

How The Number 153 Changed My Life

By Robert Rinne

If you are wondering how I met my current girlfriend, it all started with me sitting at a table at The Beanstalk Time Emporium and Pizza Before You Know It playing euchre with a wizard who claimed to be a demon, a bare chested, blonde haired, blue eyed man with enormous eagles wings growing out of his back, and his girlfriend, a female cyclops who looked to be straight out of a Ray Harryhausen movie. The demon wizard's name was Mizwraith and I had called him over because he looked lonely, sitting there at the bar in his thick, homespun robe, drinking from his coconut shaped glass through a straw because I needed a partner. I hated playing three man euchre.

"What's trump?" Mizwraith had asked.

"Finagle's Balls," the blonde man with wings said. I think his name was Aylvan. "Spades. Your partner played a nine of spades, she played the king of hearts," the Aylvan pointed to the one eyed behemoth on the other side of the table, "and now you either play trump or go off-suit. It's yours."

I guessed that he and his girlfriend met in the lab where they were created. Whatever genetic enhancements he had done to get those wings seemed to make him a very impatient card player.

His girlfriend, though, despite what you might think of a one eyed monster woman, was rather shapely in every human respect save her encephalitic head and enormous ridged eye. He called her Baby and Sweetheart and Darling and all those other sweet little nothings that were so standard

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in the first days, weeks and months of a relationship. I thought I heard him call her Honey and I thought that suited her just fine.

The Beanstalk – we called the bar that for syllable's sake – is a big old time machine located on the very edge of the expanding universe. We expand along with it, getting further and further away from the centre of the Big Bang. You could come here from any time or any place and enjoy yourself for as long as you want. Your body would age biologically, of course, but you could go back the exact moment you left. But once you left, you could never come back. The owner of the Beanstalk, Max, hired me on as Host. Making people feel welcome was my job. And because making people feel welcome means having to talk to them, one of the first things I got Max to do was make some universal translator gadgets, but not make them look like universal translation gadgets. So, each customer wore one that looked like one of those gag buttons you picked up at a joke store. Mine read 'Work is the Curse of the Drinking Class'. When I went over to Mizwraith and asked him to play cards, I slapped a button on him – his read "I'm not weird, I'm gifted" – and guided him to the table by his elbow.

Max had called me over to the bar as Mizwraith took his seat.

"He's an Amar," Max warned me. "A Demon Wizard." I could hear the capital letters he put to it. "Don't play games with an Amar, Jack."

"I'm not playing games, Max," I said. "I'm playing euchre." And I went back to the table.

Since that, I came to understand Max's warning. Mizwraith was a piss poor card player.

After asking a second time what was trump – and after Honey calmed down Aylvan – Mizwraith finally played the jack of clubs. I groaned and Aylvan

smiled. He threw down his jack of spades, took the trick and the game. Honey hooted a most unwomanly hoot of joy and reached across the table to hug Aylvan.

"Ah, Magueijo," I swore.

"Excuse me?" Mizwraith asked. "What was that you said?"

I thought maybe the translator widget skipped. I repeated the word slowly and he tried to imitate it.

"Ma-jew-air-oh," he said.

"Gesundheit," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"Sounded like you sneezed," I explained.

"I didn't," he said. "What does it mean?"

"What does what mean?" I asked.

He sneezed again. I blessed him.

"Exactly," he said.

The translator widgets weren't working right and had reduced our conversation to an Abbot and Costello sketch. I decided to take another track and hoped that the translator could keep up.

"Did you guys have another guy in your world that was really smart?"

Every reality did. A creature at the bar, trunk and mane of a lion with a peacock's tail who was definitely male by virtue of his culture lacking a nudity taboo, told me so. Said it was one of the constants in the universe. There were four others, but he said if he told me all five, he'd have to eat me so that he could take nourishment from the wisdom I had gained from the thoughts he gave me.

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Mizwraith looked around the bar searching for a face before nodding slowly and saying, "Yes. But I'm forbidden to say his name out loud."

I shook my head. "Anyway, in my when, there was a guy that accurately predicted the world we live in right now with only a few simple equations. He was really, really smart. As things go, if you ever get a chance to go to my world, and you want to make reference to someone being smart, you call them an Einstein."

"But you said Ma-jew-air-oh,"

"Gesundheit," I said.

He didn't find the malfunctioning translator as funny as I did.

"The math he did was so simple it was hard to believe. I mean, the Special Theory of Relativity is basically high school math. What he did was almost divine. Max could not even so much as considered this place if it weren't for Einstein. Seriously."

"There's no power in numbers," Mizwraith said.

"There isn't, eh?"

I thought that I could show him a trick or two that can be played with a few simple numbers.

I checked out his hands first. Eight fingers and two thumbs. Odds were that he worked with base ten math. I wasn't too sure that it would work for anything else.

I called out to Max, requesting a clipboard. He'd wired The Beanstalk for sound so's I could just say his name and a microphone would pick up my voice and any one of a million – and I am not exaggerating – different speakers would project his voice. I needed a clipboard from him that I could

write down my numbers the way that I know them and my friend Mizwraith could see his numbers and see them the way that he knew them.

When I got my clipboard, I started to tell my story.

"Once upon a time there was a guy who had to make a speech. He had twelve assistants and they did all the arranging for places to speak, special deals and appearances. Thing is, this guy gets all excited and goes and books a speaking engagement and doesn't tell his assistants until the last minute. The guy had a place to speak but he committed to feed these people and no one had made any arrangements for food. The assistants checked the R.S.V.P. List and saw that a hundred and forty one people were confirmed to go to this thing.

"The assistants are all going apeshit. Their boss, this guy, is good, but it was pretty likely that the people were showing up for the free food. There was a food shortage at the time and free food is free food, you know? The price of bread and fish was going through the roof."

"A loaf of what?" He asked.

"Bread," I said. "Wheat and flour mixed and heated until it rises. Good with soups and stuff."

"Oh," He said. "Now I know what you are talking about. Though we don't call it 'breed'."

"Bread," I corrected. How could the translator screw that up?

"But a rose by any other name," I said.

"A what?" he asked.

"Never mind," I said. "Let me finish my story. Anyway, all these people are getting ready to arrive and there is no food for them. So the guy told one of them to take a fishing net and go out into the sea. There they would

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find everything he needed to keep these people happy. These partners were used to trusting the guy, but this time he was out to lunch, so to speak. But they did like they were told – he was their boss, after all. And they came back with a net full of fish to keep everyone happy. Exactly a hundred and fifty three fish.”

“Didn’t the guy eat?” He asked.

“No,” I answered. “He was on some kind of protein diet that didn’t let him eat fish or poultry unless it was part of his cycle.”

“Anyway,” I continued, “All of the people stayed and listened and cheered. Turned out to be one of the most important speeches in all of human history, even if you subtract all the divinity and stuff. It was called the Sermon on the Mount.”

“Was Magueijo there?” He asked.

I shook my head.

“Are you good with numbers?” I asked. He shrugged. I brought out the clipboard and started to write.

“Take the number one fifty three, cube each of it’s digits, then add together those cubes and tell me what number you get. I’m going to get another drink.”

I excused myself and went to the bar to get a drink. I passed Aylvan and Honey and nodded a hello. Honey gave me a wink and smiled. At least, at the time, I thought it was a wink. She had only one eye ; how could I really tell?

“Max,” I said. “What’s my friend Mizwraith drinking?”

Max poured a thick and dark gooey soup into a large, hollowed out coconut and plipped in a curly straw. I looked at Max and he held up his hands.

"Don't ask," he said. I didn't and instead I put one foot up on the brass rail on the bar and asked Max for my monogrammed and gold rimmed glass. It has to be one of the best things about being The Host at The Beanstalk. It has a transfer disk at the bottom of it, and whenever I tap the gold rim, an interdimensional portal opens up between my glass and a case of twelve year old scotch behind the bar, teleporting exactly one and a half ounces into my glass. I tapped my glass and took a sip and looked over at Mizwraith working on that clipboard.

Max came over and asked if I knew what I was doing.

"Relax," I said. "I'm a professional."

Max leaned over the bar to get a better look at Mizwraith.

"These guys," Max started to tell me as he wiped down a glass from behind the bar. "I got to to tell you, these guys, you know where they get their power from?"

"Power?" I said. "What power?"

"I told you he was a demon wizard, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "So?"

"Yeah, well do you know why they are called demon wizards?"

"I didn't even know he was a demon wizard until you told me, so the answer would be no."

"They come to their coming of age, kinda like puberty but their magic matures bot their you-know-whats. Anyway, when they come of age they are

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subjected to a near death experience. They get to see two ways they are going to die. The first way is to be a normal ordinary person."

I nodded. "The second way is to die a demon wizard."

"Something like that. Do you know why they are called demon wizards?"

"Because they turn into demons, Jack," Max said.

"That makes sense to call them demon wizards, then."

Max went on to tell me that their arms turn into tentacles, wings spring from their back, horns from their head. And those are the demon wizards that Max had met. He told me that some of them get to be as big as houses and the furthest thing from human that I could imagine.

"I thought they were demon mages?"

Max corrected me. "Wizards," he said. "And you know what I mean."

I told him about the peacock lion man who said he would eat me to learn the secrets of the universe. "I'm not worried about Mizwraith," I said.

"You'd better," he said. "I warned you. Don't play games with an Amar, Jack. They live on borrowed time."

I waved goodbye, grabbed Mizwraith's drink and went over to see how he was doing. Man, was he ever over the moon.

"If you do that," he realized. "You keep on getting the number one fifty three! That's amazing. But it does not really tell me anything"

"Three is a very powerful number," I said to him. "Especially when you are trying to start a religion. There's a lot of power in the number three, you know? Even before this guy did it. Greeks, Romans, Hindus, Taoists." I would be willing to make a bet with you that every major religion has the number three somewhere in it. At the time, explaining my numbers trick to

him, I could only think of those three and really could only be sure of the first two.

Mizwraith agreed with me. Told me that some guy named Dan Markum was a guy with three faces. I nodded in agreement and kept on with my trick.

"Anyway," I said. "Not only is that true of the number one fifty three but any multiple of three."

He didn't get it so I explained to him I meant to take any number that could be divided by three. So, in this case, I took the number 84.

I took the number 8 and cubed it, took the number 4 and cubed it, and added the product of the two together. Comes to 576. Then I did it again. 5 times 3 plus 7 times 3 plus 6 times three. I did it over and over again and I came right back to the number 153. I told him that would happen with any number divisible by 3, no matter how large it was.

"This was what the Sermon on the Mount was about?" Mizwraith asked. "They must have been amazed. Did they pay for their bread and their fish when they saw this marvel."

I told him the Sermon on the Mount had nothing to do with numbers.

He wanted to know about Magueijo and I laughed.

"Magueijo is the name of another guy who came after Einstein. He tried to tell everyone that Einstein was wrong and he wasn't very nice about it. He wrote a book about it, but I think mostly everyone forgot about him but me."

I should have taken a closer look at Mizwraith before I kept on speaking, but what can you do?

"But no one has forgotten that Magueijo is another way of calling someone an asshole."

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Mizwraith screamed so loud, going on about how I had taken time from him that he would never get back, that every one of Max's million or so speakers and microphones blew. The place rained little red glowing sparks. Computer monitors blew up, computers shorted out. I even think some alien's life support suit almost failed because of this guy.

He shrugged off that big robe of his. Not only did the guy have arms and legs he had three, three metre long, ribbed yellow tentacles on each shoulder – though they were more like lizard tails and less like an octopus, so you couldn't really call them tentacles. His feet were thin, red and scaly, with talons instead of toes – the kind of talons you would see on a dinosaur at a museum, only not behind glass and definitely sharp. He puffed out his chest, which was all brown fur except for one fluffy white tuft in the middle.

That's when I thought to myself that this was what Max meant about playing games.

"So you just suck at cards," I said to him.

Aylvan reached his arm around his neck and everyone else ran like hell. He had a pretty good shot at me once he got through with the other two, I thought at the time. I got ready to run. I'm only human, you know.

I looked over to see Max pull a big rifle, as long as his arm at least, and brace the stock against the right side of his chest. He pulled the trigger and a disk flew through the air and attached to Mizwraith's furry chest.

Mizwraith had enough time to look down at it but Aylvan didn't have enough time to let go and then poof both of them were gone. Those disks were something Max cooked up in case of an emergency. It was the equivalent of

throwing someone out the front door on their ass. Only, and just so's you know, that anyone, and that means me and Max as well, who leaves The Beanstalk can't ever come back.

Max stowed his weapon back under the bar, shook his head at me, and went back to work. I guess, that's his way of saying I told you so.

"Thanks, Max," I called out.

And the next morning I woke up to the ungodly snoring of my new cyclopean girlfriend, tangled in sweaty sheets, with a holographic representation of a rising sun beaming through the window of my apartment. I managed to learn to things from her.

1. Cyclopeses can wink

2. When someone says 'Don't play games', it doesn't necessarily refer to cards