

Janus Coins: John's Story

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Act 1, Chapter 2

You'd think that getting a magic coin able to change the minds of women would be the most memorable thing that happened to me in 1998, but you'd be wrong, because a few days after I got that coin, the Midwest was slaughtered by one of the biggest blizzards to hit the region in fifty years, and Iowa City got absolutely *demolished* by it. Nothing was really damaged but basically everyone was trapped in place for about a week, as everyone struggled to compensate. The whole campus was snowed in, and students were told classes wouldn't start back up for a week, and that they shouldn't struggle too hard to get back to campus if they had gone home for Thanksgiving.

The campus administrator reached out to all of us RAs and instructed us on how to reactivate the heat for our buildings, specifically so we didn't freeze to death. As other students came back onto campus, we were supposed to do everything we could to make them feel at home, but we were told that it wouldn't be all at once, and that we should expect a slow stagger. Many of the faculty were still around, so they would be opening up the mess hall at half-capacity starting Monday, because some students had already made it back as early as Thanksgiving night, and the blizzard had hit midday Saturday, so lots of people were midtravel back, stranded at motels and inns across the Midwest, unable to move anywhere.

All of this meant my trysts with Steph and Amy, well, I'm sorry to say I just don't remember them all that well, truth be told. I do remember that it felt a little like being a child in a shared custody divorce, with them being amicable to each other, but never pleased to see the other one. Steph liked to make sniping comments about Amy, and Amy seemed content just to enjoy spending time with me, although she would also occasionally let a catty comment slide.

But our time together was generally short, reserved to just the last couple of hours in any given evening, and the girls were hellbent on proving themselves sexually to me. Steph would ask about what I'd been up to with Amy, but she pretended like it didn't bother her any. Amy would mostly ask about how I was managing my own stress levels for the day, considering how maddening the campus was, running short handed in a borderline disaster.

The RAs had even been co-opted to help with snow removal, and with good reason. Some of the doors to some of the buildings across campus had been completely buried beneath snow drifts, and the longer we left them covered, the more risk the locks in the doors ran of freezing and breaking. Most of the external doors on campus opened outward, but a handful of them opened in, and one of the buildings had been opened to exposure for several hours, as a wall of snow had knocked the door in, letting the cold air flood the halls.

They were paying us both overtime and hazard pay, but it also meant that for ten hours a day for most of the week, I was engaged in physical labor, and when I wasn't doing heavy lifting, I was doing health and wellness checks for the students who'd made it back onto campus, many of whom were visibly shaken and nervous over the state of the town.

Shit, the *pizza delivery* guys were charging extra, or "combat pay," as they were calling it, just to bring pizzas to dorms on campus, and you *know* shit's gone sideways when pizza delivery drivers are afraid to go out.

All of this is to say that the seven days went by insanely fast, and while I'm sure there was a lot more going on than I was able to pay attention to, whatever was happening in the background, I wasn't picking up as much of it as I should have been, so you shouldn't make the same mistake, okay?

By the end of it, as hurried and haggard as I was, I knew the Steph and I were the worse fit. Her plan was to get into television journalism, but she didn't have any real interest in doing any of the reporting herself – she just wanted to *read* the news to people, and to be paid extremely well for it. She also didn't really have any interest in getting out of the Midwest, whereas I was thinking about moving

to London as soon as I finished college. Also, Steph seemed to think the best way to get me to do things was to order me to do them, and then get angry at me when I didn't immediately follow that order. She didn't seem to want a boyfriend so much as a manservant.

Steph also had an incredibly bleak outlook on life. I would say pessimist, but I think that's not dark enough. It wasn't just that she expected the worst to happen. She expected something even worse than she was capable of imagining to happen. As the week went on, I became less convinced she even wanted to win, just because of how little effort she was putting into the whole thing. Oh she made it clear she demanded my attention when she was around, but she didn't really seem to know what to *do* with it when she had it. She didn't like talking all that much, so mostly what we did was fuck and watch television, not that I was complaining all that much.

The other problem, however, was that I also knew Amy and I weren't a very good fit either, at least not in the long term. She was 18 and I was 21, and that meant in less than a couple of years, I would be leaving campus to make my way in the world, but she would still be right here. Her dream of being an archaeologist would take her to loads of exotic locations, but I wanted to be a filmmaker, and that was going to limit me to just a handful of places, or necessitate us being apart for long periods of time.

Amy was a stark contrast to Steph, with a positive sense of exuberance about everything all the time, and frankly, that was *exhausting*, having to deal with someone who was incredibly positive about everything. I mean, the girl saw every challenge as an opportunity, and when I was dealing with the frustration and exhaustion of having to spend full days shoveling snow out from around campus, she tried to cheer me up by pointing out how it was going to be difficult for the administration to overlook all the hard work the RAs were doing, and that there would be some kind of compensation for our dedication, beyond the excess cash. (I knew there wouldn't be, and there wasn't, but at the time, she refused to believe that the college would do us dirty like that. Like I said, she was a freshman. They're all full of an almost insufferable amount of optimism.)

I remember thinking about all of this on the Wednesday night before I had to decide which to keep in my life, and neither girl had come by for the night, to let me have some time to consider and fairly weigh my decision, although I remember also thinking that I shouldn't have to think about it too hard, since the decision was going to be compelled from me one way or another.

See, each time either of the girls had asked me “who is better” regarding anything, I'd found myself completely unable to lie to them. They never seemed to get angry at me over what I said, so I felt myself getting less protective and careful with what I said. When honest opinions aren't responded to with sharp and biting comebacks, it becomes much easier to have a conversation about, well, just about anything.

I had to watch myself around other people, because I was spending most of my free time with these two women and around them, I could say just about anything, but that wasn't true of the other RAs and the other students. In fact, one of the people on my floor had tried to give me guff about having a girl in my room, when the policy was that we were supposed to limit the number of times we had visitors staying in our dorm room. I nearly told him that I wasn't just having one girl in my room, but two. That seemed an unwise thing to say, so I'm lucky I gave half a second's pause before I answered. I pointed out to that student that I'd been lenient on him before, and if he wanted me to change that, all he needed to do was keep needling me.

He stopped after that.

When a week came around, the following Thursday, classes weren't back in session yet, but we had about 75% of the school's population back on campus, so it wasn't uncommon for me to get knocks on my door regularly again – students with questions, concerns or, most commonly, asking for condoms. Lots of kids need condoms in college, and with the AIDS crisis still in full swing at that point, they were at least being smart enough to come and ask for them. So when there was that knock on my door, I hadn't expected the two of them to be standing there, but there they were.

“Hey John, it's about time we had a talk, isn't it?” Steph said, Amy standing right next to her.

The two girls had come by in casual clothing, each wearing jeans and t-shirts, comfortable and baggy, although Steph had on a lot more makeup, as if maybe she was making one final effort to show off that she thought she was prettier than Amy was.

I invited them both in, and as soon as they were inside, I closed the door behind them. The two of them headed over to the couch, Steph sitting on one end, Amy sitting on the opposite, both looking at me, a little impatiently but not saying anything.

Of course, once they'd shown up together, I knew exactly why they were there.

During the week, I'd kept the coin in my pocket constantly, rubbing it between my thumb and forefinger over and over again, hoping I could discern what the motive behind making such a thing would be, but no answers were coming.

“We're not going to be mad, no matter what you choose to do, John,” Amy said to me. “I promise you, whatever you're thinking, it's going to be okay. You just have to choose.”

“She's right,” Steph sighed. “So can we just get this over with?”

“You don't sound so confident any more, Steph,” Amy teased.

“Y'know, I think it's just pretty clear that me and John, we have great physical chemistry, so the sex is rad, but at the end of the day, me and he don't gel,” Steph said. “But hopefully you won't mind if I swing by for a drunken fuck now and again if you two split up.”

“If he chooses me and we split up, then I don't think I'm likely to really care who's he boning, do you? So c'mon John, let's have your choice.”

I remember sighing, because even at that moment, I knew it wasn't going to work long term between me and Amy, but I also knew that wasn't the question at hand. The question was which of the two women was the better fit.

That question I had an answer to.

I stepped in front of Amy as she held her hand out to me. “Your door remains open,” I said to her, handing her the coin. I felt strange as it left my hand, as if the coin itself knew this wasn't going to be a long journey, and it was eager to return to my pocket.

“See?” Amy said, tucking the coin into her pocket, glancing over at Steph. “Told you the better woman would win. No hard feelings?” She offered her hand out to Steph, and the other girl took it from her and shook it.

“Nah,” she said, shaking her head. “Like I said, I figured out early on it was just for the sex. But you have fun with him, okay? He doesn't seem like a half bad guy, all said and done.”

Steph stood up, kissed me on the cheek and then headed for the door. She and I are still friends, but we never hooked up again, despite her coming around the dorms drunk a couple of times when I was between relationships.

Amy stayed the night, and our relationship continued for about a month and change, but just as we were getting close to Christmas, I knew it wasn't going to work. She kept talking about wanting to either take me home to her folks for Christmas or going with me back to my folks, and yet, I was planning on staying in the dorms this year, and she told me couldn't think of anything more tragic, even when I explained to her that I was doing it so I was going to graduate debt free.

See, when you come from a large family, college becomes in some ways a luxury unless you can either pay your own way or earn a scholarship. Most of my older siblings, they made easy to live with decisions. Some of them stayed local, planning to work on the farm with my folks. Some of them earned scholarships, paying their own way through with their grades. One of them, my older brother Nate, joined the Army to cover his education.

No way in hell was I staying on the farm, no way in hell was I joining the military and no way in hell were my grades good enough to get a scholarship. So that only left working my ass off left and right in a desperate attempt to get it done. The overtime pay from the blizzard had cut into my debt considerably, and the university didn't think anyone was going to do the Christmas coverage this year

so they were upping the amount of money they were offering for anyone willing to stay, so I'd taken them up on it.

Amy told me again and again that I was working too hard, that I needed to make sure I wasn't going to go crazy with overwork. I told her that if I didn't, I was going to graduate with so much debt that I wouldn't be able to chase my dreams for years.

The argument went around and around for a few days, and she simply would not let up on the matter until finally I just broke. "Your door has closed," I said, and held out my hand, on a cold December Tuesday morning.

"Yeah, that seems fair," Amy said, handing me back the coin. She headed out of my room and out of my life. Now she and I *did* hook up a few other times later in between relationships, but really, I was just keeping the seat warm for some other dude. Like I said earlier, she and I are still friends, although we don't talk as much as we'd like. She married a nice guy who was part of her dig team, a guy named Joe. They send Christmas cards every year.

Neither Amy nor Step ever mentioned the coin, or their weird little competition, to me or anyone else, as far as I know.

Weird, right?

After all was said and done, I decided to sit on the coin for a bit. The idea of using it again made me nervous, and I had done so with so little regard the first time that I resolved not to do the same thing the second time around.

For the second time, I decided to do a bit of planning, give it a little forethought.

If you thought you could get any two women you wanted, how big would you aim? Remember, just because they're going to be okay with it doesn't mean everyone else in their life is going to be. I made a decision, one I advise you to follow, not to go after anyone who already had a partner. No girls with boyfriends, no girls with *girlfriends*, nobody that would report a change in personality.

But see, here's the thing I've still never really gotten over.

I used this coin seven times over ten years before I finally found my proper match. I'm on speaking terms with basically everybody, and nobody's ever said that the coin *changed* them. Oh sure, I got the occasional joke about how I was punching above my weight class now and then, but the friends of all the girls I dated via this coin right here? None of them said their friend seemed any different while I was dating them. A couple of them remarked that I wasn't their friend's usual type – that was a bit more obvious for one pair than the rest, but still – and none of them worried about their friend while they were dating me.

But now that I knew that the coin actually worked, that I wasn't just clowning around with some joke gift my sister got me, I wanted to actually plan out who I was going to try and sway. You're about the same age I was when I first got the coin, and you're already thinking to yourself who you want to try it on, but I implore you, if I sell you the coin, you have to give it some thought first, and you can't just go using it on the first pretty girl that crosses your path.

Pretty girls make graves. I'll get to that part of the story eventually.

Oh, I also told my sister that the gift she gave me actually worked, and at first she thought I was crazy, but I let her talk to Amy, because we were still together when I told my sister, and Amy confirmed that the whole thing was real.

That scared the shit out of my sister.

For nearly two hours, my sister and I had talked on the phone about what sort of moral and ethical obligations I had considering I could now make anyone date me. But for as much moral posturing as Abby tried to lay on me, there was also a sense of excitement in her voice, and she made me promise that I would keep her apprised of nearly every step I took along the way.

In addition to that, I made her tell me all about the guy she'd bought it from. He'd been an American tourist in Haiti the same time as them, and she'd kept the present stowed away for a while, although under repeated questioning she admitted that she'd actually forgotten she'd got it while they

were there, and that it had been intended to be my Christmas present *last* year.

The tourist had been distinct, but not at all the kind of person I expected Abby to be talking to. He was in his fifties, hefty bordering on obese, with a giant mess of a scraggly beard and tattoos covering most of his body. She said the fact that he had Elvis tattooed on his neck creped her out at first, but that the man, who'd called himself Ricky, had turned out to just be one of the nicest and warmest people they'd ever talked to.

On a night out of drinking, Ricky, Abby and Abby's husband Marcus had all got to talking about their families and Abby had mentioned how I was basically the only person in our family not to have a significant other, and how worried about me she was, which was why Ricky had sold her the coin for the low price of one dollar U.S. In fact, Abby told me that Ricky seemed relieved to find someone who was in need of the coin, because he'd been holding onto it for over ten months since it had worked for him, and he needed to pass it on.

I asked if she knew Ricky's last name, but she didn't. I asked her if she remembered where he lived, and she said she *thought* it was Texas, but also confessed it might have been Arizona. Or New Mexico. Or Nevada. Something in the Southwest, at least, she seemed relatively sure of.

Keep in mind, this is all basically ten years ago, so I considered finding the guy a lost cause.

Abby told me, over the course of our conversation, that I should do what she would always do when starting a new project, and draw up a list, sort out the pros and cons of anything. I told her I didn't see not *using* the coin as a viable option, so I just needed to make sure I was giving myself chances with the best possible odds, something that she agreed seemed smart. She told me to make a list about what *I* wanted in a girlfriend, and to not act on it until I'd had the list and settled on it for a few weeks. If I found myself wanting to add something else to the list, then I wasn't ready yet.

Normally, I wouldn't have taken Abby's advice on this kind of thing, on dating or relationships in general, considering she and Marcus had been together since they were freshmen in college, but one thing Abby has always been *exceptional* at is planning things out, and if she thought I needed to make a list, then I needed to make a list.

Since I had Christmas break basically to myself, I spent that time working on a plan, and considering who I knew in either classes or activities I was involved in that might be a good fit for me, although this turned out to be a lot harder than I'd given it credit for.

See, now if you wanted to find out about someone here on this campus, you could just use Facebook or Google them, but back in 1998, you had to actually do the research yourself. I wasn't part of a lot of school activities, so that meant I had to resort to either people I had met on campus or people I had shared classes with, and that put a pretty major cramp in my style.

Even back then, I knew I wanted to be a director, and that meant I spent a lot of time in either a dark room developing film or out in the world, practicing on mastering my cinematography, because the one thing all my professors could agree on was that I had an excellent eye for composing shots. I think many of them figured I would end up mostly just being a director of photography instead of the actual film director I ended up becoming, but that just goes to show you never to underestimate people, because they'll surprise you.

That's why I'm telling you this whole story, so I can gauge your reactions to all of it and decide if I can trust you with the coin. See, unlike Ricky, I'm only four months out from being done with it, so that means I have plenty of time to make sure I put it into a good and smart pair of hands.

You're right, I am getting off topic. The list.

So over the course of Christmas break, I drafted up a long list about all the things I considered important and all the things I considered deal breakers. At first, I thought maybe I was crazy and that my list was too specific, or too comprehensive, so I considered trimming it down, but instead of cutting anything, I just decided to prioritize it instead, so that I knew what were the most important things and what were the nice to haves.

I also resolved to know the girls at least a little bit better than I had Steph and Amy before I

tried using the coin on them. Now I knew that if I wanted meaningless, cheap and easy sex, all I had to do was flip a coin a few times, so that made me somewhat less likely to seek it and more likely to aim higher.

December turned into January, and I started watching the girls in my classes more, talking to them more, and I think just knowing the coin was there gave me a confidence that overcame some of my natural shyness, because I almost stumbled into a couple of dates without even trying.

But, as it turns out, I found the second pair of people to try the coin on within minutes of each other, just a few months later, on Saint Patrick's Day.