processed change for the client at her window.

"This is a curse on a kid."

"They happen," she said, sliding the change through the slit in the window. "Next."

"What do I do?" Simon asked.

"Process it," she said.

"But what about—"

"What's it say at the bottom of the sheet?" she asked him.

It took Simon a second to connect she was referring to the laminate cheat sheet he'd relied on the whole day. He wheeled back to his space and glanced at it, finding at the bottom the warning he'd read earlier: 'IT ISN'T YOUR JOB TO JUDGE CURSES, ONLY TO PROCESS THEM'. Something uneasy rumbled inside of Simon. He returned to the woman at the window, forced himself to give her at least some semblance of a smile. He set about processing the curse.

Another package of wafers fell in the vending machine.

Simon's two neighbors rose, as if in tandem. He looked back and forth between them, his head swinging frantically. "What's happening?" he asked.

"It's quitting time," said Lassie.

"For us, anyway, baby," said the older neighbor.

"For us?" Simon asked.

"We're the earlier shift," said Lassie with a teasing wink. "You started an hour later; you leave after closing." She shifted passed him, swinging a backpack onto her shoulders, carrying her purse in her hand. Along with two others that worked the line of windows, they all filed out to and through the door pretty much in unison.

Simon watched them shuffle out. He looked down the line of empty desks to the single other employee. The other man looked down at him and waved happily, cheerfully, mildly insanely. Simon looked again up and down the line, then at the crowd that still waited from the front of the line all the way to the door.

Another package of wafers fell in the vending machine.

"Thank you," Simon told the last client. The man accepted his change and turned to leave. He exited through the empty office, circumventing the rope stands that cordoned off the now-empty line he'd waited in. There was a satisfying click as the doors locked back once he'd passed through them.

Once the man stepped out of sight into the elevators the office shared with the dentist across the vestibule, Simon leaned back in his chair. He exhaled up at the ceiling and closed his eyes. When he sat up, he saw the stack of curses that needed processing. Without any idea what to do with them, he turned around in his chair and buttoned the top button of his jacket.

His only remaining coworker was another man. A bit older than him, he carried his stomach before his chin and wore drab colors. Faded jeans and a comic book T-shirt, he wasn't without some fitness thanks to broad shoulders and thick arms. He smiled at Simon, his salt-and-pepper beard a precursor of what his hair would one day become. "You survived, man." He detoured from his speedy departure to shake hands with Simon.

"Yeah," Simon all but laughed. He whistled and looked at the empty room. "I'm not sure how."

"Nobody ever is," the guy told him and started passed. Simon watched him go, circling around the corner and, a moment later, exiting the door into the main space. He gave Simon another wave before he disappeared out the door.

It was only after the door had shut that Simon realized it was yet another face without a name, a person without a connection, only a commonality. Somehow being alone made him realize how alone he'd spent the whole day, too busy to realize it. Bereft of any other ideas of what to do, he got up. He looked around the work stations, certain he couldn't just leave but not sure what else there was to do. He exhaled and decided instructions would have come if they were his to follow, so he headed out.

Simon stopped at the front door and pushed on it. It didn't open until he pushed on the additional security handle. The lock disengaged, allowing him out. Once on the other side, he pulled on the door and confirmed it was locked. Unsure what else to do, he shrugged at his own reflection and went on.

In the vestibule outside the office, he stopped before the vending machines. Their quiet hum seemed so serene whereas earlier in the day, it seemed vacuous, almost broken. He looked at the offerings with gratitude, almost like they were friends who had helped him through the day.

As he fished around for some change, the lights inside the vending machines dimmed, startling him. "They're on a timer." He jumped as Dana

exited the office. The manager let the door swing behind her, reshouldering her purse as she joined him. "Same as our lights." She nodded through the doors into the office of the Curse Registration and Upkeep Department. As if on cue, the lights dimmed noticeably, more than a few going out.

"Huh," was all Simon had to say. He looked at the vending machine and decided he wanted to change things up. He opted for peanut butter on cheese crackers and deposited the change for it. The package fell and he retrieved it, a bit self-conscious about buying junk food in front of his boss. "I don't normally eat like this," he excused semi-genuinely.

As he stood, she put in her own money. "Yeah, me neither." She selected the peanut butter and chocolate wafers he'd been eating all day. "We're nearly out of these," she lamented to herself. She collected her treat and opened the wrapper. Together, in the quiet, dim vestibule, the two of them took a moment to enjoy their snacks.

"Rough day?" Simon asked.

"It's a day ending in Y," was Dana's only answer. She smiled tiredly at Simon. "Sorry you got thrown into the deep end but that's what it's like around here." Simon chuckled acceptingly. "Come on," she told him, hitting the elevator button. "Let's get out of here."

Simon crumpled up his wrapper and tossed it away. He rapped on the vending machine, as though to assure it he would see it tomorrow.

For more charm-of-life tales, checkout the [2017 Teach The Sky Anthology](#), including short stories not released on the site. It's available now in ebook or in print. Or you can find more about RVA and his writings at:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Rvaldrich/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/rvaldrich>

And, of course, you can find more tales of the odd and unusual at ...

Teach^T_H_ESky.com