

**RINGING  
IN A  
NEW YEAR**

# Ringin' in a New Year

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**J.K. NORRY**



## I.

Studying this body's face in the mirror, I try on a smile. It looks fake, and vaguely nightmarish, so I let the unfamiliar features relax. The ringing is dull and distant, and I put it out of my mind for now. Memories fade like gossamer strands of drifting smoke as I feel my thoughts settle into this mind. There's that thing I need to remember, and I know talking about it will help. I reach for my bell, and forget to make this body breathe for a few moments.

It's gone, and now the memory is too. An even more vague recollection strikes me, that I didn't have my bell in the last body either. It's a thread, and I follow it circuitously through the clogged channels of this sluggish brain. I've almost got it, something important about a body, when a loud voice startles me back into breathing again.

"Please prepare to disembark," the voice says. It's female, but not distinctly so; the distinction is in her clipped but friendly intonation, and her careful enunciation of each word. The voice is coming over a hidden speaker, and draws me back into the room like it drew me back into this body's hitched breathing cycle.

Looking around, I wonder what kind of vehicle this is, to have such stately accommodations. There are no windows, which leads me to believe that it's an inside cabin

on whatever vessel this body is in. All other indicators point to luxury, from the thick soft carpeting to the finely stitched linens. At first glance, it could be a five star hotel room in a space made four star by the lack of view; a second glance reveals that everything is definitively affixed to the floor.

Must be a ship, although I can't feel the floor shifting beneath me. The ocean is a hard thing not to feel underfoot, no matter how big the vessel. I don't know why I know that, just that I do. That's the kind of knowledge I get to draw from, either memories that I have somehow tapped into from this body's brain or recollections from my own consciousness filtered through this mind's senseless sensibilities.

For better or worse, I'm used to it.

It's part of being a ringer.

There seem to be few personal items in the room, and I have little use for any of them. It does leap to my attention that the clothes hanging from this body are not fine in either the fit or the form department. I'm delighted to find a selection of suits in the closet, and a garment bag hanging alongside them. I put one on, and place the other two in the bag in a way that will hopefully wrinkle them as little as possible. I may have some unusual abilities, as a ringer; they do not include the ability to be rid of wrinkles in clothing. Skin I can do, as long as it's the skin I'm wearing.

I'm not carrying any more than that, so I leave the suits that won't go with the shoes I choose. When I pat my pockets, they are naturally empty; the phone and wallet that I was carrying were discarded with the pants I'd had on. I kneel to pick them up, find myself surprised that there are two phones in the pockets, and the door opens.

A woman walks into the room, in a pretty sharp uniform of some sort. There are wings on her lapel, with her name under them. I read it aloud.

“Chloe?”

She starts, and exclaims. Something like, “oh!”

“Just finishing packing up,” I say.

I’m kneeling still, and smiling.

She looks at the pile of clothes on the floor with the same measure of distaste with which I am handling them. I’ve got the wallet in my hand now, and I’ve just pocketed the second phone.

Fully expecting her to excuse herself, and preferably apologize, I’m a little annoyed when she continues to watch me fish around in the worn slacks. Then it hits me, at the same moment she speaks.

“Where is Russell?” she says.

My breathing changed right away; first to calm her, and next to see what she was needing from this exchange. I could see the colors swirling around her energy centers, although they were muddled and blurred. There seemed to be more blue and green going on than any shade of red, so I took a chance.

“I saw you two exchange a friendly word earlier,” I said, slipping the phone in one pocket and the wallet in another. I stood up, kept talking.

“I must admit,” I shrugged, “I asked him if you two were together, or if you had anybody.”

Her eyes went wide, as I had predicted. She leaned away, and looked down at his crumpled pants with that same look of distaste she had twisted her lovely face up with earlier. They were not an item.

I went on.

“He told me you two were going to meet here, in my room,” I said.

I looked for the reason in the colors, but couldn’t see it. Glancing around the room, I guessed.

“For a drink.”

She shook her head, and I nearly started backpedaling.

“It’s not your room,” she said. “Not anymore.”

“Of course.” I was the picture of agreeable.

“You were going to meet here,” I said, “in this room, after the...”

I eyed her name tag again, guessed again.

“After the flight,” I said, nodding.

She nodded along, perplexed at my hesitation.

“For a drink.” I kept nodding. I almost had her.

“I asked him,” I said, drawing out my words slowly so I could insert his name if I remembered it, “if I might take his place and have that drink with you instead.”

Her head kept on tilting in the positive, and I kept this body’s head doing the same.

“So...” I gestured at the bar, sure I had her. “How about a drink?”

Suddenly, she stopped nodding.

“Where is Russell?” she demanded. “Why did you take his phone and his wallet? Who are you?”



## II.

The deliberate breathing had done more than calm us both down for a moment; it had energized this body as well. It's always disappointing to ring in a healthy specimen and then find its muscles starving for oxygen. With strength comes speed, such that she barely had time to register my movement before I had her.

Sweeping her off her feet in the only way I would apparently be able to, I covered her mouth as her head struck the carpeted floor. For some reason I think of how easily people get knocked out in movies as I hear the soft thud. No actual scenes came to mind, and in the moment I couldn't have named a single title to save this body's life. She was still conscious, of course; so I kept my hand over her mouth and pinched her nose shut with my other hand.

If she had been breathing properly before I cut off her air supply, it probably would not have been so quick. I shift this body's breathing as I look for a place to put what used to be her body. The air churns with energy, colors shift and kaleidoscope in unpredictably ordered patterns, and a streaming seam of electric blue shows me a rectangle nearby.

They're not doorways to other worlds insomuch as they are pockets of otherworldliness. Ringers can't travel to any of those places that souls go after separating from a body,

and from what I know I wouldn't want to. Of course, I don't know what I remember; and I don't remember what I know... so I may not be the best entity to consult on such matters.

I do know about hidden spaces between worlds, though. They are simple enough to see, once you get a body's energy flowing properly. I don't know if your typical mortal could open such a doorway once they see them, but I'm neither typical nor mortal.

It comes open easily, a body spills out, and I remember.

I had been trying to imprint this body's mind with old memories, and make mental note of where I had put the fellow I had just finished ringin'. That had led to looking for my bell, which I didn't have for some reason. I pat my pockets reflexively, and keep my breathing under control in an attempt to keep the inevitable panic at bay. This leads to the thought that maybe he has my bell for some reason, and next thing you know I'm wrestlin' one dead body on top of another in exactly the opposite order I should have been.

Turnin' him over, I searched his pockets. Another wallet, and that's it. I traded it out for the one I had taken from Russell after I compare one body's accoutrements with another's.

Sure; now I remember his name, when it can't possibly help.

My eyes fell on the bar just as the speaker erupted with another announcement.

"All remaining passengers," it said, "please disembark."

It was the same voice as before, a few degrees more clipped and less friendly. I shrugged and ditched the inferior phone that would be of as little use to me in this body as the other wallet. I stuffed him unceremoniously into the small space of timelessness, and piled her on top of him. They looked peaceful together, and kind of sweet.

There was a swirl of darkness as I moved them, and I swear a ghostly skull hovered around me the whole time. I waved it away, and cursed at it under my breath, until it drifted away or dissipated. I closed the door, shifted my breathing and picked up the wardrobe bag. After one last wistful glance at the bar, I pushed open the door that presumably led to the rest of the world.

In the same moment that I stepped into the hallway, the electronic device in my pocket started to buzz and make a noise that made me want to curse the system itself.

First they make a communication device that rings, then they ruin the most compelling part of the device. Old telephones had actual bells in them, activated by an alternating current riding the line of a direct current system, and the sweet sound of dissonance could be heard across the country. Now, even the ones that sound like bells are obvious digital recreations of a noise that could only be called ringing.

It's like pumping false engine noise through stereo speakers because people think that powerful engines should be loud. Really more of an insult to the engines of yesteryear, than anything.

I slip one of this body's hands into the pocket while I return a flight attendant's dirty look with a wide and awkward smile. A quick glance at the screen interrupts my steady breathing altogether, and I feel the smile fall from the unfamiliar features I'm calling my face today.

The incoming call is all nines.

The numbering plan area code is nine-nine-nine.

The central office code is nine-nine-nine.

The line number code is the same, except four nines.

I make this body catch its breath, and see words above the numbers.

‘Administration calling...’

Declining the call, I stow the phone in the suit pocket again. I wonder what all that nonsense about the number codes was, cluttering up this brain’s limited storage space with trivialities. Grinning at the woman with the wings on her lapel once more, I breeze past her and through the open door. It’s a bit of a shock to find that I’m stepping onto the tarmac, and another to realize that there is no security to rifle through this body’s things. A man in a black and white suit steps up to me, and reaches out his hand.

Flustered for a minute, I reach out as well. While I’m shaking his hand, I read the confusion on his face and disengage quickly. I hand him my bag, and stride away.

“Let’s go, then,” I call over my shoulder.

“Sir,” he said. “The car is the other way.”

### III.

There was an opaque sheet of glass between us, which I preferred for the first few minutes. I found that the wireless device I had taken possession of was tuned in to the very fingerprint pattern that I had swirled this body's fingers into. It opened up at my prolonged touch, and showed me a screen full of options in the form of colorful icons. One of them was unusual, pulsing and somehow three dimensional on the flat screen. This time I kept this body breathing, even when I saw that the symbol was a tiny bell. It was too cute to be terrifying, a miniaturized tower bell with a single crack up its dark iron side.

I tapped the banking folder. It opened up, verifying the swirls, and I let this body's heart beat faster. Those long strings of numbers were not negative balances, and there were four other bank icons in the folder. I tried to visualize the possibilities, rather than picture the bell again in this undisciplined mind. It was to no avail, as I had predicted.

The rusted crown, from the moisture that had gathered and clung over the years; the lines of oxidation dripping down the shoulder in thick swaths, and trickling further along the waist in thin scant discolored traces. It had been my favorite kind of image, simple and complex all at once,

down to the single crack that ran from the lip to the bead line and just beyond.

Well, that can't possibly be right; surely my favorite kind of image is more compelling than that one, and more arousing in some pleasant fashion.

The thought gives me a laugh, the rising panic subsides, and the image of a rusted and cracked bell slips from this body's mind at last.

Exiting out of one bank app, I check on another. I thank the system for fingerprint technology, and then for the numbers that pop up. I rap on the glass with the phone, wait a second, and do it again.

The partition moves down, and he is looking at me in the rearview through dark sunglasses.

"Sir?" His eyes find the road again.

"Take me to the bank," I say, with utmost confidence.

"Sir?" he says again. "Which bank?"

I shrug. "The one I usually go to."

It's hard not to make it a question, but I do my best. It's also difficult not to feel his eyes on me again, and I straighten this body in its seat.

"Business, sir?" he asks. "Or personal?"

I wave my hand.

"Whichever is closest."

I'm trying to seem irritable, instead of nervous. He's a big guy, and I get the feeling that his skills don't end at driving. The last thing I need is my own security detail suspecting me of not being the person that generally sports this particular face.

"Sir?" His eyes are on me again. "Are you alright?"

It's a simple thing for me to conjure up the rage, when I need to. It's not easy, to forget everything you know on a regular basis and live in swirling confusion for what may

as well be eternity. The system needs me, and the system makes sense; but that's intellectual knowledge, and it takes more than that to chip away at the rage.

I let it fill this body's eyes, tense its shoulders and furrow its brow. It seems to fill the spacious back seat, spilling palpably over the lowered glass and into the cab. I can't see his eyes go wide behind his glasses, but I know they do. I let him baste in the bile for a long moment before I speak again.

"Take me to the bank," I say, ice dripping from this body's voice.

I gesture at the sheet of glass.

"And put that back up."

He nods, his hands gripping the wheel while his heart surely pounds in his chest. It takes him a few seconds of fumbling, but he finally manages to separate us.

I'm laughing now, even if it seems a little cruel. When can one be cruel, without harm, if not when one is alone?

When we pull up to the curb, I exit the vehicle without waiting or saying a word. I'm assuming this guy works for me, and that works for me. I know that I can't withdraw more than ten thousand dollars without raising some red flags, and I also know that the law stating so was enacted in 1970. Somehow there is an inflation calculator in this brain, and some silly need to do the math. It informs me, quite uselessly, that I should legally be allowed to withdraw over sixty thousand of those United States dollars. At the level of trust that the government gave its citizens in those days, coupled with the inflation caused by the way they handled the nation's money, the current population is reduced to about the equivalent of fifteen hundred bucks worth of withdrawal or deposit trust.

It barely pads my pocket, and doesn't even come with a fancy band like you see in the movies.

Geez, this guy must have watched a lot of movies. Of course there's no band; I only withdrew ninety-one hundred dollar bills. You don't get a band until you hit a hundred, and that's when the man gets involved.

So I take my envelope, my nice suit and this body back to the car. As soon as I tell him that we need to go to another bank, he starts to give off warning signs.

He's knows something is up.

Looks like I'll be driving myself soon.



## IV.

There weren't any doorways nearby, so I had to put the body in the trunk. I kept waiting for someone to call out, as I dragged him out of the car and into the street. He went for his gun, and I went for his throat; it all happened pretty quickly, all things considered. The street was neither empty nor full, and no one bothered to even cast a glance in the direction of our struggle. I cleaned up the blood, patched up this body, and hefted him into the back of the car. When I closed it behind him, there was still no one interested in what I was doing.

All of the bank icons had location links, and it was easy enough to find the next closest one. The date icon kept grabbing at my attention, until I reminded this body that the date is always a surprise to a ringer. Everything seems incredibly advanced and ridiculously far behind at the same time, from the immortal perspective. Scenes of finding wall calendars or asking people the year play across the inside of this body's eyes, but it's hard to tell if they are my experiences or just more movies that this guy watched. It doesn't matter, anyway; and I stop checking to drive better.

It's weird, the same drifting amorphous skeletal vision showed up when I was stowing the body. I had to wave it

away again, and even swear at it a little, before it would float away. Very disconcerting.

I don't know if they're my memories or this body's cellular recollections or more movies telling me so, but I'm reminded of a time when checking bank balances and locating a branch were much more difficult things. I muse that perhaps the difficulty of life has deflated as much as the economy has inflated as I withdraw another nine thousand of those precious dollars, and consider that maybe modern Americans should only be trusted with what a seventies character would value at about fifteen hundred dollars. With life so easy, they have to make something hard.

While withdrawing the last handful of cash, I reconsider. Interest rates were higher on savings back then, and lower on lending. Plenty of jobs were still available that made it possible for one parent to stay home with kids, and ten thousand dollars would buy you three new cars. If no one is making a fuss about being badgered for carrying that kind of dough, it's likely that very few people are carrying around that kind of dough.

Now that we've established that twenty-seven thousand dollars doesn't exactly make this body wealthy by today's standards, it's a good time to consider what I might be able to do with the money.

The bank parking lot seems a good place to go internal, so I lock the doors and tilt the seat back a bit. I calm this body's breathing, and close its eyes.

I pick up on the ringing right away, and it's as dull and distant as before. An immortal lifetime of forgotten experience tells me that I have a month or so to find whoever is on the other end of that sound and ring them in. I remember the date that shocked me earlier, and let a

smile spread across this body's face. It's easier than before, and feels more natural. I let the smile get a little ghastly as I open these eyes and meet them in the rearview.

It looks like I'll be ringin' in a new year.

Planning a party will mean putting together some semblance of a life, and it may as well be close to whomever I'll be ringin'. It's not easy for this body to breathe right and drive all at the same time, and I discover that pretty quickly. After I've moved the vehicle far away from the ones I damaged, I park it under a tree in hopes that the shade will keep the body from getting too stinky too fast. I make myself a promise that no one else will die at this body's hands, unless you count whoever I have to ring.

Just driving around for a little while made me aware of the fact that this is not a cab city. I'll have to call one, and wait for it, and I probably shouldn't be picked up anywhere close to the corpse that will soon be rotting in the shade.

The thought comes to mind, that I could always kill the taxi driver, and I have to remind myself that there will be no more killing.

For some reason that kicks off a giggling fit that I can't stifle, and I set off walking briskly away from the car while this body's shoulders shake with it. I remember the suits fifty yards away, and it starts off another round of nefarious snickering. I reign in my mind and the giggles as I approach the trunk, remembering both its macabre contents and the fact that I locked the keys in the car.

I'm a ringer, and that's serious business; whatever head I'm occupying, I've got to do my best to keep it on straight. Of course, locks open at my touch, like most folks that are less or more than human. That's not the point, though. I've got to appear as though I'm taking my business seriously if

I want to be taken seriously, and I try on a more suitable laugh as I walk away from the vehicle again.

There will be no more twisted giggle fits, and no more killing.

Unless it's appropriate, of course.

## V.

It was easy to breathe right with someone else doing the driving. I was fully aware of the fact that the driver thought I was nodding in and out of some kind of drug stupor between our exchanges, and that he didn't care. I wasn't about to explain to him that I was using my own internal navigation system to find what I was looking for, any more than I was going to kill him. I just let this body's eyes open from time to time, to meet his in the rearview.

As soon as I got in, I pointed.

"That way," I said. "Is there a freeway that goes that way?"

He nodded.

"Yeah, sure," he said. "Eighty goes that way. How far?"

Settling into the seat, I let this body's eyelids drift closed while I breathed. I reached out, felt for the other end of the sound.

"Not far," I said. "Ten miles, maybe fifteen."

"What exit?"

The car hadn't started moving yet, and I was feeling a little annoyed. Not kill someone annoyed, but maybe considering it. I pulled a bill from the bulging stack in the suit pocket and passed it over the seat to him.

"I'll know it when I see it," I said. "If we get going now, I won't be asking for any change."

The hundred disappeared, and now I only had twenty-six thousand, nine hundred dollars. It really should be quite a party.

On the freeway, I breathed my way into sedated silence. The rage subsided, and I saw all thoughts of killing flee from the sudden brilliant burst of internal light. We were getting close, and I opened this body's eyes.

"Not this exit," I said. "The next one."

"Douglas?" His eyes looked back from the rearview. "Or Sunrise?"

I shrugged, and pointed.

"Whichever one goes that way."

There was no reason for me to imagine what I was imagining, as his eyes kept glancing at me in the mirror. I calmed my breathing, dismissed the thought, and let this body's eyelids droop heavily.

"How far down Sunrise, then?"

His gruff voice roused me, and I realized that he may have been alive when a hundred dollars meant something. I had handed him fifteen dollars in yesteryear's currency.

I opened this body's eyes.

"Not much further," I said. "It will be a left turn."

The car changed lanes, quickly but smoothly. I let this body's eyes drift closed once more.

"Alright," I said. "There's a major intersection coming up..."

"Cirby?" He was glancing up again.

"Sure," I said. "Take a left there."

He sighed, in an exaggerated enough fashion that I would see it.

"We're close," I assured him. "Another left, into that housing development."

"You know where you are now, then?" He was smirking,

trying to catch my attention in the rearview.

"I always know where I am," I answered brusquely. "This is your turn."

Under this body's breath, after, I murmured, "I don't ever really know who I am, but I always know where I am."

"What's that?" He was glancing up, and back at the road.

"I think you need to take a right up here," I said.

He chuckled. "Lost again?"

I pressed this body's hands against the glass suddenly.

"See that house?" My words were spoken with wonder.

He tapped the brakes, and started to pull to the curb.

"No, no, keep driving." I waved him away, but kept looking at the house. "It's just a nice house."

The laughter that echoed back at me from the cab of the vehicle had a tinge of cruelty to it, and I finally let him meet this body's eyes in the rearview. It was a special kind of pleasure to watch him shrink visibly, and look away. I do so hate cruelty.

"It's a housing development, that's all," he said meekly. "The homes all look the same."

I patted the seat in front of me, and he flinched away from the movement. It was all I could do not to paint that ghastly smile on this body's face as I pointed one last time.

"There it is," I said. "The place with the sign out in front, saying it's for sale. That's my buddy's house. I remember now."

He pulled to the curb, and parked a little cockeyed and into the street. I couldn't blame him; I probably shouldn't have turned it on so darkly. I thought of giving him another hundred dollar bill, but I honestly didn't feel that much for the guy. Without telling him so, I was doing him a favor by not killing him.

Rather than press me for the money I didn't plan to give him, the driver moved quickly to the back to get my garment bag. It was nice to know that this body would have some decent suits between now and the new year.

Now, I need to see about a house.