

Mitchcraft

by Greg Stolze

Mitch Glasby was in his workshop. Anyone who knew him only from the car dealership, where he handled the more abstract aspects of financing contracts, would have been surprised at the space. His office at work was tidy. Not *fussy*, there were piles here and there, but they were orderly piles. He'd at least square the edges of the papers before leaving for the night.

The shed in his back yard, however, was chaotic. For a while, before the move, he'd used a space in their finished basement, and the mess there had been a constant source of low-level distress to his wife Brenda. Having his saws, chisels, paints, outdated textbooks, clamps, drills, sandpaper scraps, lathe, gears, doorknobs, plumbing components, old postcards, broken circuit boards, chemicals, varnishes, cogs, rags, screwdrivers, grinders, exposed antique photoplates, hammers, mallets, dremmels, sanders, nonfunctional clocks, wires, branches, dowel rods, boards, planes, brushes, lamps, tin snips and pliers confined to a shed was a relief for everyone. Even if they were exploded across three tabletops, with a backless stool in the middle and pegboard flanking the windows on three sides.

It was after work and Mitch was making a walking stick. He couldn't think of a good way to make an "M" shaped handle that would fit a hand well, but it had occurred to him that the curve at the top of a "G" would be a good form for a grip, so he'd sketched the letter out with a hand compass. He cut it from a piece of walnut with a powered jig on his table saw, careful to keep his fingers back. Once, he'd seen a saw that was calibrated to *only* cut hard materials and stop when it encountered soft solids (like flesh). In the display video, they pushed a board through it with a hot dog, and it had stopped automatically before even cutting the casing.

Mitch didn't have that kind of saw.

Once the "G" was cut out, he drilled the center in a few points, then worked at removing material with a hand jigsaw, because his powered one would be a hassle to thread through the holes. After his hand tired, he stopped to look at his work. It was good. A rough letter, but the outside reach of the top arc, which was open in an actual letter on a page, connected to the shape below. He figured it would be strong enough to take weight. He'd test it once it was done.

The "G" shape also had a two-inch segment dangling off the bottom. This, he'd turn on the lathe until it was a round column the same width as a hickory dowel rod—also the same width as the interior of a copper pipe coupling. When the

handle was done, stained, and coated with polyurethane, he'd cut that so it fit halfway through the coupling and glue it in place. Then it would be ready to fit onto the stock.

That, he'd already sanded smooth, washed off, and dried. Then he'd stuck a screw into one end and carefully run two strips of masking tape down its length. Between those he'd applied an ebony stain, then hung it vertically by the screw from the shed's roof. When it dried, he'd put a pattern on it with careful, careful applications of the drill press at different diameters to make dots and discs appear light through the darkness. He'd add short stripes at angles and lengths with a rasp or a file, too.

For this one he was doing all straight lines and dots. Sometimes he did different patterns. He never planned them. He just did whatever looked good at the moment.

He was still unsure about the pipe coupling. He could just soak it in vinegar until it was shiny as a new penny. Or, he could put artificial verdigris on the outside with ammonia, vinegar and Miracle-Gro. He wasn't sure.

As he pondered, his phone buzzed. It was Brenda, in the house. Dinner was ready.

#

That night, he checked his online storefront and saw there was a message from a previous customer. Adjusting his eyeglasses, he clicked it open.

"Dear Mitchcraft, I'm sorry. Whatever I did I don't deserve this. Tell me how to make it stop, I can't sleep. I'm just a regular person, I don't know about curses or anything."

The message was from someone logged in as NHFisherCat. Mitch frowned and poked some buttons. Yes, this was a legitimate customer. Mitch had sold them a wall hanging. (That was what he called them on his shop, which was named "Mitchcraft." They weren't exactly paintings or carvings, and calling them "installations" or "mixed media objects" sounded just too precious for Mitch.)

He'd made NHFisherCat's image by sanding a board smooth and spray painting it in assorted sunset colors. After sealing that, he'd projected a photograph of electrical towers and wires on it, using a USB projector his wife had borrowed from her school. After tracing the shapes of the towers and wires, he'd removed them with the router and filled in the valleys with scrap steel and solder for the metal, and actual electrical wire for the cables, held in place with superglue and hammered into the groove. It wasn't one of his favorite pieces, but he'd put it on his shop for thirty bucks, which had gone into his craft fund. About a third of the craft fund wound up being spent on tools or reclaimed

materials. The rest of it he usually donated to Doctors Without Borders or The Trevor Project, whenever he felt moved.

“Please make my shadow stop hurting me. It’s too big” NHFisherCat wrote. “I’ll send back the picture if you want. I’ll do anything.”

Mitch rubbed his earlobe. He didn’t want the wall hanging back. The house was already busy with them in his home office and the bathrooms. Brenda said she liked them—well, she said that about some of them—but he also knew, deep down, that she preferred clean, tranquil, uncluttered decor.

He also didn’t want to engage with a stranger from the internet who thought his shadow could hurt him.

After careful consideration, Mitch typed “We do not do refunds or replacements. Sorry.”

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When he’d started selling his stuff online for fun—and, really, to get it out of the house—they’d been living in the smaller place and he’d put his home address on the packages without really thinking about it. That’s how the trouble had started.

He’d sold a cane to a woman in Arizona. Her name was Janice Crowther, and a full year after he’d mailed it, she sent an angry email about how the top had broken off and hurt her hand. She’d included a photo of the cane with the top (which he’d carved and stained to look like a horse head) loose from its fitting. He’d written back with advice on how to re-secure it, which had only made Janice Crowther from Arizona angrier.

First, she’d emailed him demanding a refund.

Then, she’d sent him a letter insisting that she was owed damages.

After that, she’d managed to use his address to find his land-line phone number, and she’d begun calling at odd hours, insistently whining about how she was entitled to compensation for the emotional distress from his shoddy workmanship.

He’d ultimately offered to send her a replacement cane, and somehow that set her off even more. She threatened him with lawyers. (He never heard from one, but that didn’t keep him from a few sleepless nights.) Finally, he’d received a stuffed toy horse in the mail with the head torn off. “THIS IS WHAT I THINK OF YOU!” was typed on the message inside, and while there was no return address, the postmark was the same zip code in Arizona.

He and Brenda had talked about getting a restraining order, but the fact was, Janice had only been the final straw that pushed them to move to a bigger place and give up their land line.

When they moved, Mitch rented a post-office box and was scrupulous thereafter to use that, and only that, on packages he sent to what Brenda started calling "internet randos."

It was through this post office box that NHFisherCat next contacted Mitch, in the form of his wall hanging, returned along with an even more disjointed letter about stalking shadows and curses and insomnia. It also had a twenty dollar bill enclosed, offered along with apologies for whatever had given offense. It made Mitch feel a little bit sick.

"This poor man," he said to his family at dinner. "I mean, it's clear he's in some kind of mental health crisis."

"You could just send him an email that the curse is withdrawn," his son said.

"I don't want to encourage that kind of delusional thinking," Mitch replied sternly.

"Just disengage," Brenda said.

"I don't know..." he said, frowning into his potatoes.

"Dad's not going to let it go," his daughter opined. (She was home from college on break.) "He's not the kind to just let someone sit and be broken if he thinks he might be able to fix it."

Mitch sighed and, fueled by his daughter's good opinion of him, wrote the customer an email that night.

Dear NHFisherCat. I'm sorry you weren't happy with the wall hanging. You did not have to send it back. I can only assure you that I did not do anything to it but make it. There was no curse and I would have no idea how to put a curse on. If you have having trouble sleeping, perhaps tell your doctor and describe exactly what is bothering you. I really hope you get past it.

-M.

For a while, that was it.

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WARNING PICTURE HAS HYPNOTIC PROPERTIES

Mitch blinked. He didn't look at reviews very often, because you never knew if it was going to make you feel good or bad. Mitch was not in a position in life to get a lot of praise from strangers, and he wouldn't have said he started selling his work to get that. He would have said, honestly, that he wanted to do *something* with the objects after he'd had the pleasure and satisfaction of making them. The money was OK too. But he'd been surprised how much positive reviews affected him.

By the same token, bad reviews—dismissal, or spite, from someone he'd only tried to make happy and to whom he couldn't (or definitely *shouldn't*) reply... that was uniquely frustrating.

This one was not a typical bad review. Though, to be sure, it did give him only half of one star.

When I saw this online I thought \$20 bucks for a tree in front of a night sky was an OK price and at first it was fine but its not on regular paper there are words in the stars and on the moon from some kind of old book with weird letters or shapes.

Mitch frowned. Of course there were words. He always checked out the giveaway pile at used bookstores and he'd found a book printed in Russian. Liking the look of the Cyrillic letters, he'd razored out pages and used them as the background for that series of images. It had said, right on the description, that the wall hanging was *ink on collage*, that's what collage meant!

I really liked the picture at first and looked at it everytime I went in my bathroom, but pretty soon I wanted to see it more so I hung it up at work. We're not supposed to have personal stuff in our cubicles though so I put it in a drawer and would open the drawer when no one was around, but then when I was at home I kept worrying about one of the cleaning staff taking it, so now I carry it around in my purse. Why does it do this? I don't even think it's cute anymore.

Mitch leaned back and stared. First NHFisherCat and now this. He clicked a few tabs and saw that while he'd sent the power line image to Delaware, the tree silhouette had gone to Utah. He compared and, sure enough, the logins matched between the woman who'd bought it and the woman who was complaining about it—BluBlossumBelle. Her real name was Alicia Liu. He was forbidden from sharing user's identifying data, but it had to be on the honor system because he needed that information to send products.

He didn't like having that weird comment—and a half-star review!—as the first one for his store, so the next day he was glad to see a new one, from "OldTimeSurfer." Then he read it.

BlueBlossumBell it sounds like you were inflicted with some kind of mimetic virus. It must be something in the letters, but the scans Mitchcraft put up aren't clear enough to really examine. Do you have access to a high dpi optical scanner?

"I went through everything I used on both products," Mitch told Brenda that night as they were getting ready for bed. "The only thing they had in common was the polyurethane sealant, and there aren't any warnings about that causing... you know, effects."

"Yeah, if those chemicals made people crazy, you'd be chewing the furniture by now," Brenda replied, folding her bra and throwing it in the laundry.

"I'm serious, there's nothing in my work that could, like, *poison* anybody... like that thing about leaded gas, remember that?"

"Look, it's the internet, people are nuts on the internet. *There's* the common factor that's, what, emotionally disregulating them. It's sad. It is. And you're a good man to worry about it, but you did nothing wrong and they're probably going to find something else to obsess about in a week or two. It'll be weather lasers or Qanon or something. Eventually, they'll reach their final evolution and become antisemites," she said bitterly. She'd seen this tragic trajectory play out with her uncle Stan, who had never once been exposed to Mitch's creations.

"Should I say something?"

"I dunno hon. It might just stir up the wasp nest. You can't talk reason to someone who's unreasonable."

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The router Mitch used—the woodworking kind, not the wifi kind—was an older, heavier one. When his brother Andrew died, no one else had wanted the tools, and that had really been the start of Mitch making things. Their dad had always been good at fixing, and some building. He'd spent most of a year making their mother a bedside table, milling the doors and drawer himself. There was even a hidden latch along the side, you released it by holding a magnet to it, and then the top tilted back on hidden hinges and revealed a shallow tray about an inch deep. Their dad had suggested their mother could keep her jewelry there, but she didn't have anything really precious. What necklaces and earrings she had, she wanted available for daily wear without having to clear off her lamp and tissues and other bedside bric-a-brac. But she'd said it was a very nice piece of furniture, everything on it moved smoothly, and it had always fascinated the boys.

Andrew had become a cabinetmaker and had done more than one piece with a secret compartment in homage to their dad. Even the same magnetic latch trick. He'd called it "a lock without a keyhole."

Most of the time the router was just a router to Mitch, but sometimes it made him think of his brother and it gave him a pang. It was a pang night when he accidentally skated it across the plank he was working on and tore up a six-inch splinter, ruining it completely.

He'd gotten an old book of maps and cut a wooden board to size. His plan was to gouge the outlines of the words "HIT THE ROAD" in big, wide letters, only back to front, with skinny relief of the letters inside. He'd cover the outside with black ink, and the thin letters inside with red, and press one of the cut-free map pages to it. He'd done this sort of thing before. It gave you a message in one color, surrounded and cushioned by the image from underneath, and a black edge around it. Only now he'd ruined it.

When he went inside, there was a message to him from someone logged in as WedgieLord911 asking if he could make a cursed inverted pentagram for a hundred dollars.

He immediately decided not to tell Brenda about the money. His reply was “I don’t do commissions, sorry. What’s in the store is what’s available.”

The next time he checked, WedgieLord911 had inquired about one of his pictures—a stylized outline of a barking dog printed on top of sheet music. “Is this one like the others? I only want to buy it if it’s cursed.”

Mitch saw this message after a day at work where his computer had conked out during a very complicated and fussy task, costing him more than ninety minutes of irritating toil, so he was in no mood. “That picture is as cursed as anything I’ve ever made,” he replied, “No more and no less.”

He sent the message and went to dinner, and when he came back there was an order. WedgieLord911 was Semyon Covell and he lived in Portland.

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A week after sending off the canine silhouette, he got another message with a link to an Instagram page, where Covell had posted a picture of himself bowing down to the wall hanging. It was centered in a display of dead roses and a goat skull with curling horns. Mitch sighed. Covell had put the link for the Mitchcraft storefront in the picture’s caption, and soon there were more questions about cursed work. “Can you do something to make my ex-girlfriend have a miscarriage?” was the worst one, but not by much.

Fed up, Mitch added a block of text to his page profile, right at the top where it would be seen first. He put it in all caps.

I DO NOT DO CURSED WORK. I DO NOT BELIEVE IN CURSES. I AM NOT A SATANIST. THESE ARE JUST CARVINGS AND PRINTS, THEY DO NOT DO ANYTHING OTHER THAN WHAT YOU SEE.

He hoped that was the end of it.

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“DID YOU KILL SMEYON COVELL?” shrieked the message in his storefront message box two weeks later. It was from OldTimeSurfer, a name Mitch readily remembered from the post about optical scanners and memetic viruses. He had to open it to reply, and fully intended to just write back “No” but then he saw the link to the Portland Sun obituary section and, reluctantly, clicked it.

It was definitely the address where he’d sent the image, and certainly the man pictured had the same heavy frame and long dark hair visible in WedgieLord911’s Instagram image. Four days previous, Semyon Covell had died in his apartment, apparently of smoke inhalation. Investigations into arson were

ongoing, but a follow up article stated that his body was badly burned, and that the leading theory was suicide by self-immolation, as the security cameras at the complex had not shown anyone going down his hall.

Mitch had already started typing an indignant response, his mind awl with the evidence that he'd been nowhere *near* Portland and, besides, it suggested it was a suicide right there in the article, the man had hardly seemed stable, when he paused.

What good was it going to do?

Instead, he left no reply.

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Everything went quiet for almost a year.

Oh, there was a surge of purchases from accounts that had no history on the site, buying one thing from him. There were several pictures on Instagram of people excitedly (or in mock terror) pointing at their purchases with the hashtag “#Mitchcrafted,” but after a while the fervor died down. Things went back to their normal level of sales.

Then he found the r/TheMitchcraftCurse subreddit. Incredulously, he saw that people were re-using their purchase logins, sometimes with a string of numbers after them, to connect and discuss his work, the “curses,” and speculate about who or what he was.

He read NHFisherCat123's account of his shadow growing huge and menacing. Someone called OldAndNew said that the fingers of her left hand had started dropping off, one by one, until she got rid of the walking stick with the labyrinth pattern. Another buyer who'd gotten a picture frame made of pine and verdigrised copper said he'd been inflicted with spontaneous gangrene—his blood vessels inexplicably closing off from the feet up, necessitating amputation until they got above the knees. That one included a link to an article about it in *The Journal of the AMA*.

Worse, in some ways, were what Mitch immediately thought of as “the peanut gallery”—people who knew nothing about the art, the purchasers or the events. Purely ignorant, but gamely suggesting homeopathy, or orgone therapies, or reiki, or that the buyers try to get right with Jesus. A “professional psychic” offered to fly out for consultations (on the client's dime, of course) as did a “freelance Taoist shaman” and a “native cherkoe medicine man” who was promptly ridiculed off the board for failing to capitalize his own misspelled tribal name.

People tried gematria analysis to predict how long curses would take to kick in, and how long they'd last, and what their nature was. They consulted

astrologers. They speculated on alien involvement, and were relieved to find that the artworks read as neutral to geiger counters.

He also read with growing dismay as several accounts tried to track him down and unmask “the man, or entity, behind this horror shop.” They knew his hometown and his post office box number, but they kept trying to learn more. Someone suggested crowdfunding a private investigator, since none of them (apparently) lived near him.

Mitch was done. He logged out of Reddit, immediately shut down his online storefront, and swore that he’d never go to his P.O. Box again.

He also decided to never get on that web forum again, which was why he had no idea when someone started posting there under the handle ArizonaJanice.

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Christopher Covell's plan to anonymously kill Mitch Glasby was intricate. Maybe too much so.

He arranged the gun buy anonymously on Facebook. He drove one state over before going, on foot, to an airport long term parking facility to steal license plates from a similar truck. He parked on a rural back road and slept in a tent so there’d be no hotel records. He made sure the secondhand Mossberg shotgun fired well before he sawed off the barrel. Then he did a few more test shots with buckshot. He knew buckshot pellets couldn’t be ballistically traced, but that the ejected shells would have distinctive marks from the firing pin, so he got a shell catcher and made sure that was installed correctly before tucking it all away in a gym bag.

He’d seen pictures of Mitch Glasby. He’d tried to memorize the layout of the neighborhood from Google Maps, and he’d looked up the house on Zillow and RealEstate.com to try to get a sense of its layout. He had a long brimmed hat with powerful infrared LEDs attached, in hopes that any Ring cameras or similar surveillance devices would focus incorrectly. He even had a wig on under the hat, so anyone who saw him would see long blonde hair, not short brown hair.

The day of, he applied superglue to his fingertips to prevent leaving prints, and followed Glasby home from work. He parked in an alley behind the house and made sure to leave the engine running and door slightly ajar as he took a deep breath and went over the fence and up to the sliding glass patio entryway. It wasn’t even locked.

Christopher felt himself breathing heavily as he went through the kitchen, the dining room and past the front door. He didn’t see anyone. Was Glasby upstairs? Apparently so. He shied his glance away from the things on the wall, hideous stuff, clearly the work of Glasby’s hands... a framed mountain somehow transferred onto regular lines of printed text, and a gouged and painted board

depicting a blood-red maze. His stomach clenched, wondering what curses those held but he kept on, up the stairs, biting his lip, and he saw a brief movement past a half-closed door. He made sure the safety was off, slipped his finger inside the trigger guard and racked a round before pushing the door open.

He fired and fired until he got a dry click. He got only a momentary impression of Mitch Glasby's shocked face before the fire, the noise, and the smell of cordite. Six buckshot blasts at close range. His ears were ringing. There was so much blood, and it was everywhere. He turned to go, starting to hyperventilate, and as he turned the corner of the staircase he almost ran straight into a gray-haired woman with a worried expression.

It had never occurred to him that Glasby might be married.

As soon as the woman saw him she screamed and punched him straight in the crotch—it was right about at shoulder level to her. As he hunched forward, she started fighting him for the shotgun, pulling him off balance so that the pair of them tumbled down the steps. His wig and hat went flying. He put his hand out to stop himself as he reached the bottom and felt a jarring, crunching pain in both his wrist and shoulder. It was matched by a pain in his ear as the woman bit it, hard.

He managed to shove her away, abandoning the shotgun as he ran out the back. He made it to his pickup, slammed on the gas, got up some speed and immediately struck a forest green Audi as it turned cautiously into the alley.

The driver of that car called the cops immediately after Christopher gunned the engine to push him out of the way. Christopher was apprehended less than a mile away, because the frame of his wheel-well had pushed in on impact, jamming and eventually shredding the tire. The blood from his ear injury matched what was at the scene of the crime and it was pretty much an open and shut case.

There was some discussion over whether he was competent to stand trial, since he insisted he was avenging the curse that took his brother's life, but given the extensive preparations, it was clear to all that he was aware he was breaking a law, capable of making a plan, and able to comprehend consequences.

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The funeral for Mitch Glasby was well attended. People from the dealership, his church, relatives, friends with whom he loaned and borrowed tools... and, of course, the shocked, numb faces of his widow and children.

In the back of the chapel sat four other figures, dressed in modest black and looking owlishly from one another to the family and the casket. It was a closed coffin funeral, of course.

"Did we do the right thing?" asked a woman with Chinese features but an American accent. She had a big purse, and periodically she'd open it and glance inside.

"What else could we do? He wasn't going to stop on his own," said the exquisitely dressed woman beside her. She had an aluminum cane and she kept fidgeting with it. Her left hand was missing three fingers.

"He did though, didn't he?" The man on her other side was in a wheelchair, a blanket tucked around legs that ended above the knee.

"It was too late to stop it. Chris was already... you know, setting everything up," replied the woman with the cane. "Do you think he's going to tell about us? The... the money and everything?"

"Depends on how secure you were when you sent it, I reckon," was the reply.

"I never thought Mitchcraft might have kids." The fourth of them had some kind of stains on his hands, deep in the callus. His black sweater was shabby and he wore work boots. He was pale with deep bags under his eyes, as if he hadn't been sleeping. All of them, actually, had that sleepless look, but his was worse.

"Well he never told us, did he?" The woman with the purse said, irritated. "He was so secretive! If we'd known more about him, maybe... I mean..."

She didn't finish her thought.

"Do you think this is going to change anything?" she finally said, before sneaking another glance in her bag.

"For you, maybe," said the man next to her. Then he sighed. "We probably ought to go before anyone asks questions."

The man in the work boots nodded and stood. Somehow, for just a moment, the shadow he cast over the other three seemed impossibly huge and dark. But the moment passed as they departed in silence.