

# SEVENTY GRAND

*By Robert P. Bishop*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *If you're wondering why we took this story re-read the first line. It's got everything. Voice, character, gallous humour, a touch of triste and a little 'bizarro'. Greek mythology, John O'Hara and an arresting use of parallel time frames are all part of the fun in this wise-cracking spin off of the private dick pulps of the 1950's and 60's. The author's knuckly prose has 'Mike Hammer' all over it and the wrapping is vintage Twilight Zone. Add to this an 'O. Henry' funk ending and BOOM, you have it all, Mr. Sirling. Quote: 'He reached across the desk and grabbed my neck with a hand the size of a cement truck. He squeezed. I couldn't breathe. My eyes bugged out of their sockets. I dropped my cell. My vision began to dim. I heard bagpipes playing *Amazing Grace*.'*

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by

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I was smoking a joint and photoshopping the face of my client's husband into a picture of a naked man having sex with a woman on a backyard deck and thinking about giving up the private detective gig for an easier job, like being a prison guard. The demands of documenting the wayward husband doing the deed with his mistress, or, on the flip side, getting pics of the wife and Hank the Hunk at four in the afternoon are stressful. These kinds of cases are dangerous, too. There is always the possibility some dude I'm surveilling might turn red-neck nasty if he catches me photographing his bare ass jacked in the air.

No thanks on that.

I fired up a second joint, took a deep hit and studied my handiwork. It was a good photoshop, and more to the point, my client would buy it. Her husband was toast without knowing it and I was going to collect two grand for surveillance work without even leaving my desk.

Pale blue smoke billowed around my head as I drained the joint and started to feel pretty good but the squeal of the office door hinges brought me back. I looked up to see a cadaverous old man carrying a canvas tote bag come in. Aw, geez, I thought, another geezer wanting me to track down trophy bride number four and catch her doing the dirty deed with her personal trainer, Six-Pack Abs.

The old man tottered to my desk and dropped onto the visitor chair in front of it. Without a word, he snatched the joint from me, sucked on it like an old pro, held it then blew out with an audible sigh. “Good weed,” he said. “But I’m not here to discuss your photoshop skills or your weed.” His deep, rich and slightly accented voice surprised me. It didn’t match his physical appearance at all.

His comment about photoshop made me sit up and turn off my computer.

He handed me the joint. It was wet where he had put his lips. I dropped it in the glass ashtray and got out another one.

He picked the joint out of the ashtray and took another hit, smiled, then sucked it down to ashes. “Waste not,” he said.

I popped my lighter, ready to fire up.

The old guy held up his hand. “Before you light that, we must talk about why I’m in your office.” When I didn’t say anything, he said, “By the way, you won’t be a successful prison guard. The cons will name you Nancy. Draw your own conclusions about what that means.”

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. “How did you know?” I put the joint away.

He ignored my question. “Ask me why I’m here.”

“Why are you here?”

He ignored my question. “I’m told you are the best private detective in town. And my sources say you are rather sneaky as well. You know how to make things happen when they shouldn’t happen.”

“That’s me.” I gave him my best smile. “Why are you here?”

He ignored my question again and studied me intently until I began to fidget under his gaze. “You don’t look like a private detective.”

A pain began to develop behind my eyes. “What’s a private detective supposed to look like?”

He ignored my question. “I’m here because I want you to find something for me.”

The pain behind my eyes blossomed into a full-blown headache that pulsed with every heartbeat. I wanted to shoot this weasel-dick but I didn’t have a gun. “Okay, what’s her name?”

He looked at me like I was a nitwit. “Maybe you’re not as good as you think you are, you fat little squid.”

“Hey, no need to get personal here.”

“You’re right. Let’s keep this professional. My apologies.”

“So, who do you want me to find?”

He leaned toward my desk. “I want you to find Tomorrow,” he said in a scarcely audible voice. Then he sat back in the chair, waiting.

“What’s his first name? How old is he? Is he on any social media?” I leaned toward him. “Is he dangerous?”

The old guy shook his head. "I want you to find the day we call Tomorrow." He emphasized Tomorrow like it was a proper noun.

Cascade Psychiatric Hospital was right down the road from my strip mall office. I said, "You aren't an escapee from Cascade, are you?"

He shook his head. "I'm serious. I want you to find Tomorrow before midnight today." He looked at his watch. "It's ten o'clock now. You have fourteen hours to do it."

"Why don't you just wait for those fourteen hours to pass, then tomorrow becomes today and it's here." I fiddled with the joint but didn't light it.

He sighed. "I could have done that yesterday, but yesterday's gone."

I snapped my fingers. "I know that one. Chad and Jeremy, two British dudes. 1964."

The old guy shook his head again. "If I wait for Tomorrow to come then it's today, and today is too late. You see the problem."

I didn't so I said, "No, I don't see the problem." I picked up my cell phone.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm calling Cascade Psychiatric. They'll come get you."

He reached across the desk and grabbed my neck with a hand the size of a cement truck. He squeezed. I couldn't breathe. My eyes bugged out of their sockets. I dropped my cell. My vision began to dim. I heard bagpipes playing *Amazing Grace*.

"Listen, you little squid, are you going to find Tomorrow for me before it becomes today or not?" He shook me a couple of times like a cat torturing a mouse before the kill. He let go of my neck.

I sucked in air and tried to talk but croaked like a frog instead. Finally, I managed to speak. "You better leave." I tried to light the joint but my hands shook too much.

“You don’t need that, not yet.” He took it from me and put it in his shirt pocket. “I’ll pay you two thousand dollars an hour to find Tomorrow before it becomes today. If it takes you the whole fourteen hours, so be it.”

“Why do you want to find tomorrow before tomorrow gets here? What’s the big deal about it?”

“Something is going to happen Tomorrow and I want to make sure it happens on time so I need to know that it is going to happen before it happens.”

His explanation intensified my growing headache. I vowed to buy a gun and keep it in my desk. I wondered if I could sneak a quick call to Cascade before he squeezed my neck again. “I don’t know what Tomorrow looks like.” Jesus, now I was even capitalizing the word. I massaged my neck. “I’ve never seen it. Nobody has ever seen Tomorrow. When Tomorrow gets here, it’s always today, not Tomorrow. You see the problem?”

“Three thousand an hour.”

“Catch a plane, fly across the International Date Line to Fiji. You will be in Tomorrow when you arrive today. They got swell-looking babes there, too. The word is they go topless. That’s a big turn-on for guys your age.”

“I don’t have time to do that.” He looked at his watch.

“I don’t even know where to start looking for Tomorrow.”

“You are making this too difficult. You’re supposed to be a detective.”

“What if you went back to yesterday, then today would be yesterday’s tomorrow and there you are, in Tomorrow today.” I gave him my best smile again. The headache pounded behind my eyes.

“I’ll give you five thousand dollars an hour to find Tomorrow.” He put the canvas tote sack on my desk and pulled out a bundle of one hundred-dollar bills. “Ten thousand per bundle,” he said and removed more packets and lined up seven of them.

I did some quick math. “I’m your man,” I said with a big grin. The headache went away. “Of course, there are the personal expenses and overhead costs to consider as...”

Before I could finish he grabbed my neck. “Must I squeeze your neck again?” he said in that rich, sonorous and slightly accented voice.

My neck still hurt. “No, no,” I said quickly. “Seventy grand should just about cover everything, including overhead and expenses.” He let go of my neck and stood up.

“Have Tomorrow in your office exactly one hour before midnight today.”

I nodded my head. “Who are you?”

“Kronos Titanes.”

I shrugged somewhat indifferently. The man realized his name meant nothing to me.

“I suggest you look up the name.” He tapped my computer with one of those huge hands.

“Sure, whatever you say.”

He picked up the canvas tote sack and started for the door. “The same thing is going to happen to you if you don’t deliver.”

Then Kronos Titanes was gone.

I looked up Kronos Titanes and began to sweat as I read about him and what he did to Uranus with a sickle. I read the passages again. My hands began to tremble and beads of sweat ran down my face so I fired up a joint to calm my nerves.

I knew if I didn't deliver I'd be singing in the soprano section of the church choir. Kronos Titanes was a dangerous man and this was a dangerous situation for me and required serious, clear-headed thinking so I fired up another joint.

Fourteen hours. That's all the time I had to find something I have never seen, that nobody has ever seen, or ever will see. I knew I could never find Tomorrow today so I'd have to sneak into tomorrow to nab Tomorrow. But that maneuver presented another problem. If I nabbed Tomorrow tomorrow and came back in time a day later then I would be in yesterday instead of today. But, I asked myself, would I miss Kronos if I pulled off this maneuver? And would that seventy grand still be on my desk?

The headache returned.

A good detective always knows his limits and is smart enough to use outside resources when necessary. I called my friend Aradia. She works as a barista and as a clairvoyant when the money is right.

"Hi, Nancy," she said when she picked up. "Kronos is right, you'd suck as a prison guard."

"How did you know?"

"Well, duh! What do you want?"

"You're the clairvoyant, shouldn't you know?"

"Don't mess with me."

"Five grand is yours if you tell me how to get into Tomorrow and come back with it while it's still today."

"Don't be cheap. Ten grand. I know he gave you the money."

"Deal. Now tell me how to do it."

“You can’t do it. Nobody can enter tomorrow. You can only be in today.”

“Are you sure? I’m not paying you 10K for that lame answer.”

“I’m sure.”

I could see my junk disappearing in... I glanced at my watch...a little over nine hours. I moaned. “Does Tomorrow even exist?” I couldn’t stop capitalizing Tomorrow.

“No, when you experience tomorrow you are in today.”

“How do you know that?”

“You’re the detective and you can’t figure that out?”

“So, I’m jammed up and Kronos is going to make me a eunuch if I don’t produce. That’s what you’re telling me?”

“Yes. You took his money. He bought you.”

I groaned. “Why did he choose me?”

“I don’t want to tell you.”

“Why not?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“Lay it on me. I’m tough. I can take it. I read Bukowski, you know.”

“You’re going to die tomorrow. Kronos wants to make sure you don’t miss your appointment. He’s a stickler for punctuality. He likes things to happen on time, as scheduled.”

“How do you know that?”

“Think about it; Kronos. Time. Appointment in Samarra.”

I looked at the stack of money on my desk. “I’m going to die before I can spend all this money?”

“Yes.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Well, there is, but it’s fatal if you are careless and screw up.”

I fired up another joint and breathed deep. “It’s worth a shot. Lay it on me.”

“Set your clocks ahead exactly one hour.”

“Why one hour?”

“Because that’s the wiggle room Kronos gave you; precisely one hour. If you’re off even a fraction of a minute this ploy won’t work. When he shows up you and he will be in different time frames. You’ll miss him, or he’ll miss you and you won’t end up a soprano. And you will have the seventy grand, minus my fee, of course.”

“All right, I’ll do that.”

“I’m coming over after my shift to get my money. Leave it on your desk, and don’t you dare lock the office door.”

“You got it,” I said, hung up and finished the joint. My stomach started growling. All the weed I had smoked was making me hungry. I advanced all my clocks, phones, computer, watch to 4:00 and felt something shift. I knew I was in a different time frame and would not encounter Kronos again, just as Aradia said. I felt good, even better when I saw all that money on my desk.

I decided to go across the street to the deli and get something to eat.

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The 4:00 P.M. city bus materialized in a cloud of gray diesel exhaust, slammed into him when he was in the middle of the crosswalk and tossed his smashed body to the curb. As soon as the bus moved out of the crossing zone it disappeared. Several pedestrians stood around the body, wondering how it had suddenly appeared in an empty street. One minute there was

nothing, the next minute there was a body flying through the air and landing all crumpled up against the curb. Somebody called the police.

The police detective examining the body said, "His watch is one hour fast."

"He probably moved ahead to Daylight Savings Time," a uniformed officer opined.

"We make the change tomorrow, not today," the detective said. "He got a little ahead of himself."

The uniformed officer chuckled. "Looks like tomorrow came today for him."

A cadaverous looking old man carrying a canvas tote bag stood on the sidewalk watching the police officers work. A smile spread across his face. "It's all in the timing, fellas, all in the timing," he said to them before removing a joint from his shirt pocket and walking away.

Across town, Aradia handed her apron to her boss at 4:00 o'clock and said, "I'm taking the rest of my shift off. I just inherited seventy grand."

End

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Umberto Eco's The Island of the Day Before gave me the story's idea and my experiences in crossing the International Date Line made me realize this was a kind of time travel and perplexed me no end but a couple glasses of scotch smoothed it out and made the story possible.*

*My writing philosophy can be summarized as Have something to write, write it, stop, keeping in mind the writing must be entertaining and engaging. Writers who have influenced my style to some degree are Elizabeth Strout, Charles Bukowski, Elmore Leonard, and Jack London, but I have not tried to mimic them.*

**BIO:** *Robert P. Bishop, a former soldier and teacher, has worked in North and South America, Africa, and the Mid-East. His short-story fiction has appeared in The Literary Hatchet, The Umbrella Factory Magazine, Commuterlit, Lunate Fiction, Spelk and elsewhere. He lives in Tucson, Arizona.*

