

**The Leaching  
of  
Ian Burns**

By  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: In the End, the Beginning	6
Chapter 2: My Initiation	14
Chapter 3: The First Nap	23
Chapter 4: The First Snoop	30
Chapter 5: Some Answers	38
Chapter 6: My First Introversion	43
Chapter 7: I'm ready to Listen	48
Chapter 8: Wandering	55
Chapter 9: I'd Just Like to Be Old	60
Chapter 10: The Watering Hole	64
Chapter 11: Julia to the Rescue	69
Chapter 12: Garden of Eden?	74
Chapter 13: The First Class	79
Chapter 14: Homework in Heaven	86
Chapter 15: Piecing It Together	97
Chapter 16: The Hangman	102
Chapter 17: Full of Myself, and Ready for Action	107
Chapter 18: Joint Effort	116
Chapter 19: Overwhelming Guilt	124
Chapter 20: Preparing for Emma	129
Chapter 21: Emma's Adjustment	136
Chapter 22: An Honest Conversation	146
Chapter 23: Anger Management, 1001	154
Chapter 24: Pow-Wow with the Guys	161
Chapter 25: Getting It All in the Past	164
Chapter 26: 9/11	178
Chapter 27: The Ocean Floor	183

Chapter 28: Little Irene	191
Chapter 29: A Trip to Hell	197
Chapter 30: I'm Ready to Work	206
Chapter 31: Communication is a Wonderful Thing	212
Chapter 32: Hardly a Break	216
Chapter 33: The Physics of Good and Evil	221
Chapter 34: Getting to Know Bill	226
Chapter 35: We're a Team!	231
Chapter 36: And We're Off!	235
Chapter 37: The Board Room	238
Chapter 38: Let the Tailing Begin!	246
Chapter 39: Check In With the Team	255
Chapter 40: Just Like in the Movies	262
Chapter 41: The Dinner Meeting	271
Chapter 42: What to do Next?	279
Chapter 43: The Devil in the Corner	282
Chapter 44: The Plot	286
Chapter 45: First Mission Accomplished	290
Chapter 46: Mission II, If I Choose to Accept	296
Chapter 47: Evil Incarnate	309
Chapter 48: Hermes' Alter Ego	314
Chapter 49: The Race Is On	321
Chapter 50: Back to Work, Newly Focused	328
Chapter 51: What's the Matter with Larry?	334
Chapter 52: A Meeting of the Minds	341
Chapter 53: Got ME Thinking	351
Chapter 54: My Shield Is Shattered	356
Chapter 55: Back to the Oil Gig	359
Chapter 56: Making Connections	366

Chapter 57: What about Henry?	374
Chapter 58: Moving Right Along	378
Chapter 59: I Asked For Excitement....	384
Chapter 60: Fast Forward	388
Chapter 61: Leo, Lenny and Larry	392
Chapter 62: Larry's Pet Peeve	403
Chapter 63: Danny's Last Chance	412
Chapter 64: Leo and the Lawyer	420
Chapter 65: Larry's Observations	426
Chapter 66: Change of Heart	430
Chapter 67: The Unthinkable Begins	434
Chapter 68: Gold Retrieval, On Steroids	439
Chapter 69: The Ultimate Catharsis	449

CAST OF CHARACTERS 452

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## In the End, the Beginning

The pain was indescribable. A spray of sharp needles flying at my face wouldn't hurt as much. Instantly, it spread to my chest and then to my belly. *'Help me! PLEASE, HELP ME!!'* My legs were next. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't scream. I couldn't see. I fell to my knees; then forward onto my face. Prone in the fire, through the fog of agony, I thought, *'What have I done? WHAT HAVE I DONE?'*

I became dizzy from lack of oxygen, but the pain seemed to be fading. I felt warm; not hot. And very light. I sat up (I think) but I couldn't see anything. I panicked. *'I'M BLIND! Nooooo! Take my hearing, my sense of smell, my legs, anything BUT MY SIGHT!'*

"Chill out, would you please," a calm voice near my shoulder said. "I'm here to help, but you've got to help me, too. I can't do this alone, you know."

"WHAT!!! I'm burning alive and I'm supposed to help YOU!!?"

"Yes. Now, just take a deep breath and relax."

"RELAX!!!!? RELAX!! Are you crazy, or what!!?"

"At least TRY to help me. Relax, and open your mind. Ask your question again, but mean it this time."

I groaned. But, I suddenly realized, not from pain. There was no pain. Not even my usual old age aches and pains. My panic waned. *'What question could this voice be talking about,'* I thought.

"The one you asked just before you started whining about not being able to see," the now slightly annoyed voice said.

My mouth was agape (I think). *'She can read my mind!'*

"Well? Do you want to know what you've done or not? We can't stay here forever, you know," she said impatiently.

"NO! I DON'T know! Who are you? Am I dead? Where ARE we?" I was starting to feel rather frustrated.

"Gee, they told me you'd be an easy one. Okay, maybe 'chill out' wasn't a good choice of words, but you don't need to be in such a snit!"

I had expected a guardian angel to be a bit more patient and helpful. "Are you taking me to hell?" I asked worriedly.

"Aarrgghh!!" was her response. "You know you're not evil! You're just cranky. And stubborn. And cantankerous. And too curious for your own good. Now, do you want to know what you've done or not?"

She was right about the curiosity. "I want to know what's going on, if that's what you mean," I replied.

Instantly, the darkness was transformed into a warm, bright mist. It felt so good. So soft. So fuzzy. I didn't care if I ever saw anything again. I'd be perfectly content to stay in this suspended state forever, which is saying quite a lot, for me.

A glimpse of the family and friends I'd leave behind ran through the depths of my mind, but they seemed ready to let me go. They didn't look too unhappy, though I thought I sensed a tear or two from one of them.

I was dead, whether I liked it or not.

I soon felt myself drifting down like a leaf in the autumn breeze. The fuzziness stayed above us, but the 'feel-goodness' stayed with me. *'Not a cranky bone in my body for the first time in my life!'* I thought.

My angel cleared her throat loudly. "Did you forget already? You're dead. Or at least the old you is no more. Look at yourself."

I was a wisp of my former self. My basic form was the same, but I could see through my hand and I could slice my hand through my forearm with minimal resistance.

"Does this mean I don't have to eat any more to stay alive-I mean to stay dea--I mean to exist?" Eating was a waste of time. There is, or was, so much else to do.

"You can do as you like. To eat, or not to eat, that's up to you. Here you can basically do whatever your soul desires. You can play football, golf, read, talk with friends, watch the mist swirl up above, play cards, or anything you wish you had more time for in life. Except sleeping. Sleeping is different here. It can really wear a soul out. Even the most productive sleepers have to wake up for a few hours to rest."

I pinched myself, or tried to. My fingertips just touched each other through what looked like a skin-like substance. Did I just hear her say sleeping was hard work? I had lived to sleep! When I wasn't trying to sort out something interestingly complicated, that is. But, now that I thought about it, I didn't feel the least bit sleepy. Hummm, I could get used to this place.

I looked around. We were at the top of a large treeless hill, or mountain, or volcano of some sort, ringed with various sized, shaped and colored bubbles connected by a conduit or conveyor belt sort of thing. A few feet away from where we had landed was a contraption making a humming noise. I stood up to get a better look.

It could have been straight out of the airport baggage pick-up area. "Am I finally going to get all my luggage those darn airlines lost!? This really IS heaven!" I exclaimed happily, although I knew full well I would never need ANY luggage here, and my old stuff was gone forever. "I had heard that lost baggage is what makes up the rings of Saturn," I joked.

My angel wasn't amused. She looked like my first grade teacher, oh so many years ago. "Since most new arrivals are elderly, we let them ride to their pod," she responded matter-of-factly.

'*She doesn't look so young herself,*' I thought, forgetting she could read my mind. But she actually smiled, and I got the feeling that being old here was a not necessarily a bad thing. After all, she did say I could play football if I wanted to - at my age! "What's a pod and how do I know which is mine?" I asked.



"A pod is the living space for a collection of kindred souls," she explained.

"No!" I felt a small surge of dread, though not as much as I'd have felt at the same thought in life. "I thought I was rid of the b-----!" The end of this feeling filled word did not come from my mouth. Rather, a small light gray dart flew out towards the angel at a fairly slow rate of speed. She dodged it without any apparent thought and little effort.

"There is really no need for strong words here. We can read your feelings as well as your thoughts," was her response.

'G—A-----,' I thought. A small tan fluff came out of my ear as I thought this less than heavenly phrase. *'Is there no privacy here? How's a fella to pick his nose, or relieve himself?'*

NOW the old bat laughed. It was a happy laugh, not filled with sarcasm. Somehow I knew why - bodily functions here are not necessary. "But a bit of freedom from prying angels has to be a rule here, doesn't it? I mean, some of us humans are, or were, bashful souls, *'(alright, maybe not me)'*. I just don't want my thoughts out in the open for all to enjoy. Surely there are some limits to this invasion!" *'A guy could develop a healthy case of paranoia in this place,'* I thought.

I became more than a bit annoyed, as an answer was not to be had. She just shook her head like the schoolmarm she most certainly had been. I swear I heard her cluck a *'tsk, tsk'*, even with the smile on her face.

Luckily, another, more helpful looking soul appeared. "Hi, I'm Karl. I'd been assigned to you for years now, Mr. Burns. Sorry I couldn't be the one to bring you here, but events can't always be altered or predicted. I didn't expect you to do something so silly at your age. I thought you had a few more human years left in you."

"No harm done," I said dryly. "This tremendously helpful lady kept me entertained with 'guess what I'm thinking' while I was trying to decide if I was dead or alive." I was sure to emphasize the helpfulness of my angel of deliverance. "By the way, you don't look much older than a

teenie bopper, sonny.” I shot a sideways glance at Mrs. Cratchet as a comment on HER age.

They looked at each other knowingly. "We are both MUCH older than you are, by decades. And her name is Pearl. Or Ms. Gates, if you'd like," Karl offered.

"Well, if you ask me, neither of you are dry behind the ears. If I were your boss, you'd both be fired! What kind of place is this? Can't a human being get better service than having a fill-in angel sent when he's dying, for C-----'s s---?" A small brown thumb tack flew out of my mouth instead of this phrase. It bounced off Karl's ear. He didn't even flinch.

"Being trusted to the less potent souls is an honor of sorts. It means you have more good in you than some, and needed less intervention. Or maybe I should say, you asked for guidance less often," he said. "You could have saved yourself a lot of headaches if only you had asked us for help more often."

All this gibberish was very irritating. *'Why the h--- would I have wanted THIS kind of help?'* I became more and more furious the more I thought about it. A puff of chocolate brown grit snorted from my left nostril.

"Time to get to your pod, then," Karl said abruptly. I think he saw my innards start to churn with frustration. I couldn't handle any more of this kind of information. It was too illogical and I was starting to decompensate. Maybe Karl knew me pretty well after all.

Riding the conveyor belt gave me time to calm down a bit. It moved quickly with just enough bumps to make the ride interesting without fear for one's life. Not that one's life needed to be worried about here....

I thought about being able to do anything I wanted here. I wondered if the golf courses were any good. "Hey!" I suddenly realized I had no clubs. "How am I supposed to play golf without MY clubs?! I can't use just any clubs, you know" I glared at the angel of deliverance with this question to see if the 'you know' phrase annoyed her as much as it had me.

*'I guess some things do get past them,'* I thought when she didn't react to my jab right away.

After a pause, she smiled and said, "You'll hit holes-in-one using your foot if you so choose."

*'Gee, what fun would that be?'* I wondered. *'What would be the challenge?'*

We rode by some wrinkled pods full of happy interactions. I began to wonder if I wouldn't be bored to death here. Well not bored to death maybe, but to tears, without any lively disagreements or interesting conflicts. *'If there aren't any souls here that could be easily riled, I'll go berserk. Winding people up is one of my favorite past-times. And she didn't list it as hobby in her 'you can do anything you want here' spiel.'*

In one pod, several occupants were in small window-like out-pouches in a wall, scowls on their faces. *'Nice cranky souls! There IS fun to be had!'* "Can I be in that pod?" I asked Karl.

"No. They have their hands full with the grouches they already tend. You'll need more assistance than they can give you," he replied. "Your pod is further down the hill. They have more experience with your types of problems."

*'First they tell me I'm too good to need a decent angel, now they tell me I'm too challenging for the beginners. I wish they'd make up their minds already,'* I groused to myself.

"Get used to shades of gray, Mr. Burns. The quicker you learn to not think in black and white categories, the quicker you'll deAge," schoolmarm Gates admonished.

I felt a pang of *'I like me just the age I am, thank you very much.'* "I don't want to deAge, whatever that is. I worked hard to get these gray hairs; what's left of them, anyway. And what's wrong with black and white? I hate all those cry-babies who want to have it both ways." As I remembered interactions with my wishy-washy workers, my face screwed up into a contemptuous scowl. "Yes, but, Mr. Burns....., But it could also be....Mr. Burns....That's YOUR point of view, Mr. Burns.....," I mocked. "Why can't those mealy mouthed idiots make up their ----- minds!" The nearly black dagger

that zoomed out of my mouth startled me, and Ms Cratchet flinched as it flew through her forehead.

"What the h--- was that?" I asked, barely noticing the tan fluff that floated out next.

"Seeing the world in black and white is easier for most people as it helps them make decisions more quickly, and keeps the uneasy feelings of uncertainty at bay," Karl explained. "It's much harder to live in grays on earth, but here we add color and texture to help identify what's what and who's who. You'll adjust in no time if you'll open your mind to possibilities other than those currently ingrained in your psyche." Karl's tone of voice was not curt, but his comment still didn't set well.

*'If I'll open my mind,'* I thought with a curl of my lip and a snarl in my mind. *'As if I could close it if I wanted to.'* I looked at them through narrowed eyes expecting a reaction to this thought. They just looked at each other without saying a word or showing any emotion.

*'How the h--- am I to survive here like this!'* With this thought a black puff of sand exited my right nostril in a gust. I began to wonder if some of the ashes from my playing with fire escapade had gotten up my nose, but this was sand, not ash. *'D---,'* I thought, and a smaller tan fluff exited my other nostril. *'Is this how a cold acts in heaven? But I don't ache, or have a fever. And I'm not sneezing. Maybe heaven's viruses are wimpy. Good. I hate getting colds.'*

We rode for a while in silence, which was just fine with me. It gave me time to look around. Some of the pods were actually changing color and texture, some slowly, some quickly. The ones nearer the top of the mountain had many large red bumps all over them. I watched dumbfounded as one of the zit-like swellings popped. Yucky goop sprayed everywhere. A wisp of a gold, glittery substance floated up into the fuzzy cloud high above us and disappeared.

I looked back down the mountain towards the nearest pod just in time to see another zit pop. The goop smelled rotten. As gold glitter floated up to the fuzz overhead, silver glitter

dripped from the ragged edges of the remaining wall. *'Interesting,'* I thought.

The conveyor belt stopped. "Your pod," Karl said solemnly.

I searched his face for clues as to my future. "Aren't you coming with me? Aren't you my guardian angel?" I asked.

"No. Not anymore," he replied, and slowly faded from my sight.

I looked at the fill-in spirit hopefully. "Me neither" she said as she followed Karl into the unknown. Once again, I was more afraid than I was annoyed or curious.

I wasn't convinced this wasn't hell.

## My Initiation

At the opening of the pod was a child of what appeared to be 8 years of age. "Welcome to Camp Canopy. Here we exist as our hearts desire. You will not have to sleep before you are ready. You can have any thoughts you feel like having, but be aware of how you feel, and how you choose to express yourself. Follow me."

Her greeting reminded me of those canned 'answering the phone' phrases secretaries rattled off when a human being used to actually answer business phones. I never could make sense of THEIR rapid-fire speeches, either. Besides, the pod was so amazing it quickly pushed all my questions to the back of my mind.

As she led the way through the pod, I could see there were many more nooks and crannies than I had imagined judging from the outside. Some areas even seemed to BE outside.

My curiosity grew as we went deeper into the pod. Several nurseries full of sleeping babies were tended by mere infants. One nursery looked as though the caretakers were just born themselves. "This is the newborn section. The intensive care nursery is off to the right and out of sight. Seeing the amount of work they do can be traumatic for the not yet young," my guide said with a bit of a sigh, then added, "My name is Julia. I'll be your first deAger."

I looked at her for a while, then decided not to ask questions just yet.

"Smart decision," Julia replied to my thought. Somehow, though, her invasion into my thoughts did not feel unwelcome, and I didn't feel the urge to give a smart retort. I

felt only a slight nostalgic twinge at the absence of the hereto-fore automatic reflex.

We turned to the right, making almost a complete U-turn at the next corridor. We seemed to be entering mountains, with souls camping near a river's edge, happily socializing around campfires. "Do you trust me around fire?" I asked with a smile. *'If it wasn't one of those blasted new fangled gas stoves, I'd have been okay. It didn't have a pilot light, for Chri--- sake!'* I thought I felt something in my right ear. I stuck my little fingertip into my ear canal and removed a tiny bit of fluff, slightly tan in color. My forehead wrinkled with puzzlement.

"You may have noticed strong words and thoughts are turned into visual props. It helps us notice the strength of our feelings so that we are better able to deal with them." She smiled and added, "And it also helps us to communicate, in case we are not properly tuned in to others' thoughts."

*'Chri--- must not have been too strong a word, then,'* I deduced, as a small puff filled my other ear. I smiled when I remembered that I thought I had a cold when the puffs of sand flew from my nostrils. "So that was why that dagger flew out of my mouth and into Mrs. Cratchet, then?"

Julia nodded rather sadly.

I didn't realize I used strong language so often. What would they do with some of my old cronies? *'Humm, I wonder if any of them are here...'*

"Look up ahead," Julia said.

They were at a card table that looked like a huge mushroom shaped tree trunk with a wide rim of smooth bark around the periphery of its flat top. The chairs were similar, with an arc of hollowed out bark as the backrest. They were playing my favorite card game - euchre.

"We heard you were coming, so we dealt you a hand," said my closest friend, Arnie. He had died just a few months ago. If he hadn't left me to cook for myself, I'd still be alive.

"You old coot!" I exclaimed as we gave each other a bear hug. "Why'd you leave me like that, you old f-t?" He

swooshed away the yellow fluff from my mouth as though I had bad breath, and laughed heartily.

"You were driving me crazy! I was so p----- o-- at you that even the purple pill couldn't have helped the heartburn you gave me! That may have been because it wasn't heartburn, but never mind. Didn't Karl help you with that new stove? I told him I didn't think you heard me tell you there was no pilot light. I figured you'd be persistent enough to try to find a way to light something, somewhere on it. He didn't seem too worried about you blowing up the place though."

"Well, obviously, he was wrong," I said with some disdain. I didn't think angels made mistakes, but then again I didn't think they'd send substitutes to bring their charges to heaven, either. "By the way, this is heaven, isn't it?" I asked a bit too seriously for the guys to handle. They burst out in such intense laughter that they turned a deep red.

I stood there, annoyed and puzzled. Finally Harry was able to get out: "We were....har-har, hee-ee....worried... snort, wheeze, cough....too...cough, cough, cough....."

"Gee, don't die laughing," I said coolly, which only caused a more intense round of laughter. When the color of their faces between inhalations took on a deep violet hue, I really WAS worried they'd explode. And I really DID wonder if this was heaven, especially when I noticed who was also at the table. I NEVER thought Johnny would be in heaven. That old piece-of-work was so bull-headed and hateful on earth; everyone avoided him....sorta like they did me, now that I thought about it.

We never did get to play a card game that day. After they reminisced about their deaths and properly razzed me about the stupidity of lighting a match after I had spent over an hour turning the burners off and on in futile attempts to get one to burn, Harry, Larry, and Arnie said they felt like a nap.

That left me, Johnny and Joe at the table. Johnny seemed a bit perturbed that the others wanted to nap. "They don't



need to sleep, and they know it," he said irritably. "At least one of them could stay to make a foursome."

"Why don't we just find another person to play? Surely, if we're here, other card players are here, too." I ventured hopefully.

"The ones up the hill play the hard stuff, like poker, for high stakes. Too much for me, even on earth. And the ones down the hill are too hoity-toity," answered Johnny.

"What about others here in our pod?" I asked, still hoping for a good rowdy game. I wasn't a bit sleepy, and a good game might take my mind off of all the novelty I've had to endure since I died. Johnny and Joe looked at each other and grinned mischievously. "Mikey. He's better than no one," Johnny said. I thought I sensed *'and if he pairs with Ian, here, we can finally beat the b-----.'* Red fluffs floated from their ears as they rose and hovered off to get Mikey.

As I waited for them to return, I took in the scenery and wondered how a card game with mind reading worked. *'Is there a poker mind here, as opposed to a poker face? Maybe that's the way to survive the intrusions of heavenly mind-reading.'*

I looked down toward the river where there were men fishing. Some of the other campsites were full of souls cooking over a fire; others were tossing horseshoes. There were lots of hammocks strung between the trees with relaxed and snoring occupants. In one hammock, a fluffy white cat was purring in time with the snores. Back toward the mountain some horses were being saddled as other souls walked by on foot towards a wide path into rather dense woods. In a field several souls were throwing sticks for very happy, energetic dogs to catch.

Johnny and Joe returned shortly with disappointed looks on their misty faces. "Mikey was asleep. Who on earth would give HIM a job. The guy can't even tie his shoes!"

"Let's go golfing instead," suggested Johnny.

Joe was not at all enthusiastic. "I'm fed up getting 18 holes-in-one. It's not fun anymore," he grouched. "May as well go to sleep..." and faded out.

Johnny frowned angrily at me. "What do YOU want to do?" he asked gruffly.

"How the h--- should I know?" I answered defensively.

He studied my face for a few seconds, ignoring the brown tack that floated out of my mouth towards him. He softened his gaze. "Yeah, I guess you wouldn't know all the options at your ripe old age. Let's go down to the Watering Hole. Sometimes the older sleepers have some good stories to tell."

As I walked, Johnny glided along the river. I wondered again what sort of place this could be. It wasn't as warm and fuzzy, nor as well controlled as I had been taught heaven would be, but it sure felt too good to be hell. '*This is just too d--- confusing.*' Johnny smiled at my little ear puff production.

"I really miss the puffs of all colors and textures that used to come out our ears and noses when we first arrived. I guess we're all a bunch of softies now," he said. Somehow I couldn't see Johnny as a softie. But he didn't really appear too distraught at the paucity of puffs, either.

Up ahead was music and laughter. A multifaceted silver ball like those that hang over dance floors on earth floated over the scene. Light of all colors bounced from it onto the crowd below. Lots of souls were dancing anything from the Waltz to the Hustle. Many more were sitting around tables and the bar, talking and laughing. Some of them looked vaguely familiar, as I was seeing people from my past at younger ages than they were when they died. And some who I never saw smile on earth were even harder to place, as laughter changed the wrinkles left on their now younger-looking faces.

The souls seemed to be in groups of comparable ages. The younger ones were not as animated as the older ones, but they were still very happy. Almost everyone had a glass with varying amounts of different color drinks. It was easy to tell who had the most to drink - their beings were the color of their drinks. Some had obviously tasted some of their neighbor's drinks, as their colors were not the same as the

fluid in their own glasses. A purple soul next to a red soul had blue fluid in her own glass. Some of the more gregarious souls were a nondescript brown from sampling way too many glasses. And no one seemed to need to go to the bathroom, as the floor was the color of their innards if they drank to overflowing. I could have stood and watched forever. I wondered *'how do the church ladies deal with alcohol in heaven?'*

"The drinks here taste like alcoholic drinks on earth, but they don't have alcohol in them. We just enjoy the atmosphere, and most souls are so happy at baseline, they don't need the buzz," offered Johnny.

He floated over to join an older group that was full to the brim of a rainbow of colors. They were laughing more than they were talking. "When you get good at mind reading, words aren't as necessary," Johnny explained. "It leaves more time for laughing."

I thought about asking my 'poker mind' question, but decided to wait.

"Worry about that later - you'll have LOTS of time" Johnny answered my thought. "Come on! You've got to hear this!"

If I didn't know better, I'd swear the old men around the table were wearing rugby outfits. "Listen to this one! It's hilarious!" Johnny was summoned over by Matt, who I vaguely remembered from my years at college. He was a pompous a----- .

"Nice to see you, Ian! You've aged a bit, I see!" Matt came up and shook my hand.

*'If the b----- tries to give me a hug, I'll deck him, heaven or not,'* I thought with a snort.

"I expected those gray sandy puffs from your nose, but not quite so dark and forceful. You always did have a great memory, and it appears you remembered every little slight." That he seemed amused by this was exceedingly annoying.

I didn't have the enjoyment of dwelling on this feeling, however, as I was thrust into the midst of the gaiety immediately. Arnie was at the center of the attention, looking

very refreshed. "Didn't need a long nap this time. Listen to this assignment!"

"As soon as I fell asleep, I popped into the middle of a rugby game. The home team center had just been irked but the visiting team's center. Boy was he mad! Apparently mad enough to wish for something bad to happen to the b-----, because there was this really evil-looking blob over that other center. I never had such a good game since I died! I grabbed the blob and we wrestled. Man did he stink! I had to block him over and over! He was doing his best to get the other center's head rammed into the ground. That visiting center sure looked mean! I wasn't anxious to have him killed and brought here, or worst yet to lose him to those soulless reptiles in h--- on earth. He'd 'a been good fodder for their pets. Then there'd be h--- to pay!"

No puffs came out of Arnie's ears or darts from his mouth, even though he said these 'strong' words aloud.

"Then Harry and Larry popped in just in time to help me with the pieces of the blob that broke off during my blocks. Man that stench was rough! Really got my juices flowing, though, just like old college days! Wanted to wring the blob's neck, if I knew where the blooming neck was! So there we was, the three of us and the parts if it, in a fight even past the end of the game. The props were trying to calm the home team center down-I guess that's why Larry and Harry showed up- he just wouldn't cool off. We even had to keep the blob out of the bus before the visiting team left for home. Can you believe that gutless blob tried to get the driver to run the guy over! Thought for a while I'd have to sleep for days to protect that b-----. To top it off, I never did get to hear what it was that made the home team center so mad. It must 'uv been good!"

"If you'da looked at the home team center's face and sleeve, you'da known. The a----- hocked a loogie all over him. My prop wanted to deck him, too, but I was there to stop him." Harry shook his head slowly. "That blob sure did look hateful. And the baby blobs were just about as bad! I wish I could have wrung that slob's neck myself. Took

everything I had to fight the blobs instead of him! Yeah, that was a battle."

"So who won the game?" asked Johnny.

"We did, you idiot! You know we always win!" replied Harry testily.

"Not OUR game. THEIR game, you b-----!" retorted Johnny, literally shooting a dagger at Harry as it flew out of his mouth instead of the word. And it was a very dark dagger, at that.

A few younger souls appeared above the table.

"Let's settle down," said one. Another was wringing her hands and looked rather worried. "Let's be nice," said a third.

"Let's be nice," mocked Johnny with disdain dripping from his voice. "Let me tell you about being nice." He continued through gritted teeth looking hatefully at the third young soul. "Being nice is what got me here, remember? Or is your memory gone along with your wrinkles?"

He began oozing dark gray smoke from not only his ears and nose, but from every pore in his bo-, uh, being. I sensed a definite change in the atmosphere of the entire crowd. The child nearest Johnny tried to reach him, but the smoke had quickly grown so thick that it fully encircled Johnny. His form became more and more difficult to make out until he disappeared into his nearly black cloud. It continued to grow thicker and thicker until it looked like the oil from the old clunker I had to drive as a teenager. Just as its viscosity increased to tar, a funnel shaped wisp of whirling fluff descended from above and sucked the tar up into the fuzzy cloud. I watched in amazement as Johnny's tar disappeared. I couldn't take my eyes off of the spot in the cloud where I last saw him, or what was left of him.

*'Can someone be killed in heaven, for C---- s---?' I thought. I felt a twinge of fear when a baby blue puff drifted out of my ear.*

*'I didn't mean 'for C---- s---' I meant, I meant, oh h---, that WAS what I meant!'* Another lighter blue fluff escaped just before a smaller very light blue puff. The last two

bounced off Arnie's shoulder. He was hovering above me a bit. He had been shorter than me in life.

"Don't worry, Ian. He just popped up to the fuzz for a fuzzy. Look." He chuckled and pointed up to the spot in the fuzzy cloud I had been focused on before the puffs distracted me. Silver glitter was raining down and a soft wind was blowing it out over a distant ocean.

"Well I'll be-" I stopped before I actually said 'd----'.

Arnie laughed. "Don't worry. You won't turn into tar just thinking or saying 'naughty' words. Salt maybe. But not tar." After he made this comment, he glowed red with mischief as he took a large swig from his glass. He tried his best to suppress a belly laugh until after he swallowed, but didn't succeed. He snorted his drink out of his nose before he burst into laughter. The rest of the guys quickly joined in with almost hysterical laughter as Arnie coughed and hacked between guffaws.

The crowd went back to their tables and resumed their conversations as if nothing unusual had just happened.

*'Johnny disintegrated into a blob of tar, and his ashes were blown out to sea, and NOBODY cared! Not even his friends! They actually LAUGHED!'*

Julia appeared at my elbow. "Got you thinking, huh," She acknowledged softly. "Stop thinking and feel instead. How do you FEEL?" she asked with a sincere look on her face.

I hated that phrase. I cringed with disgust. I wanted to say, '*what are you, a shrink? A bleeding heart liberal? A California hippie?*' but I couldn't. She looked so innocent.

I suddenly felt drained. My knees nearly buckled. As the lump in my throat turned to tears, I felt myself drifting away from the others, Julia's small hand leading the way.

## The First Nap

"Okay, girlie, you got me that time. I'll be ready for ya next time though, now that I'm on to your tricks," I said with as much testosterone as I could muster. I worried the others may have seen me lose it. *'Real men don't cry, ESPECIALLY in front of real men. But, I'm not real in any sense, anymore, am I?'* I thought sadly.

Julia just smiled and with a broad sweep of her arm, motioned for me to notice my new surroundings. We were in a sterile looking bright room with rows of cots. Those closer to the walls were stacked two or three high. The souls on the top bunks looked like teenagers, while the ones on the lower ones looked middle aged or older. Most were sleeping with smiles on their faces, intermingled with tics and starts and an occasional muffled squeal. *'Or were those screams?'*

"It depends on their dream," offered Julia.

"Would you please stop reading my mind!" I said with an effort to sound annoyed. But, funny thing was, I wasn't annoyed at all. It felt so good to be in her presence that I probably would agree to anything she asked me to do. It wasn't the physical attraction of mortal flesh. This was very different. It was like a wave of warmth combined with a tender hug from Mom, and a belly full of apple pie, and.....

"Mr. Burns," Julia interrupted my reverie. "You'll be able to emit the same feeling, once you're sufficiently deAged."

"So tell me how to deAge already, whatever the h--- that is!" I pretended to be irritated. The red puff of smoke that floated from my mouth gave me away.

"Boy, if this isn't more challenging to figure out than a Rubik's Cube. I'm worn out. Can I pull up one of these cots and catch a few zzzz's?" I asked.

"Certainly." She motioned to one on my right. "Would you like a pillow or a blanket?"

"Both, and I prefer goose down. Those polyester things get up my nose." I tried to be demanding. I had an image to keep up and she had seen me cry like a baby.

"Certainly," she said again. With the thought, came the bedding.

"It's a miracle!!" I exclaimed with mock disbelief. I was getting used to the unexpected. I crawled under the blanket, nestled in for a nap, and closed my eyes.

Within a split second they sprung back open as I suddenly remembered that I was too old to work, if sleeping really was work.

"We'll start you out gently" Julia reassured me and gave me a loving kiss on the cheek. I hoped I had remembered to shave before I died. I'd hate to give her brush-burned lips.

I closed my eyes again and within seconds, I was asleep. I wished I could have fallen asleep that fast in life, I mused wistfully.

My eyes popped wide open with that thought. How could I be thinking if I were asleep? I looked around in amazement. I wasn't in the sterile bright room anymore, but in a scene right out of a National Geographic documentary. A herd of gnus grazed quietly to the left, with some zebras close by. To the right was a village made of huts with grass roofs and almost no walls. Behind me was thick vegetation of some sort. I wished I could hear the narrator of this documentary, so I'd know where I was and what the h--- was going on. A barely visible yellowish mist meandered out of my ear.

Why don't things happen when I just think them, like they do for Julia?

A jolt of fear hit me as I suddenly realized I may be reincarnated as some subhuman creature. I looked down at



myself and sighed with relief to see the old wisp of me instead of a boa constrictor, or some other low life form. 'G— *Almighty, that would be awful! It had been hard enough being human!*' A bit of white fluff lodged in my ear canal.

As I tilted my head a bit to try to thump it out, I noticed a toddler close to the thick vegetation. '*Cute little thing,*' I thought as I wondered where his parents might be. The people in the village seemed too busy to notice the little tyke. I hoped he wouldn't get into any poison ivy. He was naked, and just having a rash on one square inch of my arm had been torture. I moved closer to the child to see what he was doing. He was laughing as he played with something in front of him. His back was towards me, so I couldn't see what it was. Not knowing whether or not I was visible to living beings, I didn't want to go around him out in the open, so I tested my solidity by turning into the bushes. I breezed right through with nary a scratch! This was fun!

But my joy turned to horror when I spotted the lioness crouched in the bush just yards from the youngster. I stopped cold. '*God, no!*' I thought in a non-specific plea. '*What can I do?*' My mind raced. I tried to pick up a stick to throw at the lion, but the stick didn't budge as it slipped right through my substance-less hand. I hollered "Git!" and waved my arms, but obviously I was not heard or seen by the lion or the child. I had only seconds to come up with something I could do that this world would notice, or the boy would be dinner!

I rushed towards the village. As I rounded a corner of the closest semi-wall, I ran into, or rather, through, a young woman grinding some sort of grain into meal. As I put on my brakes and turned to get back to her (wishing I could have run this fast before I died), she looked up from her work toward the youngster, and immediately bolted towards the bush to get the child. She must have sensed me somehow!! Hallelujah!!

She screamed as she ran. The other villagers dropped everything and ran towards the bush to help. The lioness

apparently realized she had to pounce then, or never, and was feet from the boy when an arrow flew by my ear.

'Jeez, that was close!' I thought. Never mind that an arrow would have gone straight through me anyway. But it didn't go through the lion. Caught her right in the haunches, and broke her stride. The young mother reached the child just as the lioness limped into the bush, with the men and arrows close behind her.

I stood, transfixed, staring at the bush, listening to the commotion as the men finished off the lioness. '*Poor thing,*' I thought. '*What if she has cubs?*' Apparently the men thought the same thing as they examined her after they pulled her carcass into the open and noticed she had been nursing. They talked among themselves for a short while in a heated discussion about whether or not they should go look for the cubs, as best I could tell from the gestures. Eventually the older men were satisfied that they were right, and went back to their chores. The younger men, and some boys, pouted and kicked at the dirt, obviously unhappy with the elders' decision. The younger men sat on the ground in a circle and began scheming as soon as the older men were out of sight and out of earshot. The boys busied themselves by examining the dead lion from head to toe; tooth to tail.

I was curious to find out how the mother had sensed my presence, so I wandered over to her hut. She was holding the boy tightly, rocking back and forth with tears streaming down her cheeks, too distraught to talk. The women around her were trying to comfort her with soft words and gentle hugs. Eventually she was able to speak. '*God, I wish I could understand their language,*' I thought. As I strained to hear, I swear I heard her say "cold breeze" as she shuddered. The others looked at each other in amazement. The air was as still and warm as the sky was blue. And the sky was very blue.

I was a bit put off that I was sensed as a cold breeze. '*After all, I did have good intentions, didn't I? Heroes aren't exactly ice cubes, now, are we?*' I enjoyed the self-pity a few minutes before I allowed logic to intervene. Of course I

would have been cold. If I had been warm and fuzzy, she might not have felt the fear that prompted her to run for her child.

With a sigh, I looked back at the young men and boys. The boys were pretending to ride the lioness, whipping her carcass with large twigs. The young men were looking shiftily back at the village, biding their time for an unnoticed slip into the bushes. I sat down on a stump and put my head in my hands. This did NOT feel fun after all. I wanted to wake up.

And so I did. The bright lights caused me to squint. *‘How did I ever fall asleep with those d---- lights on?’* I was most cranky. I ignored the brown sand that spurted from my nose. *‘If this is a sample of my job in heaven, I wonder how much worse it could be in hell.’* I felt the vague discomfort I used to feel in life after waking from a very frustrating dream, like I should have been able to do more. I couldn’t understand why I felt so badly. After all, I did save the little boy. *‘Why do I feel pity for the lioness? She was going to eat that kid! But those boys showed no respect for her at all, abusing her dead body like that. And those old men were going to just let those poor cubs starve to death!’* I felt myself rooting for the young men. I wondered if I could help them find the cubs if I went back to sleep.....

And I did. Instantly. The young men were splitting up. Some went back to the huts, others headed to a water hole. Only three slipped off into the bushes. I followed this last group, as they seemed to be the ones elected to do the tracking. They were very good at it, too. They covered what seemed to be miles in just a few minutes.

As we reached a slight elevation in the landscape, they slowed down and started looking among the rocks and vegetation instead of looking for tracks on the ground. They looked for quite some time in an area sheltered from the hot sun.

After a bit, they began to look rather discouraged. They sat and began discussing options. One pulled a piece of raw

meat out of his pocket. The others nodded their heads as he went to place it in the most secluded spot they had found so far. When he returned to the group, they hid behind a rock and watched. And waited. And watched. And waited.

It was enough to put a guy to sleep! This thought reminded me that I WAS sleeping, and I was here to help, not just watch. I smacked (through) my forehead with my palm. *'What an idiot!'* I reprimanded myself harshly.

*'Okay, so what can I do to help?'* I asked, and then answered myself: *'Just go through the bushes and boulders and look!'* I smiled as I recognized that I was now talking to myself. Not only was I dead, but crazy, too. Or maybe not dead, just crazy? *'THIS is crazy! I don't even know what those guys are going to do if they find the cubs. Are they going to raise them? Where would they get milk to feed them? How could they keep them a secret from the elders?'* I paused to ponder these issues. It didn't take long to come to the conclusion that they were going to kill them. Logically, this is the only thing that would make sense. After all, cubs grow up to be lions that eat meat, be it people or people's animals. In order for the people to survive, the cubs had to go.

I had been an avid hunter, and here I was, worried about a couple of cubs. It wouldn't have caused me any consternation to shoot a deer, although I wasn't one to hunt when the fawns were young. Now something just didn't feel right about killing animals. I'd eaten animals all of my life. I used to casually kill chickens and hogs and cattle - a quick 'chop off the head', or 'shot between the eyes', and that was that. Now it seemed barbaric. *'Jeez, this is confusing.'* Since I couldn't decide how I wanted to help, and didn't really want to know the ending, I wished myself to be awake.

But I didn't wake. I stayed there in the bush, seemingly forced to watch this to the bitter end. I almost wished I hadn't saved that little boy. Maybe it wasn't me, anyway. Maybe the mother just happened to remember to check on the little squirt. I no longer wanted to be a part of this drama of nature. It wasn't a battle of good against evil but survival

of the fittest. There would be no happy ending. Someone or something had to die.

It was the cubs to die this time. Not at the hands of the young men, however. I spotted one of the cubs atop one of the rocks, way too high up for the cub to get to by itself. Whatever killed it took it there. Two other cubs, or pieces of them, were at the base of the other side of the rock. I felt numb. It was a lot more fun watching a movie than being in one, and that's what this felt like. Movies weren't real, so they could be entertaining. This was real. This was very real.

I was relieved I didn't have to watch the men kill the cubs. It was sad enough to see the results of their violent demise. I went to the young men to try to let them know about the cubs. This time, I expected them to feel cool, and they did, but took it to mean that it was late rather than as a signal of something amiss. They got up and headed home.

I stayed at that rock for some soul searching. I didn't like the unsettledness I was feeling. I decided to enjoy the scenery and put all of this nonsense out of my mind. I laid back and watched the clouds roll by. I soaked up the warmth of the setting sun.

I woke up.

## The First Snoop

I stayed on the cot for a while, staring at the ceiling. It was a different sort of ceiling. The lighting was not from bulbs or the usual fixtures, but from the entire overhead area. It was a soft brightness. Almost made me want to go back to sleep...

*'H--- NO!'* I thought, fighting off the sleepiness as I jumped off the cot. Luckily I was on the bottom bunk; I forgot to check first. *'But then again, I couldn't really hurt myself now, could I?'*

As I cleaned the pure white cottony fluff from my ear, I looked around. Julia was nowhere to be seen, so I took the opportunity to snoop about unescorted. I snuck through the aisles hoping none of the children tending the nappers would stop me. No one did. I took a side door to what I hoped was the outside.

It wasn't. The room was furnished like a large living room, minus the TV. There were little cubicles, however, with what looked like computer keyboards, but no monitor. I went into one for a closer look.

It was a keyboard, all right, but the keys weren't the usual letters and numbers. The icons on them were very faint, like they'd been rubbed off from overuse. *'You'd think they could just wish them to be new, and 'mwah lah!' they'd be new,'* I thought semi-bitterly. I touched one, and jumped back with a start. It felt warm and soft! I stepped up again and tried to get a closer look at the symbol on the key I had just touched. *'Drat, where are my d--- glasses,'* I thought. I squinted, moved back and forth a bit, but without my glasses, it was hopeless. *'It would be nice to not need the blasted things at*

*all. I wonder if they would be solid or a mist like me, if I had them.'* I looked at the keyboard again to find it all to be in perfect focus!

"I did it!" I shouted aloud in my excitement, when I realized I made something happen by just thinking it. "I did it!" I sat down at the keyboard and again touched the key that I now could see had a folded blanket on it. I supposed it meant 'warmth' and I was ready for the warm soft feel of the key this time. But that was all it seemed to do. No blanket materialized, nor did I feel all warm and fuzzy. '*Humm... let me try another one,*' I thought, looking over my choices.

"May I help?" an adult voice over my shoulder inquired. He didn't startle me too much, considering he hadn't been there a second ago, but I did jump a bit. Enough to amuse the chap, at least.

"You could start by not laughing at me, sonny!" I replied, more than a bit perturbed. "You could've warned me you were coming. At my age I could have had a heart attack!"

He escalated into a hearty belly laugh at this statement, which didn't help my mood a bit. '*I wish I could have been this entertaining in life,*' I thought. '*I've had everyone in stitches since I got here, but d----- if I know why!*' As I cleaned out my ear canal, the young man regained control of himself.

"I'm sorry, but you newcomers are always so funny! We don't mean to make you feel as though we're laughing at you, but I can see how it might feel that way. Try to be patient with us, and work on your sense of humor. We have a ball with all the 'punny' things we can do here." He grinned impishly.

"I have more of a sense of humor than you, just not as juvenile," I growled.

But my curiosity about the keyboard overcame my irritation so I took him up on his offer of help. "I thought I had mastered these blasted things in life. The grandkids had all kinds of gadgets they tried to explain to me. Most of 'em didn't interest me at all, but the computer was fun. They gave me one of their hand-me-down computers they said was too

slow for them. It was a perfect speed for me. It gave me time to figure it out. But this thing doesn't have a monitor. How do you know what the key you push does?" I was surprised at the relief I felt at not having to figure this out on my own. I usually loved puzzles, and I was peeved if someone tried to help me solve any of them.

"It's not really a computer. It's a tool we can use to develop our receptive and self-improvement skills. Try to feel the emotion or feeling pictured on the key," he suggested. "When you get good at it, you can begin to sense the feelings of the rest of us without us having to say a thing. Sorta like reading body language, advanced level. All you needa do is hold down a key, empty your mind, and 'feel'," he said. "The feeling should wash right through you."

I didn't even try to do as he suggested. The whole thing smelled too much like that meditation stuff my crazy daughter wanted me to try years ago. It was an awful experience. She made me go with her to some guru's office for 'relaxation' lessons. While he sat there with HIS eyes open, he told us to close ours, and to focus on our breathing and heartbeat. Well, I tried, sort of. I focused on my heartbeat and breathing, all right. Both went faster and faster until I thought I would hyperventilate! And my eyes wouldn't stay shut without holding them tightly shut - hardly a relaxing posture. It was a total waste of time and money.

"Maybe if you pretend I'm not here," the man offered.

"NO WAY!" I shouted angrily. "I'm NOT going to 'empty my mind!'" The last words were said with as much mockery as I could muster. "And I'll be d---- if I'll put up with everyone reading my thoughts! It's an outrage! Where's the respect for privacy in this place! Who's in charge!? I'd like to have a nice long chat with him, if you don't mind, sir." My tone was very sarcastic. A black dagger had flown rapidly out of my mouth, but it bounced off the wall behind the keyboard. Lucky for him I was facing the cubicle instead of him.

"No problem. I can take you to Pat right now, if you'd like. But may I ask you something first?"



"Why don't you just look for the answer yourself?! Why should I even bother thinking the answer for you to 'read' it!? Or aren't your powers good enough to put the thought together, too!?" I was furious, and sarcasm was now dripping from my words.

The man smiled that hellishly annoying smile everyone around here seems to have, and said calmly, "Lord, give me strength!" Instantly, he bulked up like a young'un on steroids pumping iron 24 hours a day!

"I mean patience, Lord, patients." Out of the door opposite from the sleep room, some souls entered, one holding a handkerchief to her nose, another holding his hand over his heart and stumbling as though he was having a heart attack, a third pretending he was using crutches.

Doing his best to keep a straight face, the man sighed, and said, "Okay, I guess I mean to ask for insight." He looked at me for a second, then his eyes rolled backwards into his head! I stood there flabbergasted and speechless while the others went red with laughter. One of his eyes rolled forward for a few seconds, looked me up and down a time or two, and then flipped back to join the other eye.

I was livid! I started to smoke, like Johnny had done.

Instantly, the man's eyes boinged back into proper position under a now furrowed and puzzled brow. "Sorry, sir. I'm dreadfully sorry. I didn't realize you didn't like puns. I had heard you had a really good sense of humor. Don't blow a fuse, now Ian! Calm down! I said I'm sorry!"

He was starting to panic, as was I. I didn't want to find out what happened to Johnny by joining him! I tried to calm down, but my heart beat faster and faster and the air around me turned darker and darker. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine being in my hammock under the tree in my backyard. I took some deep breaths. My heart slowed a bit and I felt less panic. I felt the fear slowly lift.

*Gee, I puzzled, 'I didn't have a chance to tell the b----- off before I started literally burning up inside. This can't be what Susan meant when she tried to explain to me about turning anger inward.'* I never had THAT problem in life. I

was excellent at venting my anger at anyone or anything that got in my way, which was usually my family.....

When I opened my eyes, the man was looking at me with a most serious expression on his face. "Let's go to see Pat before you tar out on me!"

I shot him a look that guaranteed he would be speechless on the way to see Pat. I was not too fond of this man, and I WAS still in danger of turning into tar.

We glided around a few turns and past several doors, some closed, some open, revealing souls busy with what I swear looked like paperwork. *'That d----- stuff even exists in heaven! Now isn't that just h---ish. Next I'll be asked to fill out a 1040EZ form!'*

I glanced at the man's face to see if he 'read' me on this, and thought I saw a hint of a curl at the right side of his mouth - I was on his left, so I supposed he felt he could safely emote on the other side. *'Maybe he isn't so bad. His puns WERE creative.'* At this thought, he couldn't hide the smile any longer. *'Humm.. I can have some fun with this. What thoughts can I have that could get him into trouble?'*

Lucky for him, we arrived at Pat's office. At least that's what the name on the door indicated. But the soul behind the desk couldn't have been more than 4 years old.

"Three and one half, if you please," the child answered my thought. "I understand you have a few problems with 'this place'. Hopefully we can help you adjust to our pod. We have plenty of scars already from bubbles that have ruptured over the eons. I'd hate for you to choose to add another."

"STOP READING MY MIND!!!!" burst out of me with the frustration of it all.

"Why? Do you have something to hide?" the child asked calmly.

"Of course I don't! But a guy's thoughts should be private!"

"Why?" was the quiet response.

"Because, d--- it!" A dark tack shot out of my mouth and sailed right over the child's head. '*Oops. I don't want to hurt her. Or him...*' I couldn't tell which sex it was.

"Are you a boy or a girl?" I asked. I tried to keep the edge out of my voice without success.

"Yes," Pat answered.

That did it! I thoroughly despised when anyone answered me like that. "YES, WHICH!!!" It was an either/or question, you idiotic a-----!!!!" This time, the dark dagger that sped out of my mouth went right through Pat's forehead.

Now I'd done it. Insulting the boss even in heaven should get a soul into trouble, even if the boss is a child. I waited for my reprimand, but none came. I watched the gap in 'its' head slowly close. I then looked around the room and realized I had drawn quite an audience. Everyone was sitting, standing, or floating with glum looks on their faces. The 'patients' of the punster had come along, and a crowd had gathered at the door to Pat's office. One soul, about 6 or 7 years old, had to 'amoeba' her way in and hovered by Pat's desk. At least this soul appeared to be a female. It was most unsettling to not know if Pat was male or female. Knowing the boss's mind set makes a huge difference in how to interact to get what is wanted or needed from the higher-ups.

"Gail, I believe you may be able to help Ian more than I. He works better with souls that are obviously female," the child said to the 7 year old girl.

"Yes, sirma'am!" replied Gail enthusiastically.

"You all may go now. The excitement is over," said Pat, still without any signs of ruffled feathers.

'*Must not be human,*' I thought as we left the office. I looked to the punster on my left for a reaction.

"If you would have let me ask you some questions, I could have warned you about Pat. But you had to get you're back up. I don't know how Karl dealt with you for all those years. But to answer your question, most of us are fully human souls, but none of us is sure about Pat. That is unless Gail, here, knows something we don't." He looked through

me to Gail, who was on my right side, both figuratively and literally. At least she hadn't gotten on my bad side....yet.

"I try not to ask too many questions so I don't accidentally tell something I shouldn't." She sidestepped the question, which seemed to amuse the punster.

"Her typical airhead answer," he leaned towards my ear and whispered, "but she sure has mastered the mind reading wall."

I looked at her for signs of her hearing what the punster said, but saw only a rather bland expression.

"Or maybe there's nothing there for us to read!" He was not overly careful to whisper this last comment, but Gail still didn't register an expression. *'Maybe he's right,'* I thought. *'She's probably an idiot. So I'll still have to figure all this out on my own, if I don't go crazy or explode first.'*

"I'll help you if you promise not to go postal on me, and if you work on your sense of humor," the man offered, then turned down a hallway and disappeared.

*'I never did ask what his name is.'* I looked to Gail for the answer. She still had the same blank expression. "Didn't you hear me?" I asked, a bit irritated.

"Hear what? Did you say something?" she responded. She seemed to be sincere.

"No, I guess I didn't actually say anything, but I thought it. Can't you read minds like everyone else around here?" The irritation was still very audible in my intonation.

"I thought you said you didn't like souls reading your mind, so I didn't. Are you changing your mind? Please don't expect me to read your mind as to when you want me to read your mind. That would put me in a terrible pickle. It would really take some thinking to figure out just how to do that one." With that, she developed a puzzled look and put her finger up to her mouth as though she were already trying to come up with a strategy.

"No!!! Don't read my mind! Ever!!!" I was very happy to hear someone actually take me seriously about the mind reading. "I'll be happy to tell you what I want you to know."

"So do you have something to hide, then?" she asked quite innocently.

I managed to stop feeling so aggravated for a moment and pondered the question a bit. *'I guess I do have something to hide. I can't go talk with my buddies until I can be sure they can't pick up on my PETA-like response to the lioness and the dead cubs. I'd NEVER live that one down. And here it's not just a lifetime I'd be ribbed about it - it could be for eternity!'*

## Some Answers

"So, didn't you hear what the punster was saying? He was actually talking out loud. Couldn't you hear him?" I changed the subject.

"Oh, yes! Mark loves to tease me about being an airhead, so I oblige. It's great fun! It's actually fun to pretend even when he's not around. And I can get away with a lot, too. Souls don't expect much from me, so I can get more done....oops, maybe I shouldn't have said that..." She either was a very good actress, or she really was worried that she may have said too much.

*'D--- if I know what use I could make of anything she said so far,'* I thought as I began to wonder if she was going to replace Julia. *'I sure hope not. Julia is a lot more helpful than Gail has been so far. Although, Gail did rescue me from Pat.'* I was tired of getting puffs out of my ear, so I didn't bother removing this one. This place may be easier to take muffled.

"So, are you replacing Julia?" I didn't think I had done anything to upset Julia. "She hasn't put in for a transfer, has she?" I asked worriedly.

"No. Ms. Drew will be your deAger as long as you need and want her to be. I'm just assigned to help you adapt to the pod without causing a zit," she answered matter-of-factly.

"Snit. You mean without causing a snit," I corrected.

"No. I mean zit. Remember? Pat hoped you wouldn't choose to become another scar, that we had enough popped bubbles already," she reminded me gently.

*'Now why the h--- would I want to become a reeking zit?'* Hoping to get a sensible answer, I asked, "Why, or how, would I turn into a zit?" The puffs in my ears made it a bit difficult to hear her answer. But even muffled, her answer was infuriating.

"Remember how you stopped yourself from exploding by imagining yourself back in life in your hammock?" she asked.

*'How did she know about that?! She said she wouldn't read my mind! Is she reneging already? Or did she read Mark's mind after he read mine?'* I felt the anger rise again. *'If she knew what I was thinking before she even met me, that meant she knew I had been upset by all the mind reading that had been going on all along, so she shouldn't have listened. And if she was listening, G-- knows who else listened!'*

A jolt of panic struck. *'L---, does that mean my mind can be read from a distance? Does that mean my buddies already know I'm a whussie?'*

My knees felt weak. I managed to sit before I fell, or floated, to the floor. I wished I'd have emptied the prior puffs before these two new ones appeared, because I couldn't hear what Gail was asking me.

She seemed to realize why I couldn't hear her, though, and helped me remove the fluffs. There shouldn't have been too much earwax on them, given the number of fluffs that came before them. At least she didn't seem to be grossed out.

"What happened?" she asked worriedly. "I'm not used to being in the dark. What in heaven were you thinking to make your knees buckle? You'd done an amazingly good job with the imagery technique to defuse that near tarnation! I meant it as a compliment, honestly I did!"

"Listen," I said as I tried my best to keep the fear out of my voice. "I need some answers. And I need them now. No games." *'I hope you're not really an airhead,'* I thought. "Give it to me straight. Tell me about this mind reading stuff. How close to a soul do you have to be to read his mind? How many souls can listen at one time? Is there a 'what he

thought' chain letter system? How can I block the intrusions?"

She looked at me for an uncomfortable minute while she seemed to be mulling over what she could and could not tell me. She suddenly grinned broadly. "Mark would have great fun with that question. He'd furrow his brow, lift one eyebrow and say as seriously as he could 'If I tell ya, I'll hafta kill ya'" She began to chuckle briefly, but stopped abruptly when she noticed the furious look on my face. She quickly went into a more serious mode. "It's not that we try to keep things from you. We don't want to overwhelm you with too much at a time. Don't think badly of us. I can sense your frustration and fear without reading your mind; if I'm paying attention, that is. Your body language is quite clear. And I understand why you are so upset. We sometimes forget ourselves here; we are having too much fun, you know."

She was KILLING me with her evasiveness. "So answer my questions, you d--- idiot!!!" I was fuming with impatience. Not that they wouldn't try the patience of Job... Mother Teresa herself would lose it with this bunch.

She deftly dodged my dart. "Okay. Are you ready?" She continued to stall.

"YES!!!!!!!!!" I was a deep gray color by now, and apparently beginning to smoke, as she immediately began:

"Generally, adults need to at least be in sight of the soul being listened in on. But in your case, we, I mean Pat and me and a few other younger souls, needed to have a conference about some of the unexpected difficulties we were having with your choices so far." She hesitated for a second when she saw the "WHAT!!!!!" forming on my lips. She cut me off and continued. "We knew you were going to be a handful or we wouldn't have gotten you for a replacement for Dick, God rest his soul. He was the one who popped the zit just before you arrived. Every pod has to have a few 'challenging souls'. Evens out the work and frustration."



"FRUSTRATION!!!!!!" I spat before she could stop me. "I'M FRUSTRATING YOU!!!??"

"I think we all underestimated your level of curiosity. We thought you'd be content to play cards and golf with your buddies, no questions asked," she admitted with a sigh.

"Well you all thought wrong, missy," I snarled through clenched teeth. "I can understand why Dick and Johnny would choose a fate worst than death to escape this hellish 'heaven'!" I sarcastically emphasized 'heaven'. The longer I existed here, the more I felt like it really was hell after all. '*This is worse than Big Brother in '1984!*' I was fuming. Literally.

"Please hear me out before you rush to judgment. Our fault was in overestimating your tolerance for transparency. In life you were sure of yourself and seemed to be able to say whatever came to your mind, no matter what the consequences. We underestimated the softness of your soul."

I calmed a bit as I heard her admit that they had made mistakes. '*Dick really did smell awful when he popped. And I'm his replacement, huh. Maybe I'd better try a bit harder to contain my temper unless I want to rot in a pimple like he did. Sounds like THEY don't want me to rot either. I wonder if they get Brownie points for every soul like me they save.*'

"You see, most people who behaved like you acted in life really DON'T care about how other people feel. They just say what they want, no matter who it hurts. We didn't believe Karl when he said you really had more empathetic DNA than you showed."

"Pathetic! Karl called ME pathetic!! What about HIM! He wasn't even there for my death, the swine!" I hissed.

"Are you sure you got all the puffs out of your ears? I said EMpathetic DNA, not that you are pathetic." I heard her add without moving her lips – '*he sure is acting pathetic right now, though.*'

My expression changed from fuming to surprised. '*Did I just manage to read HER mind? Even Mark couldn't read HER mind! And what was this DNA stuff all about?*'

"Karl would have been with you at your end if he could have managed it. He was most upset at his alternate assignment. That may be why he asked for reassignment of duties after he left you here. He cited 'conflict of interest'. He really had grown quite fond of you. He said you 'were so cranky you were cute', or something to that effect. I guess that goes to show sometimes 'conflict of interest' can be a bad reason to not follow through. But this wasn't really a conflict of interest, now that I think about it. He had nothing to gain for himself by remaining your guardian. But it sure would have helped you. Unless his conflict would keep him from helping you deAge... I wish I could recall just how that discussion went..." Her expression was becoming pensive now, as though the attempt to remember was all consuming.

"Excuse me, Missy, but you're rambling." I was just a BIT sarcastic. "You are making no sense at all. How many d-- conferences do you have around here, anyway?" A small brown tack flew out of my mouth and over her head. She didn't seem to notice it as she appeared to be deep in thought.

I was beginning to run out of enough energy for a really good hissy fit. I'd had so many of them lately. Almost as many as my worst day on earth.

"Oh, no more than one or two a day," Gail eventually said as she came out of her reverie. It took me awhile to realize she was answering my rhetorical question. They sure didn't answer many of my REAL questions. "Most of them are routine issues. I can't tell you about them, though. They're confidential."

"Well, well, now. Isn't that interesting. Some things here ARE confidential, if you're in the right circle and have enough power. Just like on earth. So is this purgatory, or what? It sure isn't heaven!" I was more disgusted now than angry. "So do I have a personal spot somewhere to 'contemplate my sins'? I need to be alone." My sarcasm had to be obvious even to this hopeless twit.

We walked rather than floated as I was feeling much too heavy to glide anywhere, and Gail seemed to sense it.

She also sensed the need to be quiet, or risk another of my near meltdowns. We went down several halls and made too many turns for my seething mind to remember. If she was trying to get me lost in the maze, she was succeeding.

We finally arrived at a rather desolate place with only a few sulky souls on what looked like windowsills with the glass of the window pouched out like a half bubble. Their backs were to us. She pointed to an empty bubble rather near the floor, and said "I hope you'll find it to your liking. I'll let Julia know you're here."

With that, she faded away.

## My First Introversion

I slid through the opening in the bubble which then closed magically behind me. I plopped onto the floor and pouted. I needed a good self-pity party after all that's happened since I died. When I thought about the many mood swings I've had since I arrive in this hell-hole I remembered that my daughter tried to get me to take some 'mood-fixing' medication. There was nothing wrong with me and she knew it! If they would have done right, I wouldn't have been on them all the time. Somebody needed to keep them straight.

I had to admit, though, life was lonely without them. *'I just wish they wouldn't have blamed me for their mother's death. I took her for check-ups. Could I help it they didn't find the cancer before it was too late? And didn't I show my concern when I cursed out all those blasted doctors for not curing her? Just because Susan is a doctor didn't mean she had to side with them, for C----- s---!'* I snorted out some grit black enough to be coal dust. I sighed, and laid my head back against the bubble, which was becoming as dark as my thoughts.

My son was no better. He left for college and never looked back, except to ask for money. *'That's all I was to him - the bank. At least his wife brought the kids to see Irene and me once in a while.'* I used to overhear her talking with Irene about trying to convince Lenny that I'd mellowed in my old age. *'Yeah, I mellowed, all right.'*

I tried to look out of my bubble, but it was like trying to look through the darkly tinted car windows those drug dealers use. I closed my eyes, but I couldn't sleep. *'I guess I*

have to be in the 'sleep room' to sleep, so they could keep a closer eye on me. Yep, this must be hell, disguised as heaven.' I never felt so alone. 'Now I can't even talk with my friends until I master some thought blocking wall of some sort, and I'll be d----- if I can stand being around these batty souls long enough to learn anything of use. They're having too much fun playing with me.'

This second puff of black dust from my nose seemed to fill the air in the bubble. I wondered if this is how a zit started.

*'But didn't Pat and Gail say I'd have to choose to cause a zit? I don't want to rot into a smelly zit. Do I have to choose to NOT turn into a zit? How do I make the choice? Can I just think it? I have been able to think a few things into happening. But this is a bigger, more important issue. Where is Julia?'*

***'Just stop thinking and open your mind.'*** I thought I could sense her, but I couldn't see her. I did feel a hint of that good feeling she gives me, though.

*'What the h---. What do I have to lose?'* I was pleased to have to remove the familiar tan puff from my ear. I took it to be a good sign that coal dust didn't come out of my nose. *'I must be on the right track.'*

I tried to not think, but my mind kept wandering through upsetting and depressing life events, and now death events, too. I had no idea how to stop thinking.

***'Yes, you do. Or at least you know how to keep yourself from feeling. Remember the hammock? And the rock in your dream when you didn't want to feel pity for the cubs? Try those methods.'***

Where this thought came from was a mystery to me. It wasn't Julia's voice. But I didn't panic and managed to stop thinking.

And those d--- feelings took over.

I cried. And cried. And cried.

Quite a few swear words snuck in amongst the feelings, too, so that I almost had enough navy blue puffs to blow my

nose on after what seemed like hours of wretched sobs. If I were alive, I'd have dehydrated.

When I was all cried out, I noticed the color of my bubble was a blue-gray. I still couldn't see out, so hopefully no one could see in either. *'After all, I have an image to keep up.'* With that thought came the realization that now I REALLY couldn't face my buddies. *'I REALLY have something to hide now.'*

I seemed to have perfected the feeling thing though, as I burst back into tears without a seconds' warning.

After the second spasm of major, uncontrolled self-pity was over, the bubble was dark blue. I sank into the puddle of tears on the floor in disbelief. My favorite wine slipped out of my mouth: "Why me Lord?"

The answer this time: ***'Because you choose it to be this way.'***

*'Where the h--- are these thoughts coming from? Who in their right mind would choose to be in this situation?'* The air darkened again with my nasal coal dust puff.

***'You're not in your right mind. Not yet, anyway. When you are, you'll make better choices.'***

*'Not in my right mind, huh. Who is this putting thoughts into my mind - my daughter?!'* She always implied I wasn't normal.

***'You're not abnormal. You are just too wrapped up in being what you think you should be. Susan knew you had a soft center. She just had trouble getting past the harsh exterior.'***

I was beginning to feel uneasy. "Okay, I give up. What do I need to do get to my mind right?" I said out loud, feeling like a lunatic.

***'Be yourself. Be who you are.'***

I felt like screaming. I pounded the walls of my bubble. To my amazement, the color of the walls lightened with each blow. I continued to hit, but with less frenzy and fear and more curiosity. *'Surely this can't mean I'm supposed to beat the c--- out of anything or anyone whenever I get the urge.'*

The puff from my ear seemed to almost dance as it floated to the ground. I could have sworn it was happy. *'But that'd be crazy!'* Definitely crazier than anything that's happened since I've been here, and that's saying quite a lot.

As I stared at the happy fluff, I noticed some glitter on the sill near it, under my tears. I tried to pick it up for a closer look, but it was stuck to the floor of the bubble. I got on my hands and knees to see it better. Luckily, the light seemed to brighten, and I could see the glitter was made of symbols, or letters, or numbers. It reminded me of the glitter I saw float from the cloud to the ocean when Johnny blew his gasket, and the stuff that dripped from Dick's popped zit. But this was just a tiny bit, just a fraction of the amount I saw at those times.

I felt an overwhelming urge to sleep. I looked in to the pod side of my bubble to see a smiling Julia. It'd been nice if she could have spared me all the bizarre agony I had just been through, but I couldn't give her a hard time about it. Those management sorts probably had her busy at some useless confidential meeting. I noticed, with a bit of nostalgia, that I was too numb to be truly annoyed by this possibility.

Besides, with Julia here now, life, or rather, death, was not so bad.

## I'm Ready to Listen

She took my hand and we were in the sleep room in the blink of an eye. My cot was still unmade from the first dream, but I didn't care. I snuggled up with my down pillow and pulled the down comforter up to my chin, and promptly fell asleep.

When I opened my eyes I was in a teenage boy's bedroom. He was in his bed reading a book. He yawned, closed the book, turned out the light and pulled up the covers. As I watched, I thought I heard him say *'Thank you, Lord, for not taking that prayer of mine seriously. I really would have felt terrible if the Vikings' center had broken his neck. I'm glad you knew it was just the heat of the moment.'* The next thing I heard was the soft breathing of his sleep. Then I woke up.

This time Julia was still by my cot, grinning broadly. "How was that one? Better?" she asked expectantly.

"It was too short to tell. I couldn't have been asleep more than a few minutes, max," I replied.

"Thirty five seconds, to be exact. I thought a shorter dream with me staying here to prevent you from going back to find out more than you need to know would help you forget the trauma of your first job. You really caught me off guard when you decided to go back to sleep to see what happened to the cubs. I thought you would be here, grinning with pride at being able to save the toddler when I got back after that first assignment. You may do well to control that curiosity of yours!" She was grinning with a twinkle in her eyes as she said this, so I didn't know if she really meant it.



She took my hand, and we were instantly transported to a ledge overlooking a river valley. We sat and took in the scenery for a short while.

"So what was this three second task all about?" I asked.

"This was a completely 'feel good' trip rather than a true job. We thoroughly enjoy hearing when someone thinks we did him some good. It's a perfect opportunity to send souls in need of a lift to hear the positive feedback."

"Was that the home team center that Arnie, Harry and Larry went to help?"

"Good memory, Mr. Burns. But if you remember the events of that game, your friends were there to prevent the visiting team center from being injured. The outcome is the same, but Allen, the boy you just heard express his appreciation, didn't realize we were actually doing battle for him, not just ignoring his hate filled wishes for harm to come to his rival center. He was able to realize in the end that he really didn't want to hurt anybody. He is a really good human soul. He has great potential." She was offering so much more information than on previous interactions, I wasn't sure I should interrupt her. She was on a roll, and she had told me to control my curiosity. I tried very hard to not ask a question. It helped that I wasn't able to follow her explanation enough to even formulate one...

"You look puzzled, but I can't make out any questions you may be thinking. Do you want to know more?" she asked.

"YES!!!" I couldn't contain my enthusiasm.

She laughed, and continued, "You see, sometimes when someone thinks they are communicating with their higher power, they are really being intercepted by the lowly counterclockwise forces. We have to step in to stop the slimy demons from following through with what they claim is a legitimate request for their services. They are crafty, and creative. Your buddies are especially good at fighting the types of beings that tend to respond to these types of requests. They enjoy responding to the sports' induced pleas for evil to happen. We have a system set up for Arnie so he

knows when we need his services at a game; especially the Rugby games. It helps him with his violent tendencies."

My mouth hung open idiotically; my expression was glassy-eyed. I had no idea what she was talking about.

She paused for a moment, apparently trying to listen for any coherent thoughts I may be having. She realized I was too confused to have a complete thought, and switched into a more personal mode. "We can set up a system for you, too, once you've had enough dreams to find your strengths. I'm not sure I know a good way to help you deal with your temper, though. You don't get violent; just frustrated. Humm.....maybe jobs that keep you thinking, problem solving.....yes - that may be the way to go..."

I tried to piece together some of this garbled information. I felt a bit more challenged and a bit less frustrated now that I had heard a few bits and bobs of how things work. This may actually be a solvable puzzle with a few more blanks filled in.

She and I came to the end of our self-musings at the same time and our eyes met. I thought I heard her say *'I hope I didn't tell him too much, but I believe he'll do better with more rather than less information. He is a very quick learner.'*

*'Finally I get some credit for being more than a pea-brain!'*

"So, when do YOU teach me to mind read and how to block others from reading my mind?" I didn't want to deal with any of the others souls I had met so far, especially Gail. And I was becoming more anxious to talk to my buddies. They could fill me in on LOTS more, and more quickly.

"Mind reading is a skill, rather like walking is to human infants. You really just have to practice. You already have the methodology mastered. You heard Allen in your dream, and his was just a thought, not an audible thank you prayer. And if I'm not mistaken, you just read my mind. It is easiest when you have eye contact, but eye contact is not necessary. It is also important that there be a complete thought, not just ideas all jumbled together. Only the very young, advanced

souls can make sense of the hodge-podge type of thoughts." She paused to see if I was ready for more information.

I think she heard me think 'YES!', as she continued before I could actually say it.

"I know how important it is for you to feel less transparent when you are with your friends. I also know that if I merely told you to trust me that they will accept you for who you really are, you won't believe me. You were not as successful in fooling them about your true self as you thought you were before you all died. And some of them have been through the same rough start as you have had so far. I know you have to find this all out for yourself in order to be comfortable returning to them and the comradery you crave."

"Learning to block others from reading your thoughts is rather like blocking human souls from reading your body language. You must be aware of what you are thinking around which souls. Some souls are able to pick up some thought types better than others. Only trial and error will help you with this. Until you know who is who, and what each soul is interested in, it's best to try to keep a comparatively empty mind." She couldn't help but smile at the AARRGGHH!!! expression on my face the 'empty mind' phrase induced. The body language in this case was so clear she didn't need mind reading. "You can do it, but it takes a large amount of effort. Most souls give up trying after they become more comfortable with transparency."

She continued with my lesson: "There are two sets of neurons in our brains. One set is myelinated, or coated. The other system is not. Human infants are born with only the unmyelinated types. As they grow, most of them develop into myelinated cells. The myelination helps speed the thoughts along so that more can be thought and done quickly. The unmyelinated cells of human adult brains are unused potential. You can learn to use that potential here much more quickly than when you were alive, but the thoughts will be much slower, at least at first. You will need to use all the patience you can muster."

'So don't use it up with too much useless info!' I thought impatiently. I had to smile at the irony in the thought. After all, I had been asking for more information since I arrived, hadn't I?

Julia smiled too. "You seem to do well with concrete imagery. Remember how you imagined yourself in cozy places to block out unwanted emotions?" I nodded in reply. She continued, "Instead of picturing a physically comfortable place, think of an elephant versus a chipmunk." My brow furrowed with this one. "How do you feel when you think of how a chipmunk moves?" She paused for me to ponder this question.

"Jerky. Nervous. Wired." I almost felt that way thinking about watching one zip along at the bottom of a tree, stop on a dime, look my direction, size me up, then zoom up the tree with a prize nut in its mouth.

"Very good. Now picture an elephant."

'I wish all my teachers in life had been this good,' I thought, and did as I was asked. "Slow motion, lumbering, heavy," were the adjectives that came to mind.

"Okay. With your next thought, (thanks, by the way, for that complement), think 'elephant' and slow it down."

'Think. Thought. Humm, my mind is blank' was the best I could do.

"Great!!! Ian, you almost emptied your brain for a few seconds!! Very good!" she was ecstatic.

"You don't mean I emptied my BRAIN, do you? I mean, all the info I worked so hard to put in there didn't leave, did it?" I felt silly asking this, but you never know around here....

"Oh. I meant to say you were without a coherent thought for a few seconds, and not just because I had told you too much too fast."

"Woo, that's a relief. I'd be afraid to try again, in case it would stay empty!" I pretended to tease with a sheepish grin.

"Okay, now try again to have a slow-motion thought." She waited expectantly.

*'How can I have a slow-motion thought of any significance?'* My arms even felt heavy with the effort, but this was fun!!!

"Excellent! I don't think anyone has ever mastered it on the first try!" she beamed.

*'But I need to practice a lot before I see the guys.'* My thought sped up a bit at the dread of a failure with them.

"I could sense the end of that thought. Can you fill me in on the first part?" she asked with a proud grin.

"I just thought that I'll need lots of practice before I'll be able to feel safe with the guys," I admitted.

"You can practice with me, or you can try your skills with Mark and his cohorts. If you can block them, you can block anybody. They're interested in everything imaginable!" Julia knew better than to suggest Mark. The mischief on her face was precious.

She also knew that I was so comfortable with her that I'd not have much trouble controlling my stress practicing with her. "There's got to be somebody more stressful than you who would be safer to make a mistake with," I suggested.

Before Julia had a chance to answer, I shouted, "Karl! He already knows me inside and out, even down to my pathetic DNA, apparently. But I don't feel as comfortable with him as I do with you, little one."

"Your EMpathetic DNA, Mr. Burns," she corrected. "Yes, that's a good idea. I'll see when he can meet with us." She stood to go. "Where do you want to go while I find out? Your bubble?"

"ABSOLUTELY NOT!!!. I've had enough raw emotion to last me for eons." I thought for a moment, then asked, "Can I just wander around, if I promise to stay out of trouble, or at least TRY to stay out of trouble?" I really wanted to wander around to get my bearings. Maybe then I wouldn't feel so disoriented.

"Okay. If you need me, think hard about me and I may be able to come right away." With that she poofed into nothingness before I could stop her.

“WAIT!!” I hollered immediately, almost in a panic.

She faded quickly back by my side. “What is it, Mr. Burns?” she asked a bit too sweetly with a crooked little grin.

“You little stinker, you!” I reprimanded. “You know I need to get back to civilization before I can even hope to find my way around!” I was smiling, too, as I held my arm out for her small hand.

## Wandering

She deposited me back at my cot, then left again with a hearty smile and a deep curtsy.

I wondered when I would be able to transport myself to wherever I wanted to go, whenever I wanted to go there. I sighed, and looked around at my current options.

I decided to go the opposite direction from the one that took me to the keyboards and the Punster. I zigzagged through the sleepers quietly. Looking at their various expressions was interesting. Some had a unique grin, almost like a smirk, but without any malice. Others looked clearly frustrated. Few looked very happy this time, at least not as many as I recall seeing happy after my first nap. A few were very restless. I could imagine that they were having dreams like Arnie, Harry and Larry had. I was glad they didn't sleep walk; I'd have gotten tackled.

I saw some souls from the uppermost bunks wake, rub their eyes, roll over, and go back to sleep. There were other apparently new older souls who were on the bottom bunks with younger souls at their sides. They didn't look as confused and "green" as I felt, so they couldn't have been as newly dead as I. At least I hoped so. It then occurred to me that new souls could be arriving even at this moment.

With this thought, I found myself at the doorway of the pod.

*'I did it!'* I thought proudly. I looked up the conveyor belt, but saw no one coming my way. I did notice a lot more souls milling about the entrances of the pods than I remembered seeing when I first arrived. I stepped, or floated, over the moving belt to what looked like solid ground, but I

couldn't quite drop onto it. I stayed suspended above the ground no matter how hard I tried to will myself down. *Floating isn't so bad*, I convinced myself as I gave up the effort to land.

I looked around slowly. The sights were awesome. How I missed all of this on my arrival was a mystery to me. Even the most unobservant person couldn't help but notice all this unique scenery. The top of my hill was really not that far. Only a few pods were above me. But almost all around me were mountain ranges bigger than the Tetons and the Alps put together. They stretched farther than even heavenly eyes could see. And they all seemed to have similar beads of pod-like structures wound around them from top to bottom. Above them all was the fuzzy cloud. Far in the distance, I saw sparkling dots drifting down from the cloud in what reminded me of a rainsquall. A golden rainsquall... The cloud seemed to be much thicker around that mountain peak than anywhere else. The golden rain was showering down the top of the mountain and ran down its sides in rivers and streams.

I looked more closely in the direction of the ocean. The water was clear and the waves were relatively quiet at the foot of my mountain. But the water at the base of the stormy mountain was lapping far up the shoreline as if too anxious to wait for the golden liquid to reach it. The water in the ocean did not just turn golden as it absorbed the rain; it glowed. It actually produced light!

I floated up my mountain for a better look. I now could see some new souls arriving at the top of my mountain and hop on the conveyor belt. I also noticed some silvery glitter floating out of the fuzz; it was gently blown out to the sea.

I returned my gaze to the stormy mountain. As the storm cleared, an arc of silvery mist floated out over the ocean. As the misty cloud lifted, the rivulets of golden glitter could be seen more clearly. They were actually multitudes of souls making their way down their mountain. Most did not wait for the conveyor belt, which I felt sure the line linking their pods must have been. Few entered the uppermost pods. Most



went to the bottom where the pods seemed to be swollen even before these newly arrived souls entered them. They grew and grew with each entering soul until I was afraid they would pop like the zits did here. But they didn't. Instead, they slid slowly toward the shoreline where the waves gently picked them up and they floated out into the ocean.

With some effort, I managed to tear my eyes away from that mountain and scanned the horizon. Though none matched the drama of the stormy mountain, there were some peaks with different, interesting qualities. One just past the glittery storm had a thin layer of fuzz way above its peak and very few pods, and the pods that were there were tiny. Almost just dots. Of course, that mountain was farther away, too. I floated around the top of my mountain and circled the peak. I found quite a few more of the scantily podded slopes closer up and easier to see in detail. The pods WERE much smaller. And there were no connecting conveyor belts, or lines of any sort. I could make out shapes of what I imagine had to be souls moving about the pods like friends visiting neighbors on holidays. The colors of these small pods were happy and bright. I couldn't see if the bottom of that mountain quite reached the ocean, but I felt sure it did not have a shoreline.

As I tried to make sense of all of this, Julia appeared with Karl. "You won't be able to go back this way," said Julia. "But you may work your way down the slope if you want to leave us. You can stay at any level you choose, forever, if you'd like."

My mind must have been blank as I turned to look at her and digest what I had just seen and understand what I had just heard, because Karl gave me a hefty pat through my back and exclaimed, "That's it, Ian! You're doing exceptionally well with your mind block! Julia told me you were a quick study!"

I could see the mischief in his eyes as he said this. "Quit razzing me, Karl. You know I'm too befuddled right now to have ANY thoughts, let alone a coherent one!" I retorted, but

without my usual twinge of irritation. I was just too dumbstruck by all I had seen. "What is all this?" I asked.

Julia beamed as she explained, "This is Earth's Dark Energy Blanket. It's sort of like a protective coating, or a cozy comforter that isn't sensed even by the earth's best scientists. It's almost like a mirror image of earth in that some things work in opposition to earth's ways. Here you arrive older and grow younger, but by your own personal timeline, not by days or months. And you can stop at any stage you decide is best for you if you feel you are in balance with your skills and desires. You couldn't stay a teenager forever on earth, but you could here, if you chose."

"I can chose anything I want?" I asked rather deadpan, sneering at the phrase. So far it didn't feel that way.

"Yes," Julia continued. "Just remember your choices have consequences, and you must be ready to accept them. And be patient with yourself and us. Recall how a newborn infant has to learn the world around him in stages and often becomes very frustrated along the way. You will learn in stages, as well, but in reverse order, of a sort. And the potential for frustration is much greater."

"Great." I muttered with disdain. "You DO realize patience is definitely NOT one of my strengths..." I glanced over at Karl with a glare that dared him to comment. He just smiled.

"We do," Julia continued. "But we also have to balance your needs with your ability to process and be open to the answers you crave. If you, or we, try to go faster than you are able to handle, you could make the VERY grave mistake of wishing for something you really don't want seriously enough to actually get it. There is no going back from that mistake." Julia was extremely somber as she said this. I thought of Johnny. *'But didn't Arnie say 'don't worry, he'll be okay' after Johnny morphed into tar and blew away in the wind?'*

"We'll tell you about that and other matters when you are ready to hear and understand. The hope is that you will internalize the information. If we move too fast, you may

reject it, which could be very painful. So until then, please try to control your curiosity. Remember that a too curious toddler can be poisoned when he can't resist tasting a bottle of medicine found on an expedition to the top of Grandma's cupboards. Please trust us to tell you as much as we feel we can, as we feel you are ready." She almost seemed to be pleading.

"Why don't you just spank me when I get out of line. Rough me up. Knock some sense into me," I asked, semiseriously. I didn't look at Karl this time.

"You are bigger than I am, now, aren't you, Mr. Burns?" she replied with a smile. "And honestly, you know it would make you even more obstinate."

I couldn't disagree with her there. "Okay, Missy. Point taken," I sighed.

"So, are you ready to practice your 'poker mind' then, Ian?" Karl asked.

I had been so focused on what I had just seen and heard that it took me a bit to get my thoughts back to the reason Julia had allowed me to roam in the first place. "Uh, sure... sure. Whatever."

"Let's get busy, then!" Karl said with a chuckle.

"This is the first time I've ever seen him like this," he whispered to Julia. "It's rather entertaining!"

## I'd Just Like to Be Old

We floated back into the pod. I was actually beginning to feel like one of them, now that floating felt so natural. Almost like second nature. I smiled to myself as I thought about the analogy of the baby. *'Maybe this is like an infant learning to crawl. Or walk, if I want to flatter myself about being a quick study.'*

"I hate to burst your bubble, Ian. Floating is definitely a desirable skill here, and it does take some ability, but walking is like being able to fade from one area to another. Crawling is the closer comparison for floating." Karl didn't have any smugness in his voice. He said this in a matter-of-factly sort of way. I wasn't used to this kind of response to my tendency to think highly of myself. *'Arnie would have razzed me for hours on this one.'*

"We can play that game if you want to, but I thought you wanted to learn how to block others from reading your thoughts." Karl remained on task.

"Yes. I do. I can't go back to be with my friends until I can be sure they can't see right through me. My mind, I mean. I don't care that they can see through this old body." *'The Punster would have had some fun with that slip, wouldn't he?'* I thought with a grin.

"So when do you want to start practicing?" Karl interrupted my mischievous musing.

"Well, I guess now is as good a time as any." And I tried to think in elephant speed. *'But what should I think about?'*

"Very good!" Karl said with more of his usual demeanor. "All I could make out was *'But what'*, then you lost me!

You've found your unmyelinates quicker than anyone I've worked with before! You'll be back with your friends in no time!"

*'So how can any one get any thinking done at this pace?'* I paused to see if Karl was going to respond. He just looked at me, smiling in amazement.

"So what did I just think, Karl? Be honest." *'Actually, how would I know if he were telling me the truth or not? I need to learn how to read HIS mind, not just block him from mine.'*

"Yes, you do. And it is actually easier to read minds than to block them, so I know you'll do well. So what were you thinking on your unmyelinates?" Karl asked.

"How can anyone get any thinking done at that slow pace? I'll have to take so long to think of a good retort to an Arnie jab, it'll be too late to use it!" I was determined to be able to maintain my usual social interactions. I had finely honed skills at verbal jousting before I died. I wanted to keep them well tuned.

"As long as you're busy thinking along the lines of socializing, you'll be keeping your myelinates so busy with fun thoughts, none of the sensitive ones will break through. And if they read your retort before you say it, all the better!" He was a bit too overconfident that 'the sensitive ones' wouldn't be found out. I didn't feel ready to go for a visit just yet.

*'What if there is a pause in the conversation... It could be a VERY awkward silence.'* I practiced slo-mo thinking. *'This is surprisingly easy considering the amount of anxiety I'm feeling.'*

"Why are you feeling anxious? You're doing very well. What was the thought you had before the one about being easy even though you're anxious?" Karl asked seriously.

"I can't risk letting the guys read my feelings about my first dream. I'd never live, well, ..er I'd never be able to get them to stop ribbing me about it, and I don't think I could

handle the harassment for some reason." *'I really don't understand why I feel so sensitive about it. Maybe because I used to run people down who bellyached about being mean to 'poor animals'. They're unrealistic sissies, as far as I'm concerned. And I still think that way, so d----- if I know why I reacted the way I did in the dream.'*

Karl knew why I had the puff appear in my ear. I wasn't remembering to think in slo-mo. "You chose to go back to sleep to see the end of the drama. You 'crawled too high up the cupboards' but you may not have taken a lethal amount of Grandma's medicine."

Using the toddler analogy did help make a bit of sense of it all. "So you're telling me to not worry about what I saw and felt?" I asked with a definite sense of relief.

"Yes. It's too much for you to process right now." He didn't elaborate, and I was glad he didn't. I was very happy to hear it wasn't that important right now. I felt very happy to stay out of the 'cupboards', now that I've experienced the consequences.

Becoming less preoccupied with myself, I noticed Julia was gone. *'When did she leave?'* I thought in slo-mo, and glanced at Karl for a reaction. He was looking across the large entrance room at a collection of teenaged souls in an intense discussion about a recent job. I couldn't hear them, but apparently Karl could. He looked a bit worried. I thought I could make out, *'Not a good sign. Not a good sign at all'* before he turned back to face me. He then must have used his own slo-mo, as no further thoughts were to be sensed.

He smiled wearily. "Ian, you're too smart for your own good. You're really going to keep us on our toes."

But he had given me permission to be a toddler equivalent. I felt relieved to be able to brush the overheard tidbit aside as not my problem. I wasn't young enough yet. Whatever the 'not good sign' was, I was too old to have to deal with it.

"So, where are my buddies?" I suddenly felt ready to see them again.

Karl looked at me for a few seconds as if deciding whether or not he should tell me. "They, or some of them, are down by the river at the Watering Hole. There are some lively discussions of some fun jobs going on. You may find some of them interesting. It may help you decide to ask for a specific task the next time you feel ready for a nap." With that, he turned and thought '*follow me.*'

"I could hear you think 'follow me'. When do I learn how to fade out of one spot and into another, and why are you not fading out with me to the Watering Hole instead of floating me to it?" I did fade from one spot to another after Julia deposited me back by my cot, but I didn't know how I did it.

Karl stopped and turned to me. He appeared somewhat somber when he finally replied, "Maybe we shouldn't go to your friends just yet. It would be best if your questions were answered by younger souls. You may not get an accurate picture from your friends. They're not as curious as you are. They're content with understanding just as much as they need to know to function, and little more. They may give you their partial knowledge, based on their limited experiences. Combined with your intellect and puzzle solving abilities, that type of information may result in a dangerous combination of partial truths."

I sighed, and my shoulders drooped. "Karl, what can I do to fit in here without all this conflict?" I wasn't in the mood to attend a class, or learn intricate details. I was ready to see my friends.

"Can you stop asking, or thinking, questions while you are with your friends?" he asked as though he knew the answer to be 'no'.

I had to be honest, so I admitted, "No, I can't. But if I don't take any of their answers seriously, would I be okay? I never took them seriously in life, so that should be easy; like second nature," I added hopefully.

Karl smiled and turned, and we resumed our float to the Watering Hole.

## The Watering Hole

We went a different way from any of the other trips I'd made through the pod. I worked hard to not ask why this was necessary, so Karl wouldn't change his mind about taking me.. *'OOPS, I thought, I need to slow my thinking so he won't even know that I'm thinking the question.'*

Karl smiled and nodded. "You're getting better. It WOULD be best if you could remember to put your questions through your unmyelinates. Then your friends won't be tempted to tell you their theories; I am correct that you did make the switch just then?" He looked me straight in the eyes as he asked for this conformation.

I couldn't resist the temptation to stay on my unmyelinates; *'How could I say no with a straight face?'*

His smile turned into a hearty grin, and my 'straight face' took on a smirk. *'Now I'm ready for that card game. Boy will Arnie be surprised.'*

"You've got to tell me that last thought. Judging by the look on your face, it was rather sinister." Karl didn't look too worried as he said this, though. "You do want to stay out of trouble, now, don't you?"

"I'm going to win my first game of heavenly euchre. I've mastered the 'Poker Mind'! They won't think I could have learned to block so quickly. It'll shock Arnie to death!" This phrase reminded me, "Oh, by the way, I can't really give him another heart attack, can I? I mean, I'd really hate to cause his death twice...." This was a semi-sincere question. I



really did feel responsible for his heart attack, even though I didn't think he'd get SO d--- wound up arguing about a silly game. My puff was blue.

"No. I can answer that question quickly and easily. No. And don't blame yourself for his attack. He could have prevented it if he really wanted to."

I managed to return to my unmyelinated by the time the question '*How could he have prevented it?*' was fully formulated. Karl only noticed that he couldn't sense anything, and nodded approvingly.

The Watering Hole was less crowded this time, and also less jovial. But the guys we floated up to seemed happy enough. They were in basketball outfits this time. As we drew near enough to hear, Karl faded out. I hesitated a bit about joining in. Harry and Larry were there, but I didn't recognize the others.

"Come join us, Ian!" the hefty soul to my left patted my back so hard his hand went through to my sternum. "We're discussing the game Harry and Larry just worked. Arnie's still there, but he should be back soon."

Harry looked my direction and smiled. "We were starting to worry. It was taking you quite a while to come back. You didn't ask for a challenging dream to start off with, did you?"

"Why would you ask that?" I struggled to not think about my first dream. I was ready to jump into 'slo-mo' if any thoughts of it surfaced, and I quickly changed the subject. "Why is Arnie still at the job and you two are here?"

"He wanted to see if he could find out if the whole team was involved in the wicked scheme, or if it was just the coach and the home team's point guard," Harry explained. "But I guess we'll need to recap the job, so you'll know what we're talking about. Is that okay with the rest of you?"

The hearty backslapper laughed and said "Sure thing, Harry. You tend to dress up the second tellings nicely. Sometimes it's hard to believe it's the same job!"

After the others were done laughing in agreement, Harry started over at the beginning. "We were sent without a

specific invitation, so it took a while to figure out just what we were there to do. It started to look like maybe the point guard on the home team had wished for the visiting team's point to get hurt, because the visiting point was getting up from the floor, rubbing his head. But at the next play, we saw the home guard try to trip the other guard and there were no blobs to be seen. Then Larry poked my in the ribs with his elbow - kinda hard, I might add - his elbow went half-way through my chest!"

"Sorry 'bout that. I was a bit excited when I noticed that hateful coach signal the home point to try harder next time," Larry interrupted. "I wanted to figure out what the problem was before any one got hurt."

"About the same time, Arnie flew out onto the court to break the visiting point's fall - he had just been blind-sided so quickly we didn't see who did it. Arnie barely had time to fill himself up with ghost fluff." Harry paused when he noticed the look on my face and read my question before I could say it. "Ghost fluff has some earthly substance, so that we can actually break a fall with our substance-less bodies. It can't be seen on earth, and just barely felt. It was fun watching Arnie get flattened, though! I always enjoy seeing him squished like a balloon being sat on!" The story had to wait a while so everyone could laugh at this image.

"Anyway, after that, we split up. Larry went to float by the home team coach, and I shadowed the home team point. Arnie stayed with the visiting point to keep him from getting hurt. It didn't take us long to figure out the scheme. The home team was told to 'take out' the visiting point because he was their best player, and the visiting team tended to fall apart without him."

"Not very sportsmanlike, now was it," the soul on my left interjected. "The bastards." I looked for a dart or puff, or something as a result of this word being said, but nothing was produced.

Larry saw my puzzled look, and answered my not yet fully formulated question. "We can still use strong words when they're the best way to convey our feelings about

beings on earth. No other words can describe some of them. Even the strongest of curse words aren't strong enough for some of the evil down there." The others nodded in agreement. They looked unusually somber for a minute.

"Anyway, as I was saying, the coach had schemed to injure the visiting point and the home team point was the leader, or at least he was the one who read the signals from the coach. He was amazingly good at purposefully tripping or pushing the point without the refs seeing him. Either that, or the refs were in on the plot. The rest of the team wasn't as obvious, so it may have just been the coach and the point carrying out the plans. Arnie wanted to know, so he went with them to the locker room after the game to listen in on the post-game talk. We didn't want to implicate the rest of the team if it really was only those two."

"What do you mean by 'implicate'?" I asked. I had obviously completely forgotten about Karl's warning to not ask my buddies questions. "Do you have to report to someone after a job?" It seemed to me that Julia and Karl knew everything about my naps without me having to report anything.

"When we believe we see an ongoing plot, not just some kid wishing ill on his opponents, we make sure the younger souls in charge of jobs are aware of the situation. Sometimes that's why we ask for the 'uninvited' jobs. They can get intricate, like a spy story. But being a spy after you're already dead is a lot safer!" Harry was quick to add. "Most of the time, the young souls already have an idea something is amiss, and send us to verify the goings on. Sometimes, though, it's a rather dead-end job. A one time deal. Arnie is hoping for some good dirt so we can have a good adventure with this one!"

I didn't feel interested in a spy story. Actually, I was hoping for a card game.

"Sure, you want to hear about a spy story!" Arnie appeared with a wide grin on his face. "The coach and the home point were the only two involved in this plot, as best I could tell. But I thought I saw the Ghost of the Coach from

Hell hovering in the corner of the locker room. Heaven knows (or at least the heavenly youth hopefully know) how many other coaches he's trying to sway his evil way!"

*The Ghost of the Coach from Hell. Now I've heard everything.* "Arnie, quit pulling my leg! You can't sucker me into believing that story!" I looked around at the men's faces for signs of 'Hah! Gotcha!' but all I saw were lots of knowing smiles.

"Yeah, it is kinda hard to believe at first, but it's true. We get to match wits with the hateful souls who choose to stay on earth rather than come here or go to hell after they die. They thrive on control, never mind how many people are hurt in the process. They thoroughly enjoy convincing people to do sinister things for them, and they relish scaring the bejesus out of people, just for fun." Larry explained with a serious expression on his face. "It's like the proverbial good versus evil."

"They think we're all weaklings because we want to help people rather than hurt them," added Harry. "And they can really make a good case sometimes. You have to be on your guard all the time. They take a small truth and convince people that black is white, or up is down. They're real bullies. No other way to describe them. They're pure evil."

"So these jobs are really going back to earth to fight evil?" I said with a bit of a smirk. *'How hokie can you get!'*

The gang became quiet with that thought. They didn't seem angry. They just looked sad. Forlorn, actually. I looked around at them trying to get on my unmyelinateds, or change the subject, or anything to escape this very tense moment.

Julia tugged on my arm, and said, "Come with me please, Mr. Burns. We need you to go to sleep for us. You're the best one for this job." She took my hand, and we faded out of the scene....

## Julia to the Rescue

We re-emerged in the now familiar sleep room. "Is there an official name for this place?" I asked lightly. I hoped Karl hadn't told Julia I was supposed to not ask any questions of the guys.

"Yes. We call the rooms used to take working naps Dream Domes. Why do you ask?" Julia replied.

"Oh, just curious." *'Oops. Wroooong answer,'* I thought as I remembered that I was to keep my curiosity under wraps.

But Julia just smiled. "Would you like to know more about your career choices?" she inquired hopefully.

"Why, yes, I would," I replied rather politely in a further attempt to act innocent. Also, Julia could really bring out the best in me, somehow.

"You've experienced two types of jobs so far. The first was getting a chance to prevent something bad from happening. You kept the boy from being killed." She thankfully didn't point out that I caused the lioness to be killed instead.

"The second one was a brief 'thank you' visit," She continued. She paused at this point, seemingly to judge my reaction so far, or waiting for me to ask a question.

I didn't take the bait, and switched to slo-mo mode to think: *'I sure hope she keeps going. There have to be more types.....'*

Julia positively beamed when she realized how well I had mastered the mind block already. Made me feel quite proud of myself, actually. *'Maybe I am ready for another dream.'* "Bring it on!" I gushed with confidence.

"The next level of difficulty is the type of dream Arnie, Harry and Larry had when the home team center wished for the visiting center to break his neck. We prevented the SS agent who answered the call from carrying out their attempts to do harm, since we knew the wish was not genuine." I wanted to ask what an SS agent was, but I managed to hold my tongue AND my thoughts.

"Quite a few souls with sports in their earthly past really enjoy the assignments where the basically good natured players are pushed just a bit too far. It gives them a chance to get aggression out of their systems. Seems there were lots of games where an immense amount of self-control was needed to remain sportsman-like in their earthly lives. With these types of dream jobs they finally get to let the steam out!" She looked truly radiant thinking about how much good was done for both the people and the souls in these dreams. "It's a win-win situation, although the person wishing ill for someone else doesn't think so at the time. It really works out for the best all the way around when nobody gets hurt."

I recalled how enthusiastically Arnie talked about that game. And how the home team center was truly grateful that his wish did not materialize. *'If I were the sports type, I'd almost think about volunteering for that type of job.'*

"Oh, you can volunteer for a similar type of job." Julia obviously read my thought. "Not all ill-wishers are involved in sports. I'm sure you had plenty of co-workers and bosses who you wanted to strangle, figuratively, if not literally. And think of all the road rage. Even saintly people can go off the deep end with angry wishes, especially when the offender is anonymous. There are multitudes of choices with this type of dream. But it would be better if you knew the history of the *type* of evil you would be fighting in the various sub-sorts before you signed up for those types."

I waited patiently for her to continue without forming any coherent thought or question. This information was very interesting. I didn't want to interrupt.

"One of the more difficult adult job types is the one you just heard your friends talk about. It requires problem solving and observation. It really CAN be thought of as a 'spy' type of job. It's really not as safe as Harry would have you believe, however. You have to know how to deal with the ghosts and ghouls and their manipulative ways." She took on a more worried tone with this statement. They must really be bad...

"Until you are ready for the higher levels, I suggest you think about dreaming into your past. Are there any burning questions you have about your life?"

She really didn't need to say 'burning', given as that was how I died. She realized this almost as soon as she said it, though. I could sense her sinking feeling before she even began to say she was sorry. I smiled, and she smiled back. *'Thanks.'*

But I really didn't want to think about my life. *'What's done is done, so why bother.'* I made no effort to block her from the fleeting memories of the most painful times that zoomed uninvited through my mind; she seemed to know my entire history anyway. *'H--, she's probably dredging them up, the meddling midget.'* I sighed, waved away the tan puff, and said dejectedly, "Since you obviously have a plan in mind, go ahead and let me in on it."

"You must choose because it's your soul you may be able to alter. I can only give advice. The final decision must be yours." she replied.

I could understand her point. If I were unhappy with her choice, I'd possibly be upset with her; I'd blame her. "Well, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not relive my life right now. Probably not ever, actually. Once was enough." I said wearily. "Are there any other types of dreams?" I added hopefully.

Our conversation was interrupted briefly by a slight darkening of the room. A fog-like cloud seemed to be dimming the light that shone from the ceiling of the room. It reminded me of the change in weather just before a storm on earth. I thought about the storm I witnessed while I

wandered out of the pod earlier in the day. *'Is this a sign of a similar storm happening here?'* I wondered

"Our storms can be good things. The smaller ones refresh the air with a warm fuzzy aura when we are feeling too vulnerable to the low, counter-spin forces on earth. The bigger storms bring us many more reinforcements, but those are more difficult emotionally. Lots of the new souls' are desperate to spend more time with their loved ones left behind, but they concentrate on our needs here instead."

"Wait a minute," I said tartly. "Do you mean to say that a storm here is when lots of people on earth are killed at one time?" The idea of this being a good thing was appalling.

"Try to tuck that thought away for later, Mr. Burns, when you have had more time to adjust; more time to deAge. You couldn't possibly understand it now, no matter how I'd try to explain it." Julia said this so matter-of-factly that I couldn't question it. I tried to stuff the feeling of horror away deep in a corner of my mind, which was actually quite easy, as I still had most of the coping skills I mastered in life. Not thinking about unpleasant things was a piece of cake for me.

"Okay, so what are my other choices?" I tried to refocus on the original discussion.

Julia didn't answer right away. She was watching as quite a few of the youngest souls floated, awake and crying, up and out of a hole, which had developed in the top of the Dome. At least I didn't recall seeing it there before now. I watched with Julia for what seemed like hours, but was probably just a few minutes. Some of the less young souls returned first. They looked refreshed. Not radiant, but no longer unhappy. Younger and younger ones followed, looking the same way. They floated back to their cots and went back to sleep.

Julia looked at me and said nothing. I asked nothing. I felt as though I had just witnessed something very important; something very revered; something very profound.

Julia sighed, then resumed our prior discussion. "Your other choices are basically to just go and watch without



needing or wanting to intervene. Given your mixed needs, this may be the next best step." She seemed a bit weary.

I didn't disagree with her. That option did feel like a much safer course for right now.

She waved her arm towards the cot I had been using so far, and bade me a good nap.

## Garden of Eden?

I found myself in a very unfamiliar setting. It reminded me of the movie 'Jurassic Park' without the mist, but there were no signs of humans anywhere. Huge trees of a type I'd never seen before rose to the sky seemingly without end. I doubted even the famous California redwoods were this tall. The forest floor was like carpet with a mix between moss and grass. The sounds were eerie. None were the familiar birds chirping or even monkeys squealing like I'd heard on The Discovery Channel. It sounded more like huge cows chewing their cud, or giant horses munching their hay.

A sudden loud shrill shriek that sounded way too close caused me to jump...I laughed when I realized that I had jumped literally 10 feet with the force of my startle. Being a bodiless soul defied gravity quite a bit; it was rather interesting and amusing.

My amusement was short lived, however. It evaporated with a second shriek. It came from the treetops. I could see leaves moving, but not what was behind them. After double-checking that I was indeed still substance-less by slicing my hand through my body with little resistance, I floated up for a closer look.

High in the branches of those tall trees was a humongous bird's nest. The baby birds were at least 10 feet from their beaks to the tip of their featherless tails. Their skin was leathery and wrinkled. They had their eyes shut.

"SHREEEEEEEEKKK!" I winced as the force of the sound waves went through me - I wished I had some puffs in my ears. The sound seemed to be thousands of decibels louder up here with the 'little dears' than down on the forest floor. I

floated farther away to avoid the full force of the next shriek. I leaned on a branch close to the trunk of a nearby tree and took it all in.

Looking down onto the forest floor from this distance I could clearly see huge footprints. The shape was not any I had seen before. I tried to think back to my college days and the course I took on the prehistoric era. I wished I had paid more attention then. Little did I know how handy it could become! I smiled as I wondered how I could forewarn students everywhere that ‘You never know when you might need this information’ was not just a teachers’ ploy to try to get them to stop whining!

I thought about looking for some creature that needed saving, just in case Julia was wrong and I wasn't in the dream type where I was to just watch. I floated around in the treetops for a while. Finding nothing in danger, I went back to the forest floor. I was thoroughly enjoying this trip back in time. Floating amongst the huge tree trunks was calming. I practiced graceful floating, then speed floating. When I zigzagged through the woods, I felt like when I was a teenager again, riding my favorite horse in the poles at the local horse show.

*‘No damsel in distress to be seen,’* I thought with relief. I didn't want any responsibility right now.

I was doing summersaults around the lower branches and pretending I was swinging from tree to tree like Tarzan when I noticed the lake. Or ocean. Or whatever body of water it was. I couldn't see the other side, but there were no waves. Looking closer, I wondered if it was even water. It was awfully muddy and discolored. Almost burgundy. With a metallic hue floating on top. Kinda like an oil slick/pond/swamp all put together. And the smell was just as unattractive. I looked around the shore for any signs of mobile life. I could make out some movement in the forest to my left. There was more vegetation there, and it camouflaged the creature nicely. I floated over and through the plant life for a look.

It was a Taurantasaurus Rex. Or one of those big meat-eating dinosaurs I was supposed to have learned about. Whatever it was eating didn't look like the 'little birds' mother. The trail of burgundy grease from the shoreline indicated the battle had been in the water. *'So the water's not like that everywhere, then,'* I thought.

I looked around. There were huge eggs in a poorly made nest under a bush at the edge of the dinosaur-made clearing. (It had stomped all the vegetation flat, wooden branches and all.) Way above us was a bird larger than all the baby birds put together. It watched as the Rex ripped muscles from the bones of its victim, as though waiting its turn.

I was relieved to realize I didn't have any of the sissy feelings of pity for the half eaten beast. It didn't look too small, and judging by the cuts on the victor, it put up a good fight. The scene, though not pleasant, felt right. No bad vibes were coming from any of the participants.

I pondered on this for quite a while as I calmly watched dinner progress. *'Why am I so bothered by the African scene, and not by this one?'* I smiled when I realized I was actually paying attention to my feelings for the answers. *'Julia and crew would be so surprised! But these feelings aren't bad, just confusing.'*

Thinking back on the problem I had with the lioness, I didn't remember feeling really bothered until I saw the boys abusing her; riding her dead body. *'There was no purpose behind that act. They were enjoying the fact that they won, that they were more powerful than she was - now that she was dead.'* Watching the current scene was not bothersome, because the violence had a purpose - the Rex needed to eat. The same conclusion explained my reaction to the cubs. *'Whatever killed them didn't kill them for food. It seemed evil to kill something just because you could.'*

I decided to float on to the next 'lesson', as this was beginning to feel like. At least it was causing me to sorta remember and use what I had learned in school and college. I was content as I wandered aimlessly through the woods in search of the next topic. I hoped it wouldn't be so deep. I

didn't like thinking about corny, girlie issues. *'Maybe I should wake up now to avoid the possibility of another deep revelation.'*

I didn't wake up though. I guessed it was because it was a half-hearted wish. Other than the risk of having to deal with another pensive situation, this was a very pleasant experience. I wasn't really ready to go. *'Not just yet. The atmosphere is just soooo relaxing. And peaceful. Even more so than heaven, if that's what that place really is. I wonder if this isn't heaven instead. There are no annoying punsters, no jobs, no worries about what the guys would think, no nothing. Just privacy. And peace. And solitude. A good solitude. I wonder if I could ask to come here the next time I needed to be alone. I sure don't want to ever go back in that bubble!'*

I awoke with a peaceful feeling emanating from me, judging by the look on Julia's face. "Why did you stay here while I slept this time?" I asked her. "I think I learned my lesson about going back to see more..."

"Are you sure about that?" she said with a knowing smile. "I thought I sensed a wish to stay there forever."

"But that wasn't because of curiosity. You said my curiosity was what got me in trouble. This was a completely different reason," I argued. She was right about me wanting to go back. It was very tempting and I was hoping she could send me back soon.

"You can go back there if you want. Whenever you feel the need to be able to really relax, I can help you get there. But if you want to go for a different reason, such as to escape what you really need to deal with, it would be best if you chose not to go."

I cringed at the phrase. "And just what might I be trying to escape?" I was also just a bit perturbed by being told I shouldn't do something, even though it was Julia that was saying it.

"If you are angry, or hateful, or having some other negative feeling, then you'll do better to go to your bubble," she explained.

"Oh, so my bubble is the equivalent of my 'time-out corner', like the new-fangled theories of the wimpy generation, huh!? I'd rather get the tar beaten out of me, like my dad used to do!" I snorted.

"Exactly. So the bubble is a greater deterrent than a beating. Isn't that what we want, in the end?" Her eyes were glittering with delight at 'getting' me on this one. I was cornered. She was right, which meant all those psychobabble theories about discipline MAY have a point. MAY have A, as in ONE, point.

"So, what's next?" I changed the subject. "Is there another dream where I can just watch? It was nice to be a pure spectator."

"Yes, we can arrange that quite easily. Do you have any preferences?" She asked.

"Just so it's low stress. I'm not in the mood for any conflict right now." I replied.

"Okay. Just roll over and go back to sleep." She sounded like a doting mother putting her child to bed for the night. It felt good to be pampered.

## The First Class

I found myself in a classroom of sorts. It had no modern equipment. The paper looked thick. Almost like wood. The pupils were sitting on the floor gathered around the teacher who was on an uncomfortable looking chair. Their pens looked like quills, and they had some strange, small stones with a dimple in the middle that apparently had ink in them, as they dipped the tip of the quill into the fluid before writing their notes on their paper.

I couldn't understand a word. I had no idea which language they were using. It may as well be Greek for all I knew. I was slightly disappointed that I couldn't listen in. '***It IS Greek***' came a thought from nowhere, and suddenly I could understand what they were saying. '*Weird,*' I thought. '*And it just keeps getting weirder and weirder....*'

I listened for a while before I realized that understanding the language was not enough. The words were being used in a context that didn't make a bit of sense. It reminded me of that awful poetry c--- we had to analyze in college. '*Didn't make any sense then, and it sure doesn't make any sense now.*' I cleaned the tan puff from my ear, and realized that I hadn't had one in a while. That had to be a good sign.

I decided to relax in a cozy corner of the room and just watch. Maybe I was supposed to learn something from their body language. I studied their clothing. It looked like pictures of Romans in their togas, but this must be Greece. Once again, I wished I had paid more attention in my classes, although literature was my least favorite subject, even when it wasn't poetry. '*Why don't people just say what they mean, for C---- s---!*' I cleaned the fluff from my other ear and

wondered why the fluffs tend to alternate ears when they appear. Then I wished I'd left the puffs in my ears; this teacher was dreadful!

The drone of the teacher eventually stopped. I decided to try to pay attention now that one of the students may say something coherent. "Sir Homer," said one boy after the teacher acknowledged his raised hand. "Why does Hera put up with Zeus? As a goddess, doesn't she have enough power to do something about his infidelities?"

"Alas, dear boy, she does not. Power is a very complex thing. Even the powerful have to acquiesce to those with more power than they. These poems are about the intensity of those power struggles and the pain that results, even for the powerful gods and goddesses."

"Well then, why doesn't Zeus do away with Hera? He doesn't seem to think very highly of her, and he desires all the other lesser gods' wives." The student was trying to be logical in the most illogical of places - a classroom for the study of literature.

I didn't listen to Homer's answer. *'What was Julia thinking when she sent me here? Karl would have known how much I disliked this junk.'* I wandered around the room, looking at the book titles. They were all in Greek.

I went back to my cozy corner to sulk. *'This is SO boring.'* I debated with myself about whether or not to wish myself awake. I decided to wait it out. Surely something of interest will happen soon.

I listened to bits and pieces of the conversations between the teacher and the pupils. I smiled knowingly as I realized they couldn't understand it any better than I could when I had to read it in college, and they had the luxury of having the actual poet right there to explain it himself. *'Communication is a wonderful thing. Why do eggheads try to ruin it?'*

After what felt like ages, the class was dismissed. Homer went to his desk and sat down, looking rather exhausted. *'That's what you get for being so obtuse. Just say what you mean, and life could be so much easier!'* I thought.



I watched him just sit there for a bit. I began to wonder if he were still alive. He was so still, I could barely see him breathing. His eyes were fixed in a stare, unblinking. I floated over to him and waved my wisp of a hand in front of his face, as though that would bring him 'round. 'Strange,' I thought, arms crossed and index finger at my lips. 'What could possibly be going on?'

I looked at his desk. He was holding his book, *The Iliad*. It was open to a page that described how Hephaestus was cast out of Olympus because he was born deformed. His eyes were fixed on the center of the page. I looked from the page to the poet and from the poet to the page, wondering what I should do next.

'*Gods and goddesses are embodiments of good*' I could hear him think. I listened more intently than before. I felt like I was listening in on a person possessed by Satan, but he didn't have red glowing eyes, or anything supernatural like that. It sure was an eerie feeling. I was kinda scared, to tell the truth. I hoped his head wouldn't start spinning while he spewed green slime everywhere. I wished I hadn't seen "The Exorcist". My knees were shaking.

'*Yes, Queen Hera, I'll be sure to include that in my next passage. Yes, Queen Hera, the most beautiful of all in Olympus, I will praise your good nature and point out all the transgressions you have suffered at the hands of Zeus. I will tell the world how you loved your defective son.*' He then cringed for reasons unknown. I couldn't hear what Hera was saying to him, just what he answered to her. 'Yes, Oh Glorious Queen. I am always at your service.' He flinched again, then came to.

He sighed deeply. 'How did I ever get myself into this mess?' he asked himself. 'Now what am I to do?...' He read the page about Hephaestus over and over. I tried to read it too, thinking it may make sense by osmosis, if I got close enough to him.

As I moved closer, though, I may have caused him to feel something. "Heph, old buddy, is that you?" Homer said out loud with a look of relief on his face. I was the only other

being in the room as far as I knew. But, h---, who was I to say that a Greek god wasn't here too?

I backed away. His expression went back to one of dread. He sighed again. "Woe is me. Woe is me." Homer looked so helpless and weak that I wished I could do something to help him, even though this was a 'watch only' dream, or so I thought. Homer got up and paced around the room. I tried to stay out of his way, in case he could sense me and get his hopes up again that Hephaestus was here, but he pulled a fast U-turn on me and walked right through me. His expression immediately brightened again. "Well, even if you're not Heph, I can sense that you are warm and caring, not full of evil." Homer apparently had ESP. I thought ESP only existed on cop shows so they could find their criminal with a beautiful woman's help.

"Please make yourself known to me," Homer said as if he knew something I didn't about how spirits can materialize in dreams. No one warned me this could happen!

Homer continued to look upbeat, even though I could do nothing to communicate with him.....'unless he can read my mind even though he can't see me...'

"Yes, now that I know you are here, I can read your thoughts, though not so clearly as to fully converse as if we were face to face." Homer seemed anxious for a non-god/goddess spirit to talk to, and I was that hapless soul, whether or not I would suffice. *'I don't feel intelligent enough to talk to such an intricate person.'*

"You are perfect for my current dilemma. I need to be reminded of the good in the life here after. My will is at an ebb. These selfish gods and goddesses are draining me of all my strength. Just your presence is enough, even if you don't want to let me read your thoughts."

My curiosity was definitely tweaked. Julia must have known the temptation she was sending me into. *'I've got to find out what Homer was really trying to say in all that gobble-de-gook.'*

"What do you mean by 'gobbled book?' Did someone try to EAT my book?" Homer asked in disbelief. I doubled over in laughter. Homer laughed, too.

"What do you want to know?" He asked through his chuckles.

*'What the h--- did you mean in those horrid books of yours?'* I thought, not the least bit worried that he'd take offense at my description of his life's works. I removed the puff from my ears. I wanted to hear every word he said.

"If I could just write what I want to say, it wouldn't be so illogical, but those damn immortals just won't let me be! As soon as I write something good about one of them, another gets upset and threatens me if I don't write something bad about the good one, and something good about the bad one. Does that make sense, um, what is your name, by the way," Homer added.

*'Ian Burns, at your service, sir!'* I thought playfully. *'And that thought made infinitely more sense than anything of your printed stuff that I've been forced to read! Actually, just knowing that little tidbit may give me enough motivation to try to read them again. It just may make sense thinking of you in a tug-a-war with the gods.'* He knew full well I was never going to try to read the horrid conglomeration of words again. *'It would be nice, though, if you can give me the real scoop in a CliffsNotes.'*

"Give you what in a what? Could you think in Greek, please?" Homer said. I wondered where the translating of English to Greek and Greek to English was taking place. He may actually think I could think in Greek, or else he's making a joke. *I can't imagine the Homer I thought I knew from those awfully serious books making a joke...*

"Oh but I can have a sense of humor when I'm not being brow beaten by the immortals. Oh how I wish I'd never learned to communicate with them!" he said, slouching with the weight of it all. "Now they send all of their bickerings through me, and a handful of others foolish enough to listen to them. Once in their grip, there's no escape." His lively grin

vanished completely, replaced by the most depressed, trapped, helpless, hopeless face I'd ever seen.

*'Surely there must be a way to block them. They taught me in heaven to use my unmyelinated nerve tracts to think when I didn't want my thoughts read. Could that work for you?'* I asked hopefully. It was hard to watch anyone be this miserable.

"I have no idea what you're thinking about. What are 'nerf tacks'?" He wasn't smiling.

He didn't have to know modern anatomy to learn to think in slo-mo. I could teach him like Julia taught me. *'How do you feel when you imagine being a chipmunk?'* I started the lesson as Julia had for me.

"Tell me what a 'chipunk' is and I'll try to become one if it will free me from the gods!" He said this with a very despondent look. "I don't need to block them from reading my thoughts. They can only communicate when I tune in to them. But if I don't check in now and then, or immediately when I feel them wanting me, they cause terrible things to happen to me or my friends and family."

*'There is no danger of any of them listening in on this conversation?'* I thought. *'You don't know how good you have it! Imagine if the gods and goddesses could read your mind any time they desired. You'd be mincemeat!'*

"What's 'mincemeat' and how could it be worse than being enslaved to a bunch of supernatural evil beings!" He closed his eyes and put his head on his desk.

*'Can't you talk with any of your close friends about this? Even if they couldn't help change the situation, just being there for support may help.'* Was this thought really mine? I wondered in disbelief. That could have been word for word out of my daughter!

"Ian, would any of your friends believe you if you told them a story like this? They'd burn me at the stake!" he said with despair.

I wasn't feeling too helpful. *I should have known that.*

"But you ARE being very helpful just by being here. It gives me hope that maybe eventually the forces in heaven

will figure out how to keep people out of the gods clutches. They must be on to something. Sometimes I sense several good spirits a day visiting my classes. I just wish I could tell more of them what I've been able to tell you. Please tell me you'll spread the word in heaven that these gods are very real and very evil. Except Heph. If it weren't for him, earth would really be hell.” He seemed to brighten a bit thinking about his friend.

*‘So anything good written about any of them other than Heph was written under duress?’* I wanted to be sure I understood correctly.

“For the most part, yes. If you take out the positive writings about the really evil ones, it will make more sense..... I must go now. I'm being summoned by Zeus.” With that he went back into the trance-like state.

I thought briefly about staying and listening in, but I wasn't sure it wouldn't be picked up by Zeus, so I wished myself awake....

## Homework in Heaven

Julia hadn't waited for me this time. I sat up and looked around. I wondered if there was a library in heaven. I wanted to start reading the Iliad and the Odyssey as soon as possible. I decided my best bet would be in the direction of the keypads. They were learning tools, so classrooms and libraries may be nearby, too. After all, wasn't I told when I arrived that I could do anything my heart desires here? Many people I knew were addicted to reading while they were on earth. I bet I'd find some of them in a heavenly library.

I looked over my options when I reached the keyboard room. There were three doors other than the one I had just come out of and the one I was lead out of on my way to see Pat. I decided to choose the one with the brightest lights. Libraries tend to be well lit. I also didn't want to take the one the punster's patients emerged from. I didn't have time for such nonsense now.

As I walked, I thought about asking Julia if heaven was aware of what Homer told me. *'It would be the easiest way to find out, and she could tell me where the library was, too.'* But I was in the mood to find things out for myself, so I was careful not to wish for her to show up.

"This way, Ian," Julia said, her head poking out of a door up ahead. "The library is here. I pulled the books you want out for you. They're here on a stand by a nice comfy chair." She looked a bit sheepish. "I didn't overload you with that dream, did I? I sensed you would become impatient sooner

rather than later, so I forged ahead for you. Wasn't it interesting?"

"You little imp!" I scolded her in jest. "So are the heavenly youth aware of the reality of the Greek gods at the time of Homer's works?"

"Not just Homer's time. And not just Greek gods. In all time, and many different names and characters. If you can master the cast of characters in Greek Mythology, minus any good traits, you'll be ready for any dream in any age group!" She seemed to be quite pleased with either me or herself.

"Feel the top of your head, Mr. Burns. You may be surprised."

"Why? Is there bird dew on it or something?" I cautiously touched a finger to my head. "Well, I'll be! I can feel some peach fuzz there! My hair is coming back!" *'I must be doing okay then, if I'm getting younger.'*

"Yes, you are! I'm so proud of you!" She gave me a quick peck on the cheek, a tiny hug and a smile. Then she faded out.

I settled in for the long haul with *The Odyssey*. I lasted half a page. *'C----- A-----! This s--- is impossible!'* I thought as two puffs simultaneously flew out of my ears. *'There's gotta be a translation for normal people to read. Who besides college Lit professors can read this so-called poetry jibber-jabber!'* I wished there were an edition of the 'evil only' mode that already edited out all those lies Homer had to put in about them being good so I could zoom through without any confusion.

"Sorry Ian. You have to read the good with the bad." Karl at least had the decency to fade in slowly so he didn't scare me. "You can read the non-poetic versions as well, but they are a combination of all the authors in the gods' grips. If you want to know only what Homer wrote, you'll have to plow through these two books Julia found for you."

"Can't you wiggle your nose or something, and put all the info right into my brain? Or at least there must be some sort of heavenly speed reading I could use?" I was in a hurry to know it all, NOW.

"Patience, Ian. You are still an older soul, so you can't jump too quickly into the younger dream types for a while anyway. Relax. Take your time. You may even learn to enjoy poetry." He thoroughly enjoyed ribbing me with that last comment. He knew me better than that.

"But Julia said I couldn't go on dreams where I was responsible for helping some poor person unless I understood more about the forces I'd be up against." Until I said this, I was not aware of the strength of my desire to join the guys in their dreams. I didn't want to be left behind.

Karl thought this over a while. I couldn't make out any details, but I got the sense he was questioning Julia's judgment. "Maybe so," he said, and faded out.

'*Chicken,*' I thought. '*He could have stayed around for a lively debate on Julia's recommendations if he really wanted to.*'

I went looking for a crib sheet section in the aisle. When I found none, I realized I was thinking I was in a bookstore instead of a library. Libraries don't use marketing techniques like racks full of non-books in your way so you'll notice them and buy them, I thought cynically. I decided to ask the librarian for help. It's not as bad as asking for directions, I told myself to keep from feeling less masculine. I just need help because I'm in a hurry.

The soul floating above the librarian's desk had a smug look on her face. "No, we don't have any crib sheets on anything. The quickest way to learn about the gods and goddesses is to read this." She handed me the thickest book with the thinnest pages I had ever seen. It was worse than the Physician's Desk References my wife used to keep as hand-me-downs after Susan was done with them. And they had thousands of pages thinner than Bible pages.

I put the monstrosity back on the librarian's desk, and turned back to my chair and the books Julia had found for me. I wondered what would happen if I fell asleep reading and started snoring. There was a bit of hope I wouldn't fall asleep, though. If we are only able to sleep in a Dream Dome, I may be able to do this...



I picked up *The Iliad*. I looked at the back, the front and the inside covers for any hints of helpful translations. None found, I turned to the introduction. It may as well have been in Greek for all the sense it made. I sighed and turned to the first page. Just looking at the poetic word positioning made me groan. I laid my head back on the chair and stared at the ceiling. I sighed loudly. I looked at the page again. I tried to think of poor Homer in his misery as I saw him in my dream. We had bonded. Surely that should give me enough motivation to read what was so important to him.

*'But these aren't his exact words anyway,'* I rationalized. *'He had written in Greek. This is in English. Whoever translated it had to make some changes. No language has word for word meanings.'* I learned enough Spanish in high school to realize that. *'So what's the harm in reading someone's interpretation of the English interpretation of Homer? I would need YEARS to try to make sense of it all myself.'*

I got up to look for the file drawer with the Dewey Decimal System cards in it. I was determined to NOT ask that cranky uppity librarian for help. I found the files and started looking under the author. I was happy to find I had remembered how to use the file. I hadn't been in a library for over 50 years, and even then I didn't use the files very often. The librarians weren't as annoying in my younger years, and were more approachable.

I looked for the aisle where the books about Homer and the Greek Gods were supposed to be. I followed the numbers right to the spot. *'Who says men can't find things without help,'* I smirked to myself. I turned my head sideways to read the titles, and the rest of my body floated into a horizontal position as well. My heart sank when I realized there were FIVE shelves full of books on Greek Mythology! I decided to look only at the skinny ones with big type and lots of pictures.

Having made my selection on this basis, I went back to my chair and plopped into it. I opened the tiny book and was relieved to find the table of contents listed much of what I

needed to know. I skipped the introduction and went straight to the chapter where the names of the gods were nicely listed with brief descriptions under each one.

By the time I got to the fifth god, the characteristics of each became a blur. They were so similar in their evilness that it didn't seem to matter which one's name was at the top of the description. I sighed again, and rested my head on the back of the chair.

*'This is torture!'* I moaned. *'I had enough schooling in life to last me a lifetime.'* I had to smile at the next thought; *'Well, my lifetime is over. This is a whole new slate.'* The lighthearted thought gave me a boost to try again. I decided to start with the ones that were supposed to be the most important.

Supposedly, Olympus was some fanciful place where the gods had no cares or worries, except those that they brought on themselves. They drank and partied all the time, stopping every now and then to cause misery to the poor mortals on earth.

I read about Zeus, who was the most powerful, and Hera, his wife who was also his SISTER, for C---- s---! Poseidon was Zeus' brother and Ruler of the Sea. He didn't sound so bad. He was given credit for giving humans the horse. Hades, now, is a different story altogether. He was King of the Dead, Ruler of the Underworld. His vacation home was deep in the earth, and even the Olympians didn't invite him to stay with them. They considered him a terrible god. Athena had no mother. She grew out of Zeus' head full grown and in full armor ready to go to battle. Apollo tried to help people deal with his family and sounds like a pretty good guy over all, but he did lose his temper now and again. Apollo's twin sister, Artemis, made a bunch of Greek sailors sacrifice a maiden to her before she let them sail. *'Wonderful little lady, now, wasn't she.'* Not to be outdone, Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love and Beauty, was the ultimate seductress. She had men under her thumb, and loved to watch them squirm.

After reading about these hateful, self-centered gods, I needed a break. I put the book down and got up to clear my mind.

I wandered around the library for a short while, but that got old quickly. I decide to see more of the pod. At least I didn't have to worry about getting lost. I knew Julia could always find me.

I went back to the keyboard room. This time there were actually some souls sitting at them trying to better their heavenly skills. I decided to take one of the two doors that I had not yet been through. It didn't appear to be very different from the hallway to the library. There were some office-type doors like in the hallway to Pat, but these were closed. There were numbers on the doors, but no names. I wondered what kind of work was done in them. I then recalled seeing the souls in the offices to Pat doing some sort of paperwork. I was a bit curious to know what sort of paperwork heaven would need. I wondered if I were to go down the hallway to Pat's office, if anyone there would let me see what they were up to. I thought not, but it may be worth a try.

I turned back to the keyboard room and took the hallway to Pat's. The doors there were still open with the souls working more feverishly than ever. I stood outside one door wondering if I could interrupt for a second. The soul looked up and asked "May I help you, sir?" The child looked very young, and was apparently one of the more skilled souls who can put your thoughts together before you can gather them yourself. Before I could even start to ask a question, he answered, "I'm sorry sir, but that needs to be cleared by younger souls than I. You might ask Gail for help with your question."

*'The airhead?'* I thought with some disgust. *'She doesn't know anything. She's afraid to ask in case it's something she's not supposed to tell anyone.'*

As I hadn't switched to slo-mo, which may not have helped with the skill level of this young'un anyway, he answered, "She at least knows who CAN tell you, though."

"So, where do I find her?" I asked with a rather deadpan tone. I wasn't in the right frame of mind to deal with her.

"Go a bit further down this hall. Take the first right, then a left two halls later. Her office will be the fourth on the top." He rattled this off so quickly I didn't have time to process it. But I didn't ask for clarification. I'd just as soon get lost.

I managed to remember the first right, but by the time I had passed the first hall in that corridor, I had forgotten the rest of the directions. Except the last part. Did he really say her office was on the top of that hallway?

At the second hallway, I decided to try a right first. After a few minutes, I thought I'd turn around and try a left, since I saw nothing that looked like a 'stack' of offices. Soon after taking the left turn, I saw a rather amazing sight. It reminded me of the work space in The Monster's, Inc. the grandkids made me watch with them. It was a cavernous atrium with office doors in rows upon rows. No steps or ladders were needed, since we all could float to the desired door. Some of them were open. The souls in them had both a computer and a bunch of file cabinets. Most of their desks were covered with piles of paperwork. Some of the closed doors had names plates, but most just had numbers. I looked around for some sort of directory. Surely everyone here doesn't know everybody else. I floated around the entrance for a while, wondering if I should ask one of the souls with an open door if they knew which one was Gail's office. I didn't even know her last name, so I decided not to bother asking.

I was not the only one floating around in here, so I didn't think I stuck out. I just drifted around the cavern, looking as though I knew where I was and what I was doing, or so I thought.

"Excuse me, sir. May I help you?" a small voice just above me asked.

I had forgotten about my age. I stuck out like a sore thumb. No one else in here was even a teenager. So I had to fess up about what brought me here. "I'm looking for Gail. I don't know her last name."

"Follow me," the young soul said pleasantly. At least I wasn't in trouble, but I still wasn't sure I was ready to deal with Gail.

"Come in, Mr. Burns!" Gail said enthusiastically. "You look very well! Grew a bit more hair, I see. The wrinkles are beginning to fade, too." She didn't have a clue that pointing out that I had wrinkles, though true, was rude. I brushed it aside.

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

"I'd like to know about the work being done in all these offices. Could you direct me to someone who could tell me?" I didn't even bother asking her if she could tell me. She probably wouldn't get it right anyway.

She looked rather pensive for what seemed like minutes. Then she said, "I can give you the general picture, but not any specifics. Not yet, anyway. The specifics wouldn't make any sense to you yet, even though you are obviously making progress judging by that new hair!"

"Any information would be helpful." I tried to be as polite as possible. It may keep her on track if the conversation stayed a bit more formal.

"Sure. Okay, humm, where to start.... have you noticed ours is not the only mountain with pods?" She started answering my question with a question.

I took a deep sigh, and answered, "Yes."

"We need to stay in constant communication with all the other mountains and pods in heaven. We even have representatives at the animal hills inland, just in case anything there seems out of kilter. There are millions of other pods on thousands of other mountains. It keeps us very busy, especially when there is a disaster on earth."

"A disaster?" My ears perked up. "Was there a disaster on earth recently?" I thought about the storm I saw on the far away mountain, and Julia's comments in the sleep room when a storm seemed to be occurring here.

Gail pondered this question for another few minutes, obviously trying to decide if it was okay to tell me the answer to this. "Why do you ask?" She asked finally. I felt

good to know she remembered that I didn't want her to read my mind.

"I saw a storm over a mountain a little while ago. And Julia said storms here were good things. She said something about reinforcements." I felt the excitement of a revelation about to happen. "And, I know that the Greek gods were, and are, real." I added, thinking that if she knew how much I knew, she may be more forthcoming with details.

She looked a bit shocked, and then it took her ANOTHER few minutes to process this additional information. I wondered if she were using her unmyelinateds so I'd not be able to read her mind.

"You definitely don't do well when you are kept in the dark about things. And you seem to be doing very well with all that you have learned in the short time you've been here. I will try to answer your questions to the best of my ability, within the limits of my own understanding. I don't know all the answers myself. I've still got several years of deAging to go, you know. So please don't be upset with me if I honestly don't know the answers to your questions." She was definitely NOT in her airhead mode.

"Yes, there has just been a major earthquake in Turkey. The storm you saw was the arrival of thousands of innocent souls who perished. It really is sad, but it happens. The forces of evil are overwhelming. The mountain to which they went is the one for those of their country and culture. From there they can choose to help souls in their culture to protect the vulnerable people there from being taken in by Ares and his hateful, murderous ghouls." She paused for a while. The emotion she was feeling was palpable. It seemed to thicken the air in her office. Even the souls floating by took note of it, and steered clear. Gail floated over to her door and closed it gently.

"I would normally have strength to will it closed, but just the thought of what is happening on earth drains me." She slumped somewhat back into her chair. She sighed deeply. "And the small storm we had here was the result of a bad night of tornados in the United States. We sure can use the

help to deal with all the anger building up in the misguided souls in the States, though. Hermes and his hordes have taken a strangle-hold on some of the more powerful people in the States, and their influence is spreading." A tear dropped off of her cheek. She sighed again. "I don't know how our infant spirits can handle it. They're sleeping almost 24 hours a day. They have to wake up for a rest sometime soon or they're going to burn out." She looked at me carefully, and asked, "Did I tell you too much? Do you want to know more?"

She really did look drained. I didn't have the heart to ask her anything more, but she continued. "You see, Hermes can hijack people in search of guidance. These people think they are giving their lives to a higher power, and Hermes or one of his cohorts jumps in and pretends to be Jesus, or God, or whomever the person is praying to for guidance. Once the person has made the connection, it is almost impossible to break. They are SO convinced that they are in touch with the power of good that they have no motivation to open their minds to the warmth of the true high. Not only are they lost, but they are actively controlled by Hermes, and do horrible things 'in the name of the Lord'." She paused to gather some strength, then added, "But as bad as it is in the States, the Middle East has the forces of Ares to deal with." When she began to think about Ares again, she literally wilted, looking more like a puddle of mist in her chair than a soul.

"Please, don't say any more," I whispered. I was afraid the full volume of my voice would blow her away. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

I stood there wondering what I could possibly do when I noticed a tiny form hovering beside her chair. The infant looked at me reassuringly. I knew by his slow nod that everything would be okay. He turned his attention to Gail, and I floated to the door and let myself out.

As I closed her door, I noticed a nameplate. Gail Cristal. "Thank you very much, Ms. Cristal. I'm truly sorry to see you so upset," I whispered to the closed door. I really felt terrible about how I was thinking of her earlier.

But I was now much more motivated to go back to the book on the Greek gods to find out who these two gods she mentioned may be. I didn't remember reading about them yet. Maybe what she told me would make more sense after I learned a bit more about them.



## Piecing It Together

I only made a few wrong turns on the way back to the library. My book was still there by the chair, open to the last page I had read. I sat down and stared at it, unfocused. I wondered if the guys knew anything about any of this. They seemed so happy and carefree. They couldn't be aware of what is going on. But, then again, they did go all funny on me when I made fun of the analogy of their dreams being a battle between good and evil. *'After I finish this book, I'm going to find them and feel them out. I can't ask them flat out about the Greek gods. They'd think I was crazy. But then again, they did make reference to some lizards, or slugs, or something like that, when they discussed their rugby dream. Hummmm....'*

I'd figure that out later. Right now I have to know more about those other two Greek gods Gail named. *'I hope I can remember them when I see them. Strange names should be against the law! I never could follow stories like Lord of the Rings because of those blasted strange names!'*

With a sigh, I returned to the book. Hermes was the next one in the list. I thought that sounded familiar. *'Was it the name of the god in the Middle East?'* It really felt funny using the term god, even though it wasn't always capitalized, to describe these horrid beings.

Hermes was the God of Commerce and the Market. *'No, I guess that wouldn't be the Middle East's god. Sounds more like the United States where the free market actually IS worshipped.'* He was described as a most greedy fellow.

Ares was the God of War. Both Zeus and Hera detested him, according to Homer. *‘Gee, he must be pretty evil for two very hateful gods who are his parents to hate him.’*

*‘Could these two characters be why Gail is so worried? Surely not. There’s no way we would have to worry about those little Arab countries having enough power to do any real harm to us. And Hermes wasn’t all that bad. A little bit of greed is what makes the markets go round.’*

I closed the book. I sighed. I stood up and stretched. I felt as though I had hit a dead end. It was kind of a let down. It did make me feel a bit smug, however, to think that I was right about all those holier-than-thou hypocrites. Some of the most hateful, opinionated people I had to deal with were those ‘born again’ Christian types. If they were the hijacked people Gail referred to, then all the contradictions they posed made some sense. *‘They don’t MEAN to be hateful. Not really. They’re just too stupid to realize how stupid they are.’*

*‘No, for things to be as bad as Gail made it appear, those evil gods have to have more than hapless idiots to push around. They would need to have REALLY evil people available to use.’* I shuddered as I remembered some of those types I had met over the years. They had no redeeming factors. They weren’t just hateful. They actually spread hate. Wherever they were, bad feelings multiplied. And the more they could stir up, the happier they were.

*‘Gail had said something about powerful people being under the control of the gods. If some of those purely evil people are in positions of power, horrendous things could happen. Like with Hitler. And Stalin.’*

Now I began to worry. Not as much as Gail, but at least enough to understand how she could be so worried. *‘If she knows about another Hitler or Stalin brewing up some genocidal plot, her meltdown would make more sense.’*

I began to pace. I was working myself into a panic when Julia suddenly appeared. She looked worried, too - her little eyebrows were raised so high they almost met her hairline.

"WHAT'S HAPPENING?" We both hollered at once. Others in the library heard us, of course, and stared in our direction.

"Please tell me there's not going to be another Hitler down there on earth," I blurted out.

Julia immediately relaxed but still looked concerned. "Well, no, not exactly. You scared me there for a moment." She paused, then added, "I may have let you stray too far too fast." She took my arm to guide me to my chair.

She asked, "Why do you think there might be another Hitler in the making?"

I confessed about my visit to Gail. I wondered if Gail would be in trouble for telling me too much. I urged Julia to not tell on her.

"You're forgetting how transparent things are here, in general. And I'm sure she got clearance before she told you anything. But how did you get from what she said to Hitler? I wasn't tuned in to your thoughts until I sensed your anxiety." She seemed to feel a bit guilty about not watching me more closely.

"Not to worry, little one. I'm a grown man. I can take care of myself now and then," I joshed with her to lighten the atmosphere. Then I explained how I came to my conclusion. "I started to think about the annoying converts I knew in life, and how they weren't truly evil, just stupid. I couldn't see how those sorts would have gotten even an airhead like Gail so emotional, so I thought that if some of those evil Greek god types got behind truly evil people in powerful positions, like Hitler and Stalin, then THAT would be bad enough to explain her reaction to what she told me."

Julia looked startled. "Mr. Burns, I am in awe! How ever did you figure so much out so fast?"

"Uh, does that mean there IS another genocidal dictator coming to power? I was hoping I was wrong." I felt a jab of dread at the thought.

"You are amazing," Julia said, shaking her head. "You just figured out what most teenagers have no clue about!"

Karl was definitely right about you. No wonder you were so furious with us when you first arrived."

"So, what is being done about this situation on earth?" I needed an answer.

Julia looked at me for a while, reminiscent of Gail's pauses. I waited, uncharacteristically patient. "Let's go talk with Pat. Pat knows more than all of us put together. You won't blow a gasket if your questions still aren't answered, will you? Even the infants don't know as many of the details as Pat knows."

"Blow a gasket, huh. That doesn't sound right coming from you. Me, yes. And my 'angel of deliverance', yes. You, no." I was smiling as I said this. The phrase sounded kinda cute coming from her. "No, I promise I won't blow a gasket, and if I do, I know Zeus will smite me with plagues and a long and painful death for breaking an oath." I thought I might as well have some fun with my newfound information.

We were in Pat's office in the blink of an eye. *'I've got to find out how to do that on my own,'* I thought. I grinned sheepishly at Pat, realizing I was not in slo-mo, and she-he could read the curiosity imbedded in the thought.

"We have all become aware of how quickly you can figure things out, and how much better you feel, on one level, when you find the answers to your questions. However..." Pat paused for a moment, and took a deep breath. "On the other level, you have done yourself a disservice. You are depriving yourself of the heavenly equivalent of a childhood. You need not worry about the state of the world. The piece of the puzzle you have figured out is miniscule in comparison to the scope of the problems already solved. As bad as you may feel about what you have discovered, evil is on its last legs. We are winning the war. Maybe not all the battles, and we may not win this battle in specific, but the battles have become smaller and less vicious over the ages."

"So, what can I do to help win THIS battle?" I desperately wanted to do something. Anything.

"I know you don't want to hear this, but right now, we need you to stay with your friends. Help them win the smaller, person-to-person, small group to small group type of battles. The amount of knowledge you have can only add to their effectiveness. And there is much you can learn from them. You have to learn the alphabet before you can write."

I had to think about this for a while. I guessed she-he meant I had to learn all the little bits and pieces about the problem before I could march off to war. *'I should have known that. I'd never send out one of my trainees to do a foreman's job, no matter how intelligent or quick the trainee was. There were too many things to learn before the job could be done safely.'*

Pat smiled. She-he stood to shake my hand. *'She-he had a pretty firm grip for a substance less soul. Maybe that means she-he is a he, not a she.'* However, judging from the raised eyebrow she-he gave me at the thought, I guessed not...

## The Hangman

Julia chose to glide to the Watering Hole instead of instant messengering. She wanted to know how I managed to piece together the things I learned from my visit to Homer with current events so quickly. "I thought it would keep you busy for ages," she admitted.

"I was never one to do things the long way. I find short cuts if a task is too cumbersome. And I couldn't make it through the first line of the Iliad without that sinking feeling of 'this is impossible' in my gut. So, I found the smallest book on the subject." I was rather proud of myself.

"I'm proud of you, too." Julia said with a smile.

We drifted quietly along through peaceful areas of the pod I had not previously seen. Julia couldn't have picked a longer way to get to the Watering Hole; it gave me lots of time to reflect.....

"Julia," I started rather hesitantly, "Could I ask your opinion about something strange that happened to me when I was a teenager?" I wasn't sure I wanted to talk about it, but ever since Gail told me about hijacked people, this memory had been trying to surface.

She stopped and looked me full in the eyes. "Yes. Come with me."

We faded into a small, vacant living room type of place. "I sense you need as much privacy as is possible here in heaven. Am I right to guess that what you are about to tell me has been held deep inside you all these years?" She was making this as easy for me as possible. And I still wasn't sure I wanted to tell the story.

"I thought I was going crazy. I COULDN'T tell anyone." I took a deep breath. "It's the biggest reason I hate religion."

I looked at her for a reaction. After all, saying I hated religion while in heaven had a bit of irony to it.

She only smiled and nodded. "Do you already know about it?" I asked hopefully. There still was a chance I could get out of telling it.

"I have a vague idea, but the details are too fuzzy to be able to help you deal with it," she answered gently.

I took a deep breath, and began. "When I was just growing my first chin hair, my best friend was a member of a very strict religious group. I went with him to some of his church's functions, but it wasn't for me. I was also going through the training, catechism, I believe it was called, at the church my mother went to. All of this exposure to religion was soon after my little brother had survived a bad infection of his brain, but was little more than a vegetable. My sisters and I had tried to make sense of why this had happened to an innocent little boy by looking into ALL the religions. We studied the Eastern beliefs, including reincarnation, and really studied the Bible. Well, sorta studied it. Anyway, we didn't come up with anything that answered our questions. We looked into the ESP and other supernatural eerie theories. We even thought about using the Ouija board stashed up in our attic to ask it for answers." I stopped when I thought I saw a look of fear flash across her face.

"Go on," she urged, regaining a neutral expression.

"Well....now, remember I was under lots of mental pressure from my friend, and I was just an impressionable teenager....and I never had any more experiences like it since...." I had managed to stuff this memory into the depths of my mind by convincing myself I had been brainwashed by trying too hard to understand the illogical. I wanted to be sure Julia understood that this incident was very out of character for me, even then.

When Julia didn't respond in any way to these 'excuses', I managed somehow to continue. "One Sunday night, after a particularly guilt inducing sermon, I was lying in my bed, awake, trying my best to 'give myself to God' as the pastor had said we all should. Well, you know, especially in my

younger years, I tended to have very concrete thinking. I never was any good at symbolism. If I couldn't picture it, I couldn't understand it. So...." I hadn't been able to look her in the eyes as I was telling this. I paused to glance at her expression. It was still neutral. I sighed. "This is silly. Can't you just read my mind about this, so I won't have to actually say it?"

"I'll understand it much better if you say it," she said encouragingly.

I waited for an explanation of why reading my mind wasn't as good, but there was none. "Okay, okay. Remember, I was just a kid. And I was thinking like a kid." I was stalling, and she knew it, but let me get away with it. I sat, or rather, hovered, over the stuffed chair under me. I sighed. Then I sighed again.

"I can't do this." I finally said, and stood, planning to leave. But Julia didn't stand, and she didn't look as if she planned to follow me if I did try to go. Not that I'd know where to hover off to.....

This time, SHE sighed "You are not crazy, and you never were crazy. From what I can make out of the jumble I CAN read, it seems to me you were amazingly perceptive."

"If I look you straight in the eyes, could you read my mind better, and save me the agony of actually having to say it all?" I was pleading.

"You may feel infinitely better if you do say it," she suggested softly.

I stared off into the distance, trying to think of any other way to get out of this. '*Why did I ever bring it up?*' But Julia had me cornered.

"Okay, here goes, then." After one more deep and procrastinatory sigh, I started at breakneck speed: "I pictured myself holding something up to God, hollering 'Here I am, come get me,' or something corny like that. What I pictured next was an old man on a platform at the top of some wooden steps, with his back to me. I walked up the steps. 'What do YOU want?' he said very irritably. 'Here's my soul,' I replied. Then he turned to look at me. His face



softened immediately and his tone changed to very pleasant. 'Oh, it's you! Yes, yes, come to me.' I walked up to him and gave him my bundle, but the smile on his face bothered me somehow. As I turned to go back down the stairs, it hit me. I sat bolt upright in bed, my eyes wide open. THE DEVIL! I had just given my soul to the DEVIL! Still sitting, I closed my eyes and pictured myself turning back to the devil, grabbing the package, and running down the steps, which I then recognized as steps to the gallows. I was in a panic. I had almost given my soul to the DEVIL!!"

I paused. I had made it through the sappy part, but the eeriest, craziest part was yet to come...I glanced at Julia – she was beaming!

"Go on, Mr. Burns," she said.

Her positive reaction helped me continue... "I sat there in my bed for a long time, afraid to lie back down." It still seemed so real, even after all these years. "I eventually just thought, 'What should I do?' in a rhetorical way. But darned if the thought '**Stay away from the paranormal**' didn't pop into my head. 'Sure, sure, no problem,' I actually thought back to my own thought. I was sure I was crazy. I even thought, 'but if you know you're talking to yourself, you're not really crazy, right?' I managed another glance at Julia now that I was back in semi-joking mode. She was actually glowing! I mean, really emitting light!

She gave me the tightest bear hug one spirit can give another without hugging all the way through. When she let go, she looked up at me, her face was shining with tears of joy. "Mr. Burns, do you realize what you had done?!!!"

"I scared the bejesus out of myself, that's what I did! Never did go back to church, and I never will!" Of course I never will. Unless there are churches in heaven...

"Mr. Burns, you recognized The Hangman! You were able to escape his evil influence!" She looked truly impressed, so I thought I'd play the part. I pulled back my shoulders, and puffed out my chest and strutted around taking large, masculine strides.

"See how much better you feel!!?" Julia was literally zooming around the room as though she were my cheerleader.

"So, explain to me what really happened." I wasn't convinced I had really faced down the devil, or the hangman, or whoever, alone. "Was Karl looking after me even back then?"

"Maybe. But you had to be receptive to him or you wouldn't have recognized the Hangman for who he was, especially so soon. YOU are the one who noticed something wasn't right about his smile." Julia was trying to give me too much credit. But I was thoroughly enjoying it, to be perfectly honest.

"So, let me at the b-----!!" and I hoisted a make believe sword into the air. "To battle!!"

## Full of Myself, and Ready for Action

Julia just shook her head, and we faded back to where we were before my confession.

Now that I felt superior to any of the guys (and THEY had been here months and years before me), I was ready for some rabbleroising. I had my working orders, and I was ready to go!

"May I make a suggestion?" Julia asked.

"Certainly, dear heart," I answered rather pompously. Just acting, of course.

"Remember they still know more of the details than you know. They know the trees, you know the forest."

"Your point, my dear, is....? Remember, I'm a concrete sorta guy. Speak English."

"Be sure you follow their lead until you know what they know. Ask them lots of easy questions, and try to not show off." She said this gently, but it sure did leave some air out of my bubble. I sighed, but I did still have a bounce in my float.

"Can't I show off at all?" I asked, feeling a bit put off. "What good is knowing more than they know, if I can't gloat a little?" I knew the answer before the entire question was out. "So you little souls are sending me out to be your diplomat, huh. You want me to be good and pretend to be nice, and stupid." I knew what they were asking me to do. After all, I was a supervisor for almost forty years. I had to use lots of tact.

"But this has to be SMART tact. Before you just barked an order, and it was done. Here you have to be more like your right hand man was." She looked a bit worried.

"I thought you all wanted me to be comfortable being transparent. Now you're telling me to lie! Make up your minds!" I was sure she wasn't going to be able to weasel out of this one.

"Yes, you do have a point. But you just won't tell them all that you know. You shouldn't need to lie. It's unlikely they will ask you a direct question, so you will just be aware of more than they are. You'll be sparing them too much knowledge. They may not be able to handle it as well as you," she pleaded.

I thought she was just trying to butter me up. I didn't think I could be motivated enough to try to keep GOOD stuff from them. Sissy feelings, yes. 'I'm better than you' feelings, no.

"Mr. Burns, don't you think they would have a hard time understanding why you feel so superior?" Julia asked innocently. She knew if I tried to explain to the guys what I had just learned; they'd think I was insane.

"D---, you're good, you little squirt, you," I replied. The red fluff danced out of my mouth and landed on her sweet little head. "Now you've REALLY burst my bubble. Gee, thanks." I tried to look upset with her, but her crooked impish smile made keeping a straight face impossible.

"Are you sure you're ready to be with the guys? Are your unmyelinateds ready?" there was a bit of worry under her look of mischief.

With my own crooked grin, I explained, "I won't be needing slo-mo. I've got too much else on my mind. And the trip back to Jurassic Park helped me understand my sissy reaction to the cubs, so I feel it's settled. I'll be so busy picking THEIR brains, they won't have a chance at mine." I was still feeling a bit smug. I tried not to remember that whenever I felt this way, I tended to get tripped up.... "By the way, how much DO the guys know about the Greek gods and how things work?" I had to know more details about just how careful I needed to be.

"They know that there is real evil on earth in various misty, ghost-like beings. Their forms are not necessarily human, although some are. These hateful entities can sense

when a person is vulnerable, either in thought or deed. They grab every opportunity possible to meddle. Your friends are very good at stopping them from carrying out most of their devious plots. But your friends haven't yet learned how to stop their influence on people's thoughts." She paused for a few minutes to let this sink in.

"Stop and think about your ultimate goal. You would like to learn all that they know while using your insight to help them do even better. Use your well honed earthly skills here, for a much bigger, more important outcome," she coached.

"Okay, okay. I'll try to act my age."

She looked at me rather dubiously. She seemed to be pondering her options. My confidence level was high enough that I tried to read her thoughts, but her one eyebrow raised laterally, sorta like Pat's did when I tried to guess his/her gender. "When are you all going to teach me to mind read? It'll mean I'll know what the others know quicker," I added hopefully.

"Mind reading can't really be taught, remember. It's like learning to crawl, or walk. You just have to practice. Clear your mind, and listen." She smiled, and I thought I sensed, *'and I know how much you enjoy clearing your mind!'* I laughed, and she broke into a wide grin.

We floated into the midst of the crowd at the Watering Hole. The usual guys weren't there, at least not at their usual table. Julia and I wandered around. She pointed out some souls she thought I might remember. Some were vaguely familiar, but like I noticed when I first arrived, they were lots younger than when I saw them last. The people I saw most recently were still alive, on earth.

I thought for a second about my wife. But knowing her, she was probably deAged to the nursery level by now. Probably started out there. Everyone considered her part saint even before she died. And not just because she was able to live with me.

Julia looked at me and I thought I sensed *'she's been an attendant in the infant's nursery for the last few years. She*

*nurtures the sleep-o-holics.'* Her grin let me know I was right.

*'Wouldn't be long before I'll be able to read everyone's mind,'* I decided.

Julia just shook her head with an exasperated expression. *'He's hopelessly competitive.'*

I looked over the crowd once more. I was disappointed my buddies weren't here, but I hoped when they did show up, they'd had a good adventurous job to tell about. "Don't you know where they are?" I asked Julia.

"Yes, they'll be here in a few minutes. I just thought giving you time to wind down would be a good idea. And their job is taking longer than we had anticipated." She looked a bit concerned.

"Should we pop up to the Dome and look for them? Maybe you can send me to join them. They may need my expert advice." I pretended to hold my lapels as I struck an important pose.

She through me a motherly type of glance. *'Now behave.'*

"Just kidding, Ma." I protested, playing the part to the hilt. I resumed my normal posture and added, "No, seriously, though. Can we go see what they are doing? Can't you come along to keep me in line, if you're so worried about me?"

"No," was her rather terse reply.

I decided I'd better stop kidding around for a bit. "Why don't we find a place to sit down, and order a drink?" I suggested.

She didn't answer for a while. I figured she was thinking in slo-mo, so I waited. And waited. And waited.

I scanned and rescanned the crowd. No one struck me as particularly interesting. I was glad I didn't see that a----- from college. I glanced at Julia to see if she noticed the puff float from my ear. She didn't.

"Come this way," she said finally, and headed in the direction of the guy's favorite spot. "They're here! And look who they've got with them!" Her mood had definitely improved. I guess their mood swings even followed them to heaven, poor little ladies.

The stern glance over her shoulder as she thought '*as if you guys don't have testosterone surges!*' quickly put me in my place. I couldn't argue with her, now, could I?

"JOHNNY!!!" I couldn't believe my eyes! "What the h--- happened to you!" He artfully dodged my dancing yellow fluff as we vigorously shook hands. I almost shook his arm off, I was so glad to see him.

"Easy Ian!" Arnie laughed. "We just managed to put him back together!" As I stood there wondering what the h--- he meant by that, the gang went hysterical with laughter. I waved away the sunshine yellow ear puff and thought '*These guys could make a bundle working for the bottled laughter company. It's all they do.*'

Johnny got himself together first. "I just had a little talk with the Fuzz. We negotiated a deal. I gave up some of my silver, and got set free." His grin was definitely full of fun.

"You mean to tell me, you bribed the law to get off?" I knew that couldn't be right, especially since the other guys, who were just then catching their breath, burst into another round of even more hysterical laughter. This was getting to be a bit annoying. I looked to Julia. An impish grin filled HER face, too, as she faded away, thinking '*they're your friends. You get to choose how to react to them...*'

I waited what seemed like half an hour for them to get hold of themselves. Finally Arnie noticed my extra hair. "Ian!! You're getting younger already? It took me DAYS to grow back even one hair on my head. I still don't have as many as you do, and I've had a months' jump on you. How'd ya do that?" His question almost sounded sincere.

But I decided to take no chances. "If I tell ya, I'll have ta kill ya," I said in the deepest voice I could muster. This time I was glad to see them all return to their belly laughing. It felt good to get them laughing on purpose. I was glad they appreciated the punster's type of humor. And I was glad Gail reminded me of that one.

We eventually took our seats at the table, and ordered drinks. I wondered why the bartenders and waitresses looked

so happy to be tending to us. "It must be what they really enjoyed doing while they were on earth. There's a huge restaurant on the other side of the pod run by the cooks who couldn't stop cooking, feeding the souls who couldn't stop eating. Seems there's always a soul here who enjoyed doing almost anything in life enough to keep it up here. Even washing and ironing. Can you believe it?" Harry took my thought and ran with it. "What a waste of time! But, you know, I never see anyone coming around to clean up after us. I guess that job has NO redeeming factors."

The others took on a more serious tone, too. "Yeah, anyone who enjoyed being that subservient went straight to infancy," agreed Joe.

"Either that, or the fuzz had a nice long negotiation with them and inserted some ego strengthening DNA," added Larry.

"Yeah, and they probably got what used to be mine!" Johnny was very pleased about this for some reason. The look he gave me after he said this was inquisitive. "So, Ian, have you figured it out yet?"

"Figured what out?" I did my best to not think about what I DID figure out by concentrating on figuring out what it was that Johnny wanted me to figure out.

"What happened to me in the fuzz! I know you'll be upset if we tell you, cuz you always wanted to figure everything out for yourself. Even when we told you the answer, you were too stubborn to believe us, and still had to figure it out for yourself. So, figure it out, Ian, ol' buddy, ol' pal!" Johnny was definitely in better humor than when I saw him before his meltdown.

In fact, I'd NEVER seen him this happy. *'Maybe that trip to the fuzz WASN'T such a bad thing. And what is all this talk about DNA?'* I stopped short when I noticed that they were all looking at me intently, chins in their hands, elbows on the table.

"Isn't this grand, guys! We'll actually get to listen to his mind in action! We'll finally get to see how he does it!" Arnie looked more intent than I'd ever seen him.



"What the h--- do you ....mean." I realized the answer to my question as I waved away the meandering tack. Immediately, I switched to my slo-mo fibers. *'I had hoped to save this til a card game.'*

The looks on their faces were priceless! "Hey, can I get a picture of this?" I joked. "Anybody have a camera?!!" They had dropped their hands and their mouths were all hanging open. Every one of them.

"What's the matter with you lot? Can't read minds anymore?!" *'Oh, this is fun! I can do this the whole time I'm with them even if it does take for ever. The re action makes it all worth while!'* I felt rather smug.

"Well, I'll be d-----!" Arnie was the first to speak. The small tack gently floated my direction. I blew it back to Arnie, and laughed.

"Any idiot with two brain cells could figure out how to block mind reading," I had to rub it in while I could. I loved to gloat!

"Okay, then, what else did you figure out, you smart-a---" Johnny's old self was showing. His tack was dark green but very slow moving.

Uh-oh, I zoomed back into slo-mo in a panic. *'I can't let them know what I know.'* But they could see my panic, and my slo-mo wasn't slow enough.

"Okay, Ian, out with it. You may as well tell us, now. You know we'll keep at you 'til you do." Johnny's crooked grin looked almost evil.

I decided to go on the attack instead. "You guys would never understand it if I spent eons explaining it to you. You're all too thick. I'm not wasting my time." By now I was over my panic, and could return to proper speed slo-mo. "So, let's play cards."

They looked at me for a few minutes. I concentrated on useless thoughts in slo-mo. They gave up rather easily, and Arnie pulled out a deck of cards.

"We'll need two more players and another deck." He said, counting the heads around the table.

"Nah, count me out. I'd rather go over to the restaurant. Talking about it made me want to eat. Anyone else for a meal?" Harry asked.

"I'll go with you, Harry," said Larry. And off they floated.

That first round of euchre was great! I partnered with Arnie, against Johnny and Joe. Arnie and I had been partners at most of the games in life, so we knew how the other tended to think. All we had to do was block Johnny and Joe from reading our minds better than they blocked us. We slaughtered them!

Unfortunately, they didn't want to play a second set. I sensed a bit of resentment. "You aren't sore losers, now are you?" I asked innocently.

They rolled their eyes and floated off.

That left just me and Arnie. Maybe I could get him to be serious enough to ask about the dreams he had. I didn't bother to think in slo-mo, so he answered me before I asked the question.

"Dreaming can be fun, but it is serious stuff, too. Maybe you could join me and the guys at some of the games. We'll let you watch at first, and if we need help, you can jump in and help," he began. "I know you weren't into sports, at least not into actually playing them when you were younger, but with you're smarts, you could look out for our backs. You may notice something that will help the younger squirts do more about the bigger picture."

*'How would I get the big picture at a sports game?'* I wondered.

"I don't know. You usually manage to see things we don't, is all I'm saying. At least you could give it a try." He seemed a bit weary. He sighed. "It's really scary how much influence those evil b----- have. Just physically stopping bad things from happening isn't good enough. Sure, it's fun. But I don't think it's helping in the long run."

"Could you tell me what you know about how these dreams work? Who decides which job to give to which souls,

and how many, and when?" I couldn't stop at just one question at a time.

"Sorry, Ian. Like I said, I can't figure things out like you do. All I know is that Kenny lets me know when there's a good game, and I go to sleep. Sometimes, I ask for something different, then POP! I'm in the situation I sorta asked for. And if Harry and Larry want to go at the same time, they ask their deAgers, and we usually get what we ask for." He paused. I waited.

I thought I'd ask a more specific question. "What did you mean when you said you didn't want the visiting team's center to go to 'those lizards'?"

He perked up. "Oh, that. Well, we do know there are these mean, ugly ghosts and ghouls that show up at most of the really violent games. We figure they're there to help the mean kids of the team do their hateful deeds. They usually look like gargoyles, or reptiles, or some other god-awful creature. Their forms are more solid and usually not as clear as ours – they tend to be kinda blurry. And they can change shape, size, smell, or whatever, at will. It keeps us on our toes."

"Do you ever lose?" I was hesitant to ask.

He looked at me for a while before he said, "To be honest, I wonder if we ever win." He took a deep sigh. "They're always there when we go back. If not the same ones, more just like 'em. There seems to be a never ending supply."

"Well, hey, partner. We're a winning pair. Let's go get 'em!" I said as cheerfully as I could. I wasn't used to seeing Arnie this serious. At least not about anything serious, that is. He'd been worse than this over a stupid soccer game. He had a fatal heart attack over one!!

"Let's see what Kenny and what's-her-name have to suggest," he said with less enthusiasm than I had hoped.

## Joint Effort

We floated towards the Dome, as I wasn't able to fade in and out at will. Arnie tried to tell me how, but he eventually admitted he didn't know how to explain it. Sorta like when you learn to tie shoelaces. It becomes so automatic that when you try to explain to someone else how it's done, you interrupt the flow and can't tie your own anymore.

"Don't I have to know more about the techniques you use in your dreams? I mean like the fluff you filled yourself up with to brake the fall of that basketball player." I wanted to be as prepared as possible. "And how can you interact with the living? And how do you wrestle the blobs, if they're ghostlike? Don't your hands go right through them?"

"Whoa! Slow down, Ian old boy! One at a time!" Arnie grinned broadly. "It took me weeks to learn ONE of those things! And you know I'm no good at teaching. But I'll try. Now which of those do you want to know first?"

I weighed the options. I'd be unlikely to be the one to break someone's fall because Arnie could do that. But I had already run into the problem of trying to communicate with people. The best I could do was the cold breeze. So I asked, "How do we let the people we are supposed to help know what we want them to do?"

"Just like you to ask the hardest one first." But he was still smiling. "We don't. Next question?"

I stopped, and faced him. He stopped, too, but didn't face me. "Arnie, look at me and say that with a straight face."

He did. With a very sad expression, he said, "Ian, we can't tell people what we want them to do. We can only try to influence what THEY decide to do. Or not do. It's frustrating as h---." The tack stuck in the wide space

between his front teeth. I guessed he didn't say h--- with enough umph. He spat the tack out to the side, and it promptly disappeared.

"Okay, so how do we INFLUENCE them, then?" *'Why does he take things so literally!!? He knows what I mean!'*

"I beg your pardon, mate, but I do NOT 'know what you mean'," he said mockingly. "You asked 'how do we tell them', and I said we can't. So there. If you don't like my answers, ask someone else." He seemed genuinely annoyed. Just like he did on earth, now that I thought about it. Some things never change.....

"Okay, Arnie, you're right. I'll try to be more specific. How do we let them know if their life is in danger, like, to get them to move if a rock is about to fall on them. Or if they fall in a lake, how do we get them out?"

"We can't push them. We can't speak to them. We can't throw things to get their attention. We can only cause them to feel cold or warmth." Arnie sighed. "And we can't stop the rock from falling once it starts, either. We can try to stop it from being pushed, if we see who is pushing it in time to stop them. Our best hope is to try to find the spook before he begins to act. Once the b----- got the person pushed into the lake, it's too late."

"Okay, then what about other tricks, like the fluff? Couldn't that help?" I couldn't imagine having to just stand there and watch, if we couldn't stop the act from starting.

"Fluff's just that. Fluff. It can cushion a fall, but the force of a rock is too much for it to absorb. The Laws of Physics still do apply, you know," he added sadly. "And, yes, it is hard to watch. It really gives you motivation to 'Find Willie' as fast as you can."

I thought about this for a while. *'If we can't physically interact with people, why can the evil ghosts? Aren't we both just 'wisps' with no substance? If we have no substance, why should they? Isn't that stacking the deck a bit?'*

"They have more dark matter than we do, so they're more solid. And yes, the deck is VERY stacked in their favor. You see, their methods are more aggressive, like predatory

animals. Our methods are more passive, like prey-type animals. When they connect to tin and steel DNA in animals, they've got the benefit of 'natural instincts' on their side. We can only connect with the copper and bronze DNA, which are in control of the sissy instincts. It can really be embarrassing sometimes. So what me and the guys tend to do is to keep the slimy b----- from getting into the person's head to begin with."

"Right. Yeah, this is making sense. Loads of sense... Okay, so if we go to a job together, can WE communicate with each other, at least?" My head was spinning. *'I need to ask someone else to explain these things.'*

Arnie was a bit snippy when he answered, "If we can't communicate here, how the h--- can we communicate in the rush of a job?"

I had forgotten to think in slo-mo. "Sorry, Arnie. This is all so new. Try to be patient with me." I held out my hand for a shake.

Arnie's mood changed immediately as he grabbed my hand with so much force, I thought I'd lose it!

"THIS I can teach you! When you wrestle with a creature, you have to remember to control your grip. If you grab too hard, pieces of the slime ball fall off and then you have baby slime balls to deal with. You have to use just the right amount of force, and no more. Too little, and they slide right through your hands. Let's practice!"

Now we were in Arnie's territory. He was always better at physical things than just pure thinking things.

We spent the next hour or so practicing the physical techniques of tackling a ghost. And how to pull one out of a person's ear if they got a head start. I could still catch its tail, but it was like trying to catch a salamander. The tail ended up writhing in my fingers while the lizard-like prop Arnie had conjured up escaped. I just couldn't get the hang of it.

Arnie didn't even try to hide his amusement at my limited skills. He put on a great show whenever I grabbed his salamander-shaped arm too tightly and pulled it loose from

his body. He acted as though he were in great pain, and pretended to die. Then he'd get up, reattach his arm, and we tried again. Quite an audience eventually formed. Arnie REALLY hammed it up when groups of souls were passing by.

When he was satisfied I would at least be able to defend myself, we continued on our way to the Dome.

Julia and Kenny were waiting for us. "We consulted with each other about which type of job would suit you both. Do you mind trying what we decided on?" Kenny asked.

"Whatever you say, Kenny. I trust your judgment completely." Arnie replied.

"I agree," I added, *'but I want to ask Julia a few of the questions Arnie couldn't answer with out getting upset before we went off on a job together.'*

Julia knew somehow that I needed to talk to her alone, so she asked me to follow her into the keyboard room. "What do you want to know, Mr. Burns?" she asked.

"Is there any way to interact with people besides making them feel cold?" I knew I wouldn't be able to handle a failure to communicate.

"Yes, but it will test your ability to be calm in a crisis." She paused, and sighed. "They can sense short thoughts if you are using your unmyelinateds. But it takes an abundant amount of self-control, so please don't be upset if you can't succeed the first try. We tried to pick a job where very little needs to be relayed to the victims."

Gee, how nice. "So, if I fail, what happens to 'the victims'?" *'I don't want to even try if anyone will die if I fail.'*

"It won't be any worse than if you weren't there." She was being evasive.

"Which means...." I pressed for an answer.

"I can't tell you. I don't know myself. Only the much younger souls know all those details. I would tell you if I

knew, I promise you." She did look a bit distressed, so I didn't persist.

"Okay, lets go then," I said, and we headed back to Kenny and Arnie.

We took cots on the floor level across the aisle from each other. We faced each other, and closed our eyes on the count of three.

We both appeared at the same time outside a farmhouse that looked as though it had seen better days. The equipment looked ancient and in poor repair. The barn was a glorified shack. It was night, but the moon was bright and shed enough light to see what was happening.

But we heard it first. A loud blast from a gun came from the house. We saw shingles fly as the shot ripped through the roof. The door of the house burst open and a woman with three children ran towards the barn. She had an infant in her arms, and a toddler by the hand. The oldest child ran slightly ahead. When she tripped on her long skirt and fell, the oldest child, though not more than 3 or 4 years old, ran back to help her up. He took the infant, and the four again raced for the barn.

They made it to the barn door just as a man with a rifle appeared at the door of the house, bellowing, "I'll get ya! I'll get ever' las'one a' ya'll!!!" He saw the door of the barn close, and tried to run towards it, but he was obviously drunk. He was so off balance, he could barely walk.

Arnie said, "You go to the woman and kids, I'll take care of the b-----," and he flew to the man. I thought I saw a mist buzzing around the man's head as I hurried to the rest of the family in the barn.

They were huddled behind a mound of hay, trying to be very quiet, but the toddler was whimpering and the baby was crying. The mother held her hand over the infant's mouth to muffle the sound. She did not seem to know they had been seen going into the barn. I quickly surveyed the inside of the barn for options.



If they could go through the horse's stall and out the stall door to the barnyard, they could at least get out of the trap they were currently in. I rushed to her and thought as hard as I could, '*Over here. This way.*' I flew a circle around her hoping to stir up a cold breeze, and headed to the stall.

They followed! I continued to think '*Over here. This way.*' as I flew to the outside stall door. I was impressed that she had the presence of mind to close the stall doors as they went through them.

Once outside, they ran for cover in the woods on the other side of the barnyard fence. I then went to check if the man saw where they went; if he had made it to the barn before they were safely out of sight.

What I saw was Arnie and a whiff of a lizardly creature wrestling around the man's head as the drunkard slurred, "Yawl ruint my life. I'm gonna blow yawl to schmithereens!" He pushed the barn door open and took a few steps. He lost his balance and fell over the tongues of the old rickety wagon. The gun went off when he hit the ground, and blew a hole in the side of the barn, but not in the direction of the woman and kids. Luckily, he missed the cow and the goat, too.

It seemed the fall either knocked him out, or he passed out, as the lizard seemed to give up and left the man's head willingly. I watched a bit longer to be sure Arnie won the fight before I went to tell the woman she was safe for now. .

I went to the hiding spot. They were clinging to each other and crying. I went to them and joined the hug, and thought '*Out cold. Safe now.*' They seemed to relax a bit. Or so I wanted to believe. I wondered what they could do next.

I went back to Arnie, who was looking around the barn, apparently thinking the same thing I was thinking. "They've got to get away from this madman. Tonight. I don't know what you did to get them out of the barn, but boy am I glad you did! Now, you've got to work some more magic and convince her it's safe to come in here and harness up the

horse to this poor excuse of a wagon, and get the h--- out of here! I'll stand guard to keep that slimy lizard from trying to get in his head again."

*'Great. How am I going to get her to go into a barn where a gun blast just took out part of a wall.'* I thought as I floated out to them.

They weren't clinging to each other as tightly as before. I gave them another hug, and thought *'horse wagon run.'* I waited a bit for any signs of a reaction. I repeated the hug and the thought.

The woman sighed, and whispered to the oldest child, "Seth, stay here with the others. I'm going to hitch up Stardust. We've got to make it in to town, tonight."

Seth looked panicked. "No Mama! NO!" he was smart enough to whisper, too. He clung to her skirt as she rose to go back to the barn. I wrapped my arms around him as tightly as I could. He kept sliding out of them, though, as he clung to his mother as she began to walk. I did my best to stay with him, hoping I was giving him some sense of warmth and comfort.

Eventually, he let go of her. It was more likely because he couldn't get through the rails of the barnyard fence as fast as she and was mature enough to worry about his little siblings, than because I was trying to hold him. He turned and went back to the babies. I stayed with the children a little bit, hoping to give them some warmth. Then I went back in the barn to check on Arnie and the woman.

I got back to the barn in time to see an amazing sight: Stardust gave the hateful fiend a hefty shove with her large nose to get him off the tongues of the wagon so the woman could hook her to it. I could hardly believe my eyes!

It didn't seem to be too unusual to the woman, though. She just smiled, patted the horse's neck and whispered, "You hate him when he's like this, too, don't you?" She had obviously harnessed Stardust to the wagon many times before, and the horse was most cooperative. The woman opened the door and led the horse and wagon out of the barn.

I zoomed back out to the kids, and thought, 'Mama's ready.' Seth began edging his way around the fence towards the front of the barn, carrying the infant in one small arm while pulling the toddler with his other small hand. He met his mother at the edge of the barnyard. They piled into the wagon, and set off at a fast trot.

"Wow," was all I could say. I had seen similar stuff on television, but....

"Yeah, I know," Arnie agreed with the unfinished thought. "It breaks my heart."

"At least they'll be safe now," I said.

Arnie didn't answer right away.

*'I wonder if he's been on many jobs like this one before.'*  
I thought.

"Yes, I have. This is actually the best ending for this type of job I've had yet. You really did work magic. No one else I've worked with was able to convince the victim to run while they could. I'm just trying to not get my hopes up."

"What do you mean? She got away. She's going to town, right? She'll get help there, right?" *'I don't understand why this shouldn't get his hopes up.'*

"Let's wake up, now Ian. Ask Julia all these blasted questions!" and he faded from sight.

I hovered there a short while, trying to take it all in. The lizard was doing summer salts and flips in and out the windows of the barn, then down the chimney of the house and out the open door. Its laugh was pure evil.

## Overwhelming Guilt

Arnie was sitting on the edge of his cot when I returned. "Kenny knows I prefer sports assignments. Wait 'til I get him about this!" His look warned me not to ask him any more questions.

Kenny appeared before I could have even begun to ask anything, and they seemed in a hurry to go. "Julia will be here shortly. She's a bit hung up on another assignment. She asked me to ask you to wait for her in the library," Kenny told me.

"The library!" Arnie seemed surprised to know there even was a library here. He regained his usual demeanor enough to want to razz me about being a nerd. "And how did you find the library so soon? Just a natural calling I suppose?" he ribbed with an impish grin.

"You're just jealous because you can't read!" I shot back, reminiscent of past earthly bickerings. We loved to pick at each other's faults, both real and imagined. I knew he could read. And he knew that I knew he could read. It just made for interesting conversation to pretend otherwise. But I didn't feel all too interested in playing the game just then. "See ya later, Dopey!" I said as I turned and headed to the library.

I decided to read something light while I waited for Julia. I had had enough excitement for now. I perused the magazine shelves. 'Heavenly Days' was the title of one. 'Pod Patrol' was another. 'Intermountain News Weekly' was the thickest. I didn't pick one of these up, for fear they would present even more questions to be answered rather than answer any of the ones I already had.

I thought about asking the librarian for the light reading section, but I couldn't imagine that her idea of light reading

would be anywhere close to my idea of light reading. I wandered over to the sections that contained the happiest looking souls. They may be reading the books of humor. That would definitely be preferable to any more information overload.

I guessed correctly, and picked out a book titled, 'The World's 500 Most Told Jokes' and settled in a nice comfy chair to start reading.

The book was divided into different joke type categories. I didn't feel like reading 'Puns for the Punny'. How corny could you get! 'Short Snickers' was a possibility. *'I may like some of those.'* 'Long and Winding' sounded like too much work. The 'Off the Cuff' ones could be okay, but the 'Off Color' ones didn't seem right to read in heaven. *'I wonder how that chapter didn't get censored by the church ladies.'*

A twinge of paranoia caused me to look up. The librarian was staring at me over her bifocals. *'Did you hear what I just thought?'* I thought with a devilish grin. She clenched her jaw, which only encouraged me. *'Should I ask you for the racier section, or find it myself?'* She looked away quickly and pretended she didn't hear that one.

I tried to read the rest of the table of contents, but the librarian's easy razzability was just too tempting to resist. I got up and boinged to the library door. I did a couple of twirls, too, then checked the expression on the librarian's face. She was doing her best to ignore me, but I could see some gray poofs fly from her ears. I couldn't stop myself from an audible chuckle, wondering what awful words she had just thought to have caused such a dark gray color.

I hovered at the doorway for a few minutes. I began to worry a bit about what was taking Julia so long. I wondered if she slept while I did, and got stuck in a terrible dream. Maybe she was in a nightmare, and needed to be rescued! I started down the hallway to the Dream Dome, but changed my mind when I realized she knew so much more than I did, and if SHE were in trouble, I'd probably make things worse even if I did know how to find her.

It was most frustrating to be in the dark about so much. I wanted to know all about everything, NOW! *'This is heaven, for C--- sake. Why can't we all just magically have our brains filled with everything we need to know?'* I ignored the brown ear puff and the fact that just moments ago I was complaining about information overload.

I paced the hallway for a while. I decided to see if I could go through the wall back into the library like I can go through the walls in my dreams. I flattened into a pancake when I floated too confidently into the wall. I rebounded and reshaped. At least it didn't hurt.

I went back into the library via the door. I ended up in the self-help section. The first book I pulled out was titled 'Part II: Learning to Fade Out'. I looked over the cover, noticing a prominent warning; 'CAUTION: DO NOT TRY THIS ALONE UNTIL YOU THOROUGHLY READ AND UNDERSTAND 'Part I: HOW TO FADE BACK IN''. I put it back on the shelf.

The book about the nuts and bolts on how to read minds was too thick. The page I flipped it open to reminded me of a physics textbook. I quickly put that one back, too. 'How to Choose a Dream Career' looked interesting, and not too thick. I took it to my seat.

Chapter One was about finding your strengths. It started with one of those G-- forsaken multiple-choice tests. I rose out of my chair to return it to its shelf faster than it took the puff to leave my ear.

I returned to the hallway to pace. I thought about looking for Karl, or Gail, even, but she was more likely to give me more to worry about, so I thought hard about Karl, hoping he would appear.

It took a bit, but he finally did fade in. He looked tired. "What's going on?" I asked, now really worried.

"We are all working extra loads. We don't want to depend on having back-ups from earth." He sighed. Seems like the thing to do here; sigh a lot. "Julia is trying very hard to convince Emma to let go of her earthly strings, but it's a tough sell. Her family is draining her, and the pain is severe.

I can't understand what's holding her back." Now even Karl was giving me too much information at once.

"Whoa, slow down, buddy. What's this about over working? What back-ups?" Now MY eyebrows were raised so high they'd have been at my hairline, if I had hair.

Karl noticed my look, and chuckled. "You're comical when you're worried." He was stalling. "First you chew us out for holding out on you, now you say we're telling too much too fast. Make up your mind, Ian, old buddy, old pal." He sighed. Again. "Okay, I'll fill in the gaps. Julia's pulling double duty watching after you AND being Emma's guardian angel. You do remember Emma, don't you, Ian?" he asked.

"Of course I do! She was forever coming to be sure Arnie and I had enough to eat, as if we couldn't look after ourselves. She drove us crazy!" I thought she was a busybody, but Arnie said she never seemed to want to gossip, so she couldn't have been just being nosy.

Karl paused, seemingly weighing what to say next. He sighed. "Ian, I know you aren't as heartless as that makes you sound... Emma was severely burned trying to save you from that fire."

My heart stopped. Or it would have if it were still beating. "What?!!" I couldn't believe my ears. I poked in them to be sure there weren't any lingering puffs. "What did you just say?"

"Emma was on her way to bring you a meal when your gas-filled kitchen exploded. Instead of running for help, she ran into the house and tried to pull you out." He stopped there, watching me closely as I processed this loaded information.

"So where is she now?" I asked, finally.

"In intensive care, in a burn center. The doctors don't expect her to make it. They're amazed she's still alive. Julia has been trying to get her to come to us, but Emma won't let go. She feels too needed on earth. If you ask me, I think that family of hers drained the life's blood out of her. They don't care about her as much as they care about what she

does for them. Julia sees it differently. She thinks they really do love her for who she is. But the result is the same to me. They're sapping her strength. If she doesn't come soon, there will be too little left for even the fuzz to restore her." Once he got started, he didn't stop. "That woman is an angel on earth. If she only knew how much more she could do if she were here instead.... She'd deAge in days, if not hours. She'd be such an asset here in heaven. If she knew how many more people she could help if she were here, she'd come in a heartbeat."

While he was rambling on about how good Emma was, I was trying to deal with the guilt I felt at being the cause of her pain and what sounds like imminent death. *'Why did she try to save ME, for C---- sake? The puff from my ear was blue. I was just an old coot. I was going to die soon, anyway. And my family didn't care, so why should she?'*

"Karl," I suddenly remembered sensing one person with tears as my angel of deliverance brought me here. "Was she the one I saw crying when I died?" My heart was truly aching at the thought.

"Yes." Karl looked at me knowingly. It was all I could do to not cry myself.

"Could I see her?" I wasn't sure I really wanted to. I felt bad enough just imagining what she was going through.

"When she agrees to come with Julia, I'll see if we can be at the mountain top to greet her, to welcome her here. Let me go check on how Julia's doing at the moment. I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere." And he faded out.

My back slid down the wall I had been standing in front of, and I ended up sitting on the floor with my knees at my chin. I was in a state of shock. I buried my head in my arms. I cried like a baby. In public.

I didn't care who saw me.



## Preparing for Emma

My defenses started to kick in after a few minutes. *'I didn't ask her to come to my house. I didn't need her to try to save me. I'm not completely to blame. She was stupid enough to go into a burning house for C----- sake.'* I noticed the color of my puff was navy blue. I sighed. *'Yeah, I guess that was kinda mean. But true.'*

I was still sitting there against the wall, sullen, when Karl returned. "No luck yet. Julia is trying to round up some of her family's guardians to try to get her family to tell her that it's okay for her to leave them. I don't think that's possible, but she said she had to try."

Another pang of guilt hit at the thought of her family. "I don't want to know what they are saying about me, do I?" I knew the answer. The men in her family were a lot like me, and I know how I'd feel.

"No, you don't," Karl agreed. He didn't offer any more information, so I guessed the worst was true. *'They'd be very disappointed to find out I'm not in hell.'*

Panic hit next. "Karl, what if they die soon, and come here!!! They'd kill me! Well, maybe not kill me, but they would do their best to make my life, er.. existence, miserable." The panic lasted only a few seconds. The guilt took over as I thought, *'well, I deserve it.'*

"Not really, Ian. You don't deserve any blame. It WAS her choice to try to rescue you. That thought you had about her being silly enough to try to rescue you was correct, but not the emotion behind it. The feeling behind a thought or deed makes a huge difference." He said this matter-of-factly.

*'How did he know what I thought when he wasn't even here? He didn't show up until a few minutes after I produced the dark blue puff.'*

"I was here. You just didn't see me," he explained.

I was too drained to get even a little peeved at the thought that he was spying on me. *'I'll never get used to this transparency,'* I thought bitterly.

"You aren't the only one to be bothered by it. It definitely does take some getting used to. But it is for the best in the long run. You'll see." This time he had a more sympathetic tone.

"So, how many eons is 'the long run'? Thousands of years?" I didn't think I'd make it a few more hours, let alone days and years.

He thought a while before he answered. A rather long while. I began to get irritated. "Isn't it rude having a long conversation with yourself when company is present?" I asked, my voice dripping with disdain.

"Yes, I guess it is. I want to be sure, or at least as sure as I can be, that what I want to tell you will help, rather than hurt, your progress here. I have to weigh the possibility of the various choices you are likely to make as to how you use the additional information."

"What a lame excuse! What kind of 'choices' could I make by you answering a simple question!" It was a statement not a question.

"You could go off the deep end, and turn into tar. You could turn your frustration inward, and get depressed. You could...."

"Okay, okay!! I get it already!! I promise to take it on the chin. I promise I'll behave," I interrupted him. But my tone was anything but cooperative. He apparently decided not to tell me what he had been mulling over as he changed the subject.

"Let's go down to the river and see what they've been able to set up for Emma's eventual arrival." He put his hand on my shoulder, and we faded out of the hallway and faded in at the river.

In front of us was a campsite with a horse trailer. There was a canopy opened over a fancy camping kitchen. The front of the trailer looked as big as a mobile home. Karl motioned for me to follow him into it.

It was done up like a Recreational Vehicle. A high end one at that. It had a microwave, a full bath, a TV, all the comforts of home.

"I thought we didn't need to eat here," I pointed out.

"No, we don't. But Emma loved to cook, and camping was her favorite get-away. She didn't get to go often, and her trailer was a done-up stock trailer. Hardly comfortable. We want to give her what she deserves, even though she most likely won't accept it. But we're still working on getting her what we KNOW she'll accept. Come with me." He left the trailer and floated towards an opening in the woods.

A large pasture with luscious green grass filled the entire clearing. A small barn in one corner was large enough for at least four horses. It also had a tack room with an area to wash the horses off. I knew Emma loved horses. "Are you going to be able to bring some horses here for her, like the ones I saw when I first arrived?" I asked.

"Not horses. Just one. She was particularly attached to one she considered almost human. We sent some horse-loving souls to the prey animal mountain to see if she'll agree to come here, to stay at least for a while." He was ready to pop with anticipation. "I can't wait to see the look on her face!"

He'd never looked so happy. I felt a bit put-off. *'He wasn't even present for my death, and no one seemed to have anything prepared for me.'*

"Now, now, Ian. We had all your buddies here waiting for you, didn't we?" His grin was a bit paternalistic.

I couldn't disagree. "But you weren't all this excited then." I felt a twang of jealousy. I should have felt less bad about causing Emma's death seeing all this excited preparation. But I didn't. *'She doesn't want to come. Julia isn't able to convince her to let go. And I can't imagine*

*Emma being happy to be here, even with her favorite horse here to greet her. Surely the souls here should know that, too.'*

"You're right again, Ian. She will not adjust easily. She'll have as much, if not more, trouble with transparency than you have. We all will have to do the best we can to ease her into it gradually." His mood changed with this topic. "This has got to be a major group effort."

The jealousy hit again, harder this time. *'They didn't seem to be worried about ME. They just dove right in and helped themselves to my innermost thoughts! And LAUGHED about it!! Repeatedly!!'* Dark green smoke began to escape from my ears and nose even though I had not thought a curse word.

Karl looked disappointed. "Just as I thought," he said, and took my arm.

When we faded back in, we were in the bubble room. "NO!!!" I hollered. "I am NOT going into that bubble!! I'd rather turn into tar like Johnny did, and get sucked up into the fuzz!"

Karl just stood there for a few minutes. It gave me time to calm down. *'I didn't want to do either, actually. I have to control myself better than this. D---, that telltale smoke!'* It was hard to see the gray puff among all the smoke that was already coming out of me. I sighed. It seemed to help. Less smoke was coming out of my nose, anyway. I sighed again. The smoke stopped coming out of my ears, too.

I looked at Karl. He looked at me. I heard *'yep, this was what I was afraid his choice would be.'* I gave him a sheepish grin.

"Let me know when you're ready to go back into public," he said calmly.

After I gathered myself together, we faded to the keyboard room. He stood at my shoulder while I studied the keyboard. "Which one is the best one for me to practice temper control?" I asked.

"Well, find the one that's currently causing you to lose your temper. Here's a tornado for 'impatience', and here's a 'question mark' for stupidity. But here is the one that's likely to cause you the most trouble now." He pointed to a key that was a pukey green. "For 'jealousy'. Touch it."

What could it hurt. I touched it lightly. I felt a twinge of self-pity. I pushed on it. I could feel myself warming up, almost like what Irene had described as a hot flash. I let go. I felt the heat leave. 'Wow.' I pressed the key again, before I took time to figure out how to keep the heat wave from filling me. It overtook me much faster the second time. I let go of the key and put my hand on the arm of the chair.

"So, how do you plan to stop it the next time you touch the key?" Karl asked, very teacher-like.

"I'm not going to touch it again," I answered, very school boy like. Teachers used to tell me, in not very nice ways sometimes, how exasperatingly stubborn I was, especially in English class.

Karl didn't respond like my teachers had, though. "Fine," he said calmly. "That's your choice," and he faded away.

I sat there with my mouth hanging open in disbelief. That's not how the discussion was supposed to go! He was supposed to say, 'yes you will' and I would say 'no I won't' and a really fun little interaction would ensue. '*Gee. Now I guess I'll have to figure it out myself, or run the risk of turning to tar, or having to spend time in the bubble.*'

I looked at the green key. '*Humm, I wonder if I imagine myself on my hammock in the back yard...*' I pushed the key with less force than before. The heat came on more slowly. I managed to conjure up the feeling of relaxing in the hammock. The warmth stopped at my elbow. '*I did it!*' I thought triumphantly, and the warmth disappeared altogether. I let go of the key. I pushed the key harder the next time. The heat was almost to my shoulder before I could slow it down, and it reached all the way to my chest before I could stop it. I let go.

I don't know how long I practiced, but I eventually was able to push the key and not feel any warmth at all. I

wondered if I wore it out rather than learned how to control it.

"You've learned to control it." Karl was back.

My first reaction was annoyance at the thought of him spying on me again, but I conjured up my hammock feeling, and headed my anger off before it could cause me to blurt out a smart comment.

"Very good, Ian. You may be ready to come and welcome Emma." He didn't sound very convinced, however. "What do YOU think?"

"I don't know. If I can't handle it, could you fade me out before I do something embarrassing?" *'I had no idea what I was going to do with my guilt feelings. I hadn't even thought of dealing with THEM.'* I looked over the keyboard.

"You don't have time to practice anymore. She's coming right now. Do you want to come?"

*'He didn't say whether or not he would fade me out if I needed help.'*

"I could, but by then others may have already seen your reaction, too."

I sighed. "Let's go, then." I sounded more brave than I felt.

"Okay, let's go." Karl took my arm, and we arrived at the top of the mountain instantly.

We were just in time. Emma and Julia came slowly out of the top of the mountain. Emma was sobbing uncontrollably. She was wrapped in bandages, almost from head to toe. She had no hair; at least none that came out from under the bandages. I couldn't see her eyes. Actually, there were no tears, either. I could tell that she was sobbing by her body's movements.

"Her eyes were destroyed in the fire. The flames got her full in the face. The paramedics were barely able to intubate her before they took her off in the helicopter." Karl was amazingly calm. I was in tears.

"Do you want to leave, Ian?" Karl asked me quietly.

I couldn't answer. He took my arm and we faded out. But we didn't leave.

Karl put his arm around my shoulders, which helped a little. I didn't remember EVER feeling this bad. My wife's death was close, but I had more backbone then. I couldn't cry in front of my kids, and grandkids.

By now, Emma and Julia had disappeared into the fuzz. It gave me time to get myself together, sort of. But apparently I wasn't together enough to show my face, as we stayed faded out.

Soon they came floating out of the fuzz, just like I had; like a leaf in the fall on a breezy day. Emma's bandages were gone, and her face was just as it was before the fire. She was healed! I actually managed a smile, until I saw the tears streaming down her face. Karl and I moved to the door of the pod, still faded out. He apparently felt I was not ready for her to see me.

I wasn't. I was sobbing harder than Emma.

## Emma's Adjustment

I couldn't bear seeing her and Karl knew it. We faded back to the bubble room, but this time I was glad to see it. I needed to be alone.

Karl helped me into the bubble. The walls were blue this time. They were smoother, too. Last time, they reminded me of that textured paint with sand in it.

I felt better right away, just not having to actually see Emma like that. I wondered how her family stood it. I hoped they felt better by cursing me out. Then I would at least be good for something.

I wasn't crying anymore. I didn't even feel the need to cry. I wondered if I had cried myself out already, but I didn't think so. This feeling was too coincidental with arriving at my bubble.

*'But the last time I was here, it MADE me cry. This must be a different bubble. Same place, different bubble.'* I sighed and lay my head back against the wall. I sighed again. Sighing felt better than I ever remember it feeling on earth. I sighed again. *'I wonder if I'll hyperventilate if I keep it up.'* I sighed again.

The bubble began to feel warm. Not the hot warm of the jealousy key, but a good, loving warmth, like your mother's lap, and her arms, as she rocked you to sleep. I sighed again. If this is how hyperventilating felt here, I planned to keep it up as long as possible.

*'You can feel warmth like this outside your bubble, if you'll open yourself to it.'*

*'What!'* I sat bolt upright. The warmth disappeared. "Who said that!" I said aloud. I didn't recognize the voice. I



decided not to sigh anymore. It was causing me to hallucinate.

***'You're not hallucinating. You're not really hearing a voice. These are your own thoughts guided by the power of unseen positive energy.'***

Huh? What was 'I' talking about? Every other time I 'talked to myself', I knew that was what I was doing. This was different. I wasn't in control of this. This was creepy. "You aren't the devil, are you?" I asked.

***'No,'*** I thought I sensed a soft chuckle. ***'No, but good thought. Ask that every time you think you're being misled, and you'll be safe.'***

This was beginning to remind me of that 'nightmare' I had when I was a teenager. *'Are you God?'* I thought. I didn't want to say this out loud, for some reason. *'This is still just too strange. And corny.'* But it was like the 'stay away from the paranormal' thought I had after I snatched my soul back from the Hangman, as Julia had called him.

***'Not exactly. God is one of the many personifications of the force of unseen energy. Whenever you need guidance, just open your mind, and try to let your thoughts be directed.'***

*'Strange. Did some unseen energy that's 'not exactly' God, just tell me to 'try'? And what the h--- is a personification? I had been taught the all powerful God could do whatever he wanted. Why doesn't he just make me listen?'*

***'Personifications of unseen positive energy are necessarily full of misperceptions. Trying to describe the power of warmth and loving in the likeness of a human is impossible.'***

*'Excuse me, but I'm just a lowly businessman. Could you speak in English?'* 'My' thoughts were making less sense than Homers' poems.

***'Don't worry yourself with figuring out what is behind your current thoughts. Just understand that it can only try to direct people or souls to choose the correct way. To do***

*otherwise would be no better than a dictator. You must CHOOSE to allow yourself to be guided.'*

*'Great. People being people, no wonder the earth is a mess.'* I'd have thought whoever or whatever is behind this could put a bit more umph behind the 'guidance'. *'Why weren't we made so we'd be more likely to be good?'*

*'Good question. Do you want to get into the DNA issues now, or wait until after you get yourself ready for Emma?'*

Emma! I had almost forgotten. *'Oh yeah, how can I control myself in front of Emma?'*

*'You don't need to. Be yourself. And let her be herself. But control your anger.'*

*'Okay. I'm to be myself, but not get angry. Right. That's not possible. Angry is who I am.'* I sighed. And pouted. And sighed again. *'Do I really have to do this? Can't I just be reassigned to a different pod?'*

*'You could if you choose to do so, but you would then have even more guilt to deal with buried even deeper in your subconscious. The stuff you've buried in there over the years is why you have a temper. You are NOT your temper.'*

*'Humm, interesting thought. But since leaving things out hurts so bad, I think I'll just leave it all in there, thank you very much.'*

*'It's your choice.'* I thought I sensed sadness, though.

*'Is there a way to let things out without hurting? Maybe I could manage it then.'*

*'No pain, no gain!'* I swear I sensed a mischievous grin behind this.

*'I thought the expert jocks decided that was not the correct way to get in shape, after all.'* I hoped this 'force' was just joking.

*'No joke, son. It's the best way to convert some of that silver DNA into gold.'*

*'Okay, that's enough. Be serious.'*

*'I am. If your silver DNA isn't changed to gold willingly, you may end up accidentally choosing to undergo an unpleasant negotiation, like the one your friend Johnny*

***had to go through. And the silver he gave up could end up under counter force control. It's preferable for you to do your best to convert yours.'***

*'So, if I control my temper, I can keep my silver for myself, and the gods won't get it, right?'*

***'Sorry son. When you are working in a dream, some of it could lead you astray.'***

*'So, I won't work, er I mean sleep, then.'*

I honestly thought I sensed a deep, and long sigh. ***'Ian, do you really think you could exist with yourself knowing you could have done something positive for someone in need and choose not to help?'***

*'Yes, if I don't have to see it. If I don't know it's happening, it doesn't bother me.'*

***'So if you're sent to a pod where you know no one, and talk to no one about any of their dreams, you think you'd be okay.'***

I wasn't wiggling out of this very easily, now was I? *'Okay, okay. I'll try it your way, but just once. Do I just come back here when I change my mind?'*

***'No. You don't have to. You could ask for a transfer no matter where you are or what you are doing, if you want. Just give yourself a chance to be guided out of such an unwise choice.'***

Maybe I WAS being pushed a bit with this directing of my thoughts. I sighed. *'Okay, then. On with it.'*

The look on my face must have been hilarious, given the reaction I got from Karl when I appeared at his side at the campsite that had been set up for Emma. As sad as he was, he had to smile. "Welcome. Once again, you have amazed me with how quickly you catch on to things. I hadn't expected you until long after we had Emma settled in. You're just in time to see her presented with Lifesaver!"

I looked over toward the clearing. Several souls were on their way over to get the horse that was grazing peacefully in the pasture. I looked back at the campsite. Emma was sitting at the trailer with her hands over her face and her face in her

lap, crying. The souls all around her were crying, too, especially Julia.

*'Is this the best time to show her the horse,' I thought? 'She won't be able to appreciate her now, as upset as she is.'*

I looked to Karl to ask this, but he already heard the question. "We worried about that, too, but it's the only hope we have that she'll stop thinking about the people she's left behind. It's a risk we have to take."

The men reached the pasture, and got Lifesaver's attention. They didn't need to use a halter or a lead line. The horse seemed to know what was going on and followed the men towards the campsite. When she spotted Emma, she broke into a run, slowing just in time to not run over Emma. Emma looked up when she felt the spray of dust as Lifesaver slid to a halt. "Lifesaver!!!" Emma squeaked through her tears, jumped up and clung onto the horse's neck, sobbing even more than before. Absolutely NO one had a dry eye after that. Quite a few were actually racked with sobs, even Karl. Of course, I was sobbing out loud by then, too, but somehow it didn't feel quite so horrible as when I was crying alone.

After the ground around us began to get muddy from all the tears, I began to regain some control of myself. I looked around the crowd more closely. Arnie and the guys were all there, near the river. I could tell they had been crying as much as I had been. They were holding their ribs as though they were sore. *'Funny, now that I thought about it, my ribs were aching, too. I thought we weren't supposed to feel pain in heaven.'*

I looked at Karl for an answer, but he was still crying, and didn't seem at all interested in reading my mind. I decided I'd ask that question later.

I noticed some of the souls were starting to fade out or float away. The rest of us began wondering if we should leave, too. At least that was the 'word in the air' so to speak. Except for Karl and Julia, and a handful of other souls. They were definitely here for the duration.

I wanted to go, but Karl grabbed my arm and gave me a fatherly look. "You've at least got to try. Maybe not right now, but soon, so stay with me. We'll wait for her to let us know if and when she's ready to talk."

Julia came over to us. "Thanks for helping so much, Karl. I think having Lifesaver here has made all the difference. I had told Emma we were going to Copper Mountain to see if we could borrow Lifesaver for a while, but I couldn't promise anything. But she still wouldn't let go until her father told her to. I even took Mrs. Athy to visit Emma with me, but Emma barely recognized her. Mrs. Athy is just an infant, now, as you know. But Emma was able to feel her warmth and loving." Julia still had tears running down her cheeks. I wondered how she was able to speak through them. "Where's Ted? I need to thank him for getting through to Mr. Athy."

She scanned the remaining souls, and headed towards the river when she spotted the soul I guessed was Ted. He was one of the teenaged souls, about Karl's age. I guessed Mr. Athy didn't need a very experienced guardian angel, either.

"No, he didn't. Mr. Athy didn't ask for much help, either. Until now. Ted really got some experience under his belt. He looks much younger now than he was just a few days ago." Karl explained. "He deserves a gold medal."

Eventually Emma stopped crying long enough to look around. She was impressed with the trailer and campsite, and was full of her usual compliments, but I could sense an undertone of *'this is way too much. Whoever owns this must be very well-to-do. I'd find much better ways to spend my money than this.'* The remaining souls heard it, too. I could almost feel their hearts drop. They had worked so hard to give her what they thought she deserved; something she would like.

Julia zipped back to Emma's side. "We don't have to spend money here to get what our hearts desire. We can conjure up any and all material things," she explained to Emma.

Emma furrowed her brow. "I didn't say anything about money, did I?" She said, puzzled. *'I guess Julia knows me so well, she assumed I was worrying about how much this cost,'* she thought. "Who lives here? Who is the lucky camper?" she asked aloud.

"You do!" quite a few souls said in unison.

"They know how much you enjoy camping, and cooking, and horses, especially Lifesaver, so they put this all together for you!" Julia added.

Emma started to cry again. *'I don't deserve this,'* she was thinking. *'And I'd rather be with my family. Who's going to look after them?'*

"Each and every one of them has a soul to keep an eye on them, and if they ask for help, we can try to do what is best for them. It's not the same as having you there, but they are not alone. And you can go visit them, too, from time to time." Julia said comfortingly.

Now Emma began to look worried. "Julia, when I was alive, I wasn't surprised you could understand my thoughts. But here, are you still able to tell what I'm thinking, or does it just seem that way because you know me so well?" she asked.

Julia hesitated before she answered the question. "Yes, I can sense what you are thinking. Most souls are able to do so, too." She was being a bit evasive, and judging from her obvious discomfort, Julia knew just what she was doing.

It didn't get by Emma, though. *'Do you mean to tell me that everyone here can hear what I'm thinking?'* She had a look of sheer terror on her face. *'Oh, no! Please, I need to be alone!'* She rushed into the trailer and slammed the door closed.

"Just as I feared. She can't bear to offend anyone, and she sometimes has negative thoughts she carefully censors. I'd better teach her about the unmyelinateds now." Julia knocked on the trailer door. "It's me. Julia. May I come in? I'm alone."

Emma opened the door just wide enough for Julia to literally flow in through the crack, and no further.

*'Geez, I had to suffer for days before anyone bothered to teach ME the slo-mo trick. How come Julia's so quick to teach Emma?'* I could feel the jealousy rise in me. I didn't want to try to squelch it. *'I had a right to be upset, d--- it!'* The dark green color of my ear puff caused me to reconsider, however, and I tried to put my new skill to work. With a deep breath, I imagined myself on my hammock.....

Karl just looked at me and half smiled. "We, or I should say, they, thought you could handle having your thoughts be known to all. You have to admit that you were a bit outspoken on earth. They thought you spoke your mind all the time, anyway, and would be pleased to not have to actually say anything to get our goats. They didn't include a high enough censor control factor in the equation for you, and they didn't think you had as much empathetic DNA as I thought you did."

"What the h--- is this pathetic DNA I supposedly have too much of?!" The ear puff was gray this time.

"You don't have too much, Ian. It's good to have lots of it. It gives you the ability to be able to see things from another person's point of view. It allows you to be a better, more understanding and tolerant person. So you can understand why the others wouldn't believe me when I told them you had lots of it." The sly grin said it all.

I could NEVER have let that side of me show. *'It was SISSY!! The guys would have eaten me alive! And the kids would have run all over me!'*

"Just as you couldn't let your soft side show, Emma can't let her abrasive side show. Interesting combination isn't it?" he asked with some mischief in his voice. "You may actually be the best person to help Emma, and help yourself at the same time. Stay here a second, while I see if I can interrupt Julia, and see what she thinks."

While he went to talk to Julia, I looked for Arnie and the guys, but they had apparently left. Ted came over to me and introduced himself. "I want to let you know that I did my best to convince Mr. Athy it wasn't your fault. I believe I was

starting to make some headway, but he was too torn up watching her suffer to think of much else."

'Gee, thanks for the uplifting info, Ted,' I said bitterly. 'Besides, it WAS my fault.' A twinge of shame grew into a deep sharp knife blade through my heart as I realized everyone here knew I was the reason Emma died. *'I wish they would all give me what I deserve, and get it over with. Not chewing me out is worse than just letting me have it.'*

"We all know you would NEVER have wanted Emma to try to save you, Ian. It was Emma's choice that got her here. She chose to try to save you. It was her big heart and selflessness that caused this to happen. It was NOT your fault." He tried to make up for reminding me of the amount of physical pain she had to endure.

"Why didn't Julia stop her?" I asked. "Aren't you able to see the future and intervene when the outcome will be bad?"

"We can only intervene when we're asked to do so. Otherwise, we are just there to try to insert some guidance whenever we see the opportunity," Ted said sadly. "Unfortunately, not enough people give us the opportunity. Mr. Athy only gave me a chance when he was racked with grief, and even then I could barely make myself heard." His expression suddenly changed. "Oh, I've gotta go! Someone is asking me to do something for him." With that, he quickly faded out.

Karl soon emerged from the trailer. "Not yet, Ian. Emma's not ready. How about we go to the Watering Hole. I think we all need a breather after this intense reception."

I hesitated. "Karl, everyone here knows I caused Emma's death. I can't face them right now." *'I almost prefer going back to the bubble.'*

"You could go back to the bubble, if you'd like, but I think you're underestimating your friends. They don't blame you. They all know Emma, and what she's like. They know you would never have asked her to try to save you." Karl tried to reassure me.

"Funny, that's exactly what Ted said. Have you all gotten together and decided 'what to tell Ian'?" I said feeling both



sad and bitter. "You all may say that, but I'm sure you FEEL differently." *'Hah! The shoe was on the other foot now. They were THINKING what they were SUPPOSED to say. THEY weren't being honest with themselves.'*

"Ian," Karl began slowly. "I think you've been here long enough and are perceptive enough to know what happens when someone tries to hide something. How in heaven's name would ALL of us fake YOU out? Don't you think you would have sensed at least one of us thinking, 'D--- that Ian. If it wasn't for him, Emma'd be alive right now.'" He brushed the slow moving tack away from his mouth.

He had a point. But I still felt responsible. *'Even if they don't blame me, I do. I want to go away by myself and sulk. Not to the bubble, just by myself.'*

Karl looked at me for a bit before he said, "Okay. I'll show you where you can go for a long walk, or float if you'd rather, in the woods where almost no one tends to go. Follow me."

We went past all the campsites and onto a well-traveled wide path. In a few hundred yards, a skinny trail branched off to the left and wound up the side of a hill. Karl motioned for me to take it and then he faded out.

## An Honest Conversation

I walked up the hill a few hundred yards. I noticed the climb was much easier now that I had little substance to pull against gravity. I could have climbed for miles without being tired.

I didn't go very far before I noticed to my left I could see the campground below me. I watched for a while, wondering how Emma was doing. Lifesaver was waiting patiently outside the door of the trailer. I hoped she wouldn't relieve herself there. I had to smile to myself when I remembered they didn't need to relieve themselves, either.

I climbed higher. Even though it wasn't really exercise, it was helping me feel better, just like exercise used to help, way back when I could actually do anything that required any exertion. I began to whistle. I didn't try to sing, though. I had a tin ear. 'Hey,' I wondered, 'I've always wanted to be able to sing. Maybe if I try....'

I cleared my throat and started singing 'Amazing Grace'. It sounded okay to me. I sang all the verses. I always liked that song, even though it was a religious song. It made me homesick for the bagpipes I always heard growing up.

I sang and sang to my hearts content. After a mile or so, I reached a cliff. I sat down on the edge. 'If I fell, would I be able to fly as well as I had learned to float? I could be the elder version of Peter Pan.' I leaned forward carefully. 'Well, I'll be d----! I thought with a smile. That Karl! He knew I'd be able to see the Watering Hole from here, the b----!' The puffs that emerged were orange and fairly danced out of my ears. I grinned, ear-to-ear.

I couldn't make out what the souls were saying, but seeing the jocularities was very therapeutic. Especially after that

'reception,' as Karl called it. I hoped other people's deaths weren't that traumatic. I guessed not. There weren't too many people like Emma. I sighed, and refocused on the Watering Hole.

I could see the guys playing cards. Three were hovering over the shoulders of the four who were playing. I could make out some hand gestures we used to use on earth to signal our partners. The three spare guys were doing the gesturing. Lucky for us, we never played for money, or at least not much money. We'd have killed each other for all the cheating that had gone on. But with no money on the line, it was all in fun. When we'd catch each other in a signal, we could feign self-righteousness and accuse the low-handed scumbags of all kinds of rotten things. It was great fun.

I laid back and watched the fuzz up above. I missed the clouds. I used to imagine the shapes to be various animals and objects when I was a kid. As I watched in amazement the fuzz changed into fluffy white cottony clouds! 'D---,' I thought. My ear puff was a glowing bright yellow. I continued to lie there and enjoy the sky for what may have been hours.

I didn't notice an actual sun, so I couldn't gauge the time well. Now that I thought about it, I hadn't seen nightfall here, yet. I was inside the pod much of the time, and had assumed a day had passed after each dream. Maybe I was wrong. '*How is time measured here?*' I mused. '*Maybe it isn't important enough to need following.*' I didn't remember seeing any clocks. '*Hmmm... I wonder how the really regimented souls deal with it. Maybe that's their burden to bear. Mine is the transparency. Funny, I had been taught that once you made it to heaven, you were home free. I guess not.*'

I sat up and stretched, just to see if I could. It didn't have the same feel as an earthly stretch, since there weren't any aches and pains to stretch away, but it still felt good.

I looked back down at the Watering Hole. It was relatively empty now. The guys were gone. From this

distance, I couldn't make out who anyone else was. I lay back down to watch the clouds. There weren't as many now, so I stood up and looked around. Behind me was the mountaintop. The fuzz was concentrated there and it looked as though several souls were arriving at once. There was a bit of a crowd gathered to greet them. Some of the new arrivals looked tattered, almost like torn rags, and some were very pale. When they floated down out of the fuzz, though, they looked healthy and normal. The greeters hugged them all.

The scene felt too good for me to want to figure out how these souls died. I wanted to just enjoy the warmth of the welcoming crowd. I had to admit that I felt a small twinge of jealousy because I wasn't greeted that way. The negative feeling didn't grow into a big deal, though, maybe because of my overall good mood.

I wondered again how Emma was doing. I decided it was time for me to return to my new reality. I headed slowly down the mountain, not quite sure what I wanted to do next. I rubbed my chin, and then thought about checking my head. If I grew more hair, I may be doing okay, then. I smiled as my hand brushed over some coarse peach fuzz above the narrow strip of hair over my ears. I was growing SOME, anyway. I couldn't be doing THAT bad, then, could I?

I arrived on the well-worn wider path when a bunch of souls were heading out from the campground. Most were riding on horses. Some were doing flips and cartwheels. All were happy. Emma was not among them, though.

I headed to her trailer. No one was outside, except Lifesaver. *'She really must be a special horse.'* I went over to her to rub her neck and scratch her ears. She almost purred like a cat, she was so gentle. Her big dark eyes had a sad look, though, almost as if she understood what was happening. She gave me a hearty nudge with her nose. It almost knocked me off balance, but being ghostly, I easily regained my footing. I knew she was just being playful, and was reminding me I had absentmindedly stopped rubbing her

neck. I gave her a pat on the neck, and resumed my scratching and rubbing. It was very soothing for me, too. She nuzzled me with her nose, and I swear she tried to give me a kiss. "You ARE more human than some humans are!" I said with true admiration.

The door opened a crack after I spoke. It was Emma. She gasped, and quickly closed the door when she saw it was me. "I'm sorry, Emma, I'll leave," I said loudly enough to be sure she heard me, and turned to go. The last thing I wanted to do was to further upset her.

Lifesaver followed me, so I decided to head to her pasture. She could at least enjoy the grass while she waited for Emma. I watched her graze for a while, then turned to leave. I stopped short, however, when I saw Julia, Emma and Karl walking my way. I was sure they saw me, so I didn't try to sneak out of the way. I felt very awkward.

"Welcome, Emma," I said as I extended my hand. '*How corny. How lame,*' I scolded myself. But she didn't seem to notice. She took my hand and shook it, then pulled me close for a firm hug. I don't know if I hugged back or not, I was too shocked to notice.

And we both started crying. Again...

We didn't hug long, though, and when we let loose of our grip, we said, almost in unison, "I am SO sorry." Believe it or not, we both actually laughed at this. And hugged again.

This time, I sensed '*you old grump. If you hadn't been so mean to everyone, you wouldn't have been so alone.*' I smiled. She was right.

"Maybe I wanted to be alone." I replied calmly, but with a hint of playfulness.

Emma gasped, covered her mouth, and turned to run back to the trailer. Julia just had to stand in her way to stop her, though. Emma would NEVER push anyone to get them out of her way. Julia whispered something to her, and eventually Emma turned around to face me. "I'm sorry, Mr. Burns," she said with her head bowed.

"For what?" I was honestly puzzled.

She looked up, and studied my expression for a few seconds. "Didn't you find my thought insulting?" she asked hesitantly.

"H---, no! It was the truth! Why should I be offended?" I smiled; the fluffy puff from my mouth was a gleaming yellow. "You should have heard some of the things my friends used to say to me. They NEVER held ANYTHING back." An idea struck me. "Hit me with your worst thoughts. I can take it!" And I puffed out my chest in mock toughness.

She laughed nervously. "I can't. I can't risk hurting your feelings. You don't know how angry I can get, if I don't watch myself. I could never live, well, er.. exist, with myself if I were to accidentally hurt someone's feelings."

"Did Julia teach you about slo-mo thinking?" I asked.

"She tried, but I'm just too nervous to do it. I wanted to stay in the trailer and practice, but Julia and Karl talked me into at least coming out here to see you." She looked embarrassed to be admitting she had to be coerced to come out to greet me.

"Didn't they tell you about MY reaction to 'transparency' as they like to call it?" I asked with a sarcastic laugh. As she shook her head 'no', Julia and Karl faded out.

"Do you want to know?" I asked, before diving right into a monolog. I normally would have just jabbered on and on oblivious as to whether or not my audience was interested. The guys always called me on it.

"Yes, I'd love to," she said without much enthusiasm. '*Oh, I hope he's not going to go on and on like usual,*' was her non-slo-mo thought.

I grinned mischievously, wondering if I should let her know what I had sensed. I decided to be a bit obscure. "Would you REALLY like to hear it, or just sorta like to hear it?" I teased.

'*What is he up to,*' she thought before she said, "Certainly, I really want to hear it."

I persisted, "Do you want the short version, or the long version?" I could barely contain a chuckle.

Now she furrowed her brow, and looked at me with her head tilted sideways, sort of like a teacher just before she confronts a student with a misdeed. "What are you up to, Mr. Burns?" she said instead of just thought.

"Now, why do you think I'm up to something, dear heart?" I asked innocently.

"You usually don't even ask before you launch into a story. Why now?" she was cornered into giving a rather honest answer.

"It's the new me, plus I want to be sure you're being honest with me." I said, grinning broadly. *'I wonder if I should ask her if she really enjoyed listening to all my long-winded stories.'*

Now was her turn to grin. "Did you just ask me if I enjoyed all the stories you always told me?" She looked very excited.

"I didn't say it, I thought it." I was a bit puzzled. This was not the reaction I had expected.

"I read your mind! I can read minds, too!" She was so tickled at being able to read my thought, I decided to continue my part of the conversation in thought only.

*'So, did you really enjoy my stories?'* I thought again.

"Yes, I did," she said, followed by the thought *'the first time through, anyway.'*

*'So the second and third times weren't as good?'* I thought, still feeling playful.

She noticed the look on my face, and thought, *'I couldn't get a word in edgewise to stop you!'* And we both started laughing.

We walked over to Lifesaver and continued our exchanges by both thoughts and words. She was much better than I at reading thoughts. She guessed she picked it up so quickly because she tended to read people's body language so much on earth. If they looked at all sad, she would say things she knew would perk the person up. *'Even if they weren't true?'* I thought. She blushed. I didn't need to read her mind to know that answer.

I helped her to learn a bit of the slo-mo technique, after I made her promise to never use it on me. There were more times than I had ever imagined that I wished she had used her slo-mo; some of her thoughts WERE painful to hear. I did my best to not be insulted, but there were times I reacted before I could get onto my unmylinates or censor my body language. Like when we were discussing her family, and she compared me unfavorably to her father, thinking I was much worse than he ever was. THAT hurt, and she saw my reaction. She tried to convince me she didn't 'mean it that way', but I held my ground. I finally admitted that she was right, but that she should have told me that long ago.

I hadn't told her the full extent of MY trouble with transparency, however, so she called me on it when she caught me using some slo-mo to block her from reading the more sensitive details, so I had to 'fess up'. It was REALLY embarrassing to admit how soft I really was. She did enjoy my 'I've got an image to keep up' reason for resistance, though.

"I have an image to keep up, too," was her reply. The mischief on her face was precious.

My softness disclosure made it even harder for her to deal with the honest thoughts she had about me and my buddies, though, since she saw me as even more vulnerable to her insults. But by then I was getting used to her raw, uncensored way of thinking, and I was ready for most of them. She really had a hard time believing I wasn't hurt. Probably because I was kinda hurt, at times. I hadn't thought I was THAT hateful, but the way she described me, I guess I was. I eventually was able to admit to her that maybe I WAS hurt, but I should be. I accidentally induced guilt, though, when I pointed out to her that if she had told me in life what she was telling me now, I may have stopped being so mean. She worked through that issue rather quickly and thanked me for pointing it out to her. It probably helped that I honestly thought it would NOT have made any difference to me then. I liked being cranky, and cranky was what I was going to be.



Eventually, I asked her if she was going to ride Lifesaver. Her eyes lit up and literally sparkled. I pretended to help her get up on Lifesaver's bare back. She hadn't learned to float yet, so I thought the moral support would help. She leaned forward, gave Lifesaver's neck a hug, sat up, and without bridle or saddle, off they went, all over the pasture. They trotted, galloped and ran like a couple of kids with all the energy in the world.

By the time she was finished riding, a crowd had gathered at the edge of the pasture. Everyone who had been at the reception seemed to be there to see her so fully enjoy herself. There were quite a few tears this time too, but of joy, not grief. When she noticed the crowd, she was obviously tempted to turn Lifesaver into the woods on the opposite side of the pasture to escape, so most souls took the hint and faded out or floated away.

She stayed in the middle of the pasture for a while. I wondered if she were in a panic, thinking about how she didn't want her mind to be read. Julia apparently knew this to be the case. As she passed by me, she whispered a sincere "Thanks, Mr. Burns. You've helped more than you'll ever know."

As she went to Emma, Karl took my arm and said, "Let's go to the Watering Hole."

## Anger Management, 1001

We popped in by a table where Arnie, Harry and Larry were sitting, having a rather quiet drink together. I remembered with some panic that they had seen me in wrenching sobs at Emma's reception. *'We were there crying, too, you idiot.'* Arnie didn't seem amused.

"I guess you were. I could barely see you, though, down by the river." I was desperate to change the subject. I tried *'to get into slo-mo mode..'*

"Don't bother, Ian. We all feel the same. No need to hide the 'sissy' feelings anymore. It's not worth the effort, and actually frees up energy to have more fun, and to be happier." He didn't sound so happy, though.

"No, I'm not happy. The last dream we had was a disaster. The ice hockey games are always the hardest, next to boxing, that is. Those guys are out for blood at baseline. It doesn't take much for the evil eels to get into THEIR heads. I swear the b-----s were in there before we even got the job assignment. We didn't have a chance."

I didn't want to know what happened. *'Someone must have had their teeth knocked out, or worse.'*

"Worse. Much worse. You're right. You don't want to know." Both Harry and Larry were on the verge of tears. I sensed *'why did she have to die?'*

"SHE!" I exclaimed. "Since when did women start to play ice hockey?" I was thinking maybe in some of the preteen leagues, but not the big leagues.

"You tell him, Harry. It was your thought." Arnie was becoming more and more depressed. I thought I saw a tear on his cheek.

"Yes, it's a tear! Do you want to make something out of it?" Arnie's demeanor changed drastically. "Why the h--

don't you come WITH us next time, you d--- know-it-all! Then you can point out where we went wrong!" He was seething with anger. Dark gray smoke began to billow out of his nose and ears along with the dark gray darts that zoomed out of his mouth and through my chest.

'*Oh, no,*' I thought, '*Don't turn into tar!*' I rushed over to him. I put my arm over his shoulder and tried to get him to think of the hammock in our back yard. The smoke lightened, but was still rather voluminous.

Kenny appeared at Arnie's other side. Karl took my arm, and all four of us faded into the bubble room.

To my amazement, Arnie went into a bubble without a fight. He actually seemed relieved to be there, even though he was immediately engulfed in dark gray smoke and the walls of the bubble darkened. Karl had to smile at the look on my face. My chin was almost on my chest.

Kenny stayed outside the bubble for a while, then faded away. "Why doesn't he stay?" I asked. "Doesn't Arnie REALLY need him now?"

"Arnie's got all the help he needs in that bubble with him," Karl replied. He looked at me, contemplating whether or not to elaborate. He decided not to tell me anymore, which was fine with me. I didn't want to know any more right now. My curiosity was taking a rest. I had enough to ponder without anymore confusing tidbits.

*'I need a nap. Not the heavenly kind. The earthly 'I don't want to think anymore' kind. But I don't feel sleepy.'* I looked at Karl. He was watching the dark gray walls of Arnie's bubble turn to a deep blue.

"He'll be fine, now," he said as he turned to me. "Let's go back to your friends." He took me back to the guys, then faded out.

"How's Arnie?" They asked worriedly.

"He's going to be alright, according to Karl. He went into a bubble, and it eventually turned blue. That's when Karl seemed to stop worrying, anyway," I relayed.

"Poor Arnie. It wasn't his fault. He can't fly faster than a hockey puck. No one can." Larry shook his head sadly.

"Arnie just can't deal with defeat. Can't say as I blame him. I can understand how he feels. It's the intensity that gets him. And when he gets that sad, he gets angry with everyone and everything. So if his bubble is blue, he's back to being sad."

"So blue is a good color, then?" I asked. "Is it better to be sad than angry?" I'd much rather be angry than sad, myself. It is more satisfying to rant and rave than to sit and cry. Not that I'd ever tried crying before I came here. I never cried on earth. Not only was it 'sissy', it was too painful.

"Being angry rarely solves any problems, unless it's channeled appropriately," Larry explained. He had always been the peacemaker of all of us guys. "If you start throwing anger every which way, it just passes on to the next person, who probably doesn't even deserve it. So the problem escalates instead of resolves." He paused to gauge whether or not he was being too technical for us. I guess our faces were rather bland, so he only added, "But anger definitely is the EASIEST way to go," and sighed.

Their conversation turned to reminiscing about their most horrendous dreams. I politely excused myself, saying I'd had enough sadness for one day, 'thank you very much'. I headed back up the path hoping to find a place to relax.

By the time I got back to the main trail, most of the other souls were elsewhere. I found a path that would likely lead to the riverbank. I was correct, and settled onto a nice green patch of moss. I noticed with pleasure the absence of bugs or mosquitoes. I lay back on the bank and was happy to see all the way to the sky with only a few tree branches blocking my view. The fuzz had already transformed into white fluffy clouds, and the river was gurgling by with the soft sound of the water over and around the rocks. "Aaahhh," I said, "NOW I feel like I'm in heaven."

Unfortunately, I couldn't get some of the things Emma said out of my mind. If I was really that mean, no wonder the kids avoided me. And was I really THAT hateful to Irene? Emma let me know how she would flinch at the amount of disgust she heard in my voice when I was not happy with something my wife had done. Emma had wished

Irene would slap the stuffings out of me. I had believed I was nice to Irene in public, and saved my real anger for when it was just me and her.....and the kids.

I mulled over what Larry had said about it being easier to be angry than sad. I tried to remember if I ever felt sad in life. The closest I came was when little Richie died. He was so tiny, and had gone through so much in his short life. Those d--- doctors should have known his heart was too malformed to be repaired! They just wanted the money and the practice, the b-----.

The ear puffs were a deep navy blue. Larry and Harry seemed to think when Arnie's bubble was blue, he was more sad than angry. I wondered if navy blue meant I was sadly angered by these memories. Of course I was sad. My son had gone through hell, and died anyway. And of course I was angry. He shouldn't have had to suffer like that. And those arrogant doctors...

*'They were handy targets.'*

"What?" I sat up and looked around. "Who thought that?!" I demanded. I knew it couldn't have been MY thought, and I didn't think 'the force' operated outside of my bubble.

Julia faded in, looking a bit chagrined. "I had hoped I could slip that in there without you noticing."

"Well, I did notice, so now you'll have to explain yourself." I didn't understand why I was so bothered by this intrusion into my private musings, since it was Julia's intrusion. "They were pushy, heartless butchers!"

"Do you recall anything said, or done, in specific, to back up that feeling?" Julia was obviously not easily convinced.

"Why? Do you know any, or all, of them?" I was beginning to feel a bit paranoid.

"No, I don't. So I'll need a good description of their words and behaviors to understand why you felt so negatively about them," she explained calmly.

I thought for a while. It was so long ago. How was I to remember any specifics? I tried to conjure up an image of one of them. The head surgeon was the most abrasive. "I

can remember the head honcho just flat out saying, 'It's the only chance he's got. If we don't try to fix the problem, he'll be dead in a matter of months.' The way he said it was so hateful, I wanted to strangle him." I didn't feel the same anger now, though. I tried to picture his face while he said this. All I could come up with was a sad expression. I looked at Julia and wondered if she had planted this image in my mind to trick me, but the innocent look on her face told me the answer.

"What was your wife doing at the time?" Julia asked gently.

I shot her a sideways glance, and answered, "Crying, of course. That's all she ever did most of little Richard's short life. It drove me crazy!"

"Why do you think it bothered you so much?" She knew the answer because the darn little thing had tears in her eyes just hearing this little bit about the situation.

"Because I DIDN'T WANT TO CRY! Not then, and not now!" I looked away from her, and tried to muster up some anger, but couldn't. I sighed. But I was not going to cry again. I had cried too many puddles already since I arrived, and I was tired of it. I pushed all sad thoughts out of my mind, and asked her to please leave. She did.

I lay back on the moss and concentrated as hard as I could on the most pleasant things I could remember. I thought about the day the company had an award ceremony for my division. We had the best record for producing the most with the least defects in the shortest period of time. I was so proud, I could have burst. I savored this memory for as long as I could because I was having trouble remembering any other highlights. I was sure there were some more good times, I just couldn't quite retrieve any memories of them.

I decided to remember the funniest of my favorite shows. That didn't take too long, either. I wasn't a big TV or movie fan.

I sat up and sighed. Julia had ruined my ability to relax. I didn't want to go back to the campsite or the Watering Hole.

I decided to just wander around the woods and check out all the trails. I eventually noticed the longer trails were marked with various color ribbons. The ones with pastel ribbons were open and airy. They felt cheerful. The darker ribbons were more closed in and even rather dreary. I learned to avoid them. *'It's strange to have trails like that in heaven. I really do wonder if this really is heaven, since it's so much like earth. There're as many frustrations here as there were on earth, if not more.'* At that thought, I stopped and looked around, listening for anyone's thoughts. I felt paranoid about being watched and listened to. At least Julia didn't do it to laugh at me like it seemed everyone else did. When Julia listened, it sorta felt like a parent keeping a close eye on a toddler to keep him from hurting himself, and to teach him how to act....

A light bulb went on in my mind. "Julia," I said, wondering if I could get her to appear to ask her if my idea was correct.

Karl appeared instead. "Yes, Mr. Burns." He sounded a bit aloof, if not down right annoyed. "You told Julia to leave. So she did. She's with Emma. Emma wanted to visit her family, so Julia took her." He seemed to soften as he talked. "So, is there something I can help you with while she's gone?"

"If and when I deAge, will Julia, and you when Julia's busy, stop eaves-dropping on me, sorta like parents start to give their children more independence when they learn to stay out of trouble?" I asked.

He smiled and shook his head. "Ian, you continue to amaze me. You are sharp as a tack." *'And as prickly as one, too,'* he thought. "Yes. When you are able to venture forth on your own without too many missteps, we ONLY come when you call for us. Now, we try to keep an eye at least on your whereabouts, and sometimes listen in on your thoughts, to be sure you're headed in the right direction."

I put my hand up to my head, and felt for more hair. "So, when I have a head of hair, I'll be trustworthy?" I asked hopefully.

"It's not whether or not you're trustworthy, but whether or not you are headed the right direction. It wouldn't be good if you got OLDER than when you died, now would it?" He had a smirk on his face. "It's been known to happen."

I thought I had a few more hairs on my crown than the last time I checked, so I figured I was still going in the right direction. "So what would make me age, then?" I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer.

"If you block your mind to change, and deny who you are, it packs on the years. Becoming comfortable with who you are takes the years off. It takes lots of energy to be inflexible and keep up an act."

D---



## Pow-wow with the Guys

Karl helped me back to the guys at the campground, then left. Emma's trailer wasn't in the same vicinity as the card table where the guys were gathered. I was relieved. I wasn't ready to see her again, especially after she'd been visiting her family. I had picked up on lots of negative things they had been saying about me during that long conversation she and I had out there in the pasture. Even a saint can't help but be influenced by all that strong hatred. I also knew that what I sensed through her was a mere fraction of what they actually felt.

"Ian, stop worrying about Emma's family. They'll get over it. Get your mind here with us." Arnie jolted me out of my pre-occupation with what was still going on earth.

"Okay. Sorry, guys." I sat down on one of the bark-backed chairs.

"Don't listen to Arnie, Ian. You have every right to worry about what's happening on earth. You've just died, for C----sake. Arnie's just being flippant to wind you up." Larry waved the tan tack away from his mouth. "He still can't admit how long it took HIM to stop looking back. And he thinks we don't know he still thinks back now and then." Arnie shot Larry a wicked look at this revelation. Larry raised his eyebrows in defiance, but no further juicy tidbits were shared. I actually felt lots of sympathy for Arnie, seeings how I wouldn't want Larry telling on me, either. I mentally made a note to myself to be careful to not let Larry in on more of my thoughts than I'd want everyone else to know.

I obviously forgot my slo-mo mode, since Larry responded matter-of-factly; "I'd not point out anything

everyone else didn't already know, Ian. Everyone but you knew what I just said about Arnie. I'm just a bit weary of his jabs right now."

"They weren't aimed at you, Mr. Goody Two Shoes," Arnie said defensively. This time, however, instead of escalating out of control, he smiled, looked Larry straight in the eyes and apologized. "You're right. I keep forgetting Ian needs more time, and I need to be a bit more 'insightful' as to the possible effects my ribbing may have on him." He looked to me, and apologized directly to me, too.

I was dumbfounded. I had NEVER heard Arnie apologize to ANYONE. "Arnie, you must have given up quite a bit of your silver, too," I said as I looked to Johnny and winked, implying Arnie had been in a tar tizzy at least once. This time the laughter I helped to create was MUCH appreciated.

After we settled down, and everyone congratulated me for how quickly I put it all together, we half-heartedly started a game of cards.

I had a hard time keeping my mind on the game. After witnessing the transformation in Arnie, I found myself remembering the dream I had with the toddler and the lioness.

"What toddler? What lioness? Are you holding out on us, Ian?" the others almost said in unison.

I couldn't get into slo-mo fast enough, so I tried to concentrate on the rescue and left the ending off of the story. They were clearly impressed with how I was able to get the mother's attention on the first try, but they knew there was more to it than I was letting on. They had sensed my initial panic; they knew me well enough to know I wouldn't hesitate to brag about anything good I had done.

"So, Ian, old buddy, old pal," Arnie had me and wouldn't let Larry make eye contact with him to even hint at letting me off the hook. "What is it you don't want us to know?"

I decided to jump ahead a few steps and give him the final answer, now that I figured it out. "The men and the boys had too much silver DNA in them for my liking. The lioness

only had tin, or iron, or whatever. And she had cubs to feed, too." I was actually able to look Arnie in the eye as I said this. "I felt bad for the cubs."

"Is that all?" Arnie sounded genuinely disappointed. "Why would you not want to tell us that? What else are you hiding, Ian?" He wouldn't give up.

I decided to tell the rest of the dream. "I followed the boys who went looking for the cubs. They never found them, but I did. Something had killed them and left their little dismembered bodies to rot in the hot sun." I paused. "It just hit me wrong. I felt angry about the whole scenario, and wished I had never interfered."

"You mean you wish the lioness had gotten the boy, instead?" Larry asked in amazement.

"No, I just wished I had never even seen any of the whole situation. It was unsettling, to say the least. I felt like the anti-hunting crowd that gave us hunters a hard time. It was very out of character for me." I couldn't believe I actually said this. And NO ONE laughed. Not even Arnie.

"Welcome to heaven, Ian!" he said as he gave me a hearty slap through my back. "Feelings are here to stay! No more suppression! You can't deAge until you learn to deal with them. It's pure h---, isn't it?" He looked glad to have company in his struggle to come to terms with his inner self. My heart sank. *'I'd had enough of raw feelings since I arrived. Surely there's more to heaven than suffering through emotional roller coasters for the rest of eternity!'*

"We'll keep you busy with group jobs. With your natural gift for communicating with the earthly world, we'll be MUCH more successful with less effort." Larry tried to reassure me by changing the subject. "Just stay focused on your job, and the rest will just fall in line with time."

*'I don't want to DO this anymore,'* I thought with a whine. I wondered if there was a heavenly version of 'stop the world, I want to get off'. I was careful not to use my favorite whine, which is 'why me lord'?

I didn't really want an answer.

## Getting It All In The Past

Julia appeared at my side a few seconds later. "Yes, Mr. Burns?" she asked politely and sweetly.

"I really didn't mean to call you. I was just letting out some frustration. And please call me Ian, little one. 'Mr.' makes me feel old," I suggested gently.

"I'll try, Mr. Burns, but I've been taught to show respect for my elders by using their last names, and I may not be able to break the habit. Maybe when you're younger..." She sounded a bit hesitant about me ever being much younger in the near future.

We floated away from the guys. They had gotten into discussions of things that happened to them in their lifetimes, and I had either been there, or knew about most of the events, so they didn't try to stop me.

"Do things get easier when you're younger?" I asked hopefully.

"Generally, yes. But just like going from adolescence to adulthood in life, getting younger brings more responsibility. You will have more control over your feelings and emotions though, and you can choose an occupation with whatever level of challenge you desire," she explained.

"So, what do I need to do to get younger, then?" I had a general idea, but I was now ready to hear the specifics.

"An important step is to learn to be who you are, not who you want to be, or who you convinced others you are," she replied matter-of-factly.

"So, the 'I have an image to keep up' has to go." This was the part I had already picked up on. I felt my scalp, and was not too surprised after my confession to the guys to find I not only had a wide, full semi-circle of hair above my ears and

collar, but enough had grown back in on top to almost need a haircut. I wondered if I had been myself on earth, if I'd have kept more of my hair to begin with.

"No, Mr.... Ian. It wouldn't have mattered then. Your genetic make-up completely determined your baldness then," she answered.

She then went on to another way to eternal youth. "A faster and more potent way to really shed the years is to deal with unsettled feelings from life." Here she stopped floating forward, and looked right at me.

"What's that look supposed to mean?" I asked a bit defensively. I knew EXACTLY what it meant.

"Let me know when you are ready to go back to visit your family." She didn't seem to think it would be anytime soon, and she was right. Again. "You may be pleasantly surprised to know you hadn't completely fooled them. They were even better at recognizing who you were at the core than your buddies were, and you just saw how easy it was to be yourself with them." She had to at least try to convince me. It was her job, after all.

"Yeah, but the guys have had much more time to learn all this heavenly jibber-jabber, so they were primed to not be surprised by my sissy side. Larry has been here for years, and Harry just about as long." For a moment I stopped worrying about deAging, and considered the fact that Johnny, Joe and Arnie had all died in the last year. That shouldn't be surprising, given our ages.

"Did you pay attention to their current age? Do any of them look very much younger than when they died?" she asked. Johnny and Arnie looked maybe a few years younger, and Joe maybe five years. Harry may have lost ten, and Larry about fifteen. But then again, Larry had been much younger when he died...

"Your point is..?" I had lost her train of thought. They HAD deAged, so my comment that they were primed to be able to hear my confession without jabs was correct.

"Yes, you are right. But consider how long you've been here, and how many years you have lost already," she persisted.

I thought back to how old I was when I started to lose my hair, and how long I was without any hair. "Well, gee, now that I think about it, if I go by how much hair I've grown back, I've lost fifteen to twenty years! I've even beat Larry!" The old competitiveness kicked in and I began to feel rather full of myself.

It didn't last long, however, because Julia pointed out that I was able to de-age so quickly in part because I had done such a poor job of hiding my true colors while I was on earth. Not in so many words, of course, but that was what she meant. "Gee thanks for that ego popper, Julia," I responded dejectedly.

"Why should not being good at hiding your true self be a bad thing?" she asked. "It means the next step should be a breeze for you. Your family already understands you. All you need to do is to go and see for yourself," she added.

I looked at her for awhile, trying to take all of this in. "You mean to tell me that Susan and Lenny don't hate my guts?"

"No they don't. Well, not Susan, for sure. Lenny really doesn't either, he just doesn't admit it. You thought they had a grudge against you, so you tried to oblige by being who you thought they thought you were." She had to smile at the way that came out, but it did actually make sense. I think. "You wasted a LOT of time, and made yourself miserable for nothing."

If she was trying to make me feel better, it wasn't working. Not at all. As the gravity of what she said sank in, I sat on the ground, feeling very heavy. I felt a huge sense of loss and a large lump in my throat. "There's no way to make up for it, is there?" I asked, not expecting an answer, or at least not a positive one.

"Maybe not for them, but definitely for you." She seemed so cheerful that I almost wanted to believe her. "If you go

back to visit, you'll see. And you can eventually do things for them, they just won't know its you."

"You're making this sound so easy. Do you know how bad I was to them?" I hadn't, until my conversation with Emma.

"Thinking of Emma, she's moved along very quickly thanks to your very selfless, brave talk with her. She's now so young that you may not recognize her. She saw quickly how wrong she had been to hide her feelings of annoyance and anger from her family. She had felt so used by her family that she was feeding a very bitter, sore spot in the center of her soul. She resented the fact they seemed to expect her to always be there for them, and to do whatever they wanted her to do. But she 'had an image to keep up', so she kept giving and giving until she was full of holes. If she had realized all she had to do was to let them know how she was feeling, they would have tried harder to be more self-sufficient, and she wouldn't have felt sucked dry of her life's energy. When she said, 'It's no problem', they believed her. They had no reason to think she was lying to them. All she needed to say was, 'I can't right now,' and they wouldn't have pushed it. They would be devastated to know the truth NOW, after all these years. They loved her more than she ever imagined, and her feelings of resentment would never have developed if she had been honest with them." Julia stopped, realizing she had just given me a dissertation on Emma's central being. "I didn't tell you too much, did I?" she asked worriedly.

"So when she goes back to see them, they still don't know she resented them?" I couldn't imagine Emma agreeing to go back if there was any chance of revealing how angry she had been with them. Even the 'new' Emma couldn't cause that much pain.

"She has total control over what they learn about the 'real' Emma. If she feels its best for them to never know, they won't. But she's beginning to realize they may do better with at least a hint of how she really felt, so they can recognize the possibility of a saintly person being capable of lying.

That would help them learn to NOT ask so much from the other 'saints' in their lives. She's trying to come to terms with that now. She's mulling it over as she rides Lifesaver around the pasture, and on the trails. She's relaxing and fully enjoying herself, free of her resentment. Actually, she did mention that she'd love to tell you 'thanks' in person, if you'd like." Julia was a fountain of information. "She's still a bit worried about some of the things you heard her think. She's afraid she really hurt you. She's afraid you may not want to see her again."

She may not have hurt me so much as made me think about how I had come across to others. What she pointed out hurt. I wasn't the least bit angry with her. I was angry with me. "How could I have been so thick?" I asked, rhetorically.

"You were concentrating on not letting any of your pain show. You turned it to anger. Anger was the best defense, since it isolated you from everything and everyone, so no one would know how you felt. You were 'safe'," Julia explained softly.

"What is this? That psycho-analysis junk that Susan always tried on me?" I began to feel angry. I recognized it rather quickly now. Trouble was, I ABSOLUTELY did NOT want to hurt! I was determined to keep from crying. I hated crying and hated being around crybabies. So this time I consciously chose to be angry instead. "I'm not falling for this s---! I'm fed up with this mumbo-jumbo! I'm going back to the guys!" I stormed off, back to the guys, in a huff with a cloud of gray smoke trailing behind me. Julia dodged the black tack I pretended not to notice fly out of my mouth.

The guys knew my state of mind immediately, given the expression on my face and the trailing dark flume. I didn't know Julia was hovering overhead until I saw them looking up at her. I looked up too. She was crying. "L---J---, don't do that!" I hollered at her. The tack that flew her way was navy blue.

"You'd better go to your bubble, before you turn to tar," suggested Arnie, of all people. "You really need to learn how to deal with all that anger, Ian," he added with a sad smile.



The gray smoke subsided, thanks to the calm tone of Arnie's suggestion. I sighed, and sat down with the guys. I even managed to forget why I was so angry in the first place. "Let's play cards," I said, in a rather demanding tone.

"Will do," said Harry, getting out the cards. Arnie divided us up into teams.

As we played the set, I felt surprisingly calm; not angry. *'So, anger isn't the only way to not hurt.'* I was in slo-mo-mode anyway, for the card game. *'All I need to do is forget and get busy with something else. This is easy! I can do this no sweat.'* "Pass" I said, when it was my turn to decide trump, or pass. *'Yes, ignoring all this sissy touchy feely stuff is the way to go.'* Decision made, I returned my full concentration to the game.

"So what else can we do to relax?" I asked, after we won the set. I was tired of cards. "Can we go for a swim?" I used to be on the swim team in high school.

The guys knew of a large, deep area of the river, so we headed to it. We all floated there, so we could enjoy the scenery on the way. Only Larry and Joe and I wanted to swim, though. The others sat on the bank for a while, then hollered to us that they felt like a nap, and faded out.

We swam for hours without getting tired. We took turns winning races, not so much because we were being nice to each other, but after I had won a bunch, Joe and Larry must have wished they could win, so they did. At least that's what I accused them of doing, since it was impossible for them to win any other way. They thought I was joshing them.

We sat on the bank for a few more hours after we were tired of swimming, having a light conversation about days gone by. Eventually, Joe and Larry decided they needed a nap, too, and faded out.

I didn't feel up to a dream, so I stayed and relaxed by the swimming hole. I didn't want to risk thinking about anything painful, so I tried to empty my mind. To my surprise, I felt

that warm, fuzzy feeling Julia gave off from time to time. I didn't open my eyes to see if she was with me; I didn't want to lose the feeling. I savored it for what may have been days, for all I knew or cared.

When I did give up the warmth, it was like trying to get out of bed on a cold winter morning. I stayed, lingering in the softness for as long as I could. Eventually, I decided I might as well get up and start on the 'days' work.

I had decided I was ready to visit my family. I looked around for Julia. I didn't see her, so I lay back down, and closed my eyes, thinking of my family.

Before long, I could picture Irene and me in a graveyard, looking at a headstone with the church member who was in charge of selling plots. Irene was crying. The churchman looked sad. It was the time we were getting ready for little Richard's funeral. We were buying the plot for him.

I could tell my mood was angry. I was rather gruff with the guy about the cost, and whether or not there would be room for Irene and me next to him. I had a hard time watching the emotion-packed scene, so I looked around the cemetery for a distraction. I saw my son and daughter walking around looking at tombstones, and talking. I moved closer to hear.

Susan was talking the most, as usual. "I studied all the major religions, trying to figure out why Richie had to suffer so much. The only thing that made any sense of it was the reincarnation idea." She sighed. "Yeah, if we have to live life after life until we learn to be good human beings, Richie's definitely in heaven. Even as young as he was, he wasn't demanding. He hardly ever cried, almost as if he knew his cries would make things harder for us. He didn't have an evil bone in his body."

They looked over at me and Irene and the churchman. This time, Len spoke. "Yep. Dad's definitely got a few more lives to go." They looked at each other and smiled, but they didn't laugh. I felt a bit put off, until I reminded myself they were right.

Susan added, "But he's not evil. He has a good soul. He just doesn't understand. He just doesn't get it. He doesn't know how to deal with all this emotional stuff, so he gets angry." She sighed again. "I just wish he wouldn't take it out on Mom."

I opened my eyes and sat up. Julia was beside me now. "See? They understood you. And Susan even tried to find an explanation for what had happened to her little brother, just like you tried to find answers about YOUR brother. You two are more similar than one would think given your opposite personalities."

I didn't feel at all like Susan, and I didn't find it very reassuring that they, or at least Susan, didn't think I was capable of comprehending something.

Julia helped by pointing out that whenever Susan tried to get me to realize what I was doing with my feelings, I almost bit her head off. If I could get angry with little Julia, I must have been a holy terror to Susan. I marveled at Susan's persistence, now that I realized how much angry resistance she had been up against. She had tried to 'psychoanalyze' me every chance she got, even before she went to college and med school.

"What about Len? He didn't say I wasn't evil," I said dejectedly.

"But he did nod his head in agreement with what Susan said, didn't he? He never was one to say much, so a nod is pretty significant, I think." Julia was so observant.

"So, if they thought I wasn't evil, why did they disown me?" I persisted.

"They had no choice. You effectively kicked them out, remember?" Julia tried to say this as gently as she could, but it still hit hard. "Do you want to see their side of that altercation?"

"Not really. I don't want to have to see how bad my side of it looked." I was being honest.

"How about visiting with them well after the episode, after they had time to digest it? That would be less stressful." Julia was a persistent little booger.

"Okay, then. Let's go before I change my mind." I wanted to get this behind me as quickly as possible.

I saw the apartment I had helped Susan move into just a few months before our disagreement. Susan was walking up the steps, her arms loaded down with big books. She struggled to find her key and open the door without dropping any of the books, but she didn't succeed. She proceeded to open the door, laid the books that did not fall on the floor in the foyer, and came back out for the ones that fell outside. She went back in and closed the door. I heard the lock click.

Julia came with me, visibly this time, I think to spur me on, as I was sorely tempted to just sit at the doorstep. Julia motioned for me to go in. We oozed through the closed door. She had to really urge me to follow Susan into the kitchen, though. I knew what, or I should say, who, I would see. Her roommate was a guy. They were planning to get married after they graduated from medical school. They didn't want to commit themselves just yet, because they realized there was so much change constantly going on in their lives, and they wanted to stay flexible.

Susan tried to talk to me about this arrangement over the winter holidays, when she brought Sam home to introduce to the family. I had liked the guy when I thought he was just her boyfriend. We had good discussions about where he was from, where his family had moved to, and other light topics of mutual interest. We conversed pleasantly throughout an enjoyable meal, after which he thanked Irene profusely.

It was after dinner that things got hairy. I asked him where he was living at that point in time. He hesitated and looked at Susan, apparently for courage. He gave the address of Susan's apartment. I gave him the benefit of the doubt, and asked if he was in an upstairs apartment at the same address. That's when Susan said, "No, Dad. We're living together." I went ballistic. I was furious. I was so sure he was taking advantage of Susan that I kicked him out. Of course, Susan followed. They never came back.

To make matters worse, Len tried to stick up for him. I told him that if he ever tried to move in with a girl without a commitment, I'd kill him, or something to that effect. Irene was crying in the background, so I chewed him out for getting her upset. Len's reaction to all of this totally floored me. He usually was quiet and compliant. But this time he cursed me out like I had never been cursed out before. His eyes were so full of hate, I was afraid he was going to kill ME. He stormed out the door, slamming it so hard that one of the glass panes broke. I was speechless. I never saw him again, until Irene's funeral. Before she died, he made sure I wasn't at home when he visited her. And when she was in the hospital he made sure I wasn't there with her before he would come to see her.

Julia waited patiently for me to relive this in my mind. After I had finished she gently reminded me to go into the kitchen. I took a deep breath, and dragged heavily forward.

They had arranged the books on the table for what appeared to be a study session. The book they had opened first was on psychiatric disorders. I looked at Julia accusingly. *'Is this some kind of trick?'* I thought.

"Just listen," she replied.

"You know, Sam, I really don't think any of these categories fit my dad. He's generally an okay person, until something gets him riled. He thinks YOU don't want to make a commitment to ME. Mom just wrote me a long letter," Susan said calmly. "It's really sad. I can tell she was crying while she wrote it. It's covered with watermarks. I had a hard time reading some parts."

"Why doesn't your mom tell him it's the other way around? I'd marry you in a heartbeat if you'd have me. Wouldn't that make all the difference?" Sam was hopeful.

"You don't know how stubborn Dad can be. He's convinced no woman would turn down marriage rather than 'shacking up', so he'd just think I was lying to cover for you." Susan shook her head. "He's VERY old school. And I know

he's just trying to protect me the only way he knows how. Mom thinks he'll eventually come around. She'll let us know when it's okay to go back home to visit again."

*'When I'LL come around? THEY didn't ever want to see ME again!'* I thought with a frown. I looked at Julia. "Surely they didn't think I didn't want to ever see them again?" I asked her, but I knew the answer by the look on her face.

"They could only go by what you showed them, not by what you felt. You hid what you felt very well, so they had to guess what you really meant. They were correct sometimes, and wrong other times. You really were a puzzle." She smiled a bit, as though I would be proud of being a puzzle.

"Well, I guess she eventually thought I came around, then, since she visited after they got married. I had the impression that they tolerated me in order to see Irene, though. But Lenny never even tried to tolerate me. His wife brought their kids to see Irene." I paused. I couldn't imagine a visit to Lenny being at all positive.

"I agree we don't need to visit Lenny. He's definitely much like you." She didn't need to elaborate. He never did forgive me. Even thick old bull headed me could see that.

"But you could help him see what you are realizing now while he is still young enough to get the most out of HIS life," she added.

My ears perked up. "How?" Since I was obviously no use to him when I was alive, I'd love to be able to do anything I could, now.

She looked at me for a while, but I could not read her thoughts. She didn't say anything as she took my arm, and we instantly were back at the riverbank.

"Do we always have to come back to the same place we started from, after a dream?" I asked.

"That wasn't a dream. We weren't there to change anything or to help anyone. We went for you. We usually need to be in the Dome to go to a dream job, and yes, we tend to come back to the Dome after dreams, though we

don't have to. The younger souls don't even have to start in a Dome," Julia said as she watched my expression closely.

I sighed. "So what's next?" I asked.

"Let's go get some advice from my supervisors," she suggested.

I wasn't too thrilled about the prospects of another meeting with young-uns I didn't know but who were sure to know everything about me.... But I did want to help my son. Julia was right. He WAS just like me. Susan was flexible and understanding, like her mother, and seemed to have a happy life. Lenny always seemed sulky, and unhappy.

We floated along the path to the campsite, then into the pod and through the hallways. "Why can't we just float through the walls, since we have no substance, like we can in our dreams?" I asked.

Julia grinned broadly and answered, "We need to have a semblance of control over the elders, now don't we?" She looked full of mischief, and broke into a laugh when she read the picture in my mind of me in a playpen, standing at the rail, screaming at the top of my lungs, like a thwarted toddler. I had to smile, too. It was so backwards to think that I, as grown man, needed watching, and the toddlers were independent and responsible hard workers.

"So, what are the walls made of, then," I persisted.

"I don't know. You'll have to ask someone in construction." Julia was still grinning broadly. It felt good to see her so happy.

We eventually arrived at a set of offices I had not yet seen. All of the doors were closed. Julia didn't say anything, nor let me in on her thoughts, so I tried to wait patiently. I looked up and down the hallway. It felt rather eerie. But it was bright and comfortable, so I didn't think of anything evil, like in the scary movies where the castle is always cold and damp just before the murder. This was just too quiet.

Eventually, Julia said, "Let's ask later. This isn't a good time." She took my hand, and we faded into the Dome.

Joe and Larry were there, near the door. They saw Julia and me, and floated over to meet us. "We were interested in a small group dream. Are there any available?" Joe asked Julia.

"Where are your deAgers?" Julia asked, instead of answering the question.

"We don't know. They must be busy. We've been here for quite a while waiting for someone to show up." Larry looked worried. "Arnie, Johnny and Harry have been asleep for a long time. I wish we'd have gone with them."

Now Julia looked worried, too. "Wait here," she said as she faded out.

"What's going on?" Larry asked in near panic. "This hadn't happened for decades!"

"Could you be more specific, please, Larry." I was slightly annoyed that he would ask ME what was going on when he obviously already knew.

"No, I don't already know." He had a definite peevish tone in the statement. "I was never let in on what happened the last time. All I know is all the deAgers were missing for a rather long while, and everyone at work dreaming stayed asleep the whole time. Then the fuzz thickened and came down around the entire mountain. It seemed to give those of us who were awake a calm, but sad feeling, and when it lifted, lots of new, younger than usual souls had arrived. Most headed to the bottom of the mountain. It seemed to be days before the others woke up and the deAgers returned. Then they didn't want to talk about it. I was at the campground playing cards while most of this was going on, so it wasn't as scary then. Being here, actually seeing all the souls sleeping so long, and calling for my deAger and not getting an answer, is worse. I never actually saw all of this going on that time. I got most of it second hand, and I thought the others were joshing, so I didn't push for answers."

Once he got started, he was on a roll. "Did you ever see a storm on another mountain?" I finally was able to get the question in edgewise.



"No. Why?" he asked.

I told Larry about my conversation with Julia after I saw the storm on the distant peak, and how she said the storms are good things for us here, but not good for those on earth. His mouth dropped open when I worried aloud, "I wonder what huge catastrophe is happening on earth." I hoped I was wrong.

Joe seemed lost. I got the sense that he didn't have a clue about anything we were talking about, and didn't know what question he could ask to even begin to understand.

"Let's go to the pod entrance," I said, and turned to the door, but I stopped, remembering I didn't know how to get there. I had accidentally faded there before.

"This way," said Joe. "It's not far."

We floated as quickly as possible. We could sense a heaviness coming over the pod. A calm, but sad, heaviness. When we got to the entrance, we could see a steady flow of souls floating and riding down to the bottom pods. We looked up the hill through the warm mist to see hints of various sized soul parts, and a few intact souls floating out of the mountain top, and into the thickened fuzz. Coming out of the fuzz were lots of complete souls, apparently put back together. They rained slowly downwards as if suspended by invisible parachutes, while the silvery glitter that swirled out of the fuzz with them was blown out over the ocean. They all looked solemn and determined. Their years seemed to melt away with ease as they progressed down the hillside. They were all just infants as they made their way into shiny, glowing pods at the ocean's edge. The pods stretched ever bigger to accommodate all the young arrivals.

The eruption seemed to go on forever. We stood and watched in awe.

"Hey, Ian! That guy looks just like your son! ..... It IS him! Hey, Lenny, over here!" Larry had seen more of Lenny over the years than I did, playing the peacemaker, but to no avail.

I looked the direction Larry was looking as he waved and whistled. It WAS Lenny floating down out of the cloud looking ten years younger than when I saw him at Irene's funeral. It didn't take long before he spotted me. I thought about trying to hide.

"Pops! Is that you!!?" He flew to me before I could act on my thought, tears glistening in his eyes. He hadn't called me Pops since he was a kid. Without a moment's hesitation, he gave me a bear hug. I was too shocked to speak as I hugged back, my tears flowing freely.

Larry's expression was one of incredulity. Lenny turned to greet him with a hearty handshake and a pat on the shoulder.

"What's happening?" Larry asked. I hadn't managed to say anything, but Lenny looked at me, too, as he answered.

"A plane flew into the North Tower, Dad. A huge passenger plane. We rushed to help, and started up the stairs. Last thing I remember, we were on the 68th floor, and the world came crashing down around us." He paused and looked back up the mountain to the fuzzi. "That is one awesome cloud. I could have stayed in there forever." He looked back to me and asked if I arrived the same way.

"Sort of. Except I didn't come out so young. I was the same old crank I was when I died."

Lenny had to smile at that one. "I wasn't the easiest son in the world, either. We wasted a lot of time, didn't we, Dad."

We looked into each other's eyes. Words weren't necessary. We hugged again, both crying like babies.

Eventually we were able to converse on a less emotional level. He bragged about his wife and kids, and worried how they were dealing with this catastrophe. He asked me to find his mother and ask her to look out for them. He had a very determined look on his face.

"What happened in that cloud was a total transformation," he said. "I feel like I have no potential for hate, or anger, or jealousy or even frustration. Did you feel this way, too, when you died?"

I had to grin sheepishly. "No, I'm afraid not. It actually took me quite a while to be convinced this wasn't hell." As Lenny laughed heartily at that confession, I looked to Larry, hoping he'd have an idea of why our arrivals were so different. He just shrugged.

"While I was in the cloud, I sensed we were here for a specific reason. For a mission of some sort." Lenny said. "I'd love to stay and talk, but I must move on to my next work station." We hugged one more time before he joined the others heading towards the bottom of the mountain.

It broke my heart to watch him go.

"Let's go to the Watering Hole, Ian," Larry suggested. "Or do you need to be alone?" He looked at me worriedly. I was just short of sobbing aloud. In public. Joe looked as though he had seen a ghost.

I managed to pull myself together. "I need to find out where Lenny is going. I need to find out what's happening. Let's go." I was filled with an intense need to know what my son was up against.

We quickly popped into The Hole. None of the usual guys were there, but I didn't care who or what they were if they could answer any of my burning questions.

A guy named Jack was the most helpful. He was younger than the rest, but not young enough to be a deAger. He had been through a few of these events over the years, but never one of this magnitude. *'At least he paid attention to what was happening, unlike Larry.'* Larry set his jaw and his

expression showed more than a hint of anger when I thought this, but I didn't care. I was on a mission.

Jack said he had heard that prior victims of large tragedies were rushed through to infancy. "Apparently they have ALL of their silver DNA removed on arrival. It's not right that we have to suffer through getting rid of ours ourselves, and here they are rushed through to the head of the line, like they're privileged characters or something. I mean, a lot of us were killed in tragic accidents, just not all at the same time. Disaster victims always get more attention," Jack opined with a bit of a whine.

I didn't like hearing Lenny referred to in this way, and was sorely tempted to say so, but I didn't want to risk offending my best source of information. "So where do they go in those huge pods? What are they being sent to do?" I asked impatiently.

Jack looked at me for a bit as though deciding to answer. I guessed he could tell I was angry about his comment about victims. "Sorry, Ian. I didn't know your son was one of the victims. Forgive me."

I nodded my head in answer, but didn't lower my gaze. If I could have torn his knowledge out of him, I would have.

"They are sent deep into the ocean for some sort of a major mission, but I honestly don't know anymore than that. Maybe when the deAgers come back, you could ask them." Jack looked truly sorry.

"That's okay, Jack. You tried to help. I appreciate the effort." I headed back in the direction of the pod with plans to see if any of the office doors around Pat were open, or to see if Gail was available. Joe stayed at the Hole, but Larry followed, thankfully, as I was still too disoriented to be sure I'd get were I wanted to go. Luckily he wasn't one to hold grudges. He helped me find the offices.

The office doors en route to the stack of offices were closed, but the large atrium was really buzzing. I flew to Gail's office, relieved to see her there with her door open, but she was too busy to look up. I cleared my throat a few times

before she noticed me, then she held up a finger as if to say 'in a minute'. Larry and I waited outside her office door for what felt like hours.

Finally she motioned me in. "I can't talk long. We have an emergency on our hands. The communications from Middle East Mountains are voluminous." Her computer emitted a shrill beep, and she went back to her work with intense concentration.

Larry suggested we look around at some of the other offices. If we could find anyone who could spare a moment we could ask for more details.

We checked almost all of the offices with open doors before we came across a child who was apparently coming out for air. She didn't have much time, but she was able to tell us that BOTH of the towers were hit by passenger jets, AND the Pentagon was hit. Information from the Middle East suggested that a group from that area was taking credit for it. Before we could ask about where the victims were going, she was summoned back to her office by a colleague hollering, "A plane just crashed in Pennsylvania!"

I looked at Larry, truly worried now, not just for my son, but for the world. "Do you think this is the beginning of World War III?" I asked. He was too shocked to answer me. I wished I had paid more attention to politics before I died. I stopped watching the news shows when Arnie moved in. He got more wound up discussing politics than he did arguing about sports, and a sports argument is what caused his fatal heart attack.

"Did you keep up with any of the politics after you died, Larry?" I thought maybe he had gone on some jobs that would have at least given him a clue as to what would have made some people so angry that they'd do something so vicious.

"I have no idea, Ian." Larry suggested we wait a bit for some other overworked soul to come out for a breather.

I could only wait for a few minutes. I had to be more proactive than just waiting, and waiting...

I managed to convince Larry to help me find the way back to the door of the pod. Souls were still raining down. Silver was still swirling out to sea. And the victims were still heading dutifully down to the large bubbles. I could see the tops of some bubbles that had already being taken out to sea by the waves.

Other pods on the way to the ocean had souls at the entrances, too, and some of the victims stopped to talk, just like Lenny had done here. I stopped one of the other victims to ask for more details, but he didn't know much more than Lenny.

Larry was doing his best to calm me down. But I had just seen my son for the first time in over 10 years! I couldn't just let him get away now!

"I'm going to follow them." I said finally.

Larry was aghast. He tried to talk me out of it, but I'd have none of it. I was going.

My mind was made up.

## The Ocean Floor

“Don’t be stupid!” Larry exclaimed as he tried to grab my arm to stop me.

“I’ve got nothing to lose!” I hollered back at him, having easily evaded his grip. *‘What can be worse than being dead?’* I wondered. *I can’t feel any physical pain, and I’m already in so much emotional pain that I can’t imagine feeling any worse. I really do have nothing to lose. Except maybe, hopefully, some silver.’*

Larry waved goodbye from the door of the pod. He looked as if he thought he’d never see me again.

The steady stream of souls slowed to a trickle, but I still felt like I blended right in. I sat on the conveyor belt taking in the sites on the way down. The closer we got to the bottom, the souls I could see in the pods were younger, and there were fewer and fewer of them wandering around. The lowermost pods looked like gigantic nurseries.

At the shoreline were large pods that looked like those I had seen in the distance. They were enormous. The pod in front of me was mostly under water already, and it was porous, so the water line inside was at the same level as the outside. The entrance was big enough to see that as the souls went through they initially floated on the water.

THEN I remembered that all the while we were coming down the mountain, the souls from the disaster were turning into infants. By the time we reached the pods at the bottom, the others were newborns with umbilical cords. I was still an old coot.

I hopped off the conveyor belt before it divided into the different pods. A toddler was at each fork, apparently deciding which pod to send which newborn into. One of the

toddlers looked at me curiously, but didn't stop sorting to address me. I may have blended in when we started at the top of the hill, but I definitely stuck out now.

Since no one sent me straight back up the hill, I floated over to the entrance to one of the pods and looked in. I gasped. The newborns had sunk beneath the surface and were fetuses! *'Do they deAge all the way to a fertilized egg?'* I wondered. *Or maybe even beyond that to an egg and sperm?'*

Being an excellent swimmer, I decided to see how much more I could make out if I swam into the ocean. I wasn't brave enough to go inside the pod. I was afraid I'd get trapped in it. The walls were see-through enough for me to look inside from the safety of the open ocean.

I took a deep breath, and dove in. The salty water didn't burn my eyes like it used to when I was young. *'Ah-hah!'* I thought. *'I probably don't need to breathe, either.'* I stayed near the surface for a few minutes still holding my breath, in case I started to feel light headed and needed to breathe after all.

While I was near the surface, I could see the fetuses clearly. They were wrapped in what was the equivalent of the amniotic sac, and the placenta looked fuzzy. As I got braver, I went deeper. The fetuses were smaller and smaller, and eventually looked like the pictures of embryos I remembered when Irene made me look at to see which stage she was in her pregnancies.

Beneath the embryos were tiny little grainy bits floating just above the surface of the bottom of the pod. I looked closer, trying to see if the bits were in bubbles, like I supposed a fertilized egg would be, but I couldn't make anything out. I did notice a faint gold light coming from the bottom of the bloated pod.

As I was concentrating on this, the pod began to move. The height and strength of the ocean waves had picked up remarkably and rather suddenly. I debated whether or not to follow the pod or go back to shore. Again, I decided I couldn't be any more dead than I was now, and I couldn't feel



physical pain, so I followed. As I ascended to the surface, I bumped into little balls of what reminded me of jellyfish. They seemed to get bigger and bigger the higher I went. It wasn't long before I realized these too were embryos and fetuses. I stopped for a moment. I was beginning to feel as though I were in sacred territory, as though I were in a womb with all these soon to be angels, or some other perfect beings.

I looked at the pods that were already farther out to sea. The tug of my need to follow my son was greater than my sense of reverence. I thought of the silver DNA I'm sure I still had. I worried for a split second that I may contaminate the waters, but I promised myself I wouldn't cry, or get angry, so it was safe within me.

I had to swim quickly to catch up with the pod that just left the shore. When I reached it, the waves had calmed, and the pod was going slowly enough for me to look around as I swam along. Some of the embryos outside the pod were stuck to the sea floor instead of floating along. Some of the embryos, and an occasional bit of dust, would float to the surface of the ocean. I swam to the top to see what became of them. I noticed the water was a bit shimmery towards the top. I wondered if it was the silver glitter that had been blown out to sea when souls were de-silvered.

As the embryos and bits of dust broke through the surface, they were transformed into a beautiful collection of dancing golden glitter that rose far into the sky. I watched the dazzling display in an all-consuming state of awe. It was wondrous. It was heartwarming. The tiny bits of escaped dust coalesced into shimmering golden happy swirls gracefully making their way into a golden glowing cloud that was surely, truly, heaven.

Eventually I noticed that I was facing the shoreline. At the waters edge was a smaller pod that wasn't yet launched. Larger embryos and small fetuses closer to the shore were popping out of the water and transforming into the golden glitter just as the smaller embryos and dust bits had done.

They also danced and shimmered happily up to the golden heavens. Closest to shore, some of the rising fetuses looked big enough to almost be newborn, but their golden glitter looked just as happy to be joining the glowing warmth in the sky as the dust and small embryos had been.

I looked out to where the original pod I had followed should be by now, and looked back to shore to gauge whether or not I should just wait for the next pod or try to catch up with the other one. I decided to wait so that I could check out what happens to the embryos and dust that don't break loose from the ocean floor.

I swam to the ocean floor. I picked an embryo to watch for a bit to see if it changed at all. I also kept an eye out for the remaining pod. The embryo seemed to slowly shrink and become less distinct. VERY slowly. So I turned my attention to the tiniest one I could find that was still big enough to be sure it was an embryo. Sure enough, it got smaller and smaller until it was just a dot. Then it disappeared. It either got sucked up by the sea floor, or got too small for me to see. I went back to the original embryo, which was now just a blob in a bubble. Then, puff! It too was gone. It HAD been sucked into the ocean floor! I stared at the spot it had been before it disappeared for signs of a hole, or a creature, or anything to explain its disappearance.

I wondered if I watched some of the other more visible embryos long enough, if they would disappear, too, before they become as small as the dust. Though it challenged my patience severely, after I was sure the last pod had not yet left the shoreline, I returned to the seafloor and watched. And watched. And watched.

I floated back to the surface now and then to check on the pod. I had decided to follow it, even if I hadn't seen any fetuses or larger embryos disappear by then. It was the only way I could manage to watch any longer.

The fetuses and embryos I watched got younger and smaller, but didn't disappear. When the last pod left the shoreline I swam to meet it. I tried to stay focused on it, as I

may not have another chance to see where the pods go, and I could always watch the embryos on my way back.

I followed the pod for hours. It went deeper and deeper. The water was darker at these depths, which made it difficult to see well enough to keep my bearings.

I started to worry about not being able to find my way back to the mountain. My curiosity and devotion to my son were eventually overcome by lack of courage. I swam up to the surface.

Panic hit. I could barely see the tops of the mountains. I then realized I never studied how our mountain was different from the other mountains. If I swam back at an angle off just a hair from the correct one, I may end up at the foot of the wrong mountain. I calmed myself by remembering I didn't need to eat for energy, and I wasn't at all tired from the distance I already covered. It may just take a longer time to find my mountain than if I knew exactly where I was going, but I would find it. I wished I had learned how to fade in and out.

So, I swam. And I swam. And I thought about what I had seen. *'Where were the embryos going when they went through the sea floor? Why were some of them seemingly set free to go to the golden glow?'* It felt as if those left on the floor were not as happy. *'Were they somehow eaten by something? If reincarnation is real, are they going back to earth, while the released ones were, finally, safe in heaven? And what would happen to all the shimmering silver in the top layers of the ocean? Did it tarnish? Was there any danger of it being reused to make purely evil creatures? Why wasn't it just flat out destroyed?'*

*'Where were the disaster victims going? Surely, they deserved to be in heaven. Did the people from the disaster I saw in the distance end up in a similar pod? Were they meeting somewhere? My son is in one of those pods. Or at least his golden remnants are, in some shape or form. I know where Susan and Irene are. Susan is happy on earth, and strong enough to be able to deal with the loss of her brother, and Irene is in her infancy somewhere on our mountain. But*

*I can't bear the thought of Len disappearing into the depths of the ocean, never to be seen or heard from again, especially now that I realized what a fool I had been. Surely they had to be going to somewhere useful. Julia had implied these victims were good for us here. They may be going off to fight the ultimate evil. But how? Len had said something about going to the next work station, hadn't he? Does he know specifically where it was, or is he just blindly following instructions?'*

My mind was swimming as fast and as furious as my misty being was. *'What is the mist made of? How do we get to the places on earth in our dreams? Are the dreams really of things happening on earth, or heavenly hallucinations made for us to feel useful? Why can't we be told all these things when we arrive, sort of like an orientation session for new workers to learn the rules and such?'* I started to feel anger and frustration at the lack of communication we were given on arrival. *'What's the purpose of all this torture from not knowing?'*

I remembered my promise to myself about not getting angry, so as not to risk losing any silver DNA here in the ocean, but I figured *'what the h---, there's plenty of silver out here already.'* The light gray puff bubbled out of my ear and to the surface of the water. As it popped into the air, it darkened, and swirled like a tiny tornado near the surface. To my horror, it sucked up some of the silver from the ocean water, and then quickly swirled away in the direction the pods of the victims had gone.

"Oops," I said aloud. "I guess I'd better watch my temper after all." I hoped there wasn't any real damage done by my little light gray puff. *'I mean, it isn't really evil, now, is it?'* I started to feel angry again thinking that we could have been warned of things like this, so we wouldn't have to learn everything the hard way.

***'But you like to learn things the hard way. You don't believe what you're told until you've worked it out for yourself.'*** The thought was mine, but out of my usual pattern, like it was being planted there, sorta like in the

bubble. ***‘Keep your thoughts fluid, and some of the answers will form.’***

Huh?

I stopped swimming, so I could concentrate on this new development. *‘What am I thinking? Or rather, how am I thinking? Is ‘the force’ from my bubble all the way out here? How could answers to things like the goings on here just form in my mind, and how do I keep my thoughts fluid? What is this nonsense?’* I stopped asking questions for a few seconds, as if I were listening for an answer. *‘This is crazy,’* I thought.

***‘No, it’s not,’*** came an answer, again in my own thought. ***‘Let your thoughts be directed, let them flow freely, creatively, and the answers will come.’***

*‘Okay,’* I thought. *‘I’ll try.’* I tried to let my mind wander, without asking any specific questions. I looked around, again trying not to think of anything specific. The water felt warm and soothing. The sky was a fuzzy blue. In the distance were the mountains.

I was probably halfway back.

***‘A bit better than halfway. And you are headed in the correct direction.’***

*‘Am I to do anything special when I get there?’* I thought, as though I were actually in a conversation with that special bubble force that could direct my thoughts and form an answer.

***‘Yes, there is,’*** came the response. ***‘When you get back, find Irene. She can answer your questions.’***

I wasn’t real keen on the idea of finding Irene. I was embarrassed about how I had behaved on earth. I didn’t know how I could face her.

***‘She’ll be thrilled to know how much you’ve learned already. She’s always been worried about you. She could see right through you, even before you turned to mist.’***

I had to smile at this. A bit on the punny side, but light hearted just the same.

***'You will feel much better when you see her. You won't recognize her misty form, but you'll know it's her.'***

I sighed. *'Okay, then. I'll look for her as soon as I get back to the mountain,'* and resumed swimming. Slowly. Ever so slowly....

***'Tiring, are we? Here, let me help.'***

Almost before the thought was finished, but not before I sensed the *'trying to procrastinate, aren't you'* feeling behind it, I was back in my pod, soggy and chagrined, but 'home'.

## Little Irene

I had been deposited in the Dome. I could see plenty of deAgers and souls awake and active, so the freeze that had been put on everything apparently had been lifted. I wondered if Julia was busy with Emma, and if I should just ask for Karl instead.

Julia appeared, answering that question. She seemed to already know where I had been, and what I had done, as she was smiling and shaking her head as a mother does when she catches her curious toddler into yet another project. "Shall we go, then, before your wet feet get cold?" she asked.

"Do I have a choice?" I asked, knowing I did, but that I'd be foolish to choose not to go. Julia held my arm, and we faded into a nursery in our pod. At least, I believed it was still in our pod, although I had no idea how I could know that. Before I had a chance to ask Julia, a tiny two-year-old came running, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Ian! Oh Ian, it's you!" she exclaimed as she pounced right up to my neck and gave me the biggest bear hug any soul could get and survive to tell about it.

She let loose for a second to look at me with my cheeks in her tiny little hands, planted a huge kiss on my lips, and went back to hugging and crying. Her smile was so big that it almost went from one ear to the other.

I felt exceedingly guilty. "I don't deserve this kind of reception, after all the grief I caused you in life." I knew this little girl was Irene, even though I had never seen her this young, even in pictures.

"I knew you were hurting, Ian. I just didn't know how to help you." She had an impish half grin on her face as she

added, "But there WERE plenty of times I thought a two by four 'upside' your head may have done the trick!"

She looked more closely at my hair and skin. "You've lost a good ten years from when I left you, and that was years ago. I had heard you were doing very well here, after the first few missteps, anyway, but seeing it for myself is wonderful!" she said as she resumed her hearty hug. I felt like I was holding a tiny Susan except for the tightness around my throat, which was not just from the strength of the hug. Before I could stop them, the tears began to flow.

I could almost feel the hair grow back on my head. Irene was happily running her hands through it, crying and laughing at the same time. "I wanted so much for you to let yourself be human. To let yourself feel. But you'd have none of that sissy stuff. Oh how it hurt to watch!" Seeing her so happy felt so good, it was almost unbearable.

*'So why the h--- am I crying?'* (My ear puff was yellow.) I felt like one of those overly emotional women bawling at a wedding, or some other silly sentimental happy event. *'I'm glad only infants and toddlers are here to witness my weakness.'*

"But don't you see, Ian? It's a strength! To be able to feel, AND to be able to express your feelings is a blessing! All that macho stuff boys and men have to deal with on earth is such a miserable handicap. It causes so much suffering. If you don't worry about what anyone else will think, you can be yourself, pure and simple, and enjoy existence. Don't you feel FREE now?" She was so excited that I didn't disagree with her, but what I felt was not exactly freedom. Intense regret was mingled in with the joy of seeing Irene like this, and sadness from realizing what might have been, all combined to really muddle up the picture. *'If freedom means having to feel all possible human feelings at once, I'm not sure I'm ready for it.'*

"It'll be less intense after the initial releases. After all, you do have quite a few years of repressed feelings squished up in there, now don't you." It was a knowing statement, not a question, said with a smug look on her face. I had never



seen that look on adult Irene's face. I smiled as I realized that she, like Emma, had to learn to allow 'not nice' feelings to surface. She had to deal with her own tendency to 'act nice' like good little girls are taught to do.

We gave each other knowing looks, then we BOTH hugged each other so hard that we started to look like party balloons being reshaped so as to twist into various animals-like shapes.

Many of the other toddlers had gathered around to watch the reunion. All were in tears with huge smiles on their faces. One of the boys said, "This is embarrassing. Couldn't you find a nice, quiet place to do this?" His expression was one of pure mischief. He was obviously poking fun at the macho image.

We eventually let go of each other. I watched Irene as she rearranged her mist to refill in her middle where I had squished her waist into a pancake. She looked at my neck when she was done reshaping herself, laughed, and started easing the mist that had gone to my head back into my now two inch diameter neck. "I always did think you had a rather swelled head, but this is ridiculous," she said with a sideways grin and one raised eyebrow.

I chuckled heartily. "Let's go for a walk by the river," I suggested to little Irene.

"Sure thing. Let's go," she agreed, winking at both me and her toddler friends.

Irene had mastered the fading technique long ago, so she just took my hand, and we appeared near the swimming hole. We sat on the bank in the mossy spot I had relaxed on earlier. We didn't talk for quite some time. There didn't seem to be a need to say anything. Even though I couldn't read her thoughts word for word, she was telling me loads without apparently having to even think it. I understood all of the intricacies of our lives together; I knew now that she knew all along that I hadn't been a bad person. I had been a person behaving badly. She had spent most of her adult life trying to get me to let the real me out. I hadn't been quite the

ogre my experiences since I had died had led me to believe. Since my death, I had just been dealing with all the bad times and bad feelings. There had been lots of good times between the bad. She was now helping me see ALL of the aspects of the life we had together without saying or thinking a word. We really had been a merger of two people, and now a merger of two souls. I felt whole, for the first time since I died. I felt calm. I felt okay to be me. I felt truly loved.

"You're crying again. It feels good, doesn't it?" she asked calmly. "It really does a soul good. Did you notice all the silver you lost down in the nursery?"

I hadn't. I wiped my cheek and looked closely at my tears. The fluid on my fingers was glimmering. I looked at Irene. "So was I right when I figured one way to get rid of the silver in us is to cry it out?"

"Yes. When PEOPLE cry, they don't actually cry the silver out, but it reduces the power the silver has over them. The world would be a much easier place if people would just let themselves cry when they feel the urge." She grinned mischievously. "I'm sure it's what saved you many times."

I had to laugh. Irene used to cry when she had to swat a fly that got into her kitchen and it wouldn't cooperate with being shooed out an open door. She even cried at some commercials, for P----s----. My ear puff was orange. *'If crying is what reduced the power of HER silver DNA, it had been absolutely powerless. It was probably not strong enough to get her to think to 'hit Ian upside the head', let alone act on the thought. And, actually, if she had hit me, I'd have been so shocked, it may just have worked!'*

We hugged again, but more gently this time. We looked like a father and his precious little girl, but in reality, it was the other way around. Precious little Irene was parenting me. And I was enjoying every sweet moment.

I began to tell her about my visit to Susan but she already knew about it.

"You missed a good funeral," she said. "Susan cried buckets, but she was still able to show that wonderful sense of humor. She told people that she wondered if heaven's

figured out what hit it yet! She said she couldn't quite picture you with a halo and wings unless she pictured the halo a bit tarnished and askew. She even had one of the kids draw a picture of the 'angelic' you to put over your casket! It was adorable! Even some of your more macho friends had to wipe away a tear when they saw it." Irene was crying again, too, despite the healthy grin.

I was shocked at the thought that anyone even showed up at my funeral, let alone CRY at it. Jeez, I must have really been out of touch.

*'I bet Lenny wasn't at my funeral, though.'*

"He was there, too, right beside Susan," Irene offered. "He wouldn't let himself cry. He was so like you. Cindy was by his side, crying as much as Susan and Sam."

Irene already knew about Lenny, too.

"Where did he and the others go?" I remembered the thought while I was in the ocean telling me that Irene could answer all my questions. I sat bolt upright, eager to finally hear the answers.

She looked at me for a long time before answering me. Then she said slowly and solemnly, "They've gone to infiltrate the enemy. Literally. Their purified and strengthened gold is headed to Hell to hopefully neutralize the negative influence of silver."

She looked away from the shocked look on my face and continued. "The DNA that codes for our souls is influenced by the forces of gold and silver in the molecules. The gold's effect on our DNA helps us to have an open mind. It helps us do for others what we would want done for us. It helps us to put ourselves in the other person's shoes. It gives us insight into the plight of others so as to be less judgmental. Basically, it is the force behind altruistic behavior. It spreads warmth and love...." She looked up at me and sighed. She looked so sad. "It feels so much better when we all look out for one another; when gold spin is in control."

She took another deep sigh and continued. "The silver force in DNA causes a person to have tunnel vision. It interferes with a soul's ability to care about anything or

anyone other than themselves. It focuses that entity's thoughts and desires on itself. It guides its victim to plot and scheme with others of its ilk to oppress and control less selfish souls in order to gain more power. It is greedy. It is manipulative. It is self-centered."

She drew in a deep breath before she went on. "It's given strength by intimidation. By miscommunication. By secrecy. By rigid, unbending, nonsensical rules." She stopped when she saw the puzzled look on my face. "Yes, by something as ubiquitous as rules. The rules of culture. The rules of religions. The rules that groups of people mandate for themselves so that they feel secure in knowing what is expected of them. Most rules are good, but they are very easy to hijack for the evil purposes. They can be used to convince even those with the best of intentions that something they want to do, but isn't a 'good' thing, actually IS good for everyone in the end. Rules can be interpreted so that even basically good people feel justified in doing things that are really very heinous. Misguided and misconstrued rules are used to convince masses of people that theirs is a good goal, even if it means doing VERY evil things to achieve the goal. They are convinced that the end justifies the means."

She stopped. I didn't comprehend what she meant about rules, and she knew it.

"I'm sorry, Ian. I guess I've been too isolated from other parts of the pod for too long. I forgot how long it took me to understand all the nuances of the soul and the collective powers of the metals. I shouldn't have gone on like that. Forgive me." A tiny tear dripped out of the pool that had collected over her lower lid. "I guess I just wish everyone could understand NOW, so that the world would be the better place I know it can be." She looked at me with a sad smile and quipped, "I guess that makes me as impatient as you!"

I didn't think that was possible.

## A Trip to Hell

Suddenly, Irene's eyes lit up with excitement. "Excuse me, Ian. I just got an idea." Before I could answer, she was gone.

"Well I'll be d----," I said to no one. I was flabbergasted. As my tan feather floated serenely to the ground, I frowned, completely confused. *'Irene really has changed to be able to just pop out on me like that.'* She ALWAYS considered everyone else's feelings over hers. She even admitted that she felt she had to let those annoying telephone menus complete a sentence before she could push a number. She didn't feel right about interrupting the voice. 'It's a d---- recording!' I bellowed when she confessed about why it took her so long to refill just ONE prescription using the pharmacy's automated system.

I thought about everything she told me so far. About my funeral. About gold and silver. About rules. None of it made sense. *'How could there have been many people at my funeral? I had become a virtual hermit in the years before I died.'* I had an easier time understanding how Lenny was there since our encounter during the catastrophic storm, but then again he hadn't been transformed by the fuzz before my funeral. *'And Irene, who is now mostly under the control of gold, is NOW able to selfishly disappear and leave me high and dry when she was totally selfless BEFORE she came to heaven. Nope. None of this makes any sense.'*

I lay back on the moss and watched the clouds as I pondered some more. *'Maybe Irene had to go through what Emma went through, to be honest with herself. Yeah, that had to be it. There was no way Irene could EVER turn selfish.'*

Before too long, I felt myself being slowly engulfed by that warm, heavenly, loving, peaceful feeling. I let go of my churning thoughts, and enjoyed.

When I came around, Irene was next to me, obviously having a hard time waiting for me to return to the new reality. She was uncharacteristically fidgety and very excited. She looked like a kid at Christmas.

“Ian! Hurry up! Let’s go!” she exclaimed when she saw me stir.

I frowned at her. “What the h---.....?”

“I’ve managed to get the okay for us to go on a very special trip! Come on!” she grabbed my arm, and we were gone before I could spit out the feather.

We materialized in a huge open atrium similar to the one in which Gail’s office is located, but this one had no offices. It was more like a cave. Just one big open space with waves of water lapping in and out of a graceful archway through which we could see the ocean. It was foggy, but bright and happy. There was a warm, misty fuzziness hanging over the entire scene.

Floating at the edge of the beach were several souls who looked to be newborns. They still had their umbilical cord stumps attached. They didn’t talk, but they communicated with each other somehow.

Irene didn’t speak. She looked as though she were in a state of pure awe. She was oozing respect for these obviously accomplished beings. The feeling in the chamber was one of total, heartwarming peacefulness. I felt as if I could just melt into a puddle of perfectly content putty.

Two of the infants came over to us. They looked into each other’s eyes for a few minutes, communicating without words or thoughts. At least not thoughts an old foggy like me could pick up. Irene knew what was going on, though, and even though she looked very nervous, she was beaming.

Then the infants faced us, and touched our shoulders. We were instantly wrapped in a bubble like a tiny version of the

one that carried my son and the others way out into the ocean. I asked no questions. I didn't need to. I knew the answers without even having to formulate questions. I knew I had to be quiet and calm.

I knew we were going to see our son.

We eased down to the ocean waves and out of the chamber. We stopped to look back at our mountain before heading out to sea. I knew we could have faded to the place we were headed, but we didn't so that I could have time to prepare myself. Information was seeping into me seemingly through every pore. I didn't have to process individual bits, either. They all coalesced effortlessly into a feeling of total understanding. I had to suppress a twinge of irritation as I thought, *'well, gee, why couldn't it be this easy from the get-go?'*

The look I got from my escort gave me the answer. The reason for actually having to see things for myself became clear. For knowledge to be functional it had to be very specific and very strongly held in my being. The nebulous knowledge I was currently absorbing so easily was not powerful enough to 'stick'.

My tiny guide then sent me another very clear thought. *'DON'T LET ANY GOLD SHOW, OR WE'LL BE SENSED.'* I knew what was being done for us, and me in specific, was very out of the ordinary and very risky. I knew that only very special souls like my son made this journey for very specific missions.

We moved faster through the ocean than the bubble that I had followed, so we were able to reach the destination more quickly; about the time I had finished processing the dangers and meaning of the visit. We rolled gently down into a very deep fold in the ocean floor. It was like a very smooth, rounded under-water Grand Canyon, but much deeper and wider. I could see the bubbles that I had followed attached to the floor of the fold. They were smaller than I had remembered. And they looked wrinkled.

When we settled into a little nook in the bottom of the fold, the infant took my cheeks in its little hands, looked into my eyes, and turned off my silver genes. Or at least it felt that way. I felt like a saint. I couldn't conjure up a bit of irritation at anything. I felt no fear, jealousy, greed, anger... no evil thoughts or feelings at all. I almost felt good enough to radiate the good feeling that filled the infants' chamber, and the one that emanated from Julia off and on. It was wonderful...

Because of the strength of this good feeling, I knew how important it was that we stayed encased in our bubble; to remain unseen and unsensed by the inhabitants of the world we were about to enter. I was to hold onto the infant at all times to 'keep my cover'. If at any time my grip were to loosen, we would return immediately to the ocean floor. I held the infant very close to my heart, cradled snugly in my arms.

Irene and her guide were ready before I was, but they waited patiently for me to fully prepare for what we were about to do.

We popped through the bottom of the fold the same way I had seen the embryos on the bottom of the ocean floor disappear. I knew now that those embryos had popped into a newborn on earth.

WE were popping into hell.

It wasn't the fire and brimstone I had expected. It was actually rather cold, like the dead of winter in Canada. It was permeated with a cold gray fog that had a heavy, tense feeling. The housing was very different from earth and heaven. Large, elaborate collections of bones and skulls formed the walls of one dwelling, and reptile skin stretched to the point of tearing formed the walls of another, somewhat smaller home. Not all of them were constructed of gothic materials, however. One was of intricately interlaced corn stalks and grape vines. Surrounding the larger homes were much smaller, more open lean-to and tent-like structures



housing a number of very sullen, angry looking souls. Their beings were dense mists of various shades of gray. A sense of sadness; a sort of resignation, emanated from them. The souls with the lighter hues had more fear on their faces than the darker ones. The burgundy ones looked pure evil. They oozed hate and superiority. The purple ones seemed to be pretentious, like they felt they were better than anyone else and deserved respect and admiration.

There were few trees, and only a few patches of dying vegetation, even though most of the environment was outdoors. It had a seedy, run-down feel. The ground was not paved or hardened, and the stones and pebbles in the ground looked sharp and mossy at the same time. The souls didn't float, but walking on the sharp dirt didn't seem to cause much discomfort. No one actually seemed to be suffering. There was no torture, no wanton murder, no evil red being with a red fork and red horns. There was just a complete and total lack of happiness. Quarrels and cursing were heard coming from all directions. The fowl were bickering over a specific kernel of corn. Even though there were plenty of other kernels they all seemed to want THAT particular one. Feathers flew everywhere.

Suddenly, souls started running here and there rather frantically. The pompous purple ones pretended not to be the least bit concerned. The burgundy ones seemed to be relishing a potential confrontation.

Out of the sky, seemingly out of nowhere, came a being with wings on his feet and on his helmet (but no wings on his back-he was definitely not an angel). He stood on an open chariot-like wagon pulled by several of the meanest looking horses I had ever seen. They were definitely not the type to treat with sugar cubes and pat on the nose.

He guided the horses to the front of a massive palace made of gold and silver, statues and sculptures, steel and bronze, marble and granite, and any other valuable trading commodity you could think of. The gold I knew to be fool's gold, and the silver looked a bit tinny, but it was still an impressive sight. He was met at the door by many souls who

immediately began to wait on him hand and foot. Literally. As soon as he alit, he was eased into a cushy chair with wheels. His shoes were removed and while they were being polished, others started doing a quick but thorough pedicure. Two other souls were busy with a manicure, and a few more were tending to his hat and his hair. While they were working, he was guided to and through the door to the mansion, causing them to scurry to keep up while still doing their work. Luckily the door was wide enough for them all to fit through at the same time.

The horses were less compliant with their assigned souls. They were very obstinate about pulling the now empty cart to where they were graciously housed around the back of the palace. Their stable was made up of well-constructed alcoves of healthy vegetation and surrounded by lush green pastures; a sharp contrast from the rest of the land. The grooms persisted, and despite the beasts' biting and kicking, the harnesses were removed. They were hosed down instead of brushed, however, after a few of the grooms had their innards kicked out trying to get close enough with the currycomb. Luckily, the grooms were able to reassemble themselves, just like in the cartoons I used to watch when I was young.

The obviously pompous being was Hermes, and he had just returned from a visit to his dear daddy. He tended to be a bit cranky after such visits. He thought he knew more than his father, and resented being told what to do. He was especially irritable after this trip, as he was told to beware of an uprising. Zeus had warned him that the peasants were becoming restless, and were planning a revolt.

I surveyed the souls that populated this realm. I somehow knew the number of deep burgundy ones was usually higher, and the shades of gray were usually darker than their current shades. And the purple souls were not as deep a shade as they would normally be.

I also could see an occasional glimmer of gold in the air. Gold in tiny bubbles. Some of my son's gold.

The residents of hell didn't seem to be aware of the gold. As they went about their business, some of it was breathed in with the foggy air. From the lungs, I could see brief glimmers as it traveled to the heart and then up to the soul's head. Some souls could be seen lightening up a notch almost immediately, but the darker ones were apparently more difficult to infiltrate, and some didn't change their shades at all until a few more bubbles of gold were inhaled. Then a minimally perceptible change occurred.

The density of the gold bubbles was very low. The infants in the chamber in heaven monitored the progress of the gold so that the transformations would be made slowly. They released more gold from the main bubbles in the fold in the sea floor very slowly so the changes in the shades of the souls in hell would be so gradual that they would not be noticed by Hermes.

However, Zeus watched over all of the realms of hell. He had already seen the types of subtle changes that had occurred over the years under Apollo's watch over Europe. While Apollo enjoyed himself playing his music, the gold from the victims of the all the invasions and wars over the centuries quietly infiltrated his subjects. After WWII, Appollo's part of hell became so meek and mild mannered and had been infiltrated by the gold of so many victims of the wars that it was a sparsely populated oasis of sorts. Zeus never did forgive him.

Ares, however, was still very much in good stead with Zeus. He had a much tighter grip on the people of the earth than Hermes, and the souls of Ares' part of hell were much more full of hate and contempt than the souls of any other realm. The gold bubbles sent there by the Middle East's mountain in heaven were very slowly infiltrating their evil counterparts. The change was noticed by Zeus before Ares noticed, so Ares got chewed out big time when pappa Zeus called him to Olympus. Ares was therefore exceptionally angry, and was very skilled at taking his anger out on his subjects. He was an expert at twisting events to his benefit,

and could convince souls that black was white and white was black. Literally.

Ares convinced the souls in his realm that the lighter souls were traitors, just pretending to be fearful. So, when they went to earth on nightmares, which are Hell's version of dreams, a more devious, darker soul would spy on the assigned soul to be sure they didn't let anybody on earth off the hook. And if anyone from hell were to actually defect to earth or heaven, the spy would report to Ares, and the family and friends left in hell would suffer the consequences. Not that there were usually many true friends in hell....

My attention was brought back to Hermes' mansion when a large burgundy soul was shoved roughly out of the front door. His complexion was not as deep as some of the more powerful looking brutes outside. His face looked more determined than angry with a tight set to his jaw, and he had a sureness in his step. I recognized my son's DNA in him immediately. That look was a very familiar one to me. I had seen it more often than not as Lenny grew from a child into a young teen. It became his permanent expression by the time he left for college. One glance at Irene confirmed my impression.

The soul my son's DNA had infiltrated had been a trusted companion of Hermes. But on returning from Zeus, Hermes noticed how pale his friend, Leo, had become without evidence of fear. With Hermes now inclined to notice the lighter shades of his subjects at times other than when he was trying to instill fear in them, he suspected Leo of treasonous planning, and threw him from the life of luxury. I smiled knowingly with the warm glow of pride as I watched Leo/Lenny march straight to the soul with the deepest burgundy color and the most amount of greed in his eyes. Lenny never did waste time with starting slow and easy. He loved to take the bull by the horns whenever possible, as he was doing now.

As I watched the two of them talk, I saw quite a few gold bubbles enter Leo/Lenny's lungs and float easily to his head.

His light burgundy color became less dark, but the man he was talking with didn't appear to notice. It was all I could do to suppress a cheer. It was like watching Lenny make a fabulous move on the football field. I wanted to raise my arms, jump up and shout and whistle, but I knew I had to hold tightly to the infant, or all of Len's hard work would be ruined. I think my infant sensed the near loss of self-control, as the next thing I knew, we were all back in the nook in the sea floor.

## I'm Ready to Work

In less than a microsecond, we were back in the infant's chamber. The infants were smiling, but a hint of relief that the mission was successfully accomplished was clearly present, too. They communicated with Irene for a short while, then nodded their heads, and faded out.

"You behaved yourself very well, Ian. I'm impressed with your self control," Irene said after they were gone. "Your infant had been particularly worried at the prospect of taking you, but I persisted. It took some pretty intense communication with a host of souls on all levels having to agree. It was unanimous, though. So, off we went."

She took my hand, and we walked to the water's edge. We let the water rush over our feet, and then recede, over and over again.

"I've been in touch with Susan for years, so I know she'll understand when I tell her what Lenny's doing. I'll have some difficulty convincing her that he isn't suffering, though," Irene said.

I hadn't thought about it that way. I was so busy thinking of my need to see where he was, it never occurred to me that he was actually living in hell. We had just gone there for a brief visit. He had to LIVE there, maybe forever!

Irene noticed the look on my face, and said reassuringly, "When the victims of catastrophes arrive in heaven, not only is the silver in their DNA removed, but the gold's power is strengthened. They are well looked after. They are not on their own."

The nebulous knowledge the infant had planted in my mind for our trip to hell had already evaporated like a drop of water in a desert. I was back to my limited old codger

grasp on the ways heaven operates. And the silver forces in my DNA were back, full force.

“What the h--- are you talking about? Gold is gold, and silver is silver. How the h--- can it be strengthened, and how can heaven look after him when he’s literally stuck in that evil b----- in hell?!” My concern had quickly turned to anger. My son had been sent as bait to rot in hell!

Irene had a knowing smile on her face as she deftly caught the small kitchen knives that flew from my mouth. They disappeared as she tossed them over her shoulder.

“I’m not sure myself about the details of how these things work, but I can find out who can teach you what you need to know,” she said.

"But I need to know, NOW!!!" I shouted. "You saw where Lenny is! We need to do something! I don't have time to listen to some egghead talk about details! Why can't you just wave a wand, or something, and put all the answers in my head, like that infant did, so I can know everything NOW!?" I didn't remember the last time I felt THIS impatient.

Irene laughed. "No, I can't just 'wave a wand'. I'm not Wendy the Good Little Witch. And learning things by being IN a situation is much more useful and powerful than just hearing about it. That mind full of information instilled by the infant is gone already, isn't it?"

"That little imp took it with him, the little b-----. He could have left it with me if he wanted to," I replied tartly. "I don't care if I don't learn it as well. I just want the general ideas; the ins and outs of how heaven works!"

Without a word, she took my hand and we faded into another office-like area with many middle-aged souls. There were also many large rooms with rows of tables instead of one large table. In the very center was what looked like a welcoming desk with souls in line apparently waiting for some sort of service.

Irene let me take it all in for a short while, then she led me towards one of the smaller rooms that looked like a large office. The wall behind the young soul sitting at the desk

was like a mural. I studied it closely as we took seats near the door and waited for him to finish the task he was diligently working on when we floated in. It was three dimensional, and changed from one scene to another like a hologram.

"How may I help you?" the soul at the desk asked shortly.

Irene said, "My husband, Ian Burns, wants to know how heaven works. He wants a quick overview first, and the details later. Do you have a suitable teacher for him?"

The soul behind the desk looked about 3 or 4 years old. He studied me for a while then replied, "He may do best with a small, advanced group. One of his friends just signed up for a course that started a short while ago. He should be able to catch up with them in no time."

"Which friend?" I asked excitedly. I had given up on any of them being curious enough to want to learn any more than necessary.

"Larry Curmutt. He said you and your son inspired him. He said he last saw you heading down the conveyor belt." The boy-administrator was smiling broadly now. "You really do have a powerful sense of adventure. Very admirable. We want to do everything in our power to enable you to use that drive to its fullest potential, but you may need to try to contain it a bit from time to time." He came from behind his desk and shook my hand. "Let me show you where they are."

We floated into the large area that I now knew to be the Education Department. We followed him into a small classroom where a child of 7 or 8 was setting up a large tablet on an easel as several adults hovered above the chairs arranged in rows.

"This diagram is a schematic of how different tasks are organized in heaven," the boy-teacher said as he unfurled the top sheet to reveal a maze of lines and dots. "This is not a hard-and-fast system as there is much overlap, and rapid changes with little notice occur quite frequently. But it will help us get the general idea of the different ways we can work for the advancement of effective gold in genes."



He pointed to the lower right hand corner where there was a picture of an older couple. "This is where we find the preschoolers. They have enough gold to do good deeds in limited types of dream as they sleep. Many of them have enough silver to cause some difficulty in handling even the most straight-forward of dreams, however. That's where the deAger's come in. They are to aid in the process of silver leaching so that dream jobs can be assigned more safely."

"The little devils!" I exclaimed before I could censor myself. Julia and Karl and all the others knew EXACTLY what they were doing when they got me so angry and off balance when I first arrived. It was NOT a misunderstanding. I had been had by the precious little angels.

The teacher grinned broadly and the others spun around so fast they twisted at the waist before their bottom halves had time to catch up.

"Ian, you old f--t! I was sure you were dead! Well, maybe not dead, but gone forever!" Larry said as he rushed to me and gave me a hug. "I am SO glad to see you!"

The others didn't look at all familiar, but they didn't seem to be annoyed by this interruption. The instructor nodded, acknowledging my presence. "Interesting reaction, Ian. Please, come join us." He motioned to the others and asked, "Would you like to be introduced to one other, or just learn who is who as we go along?"

"Oh, we'll learn as we go along," Larry butted in. "Get busy explaining your indignation, you old crank!" He was so happy to see me you'd have thought he hadn't seen me in twenty years, not just a few days. Or so.

"I don't need to explain anything to anyone," I muttered under my breath; my jaw set and eyes narrowed. I didn't like the looks of this snot of a teacher, and the others looked like dotting puppies. Despite Larry's presence, I turned to request a different assignment. My expression changed instantly when I saw both Irene and the boy-administrator were gone!

Larry saw my reaction to being 'left at the door' so to speak, and burst into laughter, which didn't help my mood

one bit. The instructor grinned a hellishly annoying grin, and motioned for me to sit down.

"Steve, Ian can be an aggravating old b-----. Just ignore him," Larry managed to get out between chuckles. A yellow feather drifted out of his mouth.

I hovered at the door for a bit trying to decide whether to leave or stay; my expression a stony glare. Larry whispered, "They're an interesting, intelligent bunch, Ian. You'll get along just fine. And Steve does have a less formal side. Stay and give us a chance."

"What the h---. What do I have to lose?" I growled. "Just stop laughing at me before I deck you," I added through clenched teeth. I followed him to the chairs, and hovered over the one next to his.

"Welcome, Mr. Burns. We are reviewing the various job opportunities available to souls here in heaven. We had just begun to cover older adult positions. I don't think you've missed too much of importance since we basically just got through introductory business," Steve said too sweetly for my liking. I sneered in response. He just smiled and turned back to his diagram.

"Once sufficient silver is lost, the dream team can assign more difficult jobs. Anyone who wants to stay at the level of preschool is free to do so as long as she or he desires. It is a relatively stress free existence, and useful as well. However, should a twinge of curiosity or ambition strike, the next steps are always available to all who are willing to part with more of their silver. And there are easier ways to rid yourselves of your silver than the emotionally painful ways you have encountered to date." He smiled, looking at me as he said this last statement.

"If your motives are sufficiently strong, you can destroy your silver's power with the sheer will of your gold DNA. It can be denatured into a glob of useless particles so that it can never function again. And with skill, it can actually be transformed into gold. I'll get into these methodologies at a later date. I just wanted to let you know about it so that you don't feel proceeding with your quest for knowledge is

always going to be painful. It is not necessarily so. It is your choice."

I was now conditioned to cringe at the phrase 'it's your choice'. *'What if I don't like the choices being offered? Is that really a choice?'* I felt very bitter.

Steve looked around the class. "I sense a few of you have questions related to communication with people on earth. Would you like to proceed to the topic of methods of interaction before continuing with other career options?"

"I'd definitely like to know more about communication," one of the men said. "Some of the dreams I went on were exceedingly frustrating because of failure of communication."

"Okay, then. Let's move on to Communications 1001," Steve replied.

## Communication is a Wonderful Thing

Steve replaced the original tablet with a smaller one, and opened it to a page with columns.

"I know Ian, at least, is not fond of physics, and George knows more than I do given his earthly career in NASA. So I'll keep the science of what we do to a minimum, and focus on the 'how to' aspect of using our heavenly 'equipment'." He turned to the chart and pointed to the first column, headed EARTH, and wrote, 'electronics'. "On earth, people now use computers and cell phones to send messages. Not so long ago, they had only mastered the wavelengths needed for radio and TV. As they figured out how much control of the invisible forces on earth they could harness, communication got easier and quicker."

He pointed to the third column, headed HEAVEN, and wrote 'minds' and explained, "Here in heaven, we can harness these unseen forces without the need for mechanical or electronic devices. Our mind reading here is comparable to the walkie-talkie for beginners on earth. Our skills improve as we become younger, and we eventually improve our ability to communicate to the level of cell phones and wireless Internet without needing any of the hardware. It's as if we have a Personal Guidance System hardwired into our beings."

"The broad middle column is the one we will concentrate on now. It is how heaven communicates with earth." He sighed, and continued, "And it is NOT easy. It's like trying to communicate in two entirely different language systems."

"There are five general categories of people's receptiveness to our thought waves. The first group is people who take the world very literally, and basically don't listen to any input that is not tangible. They go by the book. They

look to others for the answers to the moral and ethical issues they confront in their lives. They are not prone to introspection." He wrote to the left of the first line, 'Literal, grounded', to the right of that he wrote 'airwaves, wind' as he explained, "The only way we can communicate with them is by trying to disturb the air around them so that they can literally feel a change in their environment."

"The second group is people who use their intuition in their daily lives. They are able to look at different situations and make decisions based on their experiences. They vary greatly in the amount of trust they have in these decisions, however."

"They have a remnant of the piece of the fuzz they were born with in their Ligaments of Teres. We are able to communicate with this bit of heaven on earth by way of our slower, unmyelinated thought tracks. The catch is that the person has to be in tune with his 'gut feelings' in order to hear us." He wrote 'sound transmissions, whispers' in the second column to the right of 'intuitive'. "It's sort of like having a radio, but not turning it on at all times. And some people have better radios than others and can pick up our thoughts with more clarity. Those with radios with lots of static are less likely to trust their gut feelings."

"The third group is people who have used their remnant so much and so well that it has overflowed the ligament, and entered the person's bloodstream. These people not only use intuition often and well, they are also tuned in to their feelings. Given situations with various choices, they use their hearts as well as their gut in making a decision. They are ALMOST able to understand us when we think on our myelinated, faster tracks, and so more can be communicated more quickly." He wrote 'thought waves' on the chart next to 'feeling'.

"The more advanced souls have to take over with this third group, since our thoughts are actually entering the person's circulation. We have to be careful of how much silver DNA may still be functioning in the soul doing the communication. We need to avoid contamination which

could cause confusion. If any silver thoughts are picked up by the person instead of good, gold thoughts, the person will feel conflicted. If that happens often enough, the person is less able to trust his or her heart and feelings. So, until you are at a young enough age, you will not be expected to communicate with people of this receptivity."

"The fourth group is people who 'pray' open-mindedly. They let their thoughts be fluid so that our thoughts can influence them more directly. They easily pick up our fast track thoughts with more and more clarity as they improve with time and practice. Only the absolutely silver free souls can be used to communicate with them safely. They basically are just conduits for the power behind the fuzz to do the actual communication. They facilitate the flow, almost like an antenna, to keep the person well tuned in. They also protect the person from being hijacked by the silver forces. The Manipulators sometimes can sense a person with an open mind and try to beat us to him or her. Sort of like a hacker can intercept wireless communications. When that happens, if the person doesn't pick up that something is amiss, we do our best to interfere with the frequencies until he or she 'tunes out'."

He wrote 'wireless' on the chart next to 'open, fluid' and again sighed heavily. "Unfortunately, the hackers are successful far more often than one would imagine. At all levels of communication."

"But more about that later," Steve said, then continued: "This brings us to the next group of people who are unfortunate enough to tune in to the paranormal. Some are just too curious for their own good. They are fascinated with the possibility of foreseeing the future, and end up getting trapped by silver. By the time they are aware they are in communication with counter forces, they are unable to escape the evil influences. The gold dominated people who have been trapped are the least difficult rescue. The people whose gold and silver make-up is about even are more difficult."

“The most difficult group of people to detach from this connection is the silver dominated group who delve into the paranormal with their heart and soul, and practically worship the devil. They are almost impossible to save. Usually any gold that had been in them to start with is severely drained of its power.” Steve paused then added sadly, “We are rarely able to save that bit of gold.”

"We try to convince them not to choose hell. They are not PURE silver. They still have some gold so we try to bring them here, or at least convince them to stay on earth, where we can continue attempts to help them. If they are brought here when they die, we have a decent chance to save the gold they still have in them, but it is not an easy task. Many of them end up causing the ruptures in the pods some of you may have noticed. They are so uncomfortable here that they can't be reached even in their bubbles. The silver in them festers until the soul explodes. The silver eventually all degrades, and the gold that had been in them goes up to the fuzz, but the individual's identity is lost forever."

I thought about how Pat and Gail thought I would choose to become a zit. "Do any other types of souls ever explode in a zit, um, er bubble?" I asked.

Steve smiled. "Yes. Interesting that you should ask. People in general who have more silver than gold can choose to explode rather than exist here in heaven. They have a very hard time with the transparency and lack of control over others. But they usually don't choose to form a 'zit' as you call them. Some of them actually turn out to be rather helpful, overall." I smiled back a bit sheepishly. *'I had really come close, hadn't I?'* I thought. Steve nodded his answer.

Steve surveyed the group, and asked, "Anyone for a break before I go on to the ways we can tell which group the person with which we are dealing is closest to fitting into, and how one person can go from one group to another in the same thought?"

We all quickly agreed.

## Hardly a Break

I wanted to find Irene and ask her about Susan and Cindy and the kids. I tried to figure out the best place to find Irene. I wondered if she went back to the nursery.

Steve suggested I think really hard about wanting her to find me, and she may be able to come here, but after a few minutes, it was obviously not working.

"She must be busy. Try Julia or Karl." Steve didn't seem worried, so I didn't worry about something gone wrong. I thought hard about Julia instead.

It still took awhile, but Julia did finally appear. "Mr. Burns! You look years younger!" she exclaimed happily.

I felt the top of my head. It was full of hair. "What color is it?" I wondered. I didn't start turning gray until my 40's.

"It's gray, but there's so much of it!" She was smiling with twinkles in her eyes. "You've lost more than twenty years already! That's got to be a record!" A small pink butterfly flitted out of her mouth with this compliment.

"How could it be a record, dearie. I know of several saintly souls who lost 50 years on arrival. Be honest in your flattery if you want it to mean anything." I felt rather paternalistic.

Julia blushed. "I meant for someone of your silver content. Most souls with as much silver as you usually take years to lose even one year. Your gold must be really potent."

"I owe a large part of my success to you, little one." I had forgotten how irritated I felt when I learned just what her job entailed. Besides, if it weren't for her and the others, I would have ended up as a popped zit.

"So, you want to find Irene, then?" Julia asked me sweetly.



"Why yes I do, dearie. Do you happen to know where she may be?" I responded with mock politeness.

"She's on a rather complex job at the moment. Would you like to go watch?" Julia's smile had a hint of sadness.

I thought about asking her for more information before agreeing to go, given her tendency to have tricks up her sleeve, but decided to let her get away with it. "Sure. Let's go."

Julia took my hand, and we faded out, reappearing at Susan and Sam's house. Susan was crying, alone, in her bedroom. A newspaper was strewn across her bed. From the headlines, it must have been just after September 11, 2001. Irene was hovering over Susan.

I looked at Julia with a puzzled expression.

"Susan is trying desperately to deal with Lenny's almost certain death. So far, he's not been found, but they know he was in the North Tower when it collapsed. Irene is waiting for her to tune in so that she can comfort her and relay a sense of some of the details."

I then saw a truly amazing sight. Irene literally melted into Susan. Susan stopped crying. A tiny smile appeared on her lips. She sighed, then whispered, "Thanks, Mom. I needed that."

"Irene just gave her a large dose of 'warm and fuzzy' in a heavenly hug," Julia whispered, a large grin on her face as tears trickling down across her dimples.

Eventually, Irene reemerged, and Susan went into the bathroom to wash her face. "But why?" she asked her puffy-eyed image in the mirror and started crying all over again. Irene went to her and hugged her neck, very like the hug she gave me, but much more tender. Irene was crying almost as hard as Susan.

I looked at Julia. Her tears were flowing freely. I was crying, too, despite trying to conjure up all the hammocks on earth. I looked back over at Susan and Irene, and whispered,

"I'd like to go over to them." Julia nodded and gave me a little push on my elbow.

By the time I reached Irene and Susan, I was crying like a baby, audible sobs and all. I cried harder than the worst time in my bubble.

We cried for what could have been hours. No more words were spoken, but much was communicated. Somehow Susan could sense that I was there. She smiled and thought *'so you're managing in heaven, then. How's heaven managing with you?'*

*'You little booger,'* I thought with a smile as I recalled Irene's description of the rather ruffled angel Susan's kids put on my casket.

Susan managed to get herself together eventually. She finished packing to return to New York. She had rushed to be with Lenny's family immediately after the catastrophe, but came home for a short while to get things in order so that she could go back and stay as long as Cindy and the kids needed her.

Sam and their young teens sat waiting downstairs, their eyes just as puffy as Susan's. It was more than heartbreaking. It was more pain than I could bear to watch and feel. I wished I could do more. I gave the kids hugs, and put my arm around Sam. They didn't seem to notice, but I felt a bit better. After Irene was through giving her much more potent hugs, she returned to me. We hugged. And cried. And cried.

The next thing I knew, we were on that mossy bank by the river, back in heaven. Still crying. Still hugging. I had felt more painful emotion with this exposure than I had felt in my entire life AND death so far. I ached with grief. Grief for Cindy. Grief for Susan. Grief for the kids. Grief for Sam. Grief for the world.

I thought about Lenny, and what he must have gone through in his last moments on earth. It must have felt like hell. A pang of fear ran through me at the thought. *'And now he may be stuck in hell forever!'*

"It will take time, but he will eventually be able to join us here in heaven. Try not to worry." Irene sighed. "We need more people who are at least as receptive as Susan."

I remembered some of Steve's lecture on the groups of people in terms of their receptivity. Susan was probably in the bloodstream group.

"Actually, she's in the most advanced group, Ian. Remember way back in college when she tried to teach you to meditate?" Irene laughed, remembering the time herself. "You WERE hysterical to watch, by the way."

"Well, if everyone wouldn't have been watching me, I could have done it!" I responded defensively.

"Well, anyway, Susan mastered heavenly communication way back then. After I died, she perfected it. It has really been wonderful being able to communicate with her all this time. We actually feel closer now than when I was alive." Irene had a dreamy look on her face.

"Why didn't I know about it?" I asked before I gave myself time to realize the answer myself. Of course Susan wouldn't tell me. I'd have thought she was crazy. I did anyway.

"Not even Sam knows. Not very many people are receptive enough to even begin to understand what she is able to do. Some fellow meditators are the only people she can confide in. She can hint at it when she talks with some of her friends who have mastered the ability to have fluid thoughts, and sense some guidance through lots of static. But if she were to tell any of her usual friends the clarity with which she can understand me and others who come to guide her, they'd think she'd need to see a shrink!" Irene smiled at the irony of that statement. Susan WAS a shrink. "But mostly, she doesn't talk about her ability because of how much it sounds like the misled people who claim to have talked to God and have a divine mission. She knows

that's not how heaven communicates with people. She knows heaven's guidance is much more subtle and diffuse. It's more feeling than actual thoughts. She can feel her thoughts being guided by us, or by the energy of the high. And she feels at peace with what she decides to do or say based on that guidance. She has even been able to sense the warmth of the fuzzy high without the help of any of us souls from time to time."

I knew Susan was a perpetually happy person. I thought it was just her nature. '*Now I know where she got, and gets, her strength.*' I almost burst with pride! "That's some daughter we have, huh, Irene. She's amazing." I looked at Irene and leaned over and planted a kiss on her cheek. "Thanks to you."

## The Physics of Good and Evil

Irene helped me fade back to the classroom, gave me a gentle kiss on the cheek, and faded out. Steve was at the front of the class, preparing the next lesson. One by one, the others returned, each looking nicely refreshed. I didn't feel very refreshed. I felt as if my emotions had just been mixed in a blender, on puree.

It didn't take long for everyone to return, and the lessons promptly resumed.

"Each of you learns best by using different skill sets you had finely honed for use in your earthly lives, so try to bear with me as I try to use each of your methods to review our last lesson." Steve sighed, and stood deep in thought for quite some time.

"Sheila, I may need your input. If you see me headed down a path that is not productive, please let me know." He looked each of us straight in the eyes for a short while. His gaze was uncomfortable for Larry and the small guy. It was less so for the tall skinny guy and the dowdy woman, Shirley. It was impossible for me. I wondered why he didn't need to look at Sheila.

"She's familiar with all the different types of learning skills. She was a dean at a major college before she died. She will be able to understand my explanations in all the forms." He smiled and added, "So if you would, Ian, try a bit harder to let me see the best way to help you to understand."

I managed to look him in the eyes for maybe ten seconds. Actually, I sorta looked THROUGH him instead of at him. Making eye contact with people I was in charge of and had control over on earth was easy. Even some of my wimpier

bosses were easy to 'stare down'. But not Steve. Knowing Steve could literally see into my soul was eerie.

Finally, he was ready to begin. "Now for the gods and goddesses. This is quite a lengthy topic. I'll try to hit the highlights for now, and if you are interested in more specifics, I can refer you to the proper teacher and classroom to learn more, when possible."

He turned to the last page in his chart. It was covered with names of not only the Greek and Roman gods, but also names of some of the mystical characters on things like Tarot cards and other paranormal games. Various names for the devil were also listed. "This is the list for the Anglo-Saxon/Christian/Jewish cultures. There are many more for the other cultures of the world, but we will limit our discussion to those more familiar to us."

"The names help us to keep the various forms of evil somewhat categorized, but there's much overlap. The gods are much more flexible than this list would have us believe, but it gives us a starting point to begin to try to understand the many facets of evil."

"The most familiar to us is Satan, otherwise known as Lucifer or the Devil. He embodies total evil. He stands for greed, hate, jealousy, violence, torture for the joy of causing pain, conflict for the sake of conflict, and general self-centeredness. Different cultures give these traits personalities with different names, but they are all basically describing the 'devil' itself. We won't get bogged down learning all the various names and functions, as we would not come away with much useful information."

"To understand the basics of how good and evil function, I'll go into a bit of how dark matter and dark energy work. Not too much, but at least some for the more scientifically oriented among us." Steve nodded to the little guy as he said this.

"I don't want to know how evil works! I just want to know how to fight it!" I felt severely frustrated with the pace of this lesson.

Steve chuckled. "Ian, you really are a driven soul. You have a unique combination of gold and silver particles in your DNA. Your DNA consists of high energy, fast spinning, up quarks and down quarks, and if you can harness the power in them, you will be able to do a tremendous number of transformations of silver to gold."

Larry couldn't control his snickers. Between the snorts of suppressed laughter, he managed to say, "You sure are right about one thing, Steve. Ian is definitely FULL of quirks!" The others were somewhat better able to suppress their chuckles, as they could sense that Steve was not especially pleased with the comment. He wasn't angry, but he didn't join in with the gaiety.

He waited until Larry had settled down, then he explained, "Quarks are one of the many pieces of matter described in particle physics. The physicists as a group seem to have a rather warped sense of humor. They choose names for the particles with the mindset of a child discovering a new bug in his backyard, if you ask me. They describe strange quarks and charm quarks that are in different 'flavor' families. There are bosons (NOT bozos) and leptons, neutrinos and muons. Physicists are a creative and generally happy bunch. But, getting back to the point, Ian's 'quarks' are in need of reining in a bit, and we can practice some of the methods of conversion by helping him to do so."

"We basically need to help Ian pair up his down quarks with his up quarks so that the spins cancel each other out at just the right point. We can help him convert the fast spinning gold particles into slow, calm, strong gold particles using the energy of his many fast spinning silver particles." He paused, then added, "The reason the rest of you don't need to do this yourselves is that you are all less internally conflicted. Your gold is not spinning wildly amongst wildly spinning silver. Your gold is calmer and more stable, and your silver is not as abundant. You are all more at peace with yourselves."

"Now, we will delve into the 'how-to' part of the lesson."

“About time,” I scowled. “And stop using me as a guinea pig, you little a-----.” I added through gritted teeth.

Steve looked at me with that bratty smirk and asked, “Have you noticed you've been feeling a bit like a yo-yo since you've died, Ian?”

Now that he mentioned it, I did. And it had been and is maddening. “That's because everybody's been driving me to drink since I've been here! And the Watering Hole only has fake alcohol, for C----- S---! I'm not going to put up with this s---!” I stood up to leave, glaring at Steve as my daggers zoomed through him.

Steve continued to smile, and motioned for the others to stand as well, giving them a wink and a nod. For some odd reason, they were not in the least bit worried about my large, dark dagger. Instead they began imitating my huffiness, but with an overwhelming sense of humorous mischief.

I hovered in disbelief. *‘Have they all lost their minds? Am I surrounded by idiots?’* I found myself distracted by my curiosity. *‘What the h--- are they doing?’* As I watched I thought, *‘They look like a bunch of 2 year-olds having a temper tantrum.’* Suddenly, I couldn't help but smile. *‘They do look rather comical.’* “D--- you all. Can't a person enjoy a good temper tantrum without having the air let out of it?!” I could literally feel the anger drain away. My feather was a gray-yellow.

When they gave each other high fives, I looked with a very puzzled expression to Steve for an explanation. “They just helped you lasso one of your spinning silvers and attach it to one of your spinning golds. Do you feel just a bit more at peace with yourself, now, Ian?” He asked, smiling.

*‘Not really,’* I thought. But he went on anyway.

“Playfulness and good hearted ribbing types of interactions are our strongest assets. Many tense situations are quickly defused with a 'no strings attached' jab of humor. . It keeps souls from taking themselves too seriously.” He sighed. “But it's not that simple. There must be absolutely NO sarcasm or edge in the jab, or the situation escalates instead of defuses. And there are still many things that are



not amenable to humor. That's where patience and tact come in.”

My shoulders slumped. I sighed loudly.

*LORD HAVE MERCY!!!!*

## Getting to Know Bill

Steve must have heard my plea, as he suggested we take another break before starting on what he referred to as ‘a most important and difficult project.’ “There’s a comfortable spot to relax just down the corridor,” he said. “You could spend some time getting to know each other better.”

We followed him out of the classroom and into the hallway. A few doors to the left past a small theater, a rather small door opened into a large, bright, open lounge. We each found a comfortable seat, and, almost in unison, sighed, which struck all of our funny bones, and we burst out in almost hysterical laughter.

It was exactly what I needed, and from the looks on the faces of the others, it was what they needed, too. I introduced myself to the tall guy, who was sitting to my left. “Hi, I’m Ian Burns, retired manager from a small auto parts company in North Carolina.”

“I’m Bill Parrish, retired minister from a small church in Virginia,” he answered. He quickly broke into a grin as I was obviously not able to hide my dismay at the prospects of a religious discussion. “Is it safe to assume that you weren’t a church-goer, then?”

I looked across the room, hoping for a rescue, but Larry and the little guy were in a conversation already. ‘*If he tries to convert me,*’ I thought, ‘*I’ll just blow him off.*’

“No, I’m not going to try to convert you, Ian. That’s not my style. I believed in letting people be who they were, not who or what I wanted them to be. I was as irritated by the types who tried to force their way of thinking on others as you were, believe it or not. But I had to control my urge to tell them off. I envy people like you, who can say what they

think, without worrying about keeping up pretenses." Bill looked very sincere. I was almost glad I forgot to think in slo-mo. It helped us cut to the chase.

"So why were you a minister, then?" I wondered aloud.

"Good question. I guess I thought if I studied the Bible enough, I would be able to figure things out. You know, like why we existed, and what our purpose in living might be." Bill sighed. "The trouble was, the more I studied, the more confused I got."

He paused briefly before continuing. "When I first REALLY read the Old Testament, starting at Genesis, without anyone telling me what it was supposed to mean, I was reminded of the feeling I got while I was analyzing the characters of the Greek gods in one of my college courses. I wondered how ANYONE could believe those Greek beings were GOOD. I had convinced myself that the Greeks didn't actually believe the stories, they were just entertained by them. But I couldn't convince myself the same of the Old Testament. The evilness in it was not on par with the Greek gods, but it was hard to see that the God referred to in Genesis was a good God. The family relationships described were more than a little dysfunctional, and God condoned and even blessed some of the worst transgressors."

I was shocked by his mention of the Greek gods. I began to wonder if he visited Homer, too. I caught myself before revealing too much, however, and cleared my throat loudly. He stopped and looked at me with a puzzled look on his face.

"I'm not well versed on either family dynamics or the Bible. I don't follow you," I hoped my statement would keep him from noticing my shock.

"Well, the first thing that struck me was the reason Cain killed Abel. You do know about Adam and Eve and their sons, Cain and Abel?"

"Of course! I'm not a heathen!" I answered indignantly.

Bill smiled. "Just checking." He seemed amused that I took his question as an insult. "Anyway, God was pleased with the offerings given to him by Abel, but He ignored

Cain's attempts to gain recognition. It made Cain so jealous that he killed his brother."

"And when Abraham was getting ready to slit his son's throat, and burn him, an angel of God came just in time to stop him, saying 'I see now that you fear God and were willing to sacrifice your beloved son,' I wondered why anyone would have to fear a good God, and why a good God would want someone to sacrifice his son." He paused for a while before adding, "And Isaac was not his only son. He wasn't even his first son. Because Sarah wasn't able to give him any children, she offered him her maidservant to have a child for her. When the maid found out she was pregnant after the encounter with Abraham, she became angry with Sarah, and they had a fight. Abraham made them make up, and was quite happy with his son by the maid, until Sarah was finally able to have Isaac as an old woman in menopause. Soon after Isaac was born, the maid and her (and Abraham's) son were sent out in the desert to die. Nice guy, that Abraham, huh. And did you know that Sarah was his half sister!?"

Bill must have been holding all this in for a LONG time. Now that he was started, he couldn't stop. Even though I wasn't consciously encouraging him, I was actually enjoying someone with a complete knowledge of the Holy Book being so harshly critical of it. I personally could never get past all the 'begats'.

"And get this - before Lot and his daughters escaped Sodom and Gomorrah, loving wonderful papa Lot offered his two virgin daughters to the mobs who had come to get the angels that came to warn the b-----!" He was really on a roll. He seemed to enjoy the dark gray tack that floated out of his mouth. "Boy, did that feel good. I've never felt I could swear and use such strong words in life. I can really see their usefulness now." He paused a bit to savor the moment.

"Apparently the girls didn't know this, because, after they escaped, and their mother died, they got their dad drunk and without his knowledge, believe it or not, they were impregnated by him, so that 'his seed' would be preserved,

meaning that having daughters didn't count. Gotta have that Y chromosome."

Bill began to realize that he was doing a bit of ranting and raving. "Am I going on too much? Would you like me to stop?" he asked.

"Not at all! This is fascinating! Keep going!" I was honestly interested. This was not at all like I had feared the conversation with a minister would be. Especially in heaven.

"Well, anyway, since all this was part of the Holy Book, it was theoretically describing the same God I grew up learning about at Sunday School. So I had to somehow convince myself there was a way to reconcile the differences. I thought I would learn how to meld the two together as I went further in my studies."

Bill gazed out a window as he continued. "By the time I realized my instructors weren't going to address these issues, I was too far into my studies to quit. So I decided to ask one of the more approachable teachers directly about the conflict."

He was quiet for quite a while. I didn't interrupt his thoughts. I could sense that he was recalling a painful encounter. His here-to-fore approachable teacher had become irate at the mere mention that God could be evil. Bill had tried to point out passages where the evilness was glaring, but the guy would have nothing of it.

"He chewed me up and spit me out. I was sure he was going to report me to the authorities and have me expelled, but he didn't." Bill looked at me and added, "It would have been the best thing that could have happened to me." He smiled. "I could have spent my life being me instead of 'the pastor'."

"So, what happened? Did you rebel?" This was really getting good, especially now that there was a major conflict in the plot.

Bill continued, "I convinced myself that I was reading things too literally, and if I tried to understand the way it was being explained to me, I'd eventually get it. I ended up rather brainwashed, if you ask me. I felt so conflicted most of the

time that I really wondered how my congregation made sense of my sermons. But I felt I was doing good things for the individuals of my flock. I may not have been able to correctly teach them what I was supposed to teach, but I was a very effective listener. Having been so harshly judged, I did my utmost to be nonjudgmental as I tried to guide people through miserable times in their lives."

Bill looked downright depressed. I was afraid he was going to start crying on me. I had no idea what to say or do. It was really an awkward moment.....I looked around at the others. The women were laughing about something, and Larry and the little guy were still deep in some detailed conversation..... I was becoming most uncomfortable.....

I was very relieved to see Steve arrive at the door, initially, anyway.

"Is everyone ready for the next lesson?" he asked brightly.

Too brightly. It hit me wrong for some reason. "And if we're not, what are you going to do about it?" I sneered. A surge of impatience hit hard as I pictured Lenny still in hell in that bastardly Leo. "I want to get busy **DOING** something, not just sitting around in some hoity-toidy classroom! I thought this was the fast group!"

Steve just grinned and motioned for us to follow him back towards the classrooms.

*'Cocky little b-----,'* I thought.

## **We're a Team!**

"I am confident that all of you are now ready to decide if you are interested in helping with a mission of sorts. We have thousands of teams on similar missions. Basically, we assist capable people who are good, caring souls, but not quite in tune to the heavenly PGS, to make big differences in their communities, their lines of business, or even the world in general. We have many successes under our belts, and they are growing exponentially in numbers and effectiveness."

He became more animated as he continued. "This group was gathered to assist Rick and Rodney, two young, energetic, independent minded physicists, to find the strength to soldier on with ideas for converting the sun's energy into a usable form of energy. The methods they have in mind will also reduce the sun's ill effects on the planet. If they succeed, the earth and its people can survive for billions more years. And with less conflict than is now the case."

"Sheila, you are familiar with Rick. You taught him in a history class, and later became his mentor, of sorts."

"Rick Reddick?!" Sheila exclaimed. "Well, I not a bit surprised! I always knew he would do something special!" She grinned ear to ear.

Steve acknowledged her response with a nod and a measured smile. He continued, looking at George. "And George, by using what we've learned in our Communications 1001 class, and what you will learn in our Physics 3001 program, you may be able to help guide the earthly scientists to success by communicating to them the actual nuts and bolts of The Grand Unified Theory."

George's expression lit up, and he squeaked excitedly, "The Grand Unified Theory?! The one Einstein spent his entire life trying to figure out?!" I thought his eyes were going to pop out of his head.

"The very one. Einstein was close. Oh so close. But he let the paradigms of his time limit his imagination. We were so hopeful when he realized the need to challenge the concept of the constancy of time, but he held onto the constancy of the speed of light..." Steve's voice trailed off as he realized that George was about to burst with anticipation. With a smile, he added, "Please try to remain with us until you hear about the rest of the mission. Then I will personally escort you to the classroom where you will learn all that you wish to know."

He turned to Shirley and Bill. "You two will work with Pastor Jacob and his wife Joan. Your task is to help Jacob to learn how to hook up to his PGS. Then, the organizational aspect of the church becomes very important for Jacob as he spreads the news about the PGS. They can use the established communication channels of the church to teach many people, quickly, how to open their minds to the heavenly 'Internet'. As more people come 'on line', we will eventually be able to gain more control over the silver spin remaining on earth."

He then looked to me and Larry. "You two will be instrumental in getting the business world behind the project. By monitoring the goings on at a prominent oil company, you will work towards encouraging the company to 'go green'. When the priorities of the ones with the money and power to help give the physicists' ideas life are properly alienated, we can't lose!"

Steve was now literally beaming as if he were a weak flashlight. "I'm looking forward to being able to proclaim true success! I really think it will be the turning point for the world. It'll be an easy coast from there, and we can bask in the warmth of the fuzzy clockwise spin to our soul's delight!"

*'I really wish he hadn't actually said anything so hopeful. It may bring bad luck.'*



"You're not superstitious, are you, Ian?" Larry asked, with a raised eyebrow and a twinkle in his eyes. He knew full well I felt as if I were sort of a jinx in life. It seemed as if whenever I tried to go on a vacation, something would happen to the bus, or train, or plane, or car, at some point during the supposedly relaxing get-away. I eventually didn't bother to even plan any trips. It caused quite a bit of whining from the kids.

"Actually, Ian did seem to attract some of the most mischievous silver imps, especially at his crankiest." Steve had to chuckle as he added, "And Ian was very cranky about vacations interrupting his routine. He really didn't want to go on those trips in the first place."

"Little imps? You mean I really was jinxed?" I hadn't REALLY thought I had bad luck. But as I thought about what Steve had said, I had to smile sheepishly. "Well, vacations WERE a pain in the a--. I could relax so much better at home. But I never asked for any silver imps to make me more miserable!" The pink thumbtack got stuck in my teeth. After I ptooded it out, I added, "But, obviously, whoever was sent to protect me from the little buggers didn't do a very good job!"

Steve and the others chuckled, then Steve said, "I'll go notify the team leaders that we're ready to go!" and he faded so fast he literally caused a 'pop'.

"I don't remember saying I'd join the mission," I said, puzzled.

"Maybe we don't have a choice," Bill suggested.

"He told me he'd take me to the Physics class!" George looked so devastated we all broke into hearty laughter.

"I believe we're all so relieved to finally have some direction that there's no way any of us can say no, and Steve knows it," Sheila said through her chuckles. "I can't wait, either, as long as I don't have to go along with George to a physics class!"

We laughed and joked as we waited for Steve to return. The others actually wanted to hear some of the things that

went wrong on my vacations, and since Larry and his family were usually with me and Irene and the kids, he was glad to oblige, with only a few embellishments.

After a few more topics of light conversation and still no ‘team leaders’ appeared, we began to worry. Was Steve more confident of our abilities than the others? Was he having a hard time convincing them to go ahead? Sheila began to worry that we may need to pass a test of some sort, to prove we learned what we needed to know.

“You aren’t getting cold feet, now, are you?” I asked. “We, or at least I, want to get moving. I’m fed up with all this classroom c---.” As I waved away my tan tack, the others settled into silence.....

## **And We're Off!**

Eventually three souls who looked like they were preschoolers showed up. They introduced themselves and shook our hands. It was actually rather comical, as each of them wanted to shake hands with each of us, and we had to 'dance' around each other, as we weren't organized into a reception line. We didn't trip over each other, but actually sometimes went THROUGH each other. It really broke the ice. Sheila and George even pretended to do a waltz to get around each other after they did a few of those back and forth moves people do sometimes when both try to move aside for the other and move into each other's way instead.

Mary was to coach Bill and Shirley. They were going to have a look at the situation on earth, and then formulate a plan. If they needed more lessons, they would be assigned to a specialist for that issue. I got the sense that it was going to be time consuming for them to find a way to communicate with the pastor.

Al, who was to help George and Sheila, gave the impression it was going to take even longer for the main part of their mission to even begin. George was to be sent right off the bat to the College of Heavenly Physics to learn things not yet figured out on earth. Only after he masters the material can he try to communicate it to Rick. Sheila was to keep an eye out for Rick in the meantime. If she saw an opportunity for him to attend an exceptionally good conference, for instance, she was to try to influence him to go, or if a highly compatible colleague had a creative approach, she was to try to get the two of them together.

Tom was in charge of me and Larry. He seemed to think we had the easiest job. All we had to do while the others

were formulating communication plans, learning physics and scouring CME journals, was to spy on the men who wanted to influence the scientific progress. Or interfere with it. Or trip it up. Or whatever. He suggested we just go and watch for a while to get to know our 'enemies'. Tom didn't use that term, though. But I felt it was the most accurate, even if it wasn't politically correct. We were to analyze their spin and silver power, and scout for any useable gold in their DNA. The expectation was that the guys Larry and I are assigned to would want to foul up anything Rick and his cohort's come up with to replace oil as the main energy source. My heart sank. That could be YEARS. And it was only IF things progressed as expected. It may not even happen.

"Quit pouting, Ian," Larry scolded. "I hope you were paying attention to the lesson on spin and silver power." He looked at Tom and asked, "We won't have to try to communicate with these guys, right? We're not supposed to let them know we're even there, if we're spies, right?"

"Right," Tom answered. "You'll get to fine tune your listening skills. You generally won't be able to read their minds, so you'll have just their words and posturing to go by. Also, their silver has the potential to sense our presence. It makes the person feel paranoid while we are watching him. It makes him feel uncomfortable, as though he were going to be found out."

Tom smiled in a rather mischievous manner. *'I wonder if he's enjoying a memory of causing some discomfort himself. But that would be evil, and he probably doesn't have much silver left.'*

Tom grinned even more broadly at my thought, and flew up to my shoulder to pat me heartily on the back. "Good job, Ian! If you can recognize the little bit of silver in me at work, you should be able to notice even a trace of gold in the people we are to monitor."

"Well, Steve didn't spend all that time and effort for nothing," I answered. I felt both proud and annoyed at the same time. I was proud of my skills and annoyed that Tom had even thought that I wouldn't be able to use them.

“Let’s go then.” I added impatiently, still sulky about the slim prospects of anything good coming out of our efforts.

## The Board Room

We appeared in what looked like a boardroom of a VERY important company. I wondered how Tom managed to transport us without touching us, like everyone else seemed to have to do, as I also took in the surroundings and noticed the ridiculous look on Larry's face.

*'Larry, close your mouth!'* I thought, shooting him a stern glance. *'It makes you look like a tourist!'* He obviously had never seen anything so posh in person. I had come close when I had to go to some of the bigger companies our little firm had dealings with.

The table was huge and shiny. The screen at the head of it was also enormous. It was being used for a state of the art power point plus presentation. Instead of paper and pens, the attendants were taking notes with their PDA's, blackberries or PC's. Some were taking more notes than others, as though they were the designated secretaries.

The man giving the talk appeared to be normal enough. He didn't look particularly evil. He actually looked a bit stressed as though he were not used to giving presentations.

The man at his right, however, looked like a pompous a--. He was leaning way back in his ergonomic chair, his arms crossed and his legs forward with straight knees and crossed ankles. He was obviously the boss, as no one else dare strike such a relaxed and 'in charge' pose. He also had a toothpick dangling out of the corner of his mouth. It was in shreds.

The guy on his left looked somber and important but not overly arrogant, although he definitely had the potential. He looked as though he wouldn't take any c--- off of anyone, but wouldn't bite heads off either.

I reflexively started to get the puffs out of my ears for having thought these ‘strong’ words, but found none. *‘No puffs are produced if the word is an accurate description of the person or situation,’* Tom thought. He had a smile on his face that looked rather smirky.

*‘That’ll help us to know when we’ve pegged someone correctly, then,’* thought Larry. Tom nodded.

I felt a bit huffy that I didn’t think of this first, but decided to not dwell on the feeling. I returned my attention to my survey of the meeting.

Out of the handful of others, one looked rather wimpy. He had a look of angst on his face as though he were ready for the worst to happen. *‘He can’t have too much silver,’* I thought. *‘He looks like a mouse being fed to a pet boa.’* I felt a twang of sympathy for him, but mostly disgust. *‘He has jello for a backbone. He’ll never be able to do anything of use.’* Larry’s glance in my direction must have activated my empathetic DNA, however, as I immediately regretted this thought and feeling. Tom still had that smirky smile on his face. It was becoming rather annoying, to say the least.

There was only one woman in the group. She was rather nondescript. She didn’t look anxious or pompous. Just interested and alert.

Two of the younger looking guys were nodding off, despite the super-sized mugs of coffee in front of them. One of the apparently more ambitious men across from one of the noddors was thoroughly enjoying a feeling of superiority over the schmucks. He was probably plotting how to get higher up the ladder instead of listening to the speaker, as he had a rather distant look on his face. I hoped the pompous a— would look his way and catch him by asking him something about the talk.

The topic was how to invest all the profits made that quarter. The speaker was going over the options. He had just finished reviewing the cost of setting up more oil wells in the Gulf verses the cost of setting up in the Alaskan wilderness. I assumed he meant the off-limits wildlife reserve. He pointed out the length of time it would take the investments

to pay off, and projected how much profit it would eventually bring in if the price per barrel rose to various ranges. The profit in the worst-case scenario was obscene enough, but the other end of the graph was a real eye popper. If all goes well AND the price per barrel hits \$90, they'd rake in more than the entire federal budget!

The smile on the pompous a—'s face was nauseating. The semi-arrogant guy's expression wasn't much better. Most of the others just had normal, happy, expectant type of looks. The nodders sat up and looked around, and taking their cue from the other's faces, put on the same happy grin.

"Good job, Henry," said the arrogant boss. He then looked down the table to the scared mouse and said, "You're next, Ralph. But PLEASE try to lower your eyebrows to within an inch of your eyes." The snickers from some of the others helped Ralph lower his eyebrows enough to almost look angry.

They didn't stay puckered for very long, however, as the power point system was not cooperative with his efforts to bring up his presentation. One of the men with a softer look on his face who had not joined in with a chuckle at the boss's jab, helped Ralph to fix the problem. Judging by the quick glance the helpful guy threw Henry, the system had been sabotaged to give Ralph problems. *'Henry is apparently in good stead with The Powers That Be,'* I thought, *'or that guy would have been able to do more than throw him a dirty look.'*

Ralph's presentation was not treated with as much respect as Henry's had been. His topic was investing in alternate energy systems. He reviewed the projected time to profitability if non-petroleum fuels of various types were developed under all imaginable circumstances. Of course, the worst-case scenario for this option was loss of all the investment and 'negative profit' if biofuel, hydrogen cells, solar panels, etc, all failed to be accepted due to higher costs than fossil fuels. The best-case scenario, however, wasn't that bad. If all of the alternatives were successful in some



niche or other, the investment would pay off with at least as much as the worst-case scenario of Henry's presentation.

The last few graphs were basically glossed over, as the attitude of the larger and more expressive part of the group was one of disdain for the subject. Benefits to the planet and humanity in general were obviously not high on the list of the head honchos' priorities.

Ralph bravely persisted with efforts to cover the information in the graphs with the non-cynical attention of the man who helped him with the sabotage, the woman and a few of the others. The nodders had refilled their mugs while the power point was being fixed, but the coffee was apparently de-caf, because they were both asleep again. One of them had apparently plopped a piece of chocolate in his mouth, too, as he was drooling a brown riverlette out of the corner of his mouth and onto his designer suit jacket.

The semi-arrogant boss thanked Ralph, and turned to face the others at the table. "So, what do we do with this information? Do we stay the course with oil products or branch out into renewables?" He tried to put on a neutral expression as to which way HE wanted to go, amazingly enough. But it felt like a trap. *'I'd put money on it.'*

The guy who helped Ralph took the bait. "If we put some investments into the renewables, we would improve the company's PR immensely. And if we did hit any workable solutions, we'd be able to claim the moral high ground."

The pompous a----- stifled a snort. "Very good, Andy. Great idea. We can put a token amount into a renewables 'front', and play it up to the public. I like your way of thinking." His tone was just a bit sarcastic. "But why should we worry about the public's perception of our company? We've got 'em over the proverbial barrel, now, don't we?" His laugh at his pun was pure evil. Most of the others responded to it with a fake, stilted laugh. "Why waste ANY investment on a project doomed from the start?"

Andy didn't reply, but his look was not one of defeat. He was brave enough to look the b----- full in the eyes, but the a----- had started sizing up the others at the table before he

finished his rhetorical question so he didn't notice the attempt at defiance. But the semi-arrogant boss did.

"I'd like to hear what Mr. Maven has to say, Dan. Why DO you think it would be worth our while to worry about public opinion, Andy?" he asked a bit too nicely.

"Governments change. We can't depend on favorable legislation and friends to hold back the anger that would be unleashed if the best-case scenario were to occur. This IS a democracy, after all, Mr. Jackaston," Andy replied firmly, looking directly at Dan.

JACKASTON. What an appropriate name! I loved it! Larry left out a snort trying to hold in a major snicker.

Mr. Jackaston smirked. "Is that right, Mr. Maven. And what is your current salary?"

"\$30,000 a year, sir," Andy answered without hesitation. I doubted it was really that low, but it seemed to satisfy Mr. Jacka--.

"So, how many favors have you been able to buy with your pittance of an income?" Mr. Jacka— gloated, and didn't wait for an answer before adding, "You'd be amazed what most people will do for the right amount of money as an incentive. And if the best case scenario happens, we'll have plenty to spread around," He oozed evil.

It was all I could do to keep from punching the guy's lights out. Since I knew he wouldn't feel it, I wondered if I could go give it a try and at least get out some of my hatred. Tom gave me a nudge. *'Go ahead. Go over to him and strangle him, or whatever your heart desires. Just pay attention to any gold vibrations he may have buried deep within his sordid soul.'*

I looked at Tom's expression to be sure I heard his thought correctly.

*'Close your mouth, Ian. You look like a tourist.'* Larry's thought was accompanied with set jaws, but still with a hint of playfulness. I guessed the 'set jaw' part of his 'soul language' was a response to the Jacka--, and not aimed at me.

I rushed over to the b----- before Tom could change his mind, but I couldn't put my hands on him. He was LITERALLY repulsive! I couldn't get within 3 feet of him. When I moved closer, I felt a very uncomfortable tug in my innards, but also a very firm push, as though I were being pulled apart. I kept my distance, and paid close attention to what he was saying and how I was feeling.

"All we'll need to do when we're really raking it in is to cry about how long it took for us to reap the benefits of all those years of hard work. And THEN we could do the goodie-goodie tree-hugging act. But only if we HAVE to in order to quell the masses you predict will be at our throats." My innards felt especially tugged over the tree-hugging comment. I figured that was because of the silver in me responding to a call from his anti-hippie silver. I caught a glimpse of Tom nodding his head.

Now the semi-arrogant b----- spoke up. "Now, Dan. You know we can't be so blatantly dismissive of the public's opinion of us. There are other companies out there competing with us, after all."

An evil half-smile came over dastardly Dan's face. "What makes you think their CEO's aren't just like me? And their board members just like you, Arthur?" Danny-boy didn't wait for an answer but continued with a slight change in his demeanor. "But you may have a point. If they really are like us, we'll be targets for their public relations departments if the public were to turn on us. They could convince the puppets, er I mean politicians, to single us out as the bad guys." His countenance changed to a less disagreeable look. "So, Andy, tell us about your plan for an eco-friendly front."

"I wasn't thinking about it as a front, sir," Andy replied with a bit of sarcasm in the 'sir'. "I would like to develop an entire new division to more closely examine the feasibility of any or all of the alternative energy options. We could then decide which of the options to fully invest in over the next few years." Andy then added through clenched teeth, "I want my son to have a healthy world to grow up and thrive in. And his son, and his son's son. The oil reserves won't last

forever. We ALL know that.” He seemed to be daring the Jacka-- to disagree.

I felt a very weak tug towards Dan. I think. “I have a son, too, Andy,” he said rather quietly. But I felt the repulsion return to its full force almost immediately as he added, “But he can work future problems out for himself. He’ll need to be a man and prove his worth.” The evil grin returned. “We can’t solve ALL the problems for the future generations, now, can we? What challenges would that leave for them to tackle?”

After this comment, Larry flew towards Dan, as angry as I’ve ever seen him. But he stopped halfway across the room. Apparently he felt the repulsion much further away from despicable Dan than I did. He couldn’t get close to Arthur, either, probably because Dan’s ‘force shield’ was so large.

Larry looked puzzled, and looked to Tom with a questioning expression. Tom nodded in Andy’s direction, and Larry headed towards him. He was able to float just behind Andy without any problems at all. Tom then motioned for him to see how close he could get to others around the table. As expected, Ralph was no problem, either, but Henry kept him at least 3 feet away.

Curious now, I had to see how close I could get to everyone. I could get right up to all of the others except regal Arthur. But Andy, Ralph, the woman and a few of the other men visibly stiffened when I was near them, as though they were actually sensing me.

Larry and I returned to Tom. But before we could think our questions, he nodded at the meeting and thought, *listen*.

Arthur was wrapping up the meeting. “Now, remember, everyone, the contents of this meeting are confidential. Mr. Jackaston and I are the only ones to decide what, if anything, is to be told to the press. If word of any of the specifics is leaked, heads will roll. I’m sure you all know how dispensable any one individual is to the bottom line.” With a grin almost as evil as the Jacka--, he added, “Thank you, and good day. You are dismissed.”

I wanted to follow the dispensable peons out of the room to hear the griping and moaning, but Tom wanted us to stay and listen to the bosses.

I was glad we stayed. Arthur was furious at the Jacka-- . It was actually enjoyable to watch.

“Why the h--- do you have to be such a blatant a-----!!? What would it cost you to at least PRETEND to be interested in our image??! Now I’ll have to run damage control and be sure news of your foul attitude doesn’t land on the national news!” His face was an attractive shade of burgundy.

The Jacka-- seemed to be enjoying the tirade. And the more he grinned, the darker red Arthur turned. When the jacka-- struck a relaxed pose with his feet on the table and his chair tilted WAY back, I could sense Arthur using every bit of his self-control to keep from tipping the idiot out of his chair. For a second or two.

WHAM!! The fat load hit the floor with a wonderfully melodious thump! It was a work of art! Arthur was so discrete with his little push that it looked as though the jack--- had fallen simply by leaning too far! Larry, Tom and I gave each other high fives, and cheered Arthur on.

Now Arthur was grinning and the jacka-- was a deep burgundy, with a touch of purple thrown in. He apparently knew why he fell, but Arthur was pretending otherwise. “Don’t blame me if you can’t control your lowly inanimate chair.” He took a second to watch the rather rotund a----- try to get up off the floor. It was obvious he wasn’t hurt; just too fat and out of shape to get up easily. Mr. Kiln gave a vicious chuckle, turned on his heel, and walked regally from the room, leaving the cursing and swearing darling Dan to get up on his own accord.

## Let the Tailing Begin!

We left the conference room to see if any of the attendees had gathered for an informal post-meeting meeting. We heard them through a closed door not far down the hall.

“It’s people like him that give us all a black eye!” Andy was livid.

“Yeah, but look what he earns,” the ladder-climber pointed out with a most materialistic look on his face. It seemed he could almost taste the money.

Ralph managed a rather strong glare in the guy’s direction. I don’t think he actually made eye contact, though.

A man called Pete luckily, or unluckily, was between Andy and the money hungry guy so Andy couldn’t get to his neck, which he obviously wanted to wring. “Calm down Andy,” Pete said. “Lawrence is a hopeless a—kisser. He’s not worth spending your life in jail for murder.”

The ‘nodders’ were now wide awake, enjoying the altercation. But neither was full of information bursting to escape. They looked rather simple, if truth be told. I figured they must be related to someone high in the corporation, and they were just empty suits. And empty minds.

The woman shook her head sadly. “If anyone is to make it in this line of work, brown-nosing’s only way to do it,” she said.

“You know, Carol, I have to agree. Nice guys don’t have the guts to step all over everyone on the way up. Only self-centered b----- like those three have enough disregard for others to just grab whatever they want, and everyone else be d-----,” Pete added. “Depressing, isn’t it.”

“It’s enough to make a man drink,” one of the nodders actually spoke.

“Like you need an excuse to drink, Daniel,” the other nodder interjected sharply.

Andy ignored them both “So, what are we going to do about them, then? Roll over and let them get away with everything? Why the h--- didn’t anyone speak up in there like we had agreed to do yesterday?! Cowards!!! Every one of you!” He couldn’t have looked any more angry if his eyes were glowing red. If this were a fairy tale, he’d be spewing flames.

“The time wasn’t right. I knew Dan wasn’t in a compromising frame of mind, Andy. No sense in all of us getting fired at the same time, now, is there? Who would still be here to hold them to any semblance of morality?” a neutral, intelligent-looking man pointed out. He looked like an unflappable sort of character. Careful diplomacy with unemotional planning was obviously his mantra. He was totally able to ignore being called a coward. Good man.

Andy was still in enough control of his faculties to see at least some truth in what the man had said. He didn’t like it, but he could understand it. “Very well, then, Brad. What do you suggest we do now.” It was more of a weary statement than a question. Andy sighed deeply, and sat down. I hadn’t noticed that people sighed much while I was alive, but I could now appreciate its positive effect on self-control. Makes you stop, and calm down.

“We need to divide and conquer. If we can get Arthur by himself, we may have some leverage. And Henry may be able to have a positive effect on Dan, when the stars are properly aligned.” Brad grinned at the obvious jab at the lack of control anyone had on Dan’s moods. “Sorry, Andy. But you do realize the daunting task we have before us, I’m sure.”

“I can pray for success in our efforts,” one of the non-descript men chimed in. “God is on our side.”

Pete rolled his eyes and groaned. “Bob, PLEASE keep your religion to yourself! Only brain-washed idiots believe

in all that fairy-tale stuff, and you know I hate to hear how stupid you are!!” Now was Andy’s turn to keep Pete and Bob from killing each other. They had to resort to hateful glares. This room wasn’t big enough for all the emotion in these characters.

Squeaky little Ralph was the one to point this out. “I think we all need to cool off for a while before we discuss this any further. In the meantime, we can all still work on our ideas. We weren’t actually told to drop anything that wasn’t aimed at finding more oil. Not yet, anyway.”

The ex-sleepy bobble-heads and Pete nodded in agreement even before Ralph had finished his suggestion. Bob and Carol just shook their heads slowly with looks of sad resignation. Andy and Brad mulled the issue over a bit before agreeing.

“Seems the one to follow is Danny-boy,” I offered. “Most of these others are apparently on our side.” I looked to Tom for conformation, which he gave me with a nod.

“And while you are getting to know Dan, Larry and I will see what we can find out about Henry and Arthur,” Tom added.

I gave Tom a sharp military salute, and turned to go. I didn’t go far, however. “Um, Tom, could you at least point me the way?” I grinned sheepishly.

“His office is just over our heads. You can float up through the floor, or go up through the elevator shaft if you prefer. The floor is rather thick, and may be harder to go through.” I headed to the elevator. I wasn’t ready to match heads with a rock-hard floor just yet.

I was most happy with my choice as soon as I oozed through the elevator door into the hallway of the floor above. It was a much wider hallway, obviously for those in charge of major operations. I was sure the floor was indeed very reinforced and soundproofed. The doors were not quite soundproof enough, however. Muffled crashes and thuds of



objects hitting walls and breaking could be heard behind the door to my left.

I reminded myself of my mistiness, took a deep breath, and oozed through the door. I ducked reflexively, however, when I saw the desk blotter frizbee-ing towards my neck. It bounced off of the closed door behind me, a corner badly crinkled.

The office was a wreck. Dan had tossed or thrown everything that was not nailed down. The walls were full of pot-marks. Large portraits and massive oil paintings were either knocked down or full of punctures. Not all of the holes looked fresh, however. He obviously had a hissy fit like this before.

He was cursing like a proverbial sailor, and then some. He was MAD.

I felt surprisingly neutral. I felt like I imagined Brad feels. Logical. Calculating. Purpose-driven. Goal directed. Focused. And my current mission was to get to know this madman.

I tuned into his feelings. Rather easy to do, I must admit, given his obvious body language. Even I as a living human would have been able to easily interpret his meaning. The ‘tug and repel’ forces were very noticeable, but not frightening. This time I knew what they meant. I paid close attention to when I was being pulled towards him, and what he was ranting about at that time, verses when I was being repelled.

For the split second he felt embarrassment, I felt pulled to him. When he was feeling hatred, I was pushed. Most of the time I felt pushed, which is what I expected. Actually, what I hoped. I didn’t want to think that I had as much silver as he obviously had. I wanted to think I had lost a lot of mine.

I knew the most important information received was what he was feeling when he pulled me towards him. If the pull wasn’t due to some shared silver, these times could show me his weak spots; where he hides his gold, so to speak. I was to find out what gold he had left in him that was still the least bit functional.

Eventually, I felt less and less repulsion. His anger was being spent, and some gold was getting through. When I sensed a particularly strong pull, I felt an urge to commiserate with him. I sensed a weak message leave me; a digital pat on the back, of sorts. I didn't try to stop it as I figured he may benefit from a sense of camaraderie.

I was wrong. He couldn't handle ANY positive interaction. I was almost instantly repelled, almost pushed back against the door. I had been sensed, but not by the gold that tugged at me. It was the silver spin 'fire wall' keeping that gold under lock and key that caught me, and threw my beamed message out.

Dan didn't appear to have noticed anything amiss, however. And I didn't feel as though the push was necessarily aimed at me. It was more like a shield being reinforced than an aimed 'punch'. So I returned to my watch and learn mode.

As I watched, the repulsion I felt earlier both physically and emotionally returned as strong as ever as his 'spam-shield' expanded. I found a distant corner of his office where I could watch without being too uncomfortable.

He eventually sat at his desk and turned on his PC. His beady grayish green eyes turned to slits as his expression turned more and more evil. I wanted to look over his shoulder at what he was doing but the force of his shield was too great.

Not being able to move from my corner without feeling like I was being torn apart, I decided to ooze through the wall behind me into the neighboring office.

It was smaller than Dan's office. Its contents made it look more like a cleaning closet than an office, but it was the largest cleaning closet on the face of the earth. I smiled to myself as I thought it very appropriate, given the mess Dan the Demon can make. And I sure wouldn't want to be the occupant of this office trying to work amid all the noise from Dan's doings.

Among the brooms and buckets were office supplies to replace the ones Dan broke or ruined. Shelves and shelves

of office supplies. And large replacement pictures were leaning against the walls. Dan must do this rather often.

I continued through other walls into some of the other offices and rooms on the floor. One looked like a living room/conference room combination. Another was a kitchen. There was even a bedroom. I didn't find any offices that seemed to belong to anyone else. I guessed the entire floor was for Dan, and Dan alone. Not even the maintenance crew was allowed unless or until they were specifically called for, most likely.

I went back to Dan's office, towards the corner in which I had been able to watch. As I oozed to the spot, I was quickly and acutely aware of an intense, uncomfortable, dizzying push. I didn't fight it, and allowed myself to be repelled back into the closet.

I wished I had kept more of my silver. And that I hadn't sent him a message when I sensed one of his stronger gold spots. Why wasn't I told to not let my gold show at all? Why wasn't I warned it would only strengthen the silver shield? I felt rather deflated at the realization that I didn't feel overwhelmingly angry at the slight. It pointed out how much silver I HAD lost, after all. I felt heavy with doubt about being of any use now. I wasn't evil enough to spy effectively.

My shoulders slumped, and I plodded to the door. I laid down and slowly oozed through the crack at the bottom. I headed out into the hall and towards the elevator. I oozed through the elevator door and hovered in the elevator shaft for a bit. The elevator was near the bottom floors. I followed the shaft down a few floors until I sensed that Tom and Larry were nearby. I oozed into the hallway, and floated down the hall until I heard voices. I listened for a bit before entering.

Henry and Arthur were discussing what to do about Dan. Larry and Tom were in a corner near the door. I went through the door and floated over to them and listened.

“As long as no one on the outside knows how he is, we’ll be okay, Mr. Kiln. Even those who agree with him are too embarrassed to let anyone know how bad he is. We’re all used to just taking him in stride.” Henry was trying to talk Arthur into some sort of risky plan. He looked worried, almost as much as Ralph had been at the presentation.

“But he’s such a weight on the company. You and I both know what a state his office will be in by now. He’s worse than a two-year-old, temper wise. But he’s as conniving as they come. He’ll stab me in the back the first chance he gets. I’ll pay for the enjoyment of that push.” Arthur didn’t look worried, though. He was actually savoring the memory. He apparently had some clout and therefore some protection from real damage.

“Let’s call another conference without Dan, so we can hear more about the plans the others had in mind for the alternative fuels. If we hear them out, we can logically tear them down without being obvious. Then the issue can be put to rest.” Henry was pleading.

“How the h--- do you propose to have a meeting without Dan? He’s got his tentacles into everything.” Arthur didn’t show any emotion. He looked as though he were thinking of the answer to his question even as he was asking it.

“Could we meet outside the office, in a hotel meeting room? Then, even if Dan does find out about it, we can blame his secretary for not telling him about it. And if he shows up, he’ll have to be somewhat civil in public, won’t he?” Henry looked at Arthur with a hopeful expression.

Arthur nodded his head slowly. “That may actually work. He fires his secretaries at the rate of one every other week, so they never get a chance to learn to please him. He’ll surely believe the ‘idiot’ didn’t tell him.” A smile crept eerily across Arthur’s face. “And if we invite the press, he’ll HAVE to behave. Yes, Henry, I believe that will work. Very good. Go and see if the others are willing to give it a go. Be sure they all know to do their best to not let Dan in on it. But maybe we shouldn’t include that duo of doorstops, and

Lawrence. They're too stupid to keep their mouths shut, and Lawrence may try to brown-nose Danny somehow."

They shook hands, and Mr. Kiln left the office.

I tried to smile at Tom and Larry, but the best I could do was an apologetic half-smile. Tom already knew about my interactions with Dan, but HIS smile was large and real.

"Don't worry, Ian. His silver shield is so big and powerful, just being able to be in the same room with him up to that point is an accomplishment. And his shield is so good at fending off any sense of warmth, yours was a drop in an ocean. And you learned from it, correct? Instead of just being told what to do and what not to do, you found out yourself, and it was learned much more deeply and quickly than any 'book-learning' could have come close to." As he grinned proudly, he gently shook his head back and forth, adding, "You really do have a severe case of push-me/pull-you, though. You have my sympathy."

"I told you how hard it was to watch on earth, even before I knew all these reasons for it," Larry said to Tom. "Of course, there were so many more 'pricklies' then, so it was easier to not feel TOO sorry for him. His marshmallow center was definitely NOT easy to see way back then." Larry had a sad look on his face as he recalled those times of conflict. He was remembering one time in specific when he had tried to get me to call Lenny to congratulate him on his engagement to be married. He knew how much I wanted to let Lenny know I wished him well, but my pride got in the way. I never was invited to the wedding. Irene left the house the week before the wedding in tears. I wouldn't even drive her to the airport.....

Tom took all these thoughts in instantaneously. He processed them and responded with a lighthearted, "But things are so much better now with less silver, Ian. And you WILL be able to tell Lenny how you wished him well, in person, in the not too distant future. In the meantime, take comfort in the knowledge that he knew then, and knows

now, how much you love him. HIS pride was as strong a ‘prickle’ for him as yours had been for you.”

Somehow I didn’t feel reassured. Tom didn’t emit any of the warm and fuzzies like Julia and Irene did. I wondered if it was a female thing.

“No, Ian, it isn’t. I have to be careful to leave your remaining silver intact, so I have to discourage you from crying. A ‘fuzzie’ at this point in time may induce a meltdown of sorts, like a mother’s hug lets a child feel free to cry when he feels exceptionally vulnerable to the world.” He stopped trying to explain when he saw my furrowed brow, and sensed some anger. He knew I liked things to be in neat little ‘either/or’ categories. Either ‘fuzzies’ were good, or they weren’t. Either crying out silver was good, or it wasn’t. Only wishy-washy pea-brains want it both ways.

Now that I was back on silver mode, I actually felt better. Sort of. At least I felt more certain I could hide my gold during future spying trips into Dan’s character make-up.

Maybe....

## Check In With the Team

Tom suggested we take a break and plan to meet back in the Lounge in the Education Department with the others in a little while. Larry and I agreed. I needed a breather. My brain was fried.

I wanted to be by the river on the mossy bank, and without anyone's help, I was there before I could even close my eyes. I took in a long deep breath, enjoyed the peaceful rustle of the leaves in the wind and the sound of the water as it flowed among the rocks.

Without even laying back, I was soon engulfed in a relaxing fog of pure bliss. Not a care in the world to mar the feeling. No thoughts to figure out or mysteries to solve. It was truly heaven.

I had no idea how long I was in that marvelous state before I felt an urge of some sort telling me it was time to 'get up and at 'em'. I saw a flash of the scenery of the riverbank between the second I exited that blissful state and my arrival in the Lounge. The others arrived one by one, in the same state of mind as I – pleasantly numb.

Except the science team, that is. George looked like he was about to burst with fabulous news. Al was beaming. "Tell them, George," he deferred to the young physicist.

"It's magic! Absolute magic!" George exclaimed. I felt a twinge of jealousy that his first adventure was more productive than mine.

"It's all SO SIMPLE!" he continued to fan my silver by being so d--- know-it-all-ish. *'He knows physics is NEVER simple to the average soul. Like me.'*

“So what’s so simple,” I said sarcastically. “Why don’t you tell us ‘simpletons’ how the world works?” I may as well have never spent any time in the fog of bliss for all the irritation I was now feeling. The evasive egghead was nauseatingly excited.

Larry glared at me. I pouted, and crossed my arms. “Well?” I added.

George continued, barely registering that I had even spoken. “It’s like Einstein changed the entire way of looking at physics when he developed his theory of relativity. He challenged the constancy of time, and it revolutionized the field! All we need to do is let people know that THE SPEED OF LIGHT IS NOT CONSTANT, EITHER!!! Even Planck’s constant isn’t constant. NOTHING is constant! With just a twist of a paradigm we can move on to the true, unified theory of physics that Einstein worked his whole life to find!”

I looked at Larry, who was looking at George with the same blank look that everyone else had. Even in his excitement, George eventually noticed that none of us caught the significance of this ‘simple’ discovery.

“Don’t you understand?” he actually looked puzzled that we didn’t get it. “I can’t believe no one could see it before. If light can’t escape a black hole and can be bent by gravity, then why couldn’t it be slowed down or sped up? Everything interacts with everything else, and if we don’t saddle ourselves with thinking anything HAS to be constant, it all makes sense! With this realization, a whole new world of possibilities opens up for the earth! This is the key to unlocking all the remaining mysteries of physics! A whole new level of understanding will be available for people to use!!”

Sheila took a deep breath, and said, “Hopefully people will use this new power wisely. We don’t want a replay of the development of the Atom Bomb, or there REALLY won’t be an earth to save. With knowledge comes responsibility.” She looked around at our blank expressions and added, “And, no. I don’t understand what he’s talking



about much more than you do. I just know what happened when the power of the atomic bomb was unleashed...” her voice trailed off as she realized the schoolmarm in her was beginning to show.

She resumed on a different topic: “There’s a World Physics Conference coming up in Greenland. All the prominent physicists of the world will be there. George will try to get Rick to understand what he is talking about before the conference. WE don’t have to understand it but Rick will hopefully at least catch a glimpse of George’s insight. I’m going to work on being sure Rick gets to the conference and meets all the right people to make the biggest splash with his new theory. Hopefully it won’t take as long for Rick to convince people what he is on to as it took Einstein...” Sheila had a thoughtful, distant look on her face. After a pause, she added, “And I think I know who can help him to move things right along.”

“Al,” Sheila said with an intensity I had not previously noticed. “I’m going to go right now. I see an opportunity to make an important connection.”

Al had barely started to nod his consent before she disappeared.

I had a slight sinking feeling as I thought about how both George and Sheila had seemed to make so much more headway than I had made. They didn’t seem to have bungled anything.....

Tom threw me a paternalistic, ‘*behave yourself*’ type of glance and asked Mary how her team had fared. I felt a whiff of relief when I realized she didn’t look as happy as the scientists were. Neither Bill nor Shirley seemed eager to tell their story.

Mary sighed, and began: “We have a daunting task ahead of us. Finding a way to break through the mindset of Pastor Sheppard is not going to be easy. Bill has started to study Jacob’s traits and thought processes for any opening, and Shirley has a few theories about his wife Joan, but nothing solid.”

“Sounds like you had the same luck as we had,” Tom said consolingly. “We basically just spent a lot of time watching and analyzing. Even though none of us can begin to understand what George has in mind, scientists are, after all, a very logical bunch. They have their ego problems, too, but in general, they are all interested in ultimately knowing the truth. We, on the other hand, have human nature and all of its intricacies and nuances to navigate.” He smiled, and looked at me as he added, “and people are anything but black and white.”

*‘Uppity young’un,’* I thought irritably. The look I sent back his way must have been good. Larry about snorted up a lung trying to hold back a laugh.

I snarled at Larry, and turned away from the group. I slouched and slumped over to a corner by myself and sat, arms crossed defiantly, in an overstuffed chair facing a window overlooking a park of some sort. There were large roller coasters and Ferris-wheels, loop-de-loops, and flying saucers. It was bigger than a state fair, and much less urban. Less commercial, too. There were no lines, and no crowds. It was strange to see only adults on the rides, however. The children were hovering at the exits waiting for their adult to dismount when the ride was over.

Some of the adults had mastered going through heavenly matter, and boy, were they hilarious to watch! They’d ooze through the back of their seats onto the laps of the souls behind them going up the coaster hills, and seemed to almost blend into the poor splatted soul’s being after the car passed over the top of the climb and shot like a rocket towards the ground. When the car skidded to a quick stop at the bottom, the unconfined souls shot off of their rear car-mates laps and slammed into the backsides of the souls in front of them. I laughed so hard my sides ached. The riders were various shades of pukey green, and floated a bit wobbly, but they still looked exceedingly happy. The older adults who were the splattees and the slammees were green, too, but not because they were splatted and slammed. Their green color was of the jealousy shade, as they thought it looked like fun

to be able to go through the seats and were envious of the 'free floaters'. They didn't seem to notice that most of the unconfined souls didn't want to do a second run...I guessed it really wasn't too much fun feeling like a loose cannon ball...

But the souls whose seatbelts slid right through them on the scramblers REALLY didn't want a second ride. When they were flung out of their seats, they had a rather rough landing, usually in the treetops. One or two managed to land in a Ferris-wheel seat, or at the top of the bungee ride. The souls in the Ferris-wheel and on the bungee were laughing hysterically as the flung soul hung on to them for dear life. I about wet my pants (if I'd have had to pee) when I saw the look of sheer terror on one of the flingee's face when he realized his bottom half was still in the scrambler!!! Even his child was laughing when he helped put the poor guy back together after both his halves were done with their respective rides.

I wondered if Julia could take me to the park, if I needed an escort. I never liked rides when I was younger because I tended to get a bit motion sick. My friends were always careful to NOT sit too close to me in case I 'tossed my cookies', or cotton candy, as the case may be. But there was no getting away from my emissions when I was on the swings. It sprayed EVERYWHERE. I think it was after that particular ride that I started to have a harder and harder time getting back on ANY of the rides. The carnival guys had begun to recognize me by then. Or so it seemed. The rides always seemed to suddenly fill up just as I got to the front of the line, and then it needed 'maintenance', until I'd give up and leave the line....

As I remembered those days of old, I decided I'd rather watch than risk being sick. I had hoped motion sickness would not be a problem in heaven, and wondered if the pukey green souls actually enjoyed being sick, just like the dizzy people enjoyed being dizzy. I never enjoyed being sick. I just didn't want to look like a wimp, so I tried to keep up with the guys.

As I sat watching, I felt an urge to abandon the mission, and just stay at the campsite with Arnie and Harry, and go on a random dream now and then. There was so much fun to be had, places to explore, ‘carefreeness’ to enjoy.....

I looked over my shoulder at the others. They looked so serious and intense. So responsible.

I turned back towards the park, and poof! There was Julia, hovering between me and the window. Her expression was rather neutral and hard to read.

“Would you like to go to the park?” she asked sweetly enough.

“I don’t know,” was my honest answer. I didn’t know what I wanted anymore. Not that I EVER really knew what I wanted. But at least I usually knew what I DIDN’T want.

“Just go by your feelings. When you feel overwhelmed, ask for a break, and you can have one. I could give you a tour, of sorts, to help you remember things you used to enjoy when you were young. Or you could spend some time with the fuzz. Or you could socialize with your friends. And when you are ready to return to the more challenging, more responsible tasks, you can return to where you left off, and not have missed a thing. Time here is very fluid. We have no deadlines. The only pressure we feel is what we choose to feel.” At least Julia made more sense than George with his ‘Unification Theory’.

“You mean to tell me that I can stop my part of the mission at any time, enjoy myself with useless activities for YEARS at a time, and when I feel like it, I can go back to the mission and miss NOTHING?” I was sure I had misunderstood something in her explanation. *‘How could I take a break and the others not take a break, and yet I wouldn’t fall behind?’*

“I don’t understand it either. It’s that physics stuff that George and the other scientific-types of souls understand. But we don’t have to understand it to be able to use it. It really frees us up to manage our abilities and stresses much more effectively.” Julia lowered her head, and looking at me with raised eyebrows and a sheepish grin admitted, “I would

never have made it to my current age without the ability to expand time when I needed a breather.”

“So, if I spent a couple of years enjoying myself first, when I decided to get on with it, I would in effect be right back here, on this chair, as if no time had passed?” It sounded too crazy to be possible, even in heaven.

“Not exactly, but close. It’s all up to you. If you can wait to see what happens, you can ‘put the book down’ in effect. Then you can pick it back up when your interest in finding out what happens next becomes stronger than your need to relax. It’s part of why heaven is so heavenly. A small part, but a part nonetheless.” Julia appeared to be serious.

“So, how long do you think I’ll want to rest between ‘chapters’, then, little one?” I teased. I knew. And I knew she knew.

“Go on back to the others, then, Mr. Burns,” Julia smiled and waved her little hand towards the middle of the room where the discussions and planning were still going on strong. “And do your best to not lose any of the strength of your curiosity gene!” The look she gave me as she faded out filled me with warmth and comfort.

I looked at the group a bit before I slowly floated over to them. Their expressions were becoming less gloomy. They must be formulating a workable plan.

*‘I sure hope so…….’*

## Just Like in the Movies

They didn't seem to notice I was back. I started to feel as though they'd never even noticed I had been gone. I managed to defuse the hurt feeling from being ignored by thinking that if I understood Julia correctly, I really wasn't gone. Besides, I didn't have time for any of those juvenile feelings. I had work to do.

"So, did any of you eggheads come up with a plan yet?" I asked flippantly.

"Not really." Mary's expression changed back to one of worry. "We'll have to do some more research and analysis. What about Ian and Larry, Tom?" she asked.

Tom answered, "Same here. Actually, I'm not even clear as to what our end goal is in specific. I know we have to do something to keep the oilmen from getting in George's way, but we still don't know how they are IN the way. Even if Rick is a friend of Ralph or Andy, I don't see how this company could snuff out any research he's working on." A look of possible insight filled Tom's face. "Unless the oil company is needed for funding...."

"It's possible," Al said. "But the company doesn't need to be directly involved with what Rick is doing to interfere with what we hope he tries to do. All they need to do is influence public opinion, or be able to pull political strings. Once they convince the public or the people in power that Rick's plan is reckless or foolish, or both, it's dead on arrival."

"What Rick must figure out is a way to harness a huge amount of energy into small, but SAFE packets," George added. "It will be easy to claim any small package that powerful is dangerous. So he'll have to deal with skeptical

environmentalists as well as the companies that want to keep the status quo.” George was not just a hopeless nerd. He pointed out some very real non-scientific problems. He turned to Al and asked, “Are you sure there are enough teams out there to deal with all the possible pitfalls?”

“As far as I know, the Heavenly Green Team has everything covered.” Al looked confident.

Sheila faded back in with a relieved look on her face. “I managed to catch up with the guardians for two key players in Rick’s part of the scheme. They’ll do what they can to guide their charges to the conference. Then we just have to get them to bump into each other.”

“Good work, Sheila,” Al said. “Now we can go see how hard it will be to get these physical postulates through to Rick. Good luck, all!” They waved as they faded on to the next phase.

“Well, we may as well go have another look. Maybe we’ll see our opening.” Mary, Shirley and Bill followed the others to their respective stations on earth.

Tom and Larry decided we could go to see what kind of home lives our company men, and woman, have. “Sounds okay to me.” I was feeling rather compliant.

We faded in at the entrance to the company. It was near 5 o’clock and people were beginning to dribble out and hurry to the parking deck.

“Do you think the head honchos have to use the front door, too?” I asked. At our little company, there was a back way in to the main offices so that we managers didn’t need to deal with all the peons of the plant.

“There’s a security concern that overrides the executives’ desire to avoid the rank and file. Besides, their hours are such that there is little overlap. As we watch the people leave for the day, we can get an idea of the general morale of the company,” Tom added. “One can gather abundant information about the leadership of a company by the

atmosphere of the working environment and the mindset of its workers.”

Larry shot me a sideways glance. I answered him with a glare. His was the shoulder some of my workers cried on. They bellyached about the stupidest things.

“Now, now, you two. Don’t fight,” Tom admonished playfully.

We watched for over an hour. Most of the workers were in a hurry. Some had large stuffed briefcases AND their PC’s. Some looked tired and over worked. Some looked clueless. Some had calculating expressions as though they were deep in thought. None of them looked truly, sincerely, happy. Quite a few looked downright depressed.

“So when do the board-room boys leave?” I asked.

“They’ll be out shortly,” Tom answered.

I looked around the outside of the building. The landscaping was topnotch, although I did spot a few weeds here and there. They had a water fountain in the middle of the short driveway up to the front door and a few small flowering trees were in large cement pots along the walk to the parking garage. The lay-out was for looks, not practicality. The walk for the dress-shoed, business attired workers was long enough for some of them to change into sneakers for the hike. Close to the front door, however, were limos and chauffeurs waiting idly for the call to get their respective big wig.

One of them got a call on his cell phone. After he answered it, he shook hands with the others as they wished him well. *‘Odd thing, to wish a limo driver well,’* I thought.

He turned his limo on and opened all the windows and the sunroof to let the heat out of the driver’s segregated front seat. Judging from the fog on the windows of the body of the limo, it was already nicely cooled. *‘How can the back be air conditioned without the car being on?’* I wondered.

He drove the few hundred feet to the front door and waited for quite a while before Mr. Jackaston showed up. The Jack--- looked very satisfied about something, and



barked an order to the chauffeur to take him to The Mystique. The chauffeur bowed and closed the door behind Mr. Jackaston. The limo swayed and bounced as the huge oaf took his seat. The chauffeur hurried back to the driver's seat and quickly drove off.

I flew quickly to catch up. I was most happy to be able to leave that front door. It was really getting dull.

The limo didn't go too far. The Mystique was a five star restaurant where a gowned and gorgeous young woman waited for him at the maitre'de's area. She stood when he entered, and tried to look very pleased, but it was fake. SHE looked fake. She was an 'all show and no substance' type of person. Mr. Jacka-- ogled her up one side and down the other, but mostly focused on her bust, which was barely covered, and quite prominent. Not quite of Dolly Parton fame, but close.

They were seated in a darkish alcove away from most of the other patrons. A soap opera scene couldn't have been any more disgusting. He all but openly groped her while they pretended to eat. He obviously didn't keep his weight up by eating here.

After only half an hour or so, thank goodness, they left together in the limo. The next stop was a ritzy hotel. They went to a side door, though. I was beginning to get the idea that this woman was not his wife. Duh.

Not being particularly voyeuristic, I decided to hang around with the chauffeur while they were inside. It turned out to be most informative.

The chauffeur called Mrs. Jackaston from a pay phone, even though he had a cell phone of his own. "Yes, ma'am. He's upstairs in the penthouse with her now. Or at least that's where I heard him say the destination was tonight.....Yes, ma'am ..... ... Yes, ma'am .... .... Thank you, ma'am." He hung up the phone and took a deep breath. He looked up at the top of the hotel, got into the limo, and drove off quietly and carefully staying as close to the hotel as he could until he was on the opposite side of the building. He obviously didn't want to be seen from the

penthouse. He went a block or so east, then turned south. He made the next turn headed west, and floored it.

He drove into the posh part of town, past the Country Club. He stopped in front of a massive gate for a few seconds before it opened to allow him to enter.

He drove up to the front of the mansion where Mrs. Jackaston was waiting for him. At least she looked angry enough to be Mrs. Jackaston. And old enough. She looked as though she could hold her own against the a-----.

This was getting interesting. The chauffeur was beginning to sweat. Mrs. Jackaston gave him a large wad of what was probably cash, because he very quickly stuffed it in his breast pocket. His hands were shaking as he got back behind the driver's seat.

The trip back to the hotel was slower. I could almost imagine what was going through the driver's mind without having to read it.

The limo pulled back into its space at the side of the hotel. The driver checked what was in the wad Mrs. Jackaston gave him without letting her see him. He seemed satisfied with what he saw. I thought I saw a plane ticket among the large number of large bills. There was a safety deposit box key with a foreign language on the paper it was rolled up in.

Finally the adulterous a----- and his escort emerged from the side door of the hotel, laughing and pawing each other. They didn't have a clue that anything was amiss.

The Mrs. was well camouflaged in a dark corner of the limo. Miss 'Dolly Dimple' didn't notice the old bat until she plopped down on the seat beside her. As Miss 'Simpleton' tried to figure out who this lump of a person was in the limo, Mr. Jackaston started into the limo.

Mrs. Jackaston promptly grabbed Miss 'Priss' by the boa around her little jeweled neck and pulled it tighter and tighter with one hand as she held a gun to the breathless hussy's head. She looked at her husband as he stopped halfway into the limo, and said, "Why Danny, dear. Do come in and join us." Her voice gave me chills.

“Jan, honey, it’s not like it looks.” Dan sounded surprisingly calm. And lame.

“I’m listening, Danny darling.” She emphasized the darling, pronouncing it like that Hungarian actress on Green Acres.

He fully entered the limo and sat down closer to his wife than his mistress. “She tempted me, sweetheart. You know how easily I’m taken in by a pretty face.” With this amazing statement, he stroked his wife’s voluminous hairdo, and held her chin in his hand, which was so fat it was more like a paw. “Go ahead and shoot her, if you’d like. The vixen deserves whatever she gets.”

‘The vixen’ was getting enough air to be conscious and heard what he said. She kicked as hard as she could towards his ‘family jewels’, and by doing so, the boa grew tighter. She turned a lovely shade of purple as she tried to say, “He’s a d--- liar! Shoot HIM!”

She wasted her last breath trying to get him killed. She went limp and slumped to the floor of the limo. Mrs. Jackaston kept a tight hold on the boa until she was sure the poor dear was dead. Mr. Jackaston didn’t even try to save her. And the gun was still pointed at his mistress, not him. The coward. The b-----.

“Now, then, Dannykins. What should I do with YOU?” Her voice dripped with hate.

“I highly recommend we go home and discuss this further over a nicely aged bottle of wine after a nice, scrumptious meal.” His eyes were softer than I thought possible for a being of this evilness. “But first we have to figure out what to do with the body.” He said this softly while stroking his wife’s cheek, looking full into her eyes. It was almost as if he were hypnotizing her.

Mrs. Jackaston put the gun back into her purse and started to cry. But it was not the meek and mild mannered cry of a soft woman hurt. She was a hard woman angered. Through her tears she called Danny every name in the book, and then some. He dutifully played the poor, pitiful dog that had been caught knocking over her favorite potted plant.

“You are so right, Jan. I am despicable. What I have done was weak. You deserve better. I was foolish to fall for her trap.” His head hung low to his chest in mock humility.

Amazingly she bought the line. The hatred in her eyes softened. “I had planned to kill you, too, then send Joe off to Switzerland after he dumped your bodies somewhere. We could follow through with those plans, if you’d like. And dumping only one body should be easier. I gave him plenty of incentive to follow through.”

Dan looked up at her with an incredulous look on his face. He pretended to be horrified at the thought that his wife would have had enough hatred of him to plan such a horrendous thing. I could sense the scheming wheels turning in his wicked mind, and I hoped Jan could also. “Okay, then. Where is he to take the body, and how is he to get to Switzerland?” he asked after a short pause.

“I gave him money, a plane ticket, and a key to a lock box at our bank in Switzerland. I notified the banker there that he would be coming to make a withdrawal. I left the details of where and how to deal with the bodies and how to get to the airport up to Joe. I didn’t want to know too much, in case the police made me take a lie detector test, or something.” Why she was stupid enough to tell him all of this was beyond me.

“Sounds like an excellent plan to me. So, let’s go, then. Tell Schmitt to get on with it.” Dan sounded rather smug. Jan really must be thick to not notice his attitude.

She tapped on the window between the back of the limo and the driver’s section. He nodded, with a look that showed he was wondering why he had not heard any gunshots from the back of the limo, and drove off.

When they got to the mansion, he got out and opened the door for Mrs. Jackaston. He stood behind the door, using it as a shield, in case something had gone awry with Mrs. Jackaston’s plans. The fear in his face was palpable as he held his breath waiting to see who would be coming out of the limo. His relief when the Mrs. exited first quickly turned

to horror when Mr. Jackaston followed, not a hair out of place.

“Calm yourself, Joe. Jan told me all about your plan. Just go on with it, but you have only one body to dispose of instead of two.” Mr. Jackaston pried Joe’s hand off the limo door’s handle, and slammed it shut. “On with it, I said!” The glare he gave Joe said it all in a split second. If Joe valued his life, he better not give Danny boy the chance to grab him around the neck and slam him into the ground.

Joe read the look accurately and almost flew to the driver’s seat. He spun out before he even managed to close his door.

Dan turned to Jan, gave her his arm, and escorted her into the house as if they were returning from a stately gala. Neither of them showed any remorse about what had just transpired.

*‘I thought these things only happened in the movies.’*

I debated for a second about going inside, then floated into the house over their heads as they went through the immense front door. I could see into the dining room where the table had been set for their dinner. They calmly walked over to the table and sat on chairs pulled back for them by their servants.

They ate their dinner as if this was a special anniversary. Grossed out, I floated into the kitchen to see if any of the staff was suspicious of anything out of the ordinary. It was good to see them poking fun at the arrogant couple, but it appeared to be a nightly comedy act for them. It was obviously used as a hatred defuser. It was definitely NOT good-hearted ribbing. They didn’t act as if anything seemed out of kilter, however. Apparently the couple dined in celebratory mode frequently after a major money making deal.

After going back to the dining room and seeing a few seconds of the nauseatingly nice Dan wooing Jan as if they were newlyweds, I couldn’t take anymore. I oozed through the dining room window and had a look at the outside of the mansion.

I saw a shadow in the guard station at the gate, and floated quickly to investigate.

“I wonder what got into Joe. Had he seemed upset about anything tonight?” The guard was on the phone. “He just sped outa here like a bat outa h---. And in front of the boss, at that! Does he want to lose his job?”

I debated whether or not to try to get close enough to the telephone to hear what the person on the other end of the line was telling him. I decided that even if the man did sense me, he'd have no idea what was going on, so I put my ear up to the receiver.

“.....tried to talk him out of it, but not knowing exactly what he had up his sleeve, I was at a disadvantage, you see. When I pressed him to open up, he about bit my head off.”

“Well, he drove off in the opposite direction from his usual. Should one of us try to tail him?” the guard said.

“Nah. He's a grown man. Not too smart, maybe, but his business is his business. If he didn't want to confide in me earlier, the h--- with him, then, I say,” the other man answered.

“Alright, then. You're his buddy, and if that's what you think, who am I to disagree. So, how's your missus?” The conversation took a mundane turn, so I floated back to the house.

Looking through the dining room window almost made me gag. The Jackastons were holding hands over the table and playing footsies under the table.

I wandered around inside and out for a few more minutes. I felt like I was on the set of Peyton Place or Dallas, but nothing new or useful was to be found. I debated whether or not I should follow the chauffeur to find out where he was dumping the body. My curiosity was strong enough to want to go, but apparently not strong enough to 'will' me there. I sighed, and decided to rejoin the other two.

## The Dinner Meeting

I did manage to will myself back to the front of the office building where Tom and Larry were still waiting patiently for King Arthur and his helper Henry to leave. I told them what I had seen.

“You’re pulling my leg,” Larry said in disbelief. “You’re so bored you made up some diabolical story to spice things up. Either that, or you’re hallucinating again.”

Tom looked surprised and asked in a sincere tone, “Does Ian have problems with hallucinations? Why wouldn’t anyone have informed me of such a significant perception problem?”

“Because it’s not true, that’s why,” I answered testily. “Larry’s just ribbing me. And, no, I didn’t hallucinate any of it. Not only is he an evil businessman, his wife is a hateful killer and a stupid sucker, and the chauffeur is immoral enough to be bought off! There’s no way he’s going to get off scot-free. Mr. J----- had an evil look on his face when the Mrs. told him their plan. I’d bet my life he’s planning to set the poor guy up somehow. Two tag-a-longs bite the dust, and the god and goddess continue to rule the roost. It’s sickening. Homer couldn’t have written a better version of one of Zeus and Hera’s spats.”

“When did you become a literary buff?” Larry asked in disbelief.

“Just ask the Dream Team to send you to Homer’s classroom. It’s definitely more interesting than what you two have been doing,” I suggested.

“I AM getting bored sitting here watching and waiting.” Larry shot a sideways glance at Tom as he tilted his head towards the young guide.

“I’m able to tune into the heavenly radio station for music, talk shows, meetings on the goings on of other teams..... I’m not as idle as I may look.” Tom had a rather smug look on his childish face. “When your tracts are all matured, you can tune in also.”

Larry and I looked at each other and rolled our eyeballs. Tom’s statement sounded like heaven’s version of ‘when you grow up, you can do what ever you want’.

“May I suggest you go back to the mansion, Ian? We need as much info on how Mr. Jackaston’s mind works as possible. Larry and I are going to split up between Mr. Kiln and Mr. Worman when they finally show up to head home,” Tom said.

“Just be glad you’ve had something exciting to watch, at least,” Larry said to me through the side of his mouth.

I wasn’t anxious to go back to the ‘castle’, so I changed the subject. “Where did the others go, and when? Why doesn’t anyone have to tail them?”

“They left shortly after Dan. They were all planning to meet in a restaurant downtown. I doubt Lawrence will go, but the others all seemed to be fairly interested,” Tom answered. “You could go get an idea of their plans, if you’d prefer. It may prove useful, too, and I can understand your reluctance to revisit the mansion. You may actually do better to wait until the next day in the office, when Dan’s alone with his thoughts. He’ll be less muddled when he’s not actively trying to fool someone.”

I didn’t wait to be told twice. I was in the restaurant in a flash. I had had enough of the soap opera for one night, and I was ready for some heated, but logical, conversation.

They were waiting for a large enough table to open up. A few had gone to the bar to wait while the others sat quietly in the foyer.

I went to the ones at the bar, naturally. There was an empty stool near them. I hovered over it, and wondered if I could have a drink, too. To my great surprise, a gin and tonic appeared out of nowhere! Of course, it was of the heavenly



variety, all mist and no liqueur, but I wasn't going to complain. I picked it up and sipped at it contentedly. *'Ah, now this is the life. I'd much prefer to follow these guys than that worse-than-dirt Danny.'*

I was close enough to hear the guys were just talking about sports, so I didn't try too hard to catch everything. I looked around the restaurant via the mirror behind the bar. I have to admit I was disappointed to notice that I was not visible in the mirror at all. I had hoped I would show up as at least a smudge or a mist. It made me feel very insignificant. But it also helped me to remember that my seat looked empty to the people there, and saved me from being sat upon by a rather large woman. I noticed her coming up to the stool just in time to grab my drink and swoosh up and to the right. I doubted I would have been injured in any way, but I wasn't interested in finding out the hard way if I was wrong.

I was able to get a better view of the restaurant from my new vantage point at the end of the bar up amongst the containers of booze and clean glasses. The place was getting busier by the moment. And louder. And younger. The bar area was quite large, and it was beginning to look like a favorite nightspot for young unattached businessmen and women to hang around and chat. And meet new faces. I hadn't been to a bar like this since my college days. We used to call them meat markets because the guys used to think of them as places to pick up a good looker for a fun night. This was an upscale version, though.

Randy and Pete finished discussing the latest games, and began to watch the crowd, commenting to each other about how the women looked, and which ones would be worth trying to approach. Daniel was just watching his drink. Randy really rubbed me the wrong way, somehow. I didn't care for his attitude at all. His comments about the women were very disrespectful, beyond the 'rating on a scale of 1 – 10' type of banter. He was downright crude. It made me really appreciate my son-in-law, Sam. My guts twisted

thinking Susan may have been exposed to an a----- like Randy when she was in college.

Which reminded me of why I hated Matt, the guy from college I had met shortly after I had died. I wanted to deck him for how arrogant and hateful he was being to a bunch of freshman girls in a dive of a meat market. My so-called friends held me back, and Matt saw them. I had to deal with the b----- bringing it up for the rest of our senior year. I wondered how the h--- he was allowed into heaven. He didn't have any gold value as far as I could see. I felt better when I imagined him popping a zit and effectively disappearing.

I was brought back from my reverie when "Mr. Maven, party of 8" was announced over the intercom. I followed the three drinkers to the table, and found a comfy corner from which to watch.

The conversation before ordering was affable enough and full of small talk. There was a tense moment when Bob tried to admonish Randy for ogling women in the bar. Apparently Pete told Bob about Randy's behavior, wanting to stir things up a bit for entertainment. Seems Randy has a 'wife-in-waiting' at home, and Bob's moral indignation was unmistakable. I have to admit, I rather enjoyed the resulting give and take. Randy was outnumbered and he took a verbal beating for his failings. From the sounds of it, he didn't just look at other women. He followed through any and every chance he had.

Brad and Andy started to talk business first, as soon as they had ordered their meals. Ralph and the woman were listening, but looked anything but hopeful. After their little tête-à-tête, the three drinkers and born-again Bob quieted down and listened, too.

"We can find the best minds in the country to back up our ideas if we can get Henry to budget enough money for our effort. If we make it a political game, he may bite." Brad was using his calculating, maneuvering skills to formulate a plan.

He looked at Ralph and asked, “How soon do you think you can catch up with some of your old college buddies, Ralph?”

“I’ve been sorta keeping up with most of them. It won’t be hard to find them. But it will be hard to convince them it would be worthwhile working with us. JK Petro has a reputation among the alternative fuel crowd for being shifty, at best.” Ralph’s expression never seemed to change from one of despondency, even here among colleagues with similar goals.

“If they don’t actually work FOR us, but just with the help of our money, would they be more interested?” Andy asked.

“Only if it comes with no strings attached. And no appearance of strings, either. They’re very sensitive to looking as if they’d been bought. They’re sticklers for not having any conflicts of interest hidden in any closets that could jump out and try to discredit their research. And there’s no way for us to legally get money to them from the company without leaving a trail for some journalistic sleuth to follow if anything of interest is discovered,” Ralph answered. He instantly turned beet red, glanced nervously at the woman and added, “Sorry, Carol.”

“No problem. You’re absolutely right,” Carol answered. “But if your friends won’t accept any money from us in any way, shape or form, then what’s the use in risking our careers trying to convince Dan and Arthur to make Henry give us any?”

Pete, ever the optimist, interjected a “Why don’t we win the lottery under an alias and donate the prize to research?!” He grinned, even though everyone shot him dirty looks. “Just trying to help. Ya’ll always accuse me of being Dour Dillon. So, support me in my venture into hopefulness!”

“Can it, Dill,” growled Daniel. He didn’t look like the type that gets happier when drunk.

Brad’s mind was at work during this little side conversation, however. “We could form a charity of sorts, and accept donations for research into ‘Green Energy’

projects. Then we could get the company to donate, along with thousands of smaller donors to dilute out the conflict. There would be no OBVIOUS conflict of interest then. They would be accepting the funds from a public charity.”

“It might look even better if we give to it on our own, looking as though we are going against the company’s policy. We could all come out of this looking like heroes!” Randy interrupted overly enthusiastically with a strong hint of sarcasm. “Then all the women would REALLY flock to me!” He thoroughly enjoyed the deep red color of Bob’s face as Bob tried valiantly to not respond to the obvious invitation to battle.

Carol shook her head and rolled her eyes in disgust at Randy’s uselessness, and continued the discussion with Brad. “Your plan won’t get past any of the scandal thirsty journalists these days, Brad.” Carol smiled at Ralph as she said this. “They have to get ‘good dirt’ to keep their ratings up. That kind of a front is child’s play to them.”

“You’re right, Carol. We either have to be above board, or,” Andy’s grin was devious, “We could hire a political strategist! After all, it’s not the truth that matters. It’s what the public PERCEIVES as truth that matters!”

Brad smiled at the concept, but said, “I’d rather stay honest, if you don’t mind. I have enough trouble remembering what’s real. I’d never be able to remember a tangled web of fiction.”

Bob almost burst at the chance to get a dig in on Randy. “This adulterous heathen has had LOTS of practice at deception. We wouldn’t have to hire anyone outside our little group to fabricate a right nice little story.” If Bob’s eyes had been lasers, Randy would have had a huge hole burned right through his head.

Randy bowed and said, “At your service.”

Bob’s eyes turned to slits full of hate, glaring at the unremorseful egotist.

“Will you two stop trying to kill each other, and get with the program!” Brad’s patience was wearing thin. He turned to Ralph and asked, “Could you talk with your friends and

ask them if they have any suggestions? They've probably run into this problem before. And I'm sure they can always use the money."

"Maybe we could donate to a charity already set up, if they already receive funds from one. That CAN'T be made to look like a front, can it?" Andy added belatedly.

"Carol, why don't you ask your husband, and feel out some of those reporter friends of yours to see what really could fly," Brad asked, now a bit more hopeful.

His expression changed back to a stern seriousness as he looked at Pete, Daniel and Randy. "Is there anything useful you three could offer to do for the effort?"

"What are you and Andy going to do?" Pete asked defensively.

"I'm going to start checking out potential charities and see if their rules would be conducive to our needs," Andy offered.

"And it looks as if my task is to think of ways to keep you three useful and out of trouble," Brad sighed. "Surely, between the three of you, a creative spark could kindle a good enough idea."

"Okay, Mr. Know-it-all," Pete said bitterly, tilting his head to his left. "What about Bob?"

Bob was sitting with his head down, praying. His was the first meal to arrive, but he didn't seem to be saying grace. His face was a bit less red. With his eyes closed, I wasn't sure how much hate he had been able to pray away, but if he didn't manage to control his anger, he'd have a heck of a time eating. I should know. It was one way I maintained my svelte physique. Not that I liked to eat much, anyway.....

The conversation stopped while everyone received their food and began to eat. When it resumed, the talk was lighter, even between the less helpful men. Of course, it was good that Pete was between Randy and Bob. Bob was very quiet, and using every ounce of self-control to concentrate on his food and block out Randy's flamboyant 'small talk'.

After the meal, no one wanted desert or coffee. The ones with defined tasks were eager to get started, and the others

were just eager to get away from each other. I didn't hold up much hope for their continued participation in the group.

I followed them to the door of the restaurant. They walked along on the sidewalk for quite a while before I realized they were walking all the way back to their office building.

Brad, Andy and Bob went back into the building. The others headed for their cars. Pete offered Daniel a ride home, putting an arm over his shoulder in an effort to help the poor inebriated soul avoid walking into the parking garages' tollbooth. Carol and Ralph were in a deep discussion about the trials and tribulations of a reporter's wife's life.

That was when I realized Randy never left the restaurant. '*He really is a b-----,*' I thought. '*He probably went back into the bar to pick up a 'looker'. A-----.*'

## What to do Next?

I went back to where Tom and Larry had been waiting for Henry and Arthur. They weren't there. *'Maybe I could go visit Arnie and the guys for a while. Julia said I could, and not lose any time on my mission. Yep, I decided, that's what I'll do. I could use a good game of Eucre.'*

There were only a few souls at the campsite. Lifesaver was grazing lazily in her spacious pasture. Emma's trailer was deserted, of course. No one really expected her to stay here much.

I headed to the card table. There were four guys there, but no one that I recognized. I turned to head to the Watering Hole when one of the guys spied me.

"Ian!! Is that you?! Where have you been?! We all thought you had died or something!" Harry gave Arnie a 'high five' for that silly comment.

Arnie got up and gave me a bear hug even stronger than the one he gave when I first arrived. "We've been everywhere looking for you! And look how much silver we gave up in the search!" He pointed to his full head of hair. But it was still gray.

When I looked at them all more closely, I could see that they were younger versions of Joe, Harry, Arnie and Johnny. "What happened to you guys? I thought you were happy with the jobs you had." I really was bewildered.

"When you AND Larry disappeared, we started to get worried. We asked our deAgers what happened to you, and they told us the two of you wanted to make more of your deaths, and headed off to school," Arnie explained, with a grin on his face. "We couldn't let you get by with showing us up, now, could we?"

Loss of a few years had done nothing to reduce Arnie's competitive streak.

"We went to a few sessions that told us about our choices, and decided some of them didn't sound too bad," Joe added, but admitted to purposely not signing up for those that sounded like they required too much dedication and responsibility. He had decided to be a guardian angel for a rotten kid he'd encountered on a dream. He said he would mostly just be watching and relaying info to the dream team, because the kid was definitely not going to ask for any divine guidance. But Joe believed there was some good in him somewhere, and wanted to try to help find it.

Arnie wanted to get to know the coach at the basketball game who was trying to get his team to take out the other team's point. He had gotten the sense that the guy was under a lot of external pressure from somewhere to win at all costs. Arnie didn't believe that the coach was really all that bad. So he volunteered to be the coach's guardian angel. He was looking forward to some fun interactions with the Ghost of the Coach from Hell.

Johnny, however, wanted more excitement. He was interested in working with the gold retrieval team. "They convince the souls who choose to hang around their death site instead of going to heaven or hell to come to heaven," he explained. "I wanted to go right to the evil types and convince them heaven isn't as 'sappy' as they think it is, 'cuz I was almost one of them. But apparently the team's afraid that a hateful ghost could convince ME to stay on earth as a ghost instead of me convincing them to come here. I have to admit, they may be right," Johnny explained. "So I get to start by going along with an experienced retriever to recruit some of the wishy-washy hangers-on. Eventually, I'll be able to go by myself. If I do well, I may eventually be able to tackle one of the scary ghosts. I really think I can do a great job."

"So what are you all doing here instead of working at your new jobs?" I asked.



“We wanted to have one more good game of euchre before we really jumped in. What are YOU doing here? You never did tell us where you went. And what did you do with Larry?” Arnie said.

“I’m taking a break. Larry’s with our coach, Tom, trailing some oil company men,” I began. “And don’t ask me why, because I’m not sure I understand myself. I think we are to try to keep them from stopping a physicist who is developing a non-oil source of power, or something like that.”

By the looks on their faces, I could tell they weren’t interested in the details.

“Well, pull up a trunk and join us, if you need a break,” Johnny offered. “I’ll go to the Watering Hole and scrounge up three other players, and we can all get good and rowdy!”

He shoved me, or I should say, he shoved my shoulders, over the seat he just vacated. The rest of me soon followed. “Thanks for the stretch, Johnny. That felt wonderful,” I said, a bit sarcastically.

“Don’t mention it,” Johnny said over his shoulder as he headed to round up some other men. “I’ll be right back. Don’t ruin my hand for me, Ian. We were winning when you showed up!”

I had a wonderful time. With four teams, we were able to have winners play winners and losers play losers. It felt like a tournament! We may have played for days, for all we knew. It was especially fun when one of us forgot to go slo-mo when a great hand was dealt. We razzed the poor guy ‘til puffs of smoke were coming out of his ears, then we let up. I only got caught once. Or twice. Or maybe three or four times, but who’s counting.

Eventually, I started to worry about Larry and Tom. I wondered if they were looking for me. I started to feel anxious to get back to work. When the guys assured me they could easily find a better player to replace me, I said, “Later, guys,” and faded out.

## The Devil in the Corner

I popped back to earth into Danny's office at the top of the oil company's building. For a split second, I barely had time to realize that was where I was before I was pushed through the wall into the large closet. I was pushed so hard that I bounced off the opposite wall.

I picked myself up and made sure I was all there. Then I slowly walked towards the wall separating me from Danny, expecting to feel the repulsion at every step. But nothing happened. I found myself face to face with the wall but absolutely no sign of the force I knew was on the other side. I hesitated, looked to the right, and then to the left, searching for an alternative to going through the wall.

I looked up, and got an idea. If I oozed through the vents, with the partial physical shield of the grate, I may be able to get close enough to see what's going on without being sensed or repulsed.

The sensation of oozing through the vent slots was interesting. I hadn't noticed any specific feeling as I oozed through doors and walls, but it was definitely different than floating through air. But now, with some of me going through metal, and some through air, the difference was very noticeable. The slices that went through air had to wait a moment for the slices that went through the metal to catch up. It reminded me of a stretching or yawning sensation.

I went back and forth through the vent a few times, enjoying the feeling, before I refocused on my search for a safe place to watch the goings on in Danny's office.

The vent to his office was close to the window. His back was to me, and I could see what he was doing on his computer, but I couldn't make out any details. I looked

around the room to see if he was alone. I saw no one, but somehow I knew there was someone else there.

“Aha!!” Danny exclaimed so suddenly I jumped. “He’s got to it! Their geeses are cooked if anyone reports the doll baby missing! And I’ll be in the clear.” He leaned back in his chair, and stretched his stubby arms over his head, cracking his knuckles. He got up and walked around the office, mumbling to himself.

I was beginning to think he was crazy when I sensed a slow spinning in the corner of the office close to the wall through which I had been pushed. It looked like a slurring; like when two liquids of different concentrations are slowly mixed. Between it and Danny was a comfortable overstuffed chair. Danny plopped into it.

I watched with amazement as the slurry seemed to engulf the overstuffed man in the overstuffed chair. As it did, the look on Danny’s face turned more and more evil. I half expected him to turn red and grow horns and a tail. He looked possessed. Not the fake possessed in Hollywood movies. This was real evil. He emitted real, unadulterated hate.

He was not speaking, so I cautiously tried to tune into his thoughts. I was careful to suppress as much of my gold as I could by focusing on how angry he made me feel.

It worked. I couldn’t make out specifics, but I knew he was communicating with a powerful force that had a strong, slow counterclockwise spin. It was reinforcing his greedy, self-centered thoughts. He was getting encouragement to continue with his current plan of attack. He felt more and more reassured that his plan would succeed. But somehow I mistrusted the message he was receiving. I sensed a dual meaning; he was only sensing one.

Puzzled, I lost my focus on how angered I was just by being in Danny’s presence. Luckily, it was a slow transition, and I could sense the building repulsive force in time to back quickly into the large closet.

I plopped onto the floor, and thought. And puzzled. And pondered.

I gave up. This was just too confusing for me to figure out alone. I decided to see if I could tune into my PGS instead of asking for Julia or Tom. I tried to empty my mind; to let my thoughts flow loosely, waiting for direction.

*'Double meaning. The force in the corner was a slurry of different substances that were not fully mixed together. Danny could sense the major part of it. I could sense both. Danny was an evil man, mostly silver, and little, if any, gold. I was some of both. Could there be a touch of gold in the force in the corner? And I can sense it but Danny can't because Danny doesn't have enough gold to notice it? Why would hell send an evil guide tainted with gold?'*

*'Eureka! I got it! This PGS is great! I've got to remember to use it more often!'*

I hurried back to the vent. I paused before going through it to regain some of my focus on my anger, but I couldn't contain my excitement.

I decided to see if I could get close to the closet wall just on the other side of the corner where Danny and the slurry were in the office. Perhaps the wall would keep out the counter spin without keeping out the clockwise spin. Somewhere I had gotten the idea that silver forces were more dense than gold....and not just figuratively. Gold forces can ooze through solids while silver is contained by structure. Gold forces are fluid and flexible. Silver forces are more rigid. Physical barriers were much more problematic for the counter forces.

As I floated slowly towards the corner, I was elated to find that not only was the counter force not able to sense and repel me, but the clockwise force was pulling me closer!

A happiness I had not felt before, even in heaven, overcame me.....

I was fully enveloped in the warmth of my son's gold!

I understood without being told. I understood AND felt what was happening deeply enough to have it seared into my being. My son's gold DNA that had infiltrated Leo in hell

was here now, interfering with Leo's duties. Lenny was reducing the evil effect Leo had on Danny. He was able to interfere with what Leo was telling Danny so that Danny's evil plot to get his chauffer would fail. And if Leo fails to help Danny carry out his schemes, Leo will be kicked out of hell. I smiled when I imagined Johnny trying to urge a disgraced Leo, with Lenny's gold, into heaven.

But I now knew that eventually Lenny would be in heaven with me and Irene.

NOW I was REALLY motivated to do this mission. Danny had to fail so that Leo would be kicked out of hell, freeing him up for the gold retrieval team to bring Leo, with Lenny's gold, to heaven.

LET ME AT 'EM!!!

## The Plot

The next thing I knew, I was in Danny's mansion, in an alcove with his wife as she was talking on the phone. She was more than a little anxious. She was shaking, pacing and pale.

"What do you mean, you couldn't get any money out?" She was also VERY angry. "Are you too stupid to follow simple instructions?" After a brief pause, she gasped. "No. NO, NO, NO!!!! He can't do that!! It's an account in MY name, and MY name only!!! You tell those morons to get their s--- together, or I'll have them fired!" She slammed the phone down so hard, it bounced off the receiver and landed on the floor.

She didn't seem to notice the mishap, and it hadn't landed on the cradle long enough to end the connection. I could hear the poor chap on the other end pleading with her to listen to him. It sounded like the poor chauffeur. Apparently Danny had put a hold on her account in Switzerland, and Schmitt couldn't get out the funds she had promised him.

When he realized she wasn't listening to him, his pleas turned to anger. He was now stuck in a foreign country without anywhere to live, and no money to go on with his new life. He believed he'd been double-crossed. If this had been a cartoon, the phone would have been spewing all sorts of angry symbols.

When Jan stopped pacing and decided to call her darling Danny, she finally noticed the phone on the floor. When she picked it up, she could hear the cursing accusations from the chauffeur. Her reply would have burned up a keyboard trying to substitute enough symbols.

The second time she slammed the phone down, she made sure it was properly placed. When the connection to Switzerland was broken, she dialed her husband's number. Her side of the ensuing conversation started out as angry as the end of the conversation with Schmitty. I wished I had heard some of Danny's side of the conversation, as Jan was quickly appeased. I had a hard time imagining what he could have possibly said to her to calm her so easily. She ended the call with, "Yes, I love you too, dear. I'll see you tonight. Love you." And she gave him a few kisses over the phone. Yuk.

I wished again that I could have heard what he said to her, and I popped into Danny's office again. This time the repulsive force wasn't as strong. It only splattered me into the wall, not through it. As I slowly extricated my mist from the wall and re-inflated, I looked around the room for the slurry. I had a vague sense of its presence, but not as strong as when I could see it in the corner. *'I wonder if it condensed and plopped into his pocket?'*

Even though I could regain my three-dimensional being while in the room, I was not able to move away from the wall. The repulsion was too strong. I was able to shimmy a bit side to side, however, and eventually I found that going to the left seemed to ease the force holding me to the wall. I continued to the left until I no longer felt uncomfortably compressed.

While I inched along the wall, I listened to his phone conversation. It was his half of the conversation with Jan. The scum-bag was almost cooing to her, like a mother tries to calm a child with a badly skinned knee. He assured her he had not placed any such thing as a hold on her account, but he would call immediately to find out what the problem may be. He assured her that he also wanted Schmitty to be able to get his reward for his part in the incident. "I'm involved in it, now, too, dear. I don't want him to go sour on us, either."

By the look on his face, I knew he meant the exact opposite. After he said his 'I love you's' and gave his smooches over the phone, he gently hung up the phone, and

chuckled. The chuckle grew into a snicker, and the snicker into a full-throated, spine-chilling evil laugh. He sounded like a male version of the evil witch in the Wizard of Oz. I wanted to puke.

Then he started to mutter to himself, and the repulsion grew stronger. I was pushed through the wall before I had time to think about my options.

Once on the other side of the wall, I gathered my thoughts. I felt angry enough to give the vent a try. I had to get a better idea of what Danny had up his sleeve. Or in his pocket.....

This time I didn't dally at the vent, and quickly took my place over his office. I was able to watch as the slurry emerged from his right coat pocket and engulfed him. I focused on his mumblings.

"When Schmittty is picked up in Switzerland for vagrancy, they'll revoke his Visa. He'll be deported back to the States, and he'll be sure to head straight for Jan. He wouldn't dare approach me. He'll threaten to blackmail her for money, or go to the police. He'll think he could get off with less time if he turns state witness on her. She won't have any choice but to pay him off. I won't put a stop on her accounts here. The flow of money can be easily traced if and when the baby doll is reported missing and the cops start their snooping. I've covered my tracks. I've always covered my tracks. I can't be pinned with anything, especially if Schmittty is caught taking a payoff out of Jan's account. It'll obviously be a case of the jealous wife out to get the whore who was after her darling hubby." His grin was pure evil. He was so smug and sure of himself.

I was wondering why he was so sure no one at the hotel saw him with her, and that no one saw her leave with him in the limo. And there was sure to be physical evidence on her body from their intimate interaction just before her death. All Schmittty needed to do was to tell what happened, and Danny would be an accomplice.

As I thought this, I heard the sound of a whish of wind pass my ear. I furrowed my brow, and listened closely. When



I heard another whish, I realized I was losing my focus on how angry I felt, and the repulsive force was growing. I refocused on the hateful slob of a human being gloating about his scheme to trap his wife, whom he supposedly loved.

It was surprisingly easy to conjure up the hatred. I was able to hang on to the feeling while I pondered the meaning of the whoshes. When I again started thinking about how unlikely it was that he could actually get away with it, another, more distinct whosh blew past both of my ears. It seemed to be trying to distract me, to blow my thoughts away.....

'Aha!' I thought suddenly, completely losing my anger as the meaning of the whoshes seemed to leap into my head. And just as quickly, I was repelled back through the vent to the closet so fast the parts of me that went through the metal of the vent were still at the ceiling when the parts that went through the air were already near the floor.

As I sat on the floor, I marveled at my realization that the whoshes were Lenny's gold spin trying to keep my thoughts from being picked up by the counter spin of Leo. My thoughts were the holes in the plan Danny and Leo were not able to see because of Lenny's influence. If Leo became aware of the thoughts through me, then Danny could be made aware, too, and they could come up with a way to plug up the holes.

As I was beginning to think I might make things worse by trying to find out more, I felt the urge to regroup with the others for some broadening of my knowledge base. Maybe I did need to know more about what the others were up to. What I was seeing and learning did not seem to have anything to do with the oil industry and physics. And I certainly didn't want to mess anything up for Lenny. Maybe if I got the bigger picture, I could help Lenny indirectly by helping the oil company crowd make more trouble for Danny.

## First Mission Accomplished

I faded into the meeting room before any of the others this time. I walked over to the window and absentmindedly watched the souls on the rides. They seemed so innocent and carefree.

I turned back to the room and took a seat on a comfortable recliner. At least it looked like a recliner. But being made of mist, I didn't have enough force to push it back for the footrest to appear. I checked for a lever. There was none. I sighed, and sat back, wishing I could adjust it into a more comfortable position. POOF! It instantly went into the fully reclined position. I smiled and shook my head slowly as I realized how daft I was. *'I just can't seem to remember how easy it is to do little things here with just a simple thought.'*

I closed my eyes and relaxed. It wasn't like the warmth I experienced when I relaxed on my mossy bank, but it was still a very good feeling. I completely forgot how angry I had been at Danny. I was unable to worry about Lenny, either. I just felt too good. I knew everything would turn out for the best.

After a bit, the others began to show up, too. The physics team was the first to arrive, one at a time. George was first, and he didn't look too eager to talk. He looked rather depressed, actually. Al was close behind him, and immediately flooded George with encouraging remarks, but didn't get the positive response he had hoped. George just plopped down in the chair across from me, and sighed.

Al decided to change the subject, and asked me how things were going for me. I told him I was too confused about what my goal actually was to know if I was making headway or not.

Sheila popped in next, looking somewhat flustered, but not discouraged. She was apparently covering great distances bouncing from one contact scientist to another as she looked for any way at all to influence any of them. She enjoyed challenges, and she wasn't about to give up on this one just yet.

Tom and Larry arrived at the same time. Their moods were difficult to read. They actually seemed to be a bit bored. "Not bored, Ian. Numb. Just plain numb," Larry corrected me. "It's getting harder and harder to watch these self-centered a----- and not be able to wring their necks,"

Tom added, "We are getting to know their methods of control over their families, and over their coworkers. They're intimidators. They're truth twisters. They're experts at keeping people off balance by making them question themselves about what are solid, consistent facts. While the others are busy trying to figure out what just happened, and to regain their bearings, Henry and Arthur gain control, and their agenda is pushed through before anyone can come up with a coherent objection."

Larry laughed when he noticed the dumbfounded look on my face. "Don't feel bad, Ian. I was there watching what he was watching, and I have no idea what he just said. All I saw was two evil guys make everyone else look like idiots. Even Brad and Andy looked clueless. It was most frustrating to watch. It brought back bad memories of all the a----- like that I had to deal with when I was alive. And it's no easier watching it now that I'm dead, either."

"So, what have you learned about Danny?" Tom asked.

The science team perked up their ears, anxious to hear what I had to say.

"Why is Danny so important? He's just one evil guy, and there are plenty of others. And he's not even involved with any of this energy stuff. He's just plotting to put his wife in jail for murder." I wasn't too sure I liked the amount of interest they were showing. It didn't make sense.

"He's more than just an evil guy, Ian. He has a connection with hell. He has extra powers to do more than just human

evil. He's got some sort of extra sensory perception tuned into the counter forces. ESP is sometimes used as a trap for hapless souls experimenting with other world-ness. It's also a powerful force behind those willing and eager to do horrendously evil things. It is the opposite of our PGS in most ways. It's much more limited. It's secretive. It's contained and controlled by a central counter spinner. It doesn't allow its victim many choices. It dictates to the receptive person which evil things to do and when. But the person doesn't feel controlled. He or she feels what they are directed to do is just the best way to respond to a given situation. And if they have any clockwise spin in them at all, it is very effectively neutralized." Tom stopped when he noticed a blank look on most of our faces. "Am I still being too obtuse?" he asked.

Sheila looked a bit smug. She appeared to be following his thought process. Al looked okay, but Larry and George just had blank looks.

Tom smiled, and asked again, "So, what have you learned about Danny, Ian?"

"Your little dissertation about superhuman evilness may not make sense, but I did get to see it, and feel it, in action." The others drew closer in anticipation. I tried, a little bit, anyway, to contain the mischief that began to rise in me. But I couldn't.

"You won't believe me. It's so far fetched you'll think I've lost my mind." I stalled. I teased. This was fun.

Larry recognized what I was doing. "Ian, we all already know you're not right. You've never been in your right mind in the first place."

George added, "After all the amazing things we've witnessed since we died, how could anything seem too farfetched?" Shirley nodded her head in agreement.

"Okay, then. Here goes." I sighed. I put a thoughtful look on my face as though trying hard to decide just how to explain what I saw. "Wait! Shouldn't the Bible bunch be here, too? They'll want to hear it too, won't they?"

Larry raised his eyebrows at me in a most paternalistic manner. Tom put his hands on his hips. Sheila, the teacher that she was, could spot my foot dragging easily, and crossed her arms sternly, and pursed her lips.

“Okay, okay.” I really did want to tell them, but I wasn’t very good with communicating normal things. Describing the things I saw and felt in Danny’s office was not going to be easy, even if I tried to be serious. I was much better at embellishing. But this was so fantastic that there was no room to ‘dress it up’. So I did my best to just tell what happened.

I cleared my throat. “When I popped into Danny’s office, I barely had time to know where I was before I was pushed with so much force into the adjoining room that I bounced off the opposite wall. It almost flattened me! But I shook off the shock of it, and figured out a way to get close enough to watch without being pushed too hard.” I struck a proud pose as I described how I thought about the vent, and figured out that the repulsion was not able to work through solid objects. Of course, I took all of the credit for solving that part of the puzzle.

“I saw a blur; sort of a slurry, in the air behind the chair Danny was sitting on. It was spinning, and engulfed him. It made him look more evil than the possessed girl in ‘The Exorcist’. But I wasn’t scared.” I was still in my straight-backed, haughty pose. “I kept my spot in the vent against the strength of the counter spin, and watched as Danny schemed to frame his wife for murder.” I paused. “Well, not actually frame her, since she did actually kill the woman, but he and the slurry were plotting to get her caught without being suspected himself.” I stopped to enjoy the confused looks on their faces.

“Oh, didn’t I tell you about the murder?” I asked innocently. “Mrs. Jackaston strangled darling Danny’s mistress in the back of their limo, and planned to pay off the chauffeur with money in her bank account in Switzerland. She had actually planned to kill them both. She had a gun, but Danny sweet talked her out of using it on him.”

I paused to watch the looks of awe on their faces. Except Larry. He still had his paternalistic look. I threw him a self-satisfied smirk, and then resumed before he had time to insert any snide comments.

“Anyway, I noticed something not quite right about the slurry. It wasn’t all spinning in the same direction. It didn’t take me long to figure out that some clockwise gold spin was mixed in with the evil spin. And it told me to keep my mind shut about all the ways Danny’s plot wouldn’t work.” I grinned at their confused expressions. “Gee, what idiotic faces.” I felt rather superior.

Larry knew how I felt, and pointed it out to the others. “Did you all see what Ian just did? That’s sorta like what Henry and Arthur did to put people off guard. You don’t need to understand Tom’s explanation. You just got to witness some of their dastardly skills in action. Good job, Ian.” The loathsome look he shot me was infuriating.

“If I’m so evil, then why is everyone so eager to hear what I have to say!?” I responded huffily.

Tom’s logical interjection put us back on track. “If Ian weren’t partly evil, he wouldn’t have been able to get as close as he did, and he wouldn’t have been able to witness Danny communicating with his demon. Go on, Ian.”

Somewhat deflated, I continued my story with a bit less emphasis on my problem solving skills, and with less pompous posturing. “So, anyway, as it turns out, the gold in the demon, whose name is Leo, by the way, is my son’s, and he’s got things under control.”

“You found Lenny?!” Larry interjected excitedly.

“Sure did,” I answered, gloating with happiness. “Lenny’s interfering with the communication between Leo and Danny so that their plot will fail, and Danny will get caught. So, it looks to me like he’ll be out of the energy picture before too long, unless it takes the cops too long to piece things together. It did seem as though Danny wasn’t expecting anyone to report his mistress missing anytime soon.”

Tom nodded his head knowingly with a pensive look on his face. “And even if Danny’s not out of the picture by

being caught and jailed by the time our physicist connects with George, Lenny will be able to intervene with any plotting he may do to foil our plans just as effectively.”

Tom turned to the others, and added, “I’ll fill in the gaps in Ian’s story for everyone, so that it will be understood by all of us. It’s important that we are aware of what Ian is able to sense and see, so that we will have some knowledge of what is going on with people who are too repulsive for us to get near enough to understand for ourselves.”

Tom then turned back to me and added, “Even though I realize I’m risking overly inflating your already very healthy ego, Ian, I have to tell you how impressed I am with how quickly you were able to accomplish your goal. Thank you.”

Now it was my turn to have my mouth hanging open in confusion. “What do you mean by that, Tom? Am I done? Don’t I have anything else to do with this mission? You aren’t dropping me, are you!?” I was becoming a bit peeved at the idea of being dumped. Especially since I had done such a good job.

Tom tried not to smile. “No, Ian. You are not being dropped. Your skills are more valuable than ever, now that you’ve shown how well you have learned to put them to good use. You have met your INITIAL goal already, is all I meant. Now we will need you for other goals.”

## Mission II, If I Choose to Accept

After Tom had filled the others in on what I had seen of Leo and Lenny in hell, Sheila was the first to suggest my next mission. “One of the scientists in a key position is very uncomfortable for me to be around. I can only bear to be in the same room with him for a brief time. I know he’s not fond of the ideas of the other physicists even though he sometimes appears to go along with them. He claims to be playing devil’s advocate whenever the others suspect he is being unnecessarily negative. But I don’t believe him. Could you have a look at him, Ian?”

I shrugged my shoulders and said, “I guess so.” I looked to Tom for any indication otherwise. He just nodded.

“Do I need any special information to help me?” I asked Tom and Sheila.

“I think you’ll do just fine, Ian. You pick things up quickly, and telling you more details than you need to know may be counterproductive.” He smiled at his choice of words.

“Shall we go, then, Ian?” Sheila asked as she held out her hand to me.

As I took her hand, we immediately popped into a most untidy office. I was barely able to make out where the filing cabinets were. It took me a while to find the person who was huddled in the midst of the chaos, busying himself over sheets of scrap paper.

He was a youngish man with all of his hair and no gray. It was sticking up every which way, but not in a stylish way. Not that I ever considered any of the sticky-uppy hairdos stylish. His glasses were so smudged I wondered if he was able to read anything through them, but they had slid so far



down his long and skinny nose that he was looking over them instead of through them anyway. They looked like more of a prop than anything of use.

I looked to Sheila for some explanation.

“No, this isn’t Rick, or the ‘devil’s advocate’. This is Rodney. It’s his project that Byron Crane is hounding. The poor kid is being pushed beyond his capacity. I’m afraid he’s going to throw in the towel. I don’t know if what he’s trying to develop is of any importance, but it sure is putting him on the hot seat for some reason,” she said.

“Well, he’s not at all repulsive, other than the mess he’s made, that is.” I hadn’t exactly been a neat-nick in my life, but this was ridiculous.

“No, he’s got a heart of pure gold. Not a bit of counter-spin that I can detect, anyway. I just wanted to show you the main reason for my concern before we jumped right into the thick of the mission. I thought it might be helpful.” She looked a bit concerned that I wasn’t feeling any special connection to Rodney.

“Do you know this kid from your life?” I asked. “Or have you gotten so attached to him already during this mission?”

Sheila looked at me in amazement. “Ian, I had no idea that you were so perceptive!”

She looked back at Rodney, thought a bit, then admitted, “I do feel a special connection to him somehow. I don’t know how or why. He just feels special to me for some reason.” She looked back to me with a pleading in her eyes. “Please help me protect him from Byron.”

*‘Jeez! Nice way to pile on the pressure!’* “I’m not the hero type,” I replied gruffly. She was SO serious that I didn’t know what else to say. I could do things when properly motivated for ME, but I’ve rarely been known to work too hard for others. *‘This is WAY more responsibility than I can handle.’*

“But you CAN do it, Ian. Your selfish side is part of what helped you to do your first mission. It’s part of what allows you to get close enough to evil people to find out how they get THEIR motivation,” she responded.

Her comment had the tone of a compliment, but the context was sort of an insult. I wasn't sure if I should be honored or upset. I decided she was right, either way, so I just nodded. "I guess I can give it a try," I said reluctantly.

"I could hug your neck, Ian," she said with a wry smile. "But I won't."

"Thanks," I grunted. "So where is the b-----."

She took my hand, and we popped into an office at the other end of the neatness spectrum. Everything was shiny and appeared to be new. And barely used. The file cabinets were lined up neatly along one wall with nicely typed, uniform labels on the drawers. The desk had one three tiered 'in, pending and out' type of box that was empty. The entire desk calendar was visible with nothing written in the date boxes and no scribbling in the margins. A designer pen and pencil set looked as if it had never been touched. A thin computer monitor was perched on the far corner as if it were placed there as an afterthought. I didn't see any keyboard.

There was a leather, cold-looking love seat along the wall opposite the files. Along the wall with the door were neatly organized books and binders. The room was tall enough to need one of those fancy ladders to be able to reach the books on the top shelves. Not that it appeared to ever be used.

The office's occupant was looking out of the large window with his hands clasped behind his back. He was chomping on a cigar butt, ashes falling on the carpet. He didn't move for what felt like hours.

When I looked to Sheila for more information, I gasped. She was paler than a ghost (which wasn't too hard for a soul of mist) and looked as if she were ready to faint. She used what may have been her last ounce of strength to grab my arm and pull me from the room.

We ended up in the hallway, which was not busy, but not deserted, either. Even though we couldn't be seen, Sheila led me to a small, unused office nearby.

As soon as we both oozed through the door, she flopped on the floor in a puddle. She was shaking badly, and crying.

“I’m so sorry, Ian. I just can’t stay in his presence very long at all. And it’s gotten worse every time I try.” She looked up at me apologetically. “Could you go and watch him? Did you feel any of the repulsion I felt?”

Somewhat stunned now that I thought about it, I answered, “No. No, I didn’t.” I hadn’t felt ANY repulsion. “So, I guess that means he’s not nearly as evil as Danny, then, is he? I mean, even I was repulsed by Danny.”

“Or you could have more silver spin in common.” Sheila had to blow my theory. *‘Why does she have to keep reminding me of my faults?’*

“They are not necessarily faults, unless the traits are misused. If you use your silver make-up to help those of us without the ability to understand evil, then you have turned a potential liability into an asset. It’s not so much what you have, but how you choose to use it.” She remembered just as she said the phrase that it had an infuriating effect on me. “Oh, Ian, I didn’t mean it that way! Please don’t be angry with me!”

Seeing the look of fear on her face was very sobering. Sheila was not some inexperienced, stupid woman. She was worldly and exceedingly intelligent, as well as a strong leader. *‘How could worry about my reaction to her comment cause such a change in her character?’* I was truly puzzled.

Sheila suddenly had a puzzled look, too. “I...I don’t understand either.” She looked at me with a curiosity, deep into my eyes. It was rather uncomfortable, and I looked away after only a few seconds. “I think it may be that I don’t understand you. You are such a bundle of contradictions that I don’t know what to expect from you. Now that I so much want and need your help, not knowing how you’ll respond is very unnerving.” She sighed, and stood. “I’ll do my best to not annoy you, as soon as I figure out how.” She smiled, and held out her hand for a shake, sorta like a truce.

“If you figure it out, please tell Irene. She’s said more or less the same thing pretty much throughout our 40 plus years of marriage.” We shook hands. We felt like we’d managed

to reach some sort of understanding. *'She'll try not to annoy me, and I'll try to not be annoyed. Simple enough.'*

"Okay, then. You want me to go back into Byron's office and see what makes him tick, right?" I was afraid this mission was going to be incredibly boring. As disgusted as I was with Rodney's mess, the neat and tidy types like Byron really got up my nose. I never could watch "The Odd Couple" because of Felix. I made Irene change the channel if she ever tried to watch it.

"Maybe if you waited until he was meeting with someone, he wouldn't be so boring. When he's not in his office, his tendency for neatness is demonstrated by his intense need to also be in control of people, not just objects. He wants his workers to be as put in their place as each and every one of his books is in its place. It's as though he doesn't think of them as human or even living beings. In any event, he is definitely NOT like the flustered Felix." Sheila paused, and thought for a few minutes.

All I could make out of her thoughts were schedules of meetings and names and places I did not recognize. She was apparently trying to find a time and place where I could see the real Byron in action.

"Let me take you back to one of the episodes that was exceptionally uncomfortable for me." She held out her hand, and added, "You may need to help will us there. I've only just mastered going back in time by myself."

This boardroom was much less pompous than the one in the oil company's office building. This was much more functional, and space was definitely at a premium. The chairs were little more than the small metal chairs I recall from school cafeterias, although they did have some worn out padding, at least.

There weren't quite enough of these pitiful chairs for everyone, however. Some of the younger members of the group stood along the walls, leaning on various mismatched bookshelves and cabinets. One of the women dusted off the shelf she was leaning on, and then brushed off her elbow.

Another was wiping off the table, which doubled as a lunchroom table, apparently.

At the head of the table was a larger chair with a high back, arms and more padding. Next to it was a dry erase board, and behind it was a blackboard with tiny pieces of chalk. On the table in front of the empty chair was a new box of chalk.

The chatter stopped immediately when Mr. Crane entered the room. He was very tall and lanky, and rather flowed, with long, pompous strides, up to the larger seat. He didn't sit, however, until he had thoroughly inspected the seat for crumbs or dribbles of drink. His long thin nose was wrinkled with disgust. "If one of you idiots could come up with even a semi-useful idea, we could put some funds into a real meeting room," he snarled as he finally took his seat.

His face was as lean as his nose. His neck was long with a prominent Adams apple. His suit was obviously tailored, as it fit his thin frame perfectly, and the arms were definitely longer than standard. He kinda reminded me of Icabod Crane in that Sleepy Hollow story by his features, but his body language was anything but awkward or scared.

He began the meeting by calling on Rodney. "So, Mr. Beak, have you finally made any progress on your part of the research?" His expression held even more disgust than when he was inspecting his seat for crumbs.

Rodney stuttered, "Nnnno, Ssssir." His face was red as a beet and his neck was splotchy. He was the epitome of nerdness.

"NO! No, you say! I ought to throw you out this very moment! You've been a worthless weight around my neck ever since you've been assigned to this team!" Icabod, I mean Byron, seethed hatred, and Rodney melted under his glare. The poor guy pulled his shoulders forward and held his head so low that his forehead almost touched the table. Of course, being barely five feet tall made the table much closer to his forehead to begin with.

The others in the group looked uncomfortable, but none come to Rodney's rescue. One of the women looked

particularly angry, however, and I wished I could tune in to her thoughts. I wondered when or if I would ever be taught how to listen in on people's thoughts. I figured they had to choose to let us listen in, by opening up their minds. And since I would be too tempted to guide her to chew this arrogant a----- out, which would certainly get her fired, I knew I would NOT be the soul heaven would want her to open up to....

It was about this time that I realized Sheila was not in the room. I guessed she left as soon as Byron arrived. I could definitely see where he could be repulsive, because he was behaving worse than a pure b-----, but I still could not sense any of the repulsive force that emanated from Danny. I listened closely as he continued around the table, abusing almost everyone, though not as badly as Rodney.

Except the angry woman. He was not nice to her, but the steely look in her eyes as she met his gaze while she gave her report for her part of the project dared him to belittle her. He didn't take the dare. Impressive. That woman truly had backbone. She responded to the atmosphere of the meeting as I would expect Sheila to respond, if she were a person and not a soul.

I pondered the fact that I still felt no repulsion. WAS my remaining silver comparable to his? Had I been that bad in life? I knew I demanded perfection from my employees, but I wasn't abusive. I tried to picture the looks on the faces of my managers during the worst of the disciplinary episodes. Some of them may have looked this uncomfortable, but those were the ones who should have been uncomfortable. They were the ones who had messed up. They were the ones who had made the company and everyone else who worked there look bad. And their incompetence could have killed or injured one of our customers. If I had let them get by with their lax attitudes, I would have been as bad as they were.

No, I decided, I was not as bad as Icabod. He was berating for the fun of berating. I had been hard on my workers to make them better workers. There is a difference. I smiled as I realized I really did understand what Steve had

been trying to teach me about how actions can be good or bad depending on their intent. Maybe I wasn't so hopeless after all.

Icabod stood up, slamming his hands on the table. Everyone but the woman with a backbone flinched. The evil grin on Icabod's face reminded me of the look on the Grinch's face as he was coming up with his plot to steal Christmas from the Who's in Whoville. Byron Crane; Icabod Grinch. Hmm. I liked my nickname much better. It was much more descriptive.

The meeting ended as everyone nodded in agreement with their boss's last statement, and Grinchy strode haughtily out of the room. I felt a surge of panic as I realized I was so busy remembering my past and coming up with a nickname for the b----- that I didn't pay attention to the end of the meeting. I also felt the slight breeze created by the reentrance of Sheila.

"Well, what did you find out?" she asked hopefully.

"Yep, he's a b-----," I stalled. "He really knows how to chew people out." I smiled as I couldn't resist adding, "I sure could have used him for pointers when I had to deal with stupid employees at the plant."

Sheila didn't take the joke too well. She wasn't angry, because she was able to tell I wasn't serious. But she was disappointed that I wasn't serious about the mission. She didn't say anything more.

I focused on the conversation the remaining scientists in the room were having now that their evil leader was gone. I thought I might be able to salvage something from the event, and not disappoint Sheila TOO badly.

Rodney was shaking, and the man beside him was trying to get him to look up. A woman across the table was seething, muttering something about, 'he knows your last name is Anteenio, not Beak. I wish I could strangle the b-----.' The woman with the backbone was quietly writing herself a note, and then left the room. Two of the guys near the head of the table discussed the project and the problems Icabod apparently pointed out, and how they could address them.

“There’s no way to incorporate the ideas he thinks are key. They would tear the theory to bits. He makes no sense at all!” said one.

“But if we don’t, he’ll fire us, or worse,” said the other. “We have to come up with a way to put his ideas in our project without letting them effect the rest of the theory. He doesn’t have a clue anyway, so he’ll never notice they don’t really fit. After we get to the point of presenting the project at the next conference, THEN we can remove his part, and it will all make sense. It’s our only chance.”

“You have a point, Brian,” said the first. “We’ll need to be very sly about it though. And if we get caught...”

“We can pull some of his own tricks on him,” Brian interrupted. “We can call his bluff and throw HIM off balance with some scientific gobble-de-gook that sounds so valid he won’t know how to respond.” A grin that was a mix of mischief and revenge came over Brian’s face. “All we need to do is to get Rodney to tell us what to say, and we’re home free!”

“If we can get to Rodney when he’s not unplugged by recent contact with Crane, that is,” added the other.

I looked at Sheila apologetically at this point, as I realized I had no idea what the project was that they were talking about.

“That’s not a problem, Ian,” Sheila responded. “I don’t understand what they’re talking about, either. It’s the interaction between Byron and the others I was hoping you could decipher. Mr. Crane’s power over these people is not by knowledge. It’s by humiliation.” She looked at me with tears in her eyes. “Please help me understand how he could be so cruel.”

Good question, I thought. But how am I supposed to know? If I was seen as cruel, it wasn’t because I was being cruel for cruelty’s sake. I was trying to make someone be a better worker. Or a better person. I didn’t feel good about it when I had to strongly discipline someone. But it was part of my job, and I believe I did it well. Most people didn’t seem to stay angry with me for very long afterwards. But now that



I thought about it, a fair number of them quit, or moved on to other departments...

I looked over the remaining people at the table. None of them were rejuvenated and filled with inspiration to go back to the drawing board. They looked as though the air had been knocked out of them in contrast to the nervous, hopeful anticipation some of them had before the meeting began. These were not people who needed discipline. These were people who needed guidance. And what they got was hammered into the ground.

"If he was trying to motivate them, he's definitely not a very observant manager. Most employees have a certain look of dread when they know they have not done well. These people looked as though they thought they had done a good job, and were hoping for support. Instead, he pulled the rug out from under them. Almost as if he WANTS them to fail..." I paused as I pondered that possibility. "Maybe he DOES want them to fail." I looked at Sheila excitedly. "I bet he has a pocketful of silver guiding him to destroy their work for some reason. Can you help me find his office so I can see him while he's alone?"

"I thought you'd be bored watching him by himself." It was Sheila's turn to have a mischievous smile.

"That was before I saw him in action," I answered huffily.

"Sure thing," she answered, and took my arm.

We appeared in the hallway outside his office. "I'll be in here," Sheila motioned to the room she and I were in after the first visit to his office. She hurried through the door as she spied him in the elevator just as its doors were opening.

The elevator door opened fully, exposing several people crammed along its walls. 'Mr.Grinch' and his evil aura occupied all of the space at its center. He seemed to savor the cowering, as he paused quite a bit longer than necessary for the door to fully open. When he did exit, he moved so slowly that the next person out had to catch the door, and the ones in the elevator had to hold the open button. The ba-----.

This man was even more hateful than Danny, but still I felt no revulsion. Or I should say repulsion. He was VERY revolting.

He sauntered into his office and tossed his jacket onto the love seat. He stood at his desk for a bit, then pulled out the chair and sat down. He pulled out the center drawer, and the keypad appeared. He turned the computer on, and grinned with evil, slit-like eyes.

I noticed a movement from the direction of the loveseat. It reminded me of the slurry that rose behind Danny when he sat in the overstuffed chair.

The slurry became more noticeable as it began to approach Icabod's chair. The closer it got to him, the more evil he appeared. By the time it engulfed him, he was laughing with such a diabolical quality I expected his head to turn and green vomit to spew from his nose and mouth.

But still I felt no repulsion.

Again I sensed the conflict in the slurry; the clockwise spin among the counterclockwise spin. But no repulsion.

I went over to his desk, and floated behind him and his slurry. I saw on his computer screen a most eerie image.

It was the earth, but it was not round. It was full of pot marks. It looked like a deflating balloon. Ocean water filled depressions in the continents. The poles were not at the familiar tilt, but almost 90 degrees off. Smoke was billowing from the edges of the dents. The remaining land looked as if it were being swarmed by ants. The atmosphere was no longer baby blue. It was a dark blue and in ragged patches. Sunlight was reaching the south pole through one of the holes in the atmosphere, and the snowcap was visibly melting away, shrinking by the minute.

And Mr. Icabod Grinch couldn't have been happier.

If this weren't so serious, I'd have sworn I was watching the next kid's show on good verses evil, and this was the part where the purely evil persona was being developed. *'I wish I could safely assume that this story will end with good winning out in the end, and Whoville would have their Christmas after all...'*

The image on his computer changed to a flow chart. At the top of the chart, in a box, was Step #1: Foil all attempts to harness energy safely and easily. The next line was a series of boxes connected to the top box by lines, and included things 'atomic energy' and 'Hydrogen fuel cell', 'solar energy', 'electricity' and 'wind power'. The last few were new ideas to me. One was 'antimatter' and another was 'photon phases'. The third line had boxes with things like 'if atomic energy harnessed, help make a bomb', and 'stir people up about left over radiation', and 'cause a few radiation accidents' under the atomic energy box. These were all checked, as in 'done'.

Some of the other blocks, like 'have birds fly into wind turbines', and 'send lots of storms to down power lines' were checked off as well. 'Send a solar flare' was still unchecked, as was 'cause a hydrogen fuel cell to explode'.

Icabod clicked on 'prevent harnessing photon's energy', then sat back to study the screen full of suggestions, put his size 15 feet on his desk, his hands behind his head, and laughed a more evil laugh than in any horror movie I had seen. "The stupid cretins think they can get by me, do they? We'll see about that, won't we, Proteus?"

The slurry began to change its shape. It formed a human-like body and head, but its arms and legs were wavy and slimy, reminding me of octopus-like appendages. And the smell that filled the room was truly nauseating.

"They'll never be able to find a way to feed their nasty energy habits without depending on the fruits of the depths of the earth. Think of the joy we'll have watching the earth shrivel away to nothing as they use up every last drop of the earth's innards." Proteus was salivating so much that some of the drool dripped on Icabod's shoulder. Icky turned his head slowly around to the putrid creature with the same look of disgust he had in the meeting while examining his chair and humiliating Rodney. But Proteus thoroughly enjoyed being the target of this glare. His posturing made it obvious that he was daring Icky to do something about the drip.

The stare-down created some shiny silver sparks, but neither backed down. At least not until Icky growled, “I can have you replaced in a heartbeat, Pro. And Hermes would not be pleased if he heard you had been contaminated.”

Proteus maintained his hateful dare stare for quite some time after this threat before he responded, “What makes you think I couldn’t report back that YOU are going soft, that YOUR spin is starting to bounce off the walls?”

Proteus closed his mouth and swallowed. Icky brushed off his shoulder with a handkerchief from his shirt pocket. Neither took their eyes off the other until Proteus wiped his mouth with one of his tentacles, and Icky put his hanky in the waste can.

When Icky mentioned ‘contamination’, I tried to sense any clockwise spin in Proteus. If it was there, it was well hidden. And Icky gave absolutely NO sign of ANY good in him. I wondered if the gods were able to impersonate people, and Icky wasn’t even human. And I began to doubt that Proteus had been infiltrated with any gold. The clockwise spin I thought I saw initially must have been an optical illusion.

Icky got up, put on his suit jacket, and headed for the door. Proteus rapidly tornadoed into his pocket, the last wisp of very dark gray JUST making it in before Icky opened the door.

## Evil Incarnate

Sheila was waiting with obvious anticipation. She seemed to think that the look of puzzlement on my face was a good sign. At least she knew I hadn't been bored. "So, did you see anything of interest?" she asked impatiently, when I didn't offer any information spontaneously.

I sighed. "Yes, I did. I saw it very clearly. Too clearly. With absolutely no repulsion. There was no need to hide. No need to figure out how I could get closer. I was able to stand right behind him as he used his computer. Even Proteus didn't seem to sense me AT ALL." I was deep in thought, not really looking at her, or anything, for that matter. I was stunned that spying on Icky had been so easy.

"Who, may I ask, is Proteus?" Sheila asked a bit timidly.

I changed my focus from my shock to her question. I looked at her and answered rather deadpan, "Icky's demon."

Now Sheila had a puzzled expression. "And who is Icky?"

That question broke the spell I felt I was under. I smiled sheepishly as I described to her how I came up with the nickname for Byron. She liked it. "Icky. You're right. It definitely suits him. Is Proteus another nickname, then?"

"No, I can't take credit for that one. Icky called his slurry by name. And Proteus actually had a form." I described the horrid creature all the way down to his drool. She looked very worried as I described the stare down and how it ended.

"What do you think it means?" she asked.

"I was hoping you could tell me." I gave her a skeptical glance, and added, "You wouldn't have any specific ideas as to why I feel no repulsive forces from such an obviously evil man, would you? Tell me flat out. I can take it."

Sheila looked at me pensively, but I couldn't make eye contact. I just couldn't. I had a hard enough time when Julia held my eyes. *'There's no way I can trust Sheila to possibly look into my soul after what had just happened. Was I really THAT evil?'*

"I'm not able to see that far, Ian. I'm barely able to read thoughts. I'm just an adult, like you, remember? But I do recall learning something about gods living among the mortals way back in English Lit. Do you think Icky is so evil he's not even human? If he isn't human, he may feel so powerful that he has no need to keep out the heavenly riffraff." That Sheila was thinking the same as I about Icky not being human was eerie.

"So then why would he have to have a demon as a source of power?" I thought aloud.

"Maybe his demon is not a source of power, but a supernatural lackey," Sheila offered. "Byron feels evil enough to me to be able to boss even hellish demons around."

"Is it worth meeting with the others to sort this out? I mean, if we're literally dealing with an embodiment of evil on earth, maybe we should see if someone up the chain of command knows about this, if we're right." I figured someone in heaven was already on top of this, but making sure couldn't hurt.

Sheila agreed, and we faded back to the Lounge.

No one else was there, so we had more time to discuss what I had seen. I told her more of the details, like the picture of the earth on its last leg, and the chart about foiling all human attempts to find energy sources other than oil or natural gas. I filled her in on my trip to Homer and the reality of the Greek gods. We knew we had to stop Byron, somehow. And we knew this mission was bigger than just two of us. Someone this evil, even if he was 'just' an evil human being, needed to be hit with everything heaven could throw at him.

We finally just sat there in silence, full of dread and despair. We couldn't come up with any viable plan to thwart his power.

Eventually Al and George returned. "We're still just wandering around looking for a way to get through to Rick," Al said. "I've checked out most of his close friends, and even some of his relatives. He's such an independent thinker that none of them has ever had much luck convincing him of anything he didn't come up with himself. They all gave up trying to expand Rick's mind long ago. And those were attempts to engage him in NORMAL, earthly discussions and debates." He didn't sound hopeful at all.

George was a bit less pessimistic. "I tried to think in slo-mo in very short phrases while floating over his shoulder while he was relaxing in front of the TV. I really think I may have made a bit of a dent. He jotted down some thoughts similar to the ones I tried to send him, anyway. George sighed, and added, "But what I really need him to hear is so off base from everything he's learned, getting him to hear enough of my tidbits to change the course of physics will take forever."

Larry and Tom arrived shortly, and relayed what they had learned about more of the oil men. The most surprising revelation was about poor Ralph. He was worse than hen-pecked. He was physically abused by his wife, Heloise. Luckily they had no kids.

I was relieved when Mary, Shirley and Bill arrived before too many details about Ralph and Heloise were divulged. It sounded worse than pitiful.

We greeted the three expectantly. They were beaming, obviously full of good news. Sheila and I were especially anxious to hear some upbeat results before we had to reveal our discovery.

Shirley was the most buoyant. She had quite a bit of luck getting through to Joan. She was able to think in much longer phrases in not so slo-mo with a good amount of information transferring successfully.

Bill was most grateful for Shirley's successes, as Joan was able to do more to alter Jacob's mindset than he had been. But even so, some of Bill's slo-mo was getting through. Jacob was beginning to question more of the various translations of the Bible.

Mary had been monitoring Jacob's congregation for signs of any pliable members. Her plan was to influence some of them to contact the Sheppards to set up a special 'open minded' study group. She had quite a few prospects.

When they were through with filling us in on their progress, Tom and Larry gave a very brief re-synopsis of their unhappy findings, George and Al passed on repeating their lack of progress and everyone's attention turned to Sheila and me.

We looked at each other, not knowing where to start. Sheila sighed, and began by explaining Byron's position over the group of scientists working on alternative forms of energy. She then gave an emotional description of his personality topped with a lighthearted explanation of how I came up with his nickname. I was glad to sense some of the developing tension evaporating. I gave Sheila a grateful nod with a half smile.

"But, in all seriousness, Ian has some very depressing observations to relay. We are hoping beyond hope that our conclusion about the situation is not correct." She indicated that I was to fill them in on what I had seen and what I had NOT felt.

I paused after I finished telling them about Icky and Proteus and the computer screen. I sighed, and paused again. It was much more difficult than I had anticipated admitting to all of these good souls that I did not feel any repulsive forces from such a hateful person. I had been so sure that Sheila and I were correct in our conclusion that I had forgotten there may be another theory, such as me being much more evil than any of them had previously thought.

Sheila interrupted. "Ian, you know you're not evil!" then blurted out, "Ian didn't feel ANY repulsive forces from either of them!"



I cringed and closed my eyes so I didn't have to see the expressions on their faces. But I was better at mind reading than I really wanted to be, and I could hear Larry think, '*No, Ian's not THAT evil,*' and Tom thought, '*Well, that doesn't make a bit of sense.*' I luckily didn't know the others well enough to be able to make out their thoughts, too.

I opened one eye. No one was glaring suspiciously at me, so I opened the other eye. I felt rather sheepish. I grinned with a 'please don't think badly of me' expression, eyebrows up to my hairline.

MY HAIRLINE!!! I immediately felt my head for any growth. It was fuller than ever of thick, curly hair!!!

The wide mouthed look of shock that took over my features must have been REALLY hysterical. ALL of the others started laughing so hard they had to hold their sides, tears running off their cheeks.

I joined in, not so much because of my expression, but out of relief. I couldn't be as bad as Icky and still have grown so much hair.

## Hermes' Alter Ego

Tom was the first to regain seriousness. He sat deep in thought, mulling over the possible explanations for the lack of repulsion I felt from Icky or Proteus. I tried to tune in to his thoughts, but the laughter from the others distracted me.

Eventually the others calmed down, too. They all noticed Tom's pensiveness, and waited expectantly for his conclusion. Mary's mind was churning around a bit, too, but Al was as clueless as the others. I guessed it was because he had specialized in scientific fields. Mary and Tom were 'people' and 'evil' specialists.

I waited as long as I could possibly wait for an alternate explanation, then I semi-whispered to Tom, "Is he human?"

Tom moved his eyes and then his head slowly in my direction. "What makes you ask that, Ian?"

*D---, I asked him a question first! I hate when people answered a question with a question!* Aloud, I replied sarcastically, "Why do you ask me why I asked you if they were human?" The puff from my ear was light gray.

Tom smiled. "Pardon me for raising your dander. It was quite accidental." He sighed, then added, "I was just wondering if you had seen or heard anything that lead you to believe they were both supernatural. Your answer could make a huge difference."

I thought about his question. "Can you give me a hint as to what the possibilities may be? All I know is that I felt NOTHING. No repulsion, no conflict, no hate, no attraction. Nothing." Having said this, I began to recall what I felt in Danny's presence besides the repulsion. "Humm. When I was in Danny's presence, I not only felt the repulsion but also disgust and hate, mixed in with the tug of my son's gold

when Leo appeared. It was a most uncomfortable mix. With Icky and Proteus, I felt like I was an uninvolved observer. While I was in the room with them, anyway. Afterwards, when I described what I had seen to Sheila, THEN the meaning of what I had seen sank in. Like a ton of bricks..."

Tom nodded his head slowly with his jaw set. "Yes, your silver is indeed very unique." He looked me in the eyes. "Your silver is so ambivalent that it shielded you from them. It's strong enough to completely hide your gold, yet weak enough to not want to deliver you to its power source."

I had to look away as he said 'power source.' Quickly. A sharp stabbing pain shot through my body like a reverse lightening bolt as soon as he began to say the phrase. I tried to get to a chair. My knees were weak and shaking. I could barely see. I was scared s-----.

All the others could see happening was the sudden onset of my weakness and the streak of white that shot out of my ear with such force that it splattered when it hit the wall.

"What happened?" I could hear Larry's voice the best.

"Tom, what happened?!" and "Is he alright?" were comments from two of the others, one male and the other female.

"Who should we call for help?" one of the women asked.

At that moment, despite all the chaos, I knew Julia had arrived. I also knew I was going to be all right, so I couldn't resist mumbling weakly, "Call 911."

My vision returned first. Given the circumstances, I knew why everyone had looks of panic all over their faces despite my joshing. I couldn't help but smile. That is until I noticed that Tom's panic seemed to be worse than anyone else's.

His fear wiped the smile right off of my face. We made eye contact for a split second. Nothing bad happened. Now puzzled, scared, weak and relieved all at the same time, I had to ask, "What the h--- happened, Tom?"

A rather large crowd had gathered. In their panic, the others had either inadvertently or purposefully called for their deAgers. A few infants were there also, apparently for

Al, Mary and Tom. Tom's infant was so close to him their mists seemed to blend.

Julia's expression was wide-eyed. I looked around in awe and said "This must be pretty bad for even the guides to need support."

Tom's infant answered some of my questions when he was able to catch my attention by sending out some peripheral signals. But first he had to convince me it would be safe to look him in the eyes. The signals seemed benign enough, so I risked a glance.

Without words, he let me know Tom was unaware of the strength of that phrase. He knew my silver was unique, but had not yet learned all the details of its characteristics. Exposed to that phrase, my silver's energy had to rapidly escape the gaze of the phrase's source, which just happened to be Tom. The analogy that came to mind was that of a petrified pet cat clawing up its owner's chest to jump over the owner's shoulder in order to escape a vicious dog that suddenly appeared just feet away. We were now at the stage where the sounds of the barking dog were well in the distance, and the cat was peering out from behind a couch. My silver was scared more s----- than I had been!

I laughed heartily when I realized what had happened. My pink ear puff helped the others relax a bit. I reassured everyone, "That was just my chicken-poop silver escaping detection. Tell'em, Tom. If I need to leave the room so my protective coating doesn't hear the dreaded phrase, I'll be happy to go. Especially if it keeps everyone else from accidentally saying it. I'm too old to go through an event like this very often."

Tom nodded in agreement that I should leave momentarily. "I'll send Julia or Larry to get you when it's safe for you to come back in."

I tried to float to the door, but my strength was still not up to the task. I was able to walk slowly, sorta like Tim Conway with tiny baby steps. Larry came to help me, warning me to be careful and behave while I was in the hallway by myself. "DON'T try to be cute and run off on another adventure." He

shook his finger at me like a father disciplining a wayward toddler. “What happened in there was VERY serious.”

I slid to the floor as soon as we were out of the room. “I have no energy to do anything but sit right now, so I think I’ll manage. To behave, that is.” I gave him a weak smile. He didn’t look totally convinced, but he went back in to the others, closing the door behind him.

My being was weak, but my mind was racing. *‘So my silver is unique, huh. It could be a shield when necessary and an agitator when it was safe to do so. It’s evil enough to keep me off balance and in conflict, but not so evil as to give me away when in the presence of REAL evil. Yep, even evil can be scared by more powerful evil. I wonder what would have made it so wimpy. In my lifetime I had never seen much REAL evil. Somewhere, my silver must have been faced with what would be in store for it if it ended up in hell, and it was scared semi-clockwise.’*

*‘So, is my silver unique because it’s scaredy-cat silver, then? Proteus sorta gave in to the intimidating glare of Icky, so silver must have some sort of hierarchy. The strongest silver will naturally overwhelm the weaker varieties. But why would its running off in response to that phrase have left me so weak? Is my gold alone too weak to keep me ‘alive’? Did I almost ‘die’? Can a soul actually die?’*

I thought about taking a rest on my mossy bank to regain some strength, but I didn’t have enough oomph to get there. I leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes. I pictured myself in my hammock in the backyard.....I felt the warm fuzzy feeling totally engulf me.....I didn’t need to be on my bank to get a ‘fuzzy’. I was now advanced enough to be open to one anywhere I happened to be when I needed one.

Since I was in a ‘deep fuzzy’ when Julia and Larry opened the door to let me know it was safe for me to come back in, I had no idea how long they had been in there discussing me and my wimpy silver. But I felt too good to feel paranoid. I just hoped they came up with some answers,

and that I'd never have to suffer through another reverse lightening bolt.

The other deAgers were gone, as were the infants. My peers and the guides looked as though they had regained their composure. But I definitely felt the strength of their resolve. "So, what's the scoop, then?" I asked as light heartedly as I could. But they looked more than a bit depressed. "Why doesn't everyone take a break for a nice warm fuzzy? I did, and I feel great!"

"We'll take a break in a little while, Ian," Tom said. "But first we need to fill you in. And I want you to know how very sorry I am that I didn't know all that I should have known."

"Don't worry about it, Tom. It was just a bolt of lightening. Nothing a strong being with a head full of hair can't handle." I struck a proud pose, making light of the whole thing. "By the way, can a being in heaven actually re-die?"

Julia took the question seriously. "Mr. Burns, what 'dying' means here in heaven is simply a transformation from one state to the next. From one form of existence to another. So, yes. Beings can and do 'die' in heaven. Most of the time it is a good thing. After all silver is shed and the gold is free to join the fuzz forever. However, sometimes, as in the poor souls in the bubbles that burst, most of their being is destroyed in the process, and their small amount of gold goes nebulously into the fuzz." She stopped for a few seconds as if she were unsure of how to explain the other scenarios. "But a truly horrible death IS possible. If a soul has a very potent form of silver, it can manipulate its surroundings unbeknownst to the soul. If and when it sees an opportunity to defect, it can overpower the beings' gold, and join whatever evil group it chooses. Generally it is to a group haunting the earth, so we still have access to its gold, and there is still hope for the experts in gold retrieval to salvage the gold."

"How is that any worse than the grumps popping in zits?" I asked, still not serious.

“The hijacked gold suffers greatly while it is subjected to watching its silver do horrible deeds. It is basically the only way the retrieval team has any chance of getting to it. Watching helplessly instills more and more strength in the gold, until it finally can escape.” Julia looked truly distressed.

Now I was beginning to worry. “What about the gold that was sent to hell to literally infiltrate the enemy? The silver it’s up against is super strong. Has my son been sent on an impossible mission?” I was having a difficult time comprehending how silver that is weak enough to be in heaven could overcome gold, but gold could overcome silver strong enough to be in hell. It made no sense.

“The gold sent to hell was strengthened to the strongest possible degree before it began its mission. Average, everyday gold doesn’t have a chance against even mediocre silver.” Julia began to wish she would have not attempted to answer my question. “Why don’t we save the rest of this for a later time, when an educator who specializes in these issues is available?”

“Don’t I need to know it now? How do I know my silver isn’t going to run off with me to some haunted house somewhere?”

“Your silver is at the weaker end of the spectrum. Yours is so interested in avoiding hell that it protects itself by protecting you. It has no choice. If it wants to avoid being detected, it has to hide your gold. It is so completely on the submissive end of the continuum that it runs, petrified, at even the thought of being found out by its.....uh, owner.” Tom was making a little sense. Very little.

“So why didn’t I feel the reverse lightening bolt while I was actually in the presence of Icky? And what set it off when you were looking me in the eyes?” This puzzle was a bit too challenging for me.

“It’s challenging for me, too,” Tom admitted. “So I’m probably not the best person to explain it to you. But I do know that it is a VERY valuable asset. It may be the only way to keep an eye on Byron Crane.”

“So, did you all decide if he’s human or not?” I asked.

I sensed a definite decline in the mood of the group, and they were none too happy to start with. The gloom was thick enough to cut with a knife.

“We double and triple checked with all levels of heaven.” Tom almost shuddered. “Your experience with him confirmed what was already feared.” He paused, sighed, and added, “Byron is Hermes’ right hand god. He is pure, solid, sturdy, sinister silver.”



## The Race Is On

“D---,” I uttered under my breath. “Now what,” I mumbled, not expecting an answer. The tiny tack that floated from my mouth was a medium blue.

“Well, you, Larry and I now know to focus our energy on the scientific crowd instead of the oil company, at least for now,” Tom replied. “And Mary, Bill and Shirley need to continue to do their best to motivate the open minds of the church. Also, we all need to remember that there are many other teams like ours doing their best. We must not lose hope.”

We sat quietly for a while coming to terms with the gravity of the situation.

*‘How are the Sheppards and their congregation going to stop Byron from sabotaging the scientists’ efforts?’ Shirley thought. ‘I don’t see the connection.’*

*‘If we can somehow get Rick to listen to George, we may be home free.’* Al was trying to come up with a plan.

Larry’s train of thought was more along the lines of keeping me alive, or at least in heaven.

“Why don’t we get some direction from Mission Control?” Mary suggested to Al and Tom. “Let me go discuss the options with Ariel. I’ll be right back.”

She disappeared before any of us could disagree with her.

“Who’s Ariel, and what is Mission Control?” I asked.

“Ariel Rabeers is one of the Coordinators of Major Missions. Mission Control is the atrium that houses all the coordinators,” Al replied. “Ariel runs the Forces of Energy, and Anne Tennet runs the Open Mind Division. And they both are guided by Rod Lightning. Whenever more

information is needed, they can get it. It's almost as if their brains are huge satellite dishes." He paused for a moment, full of awe at the thought of their abilities.

"Sometimes they know it's better for us to know less, so it doesn't clutter our minds and tie up our novice communication frequencies. Sometimes they feel we need to know more to be more productive. Mary has gone to see if this is one of the times that we all need to know more. If it is, she'll then have a task finding out if we can gather all the coordinators together at one time, or if we'll have to visit one at a time. She may be a while." Al sighed. "Sometimes I wish heaven were more like the place I learned about in Sunday school."

*'If it were, I probably wouldn't be here. I'd be in hell,'* I thought sadly.

Al gave me a half smile acknowledging my thought. Then he nodded in agreement. I feigned being insulted, and a nice mini mental jousting session started. But it fizzled because I really didn't have much ammo to shoot back to argue why what he thought was wrong. I couldn't remember many good points that I had in life, actually.

The others were somewhat entertained by our silent banter, and a few even threw in a point or two. But our hearts weren't into ribbing each other. We were worried.

Mary popped back in and said, "Come on, let's go."

We all joined hands. In a split second, we were in the biggest, busiest atrium of them all. We were at the far end, about mid level. We barely had time to gawk at the surroundings before we were summoned into a large conference room. At the head of the table were three infants, the youngest in the middle.

"Gather round, please," he said. "My name is Rod. Rod Lightning. And, yes, my parents DID have a unique sense of humor. My childhood and adolescence were not the high points in my life." He smiled, sighed, and continued. "We have a short time to make some connections for your mission to flow more smoothly. Ariel will go first."

“Thank you, Rod,” Ariel began. “A key connection within the energy realm is Verna Lumberton and Rick Riddick. Verna is the woman at the conference with Byron that Ian thought had a strong backbone, which she most certainly does. Rick is the physicist George is trying to relay heavenly knowledge to so he and others can develop a safe, efficient and inexpensive form of energy, among other things. Rick does not work in the same group as Verna, but they are friends, and she keeps him up to date about the goings on with her project, both scientifically and in terms of interpersonal interactions. Rick is an ex-classmate of Rodney’s and had tried to warn him against taking a job under Byron based both on his own dealings with Byron, and from conversations with Verna, who had worked with Mr. Crane for quite a long time. Ralph is also an ex-classmate of Rick and Rodney.” Ariel nodded to Anne.

“The connection to the Sheppards is through Verna, also. She is an intermittent church-goer who was attracted to Jacob’s church by his non-authoritarian approach to his congregation. His sermons were sometimes more like open discussions. She had a strong aversion to preachers who claimed to know what ‘God wants’ or what ‘God thinks’ and had stopped attending church because of it.” Anne smiled, and reminded us, “She is the woman with a backbone, after all. No one can tell HER what God thinks!”

Rod synthesized this new information: “So Verna will hopefully be the one to teach Rick to be open to George. Rick can work with Rodney to develop the Grand Unified Theory that eluded Einstein, and Ralph’s connection with the oil company can help fund the whole thing. If all goes well.” He didn’t sound as sure of himself as I would have hoped.

“I know you are all wondering why I added that last phrase. Remember, we do not MAKE people do anything. We can guide, and suggest, and even put stumbling blocks in their way if they are headed in a non-productive direction, but we cannot MAKE them do anything. Coercion is a counterclockwise force of the worst kind. It is extremely counterproductive, in both senses of the word.” Rod paused

to let us take in this commonly used pun. Satisfied we all got the joke when we groaned, he continued, “Think of it as making our tasks more challenging. We have to stay on our toes at all times. We have to come up with alternate plans at the spur of the moment when our charges make a decision we did not anticipate. If the stakes weren’t so high, it could almost be considered fun.”

“Any questions so far?” he asked.

“Where do the rest of the oilmen come into the picture?” Larry asked. “We didn’t waste time and energy following them around, did we?” He sounded uncharacteristically peeved.

Ariel answered with a smile, “Your knowledge of the situation at the oil company will come in very handy as Rick, Rodney and Verna search for ways to develop their system. Remember the company meeting about ways to use the company profits to either explore for more oil fields, or develop green energy? Your hard work will help us guide the ‘green’ folks of the company to get those in control of the purse strings to realize the importance of funding the green efforts.” Ariel then nodded, and added, “And I do realize now how difficult watching some of the relationships were, for all of you.” She looked at me and Tom as well as Larry. “The information we obtained through your efforts is invaluable.”

I looked at Larry, and Larry looked at me. “What?” we both said at the same time. Larry continued, “How do you know what we saw? If you can see it at the same time we do, then why did we have to even be there?” I was confused. Larry sounded angry. *‘Boy, he must have seen something awful to be that peeved. I saw someone being murdered, and I’m not that angry.’*

“We cannot pick up the signals unless there is some heavenly gold as a conduit. If you hadn’t been there, we couldn’t have seen it either,” Ariel explained. But of course. How simple.

“So, do I have enough gold for you to get the signals about Ol’ Icky, then?” I asked.

Rod smiled sadly and answered, “Yes. We got the signals loud and clear. And we are very impressed that you and Sheila figured it out so fast. It has reassured us that we have chosen the correct souls for this team.” He looked around the room at all of us, giving silent congratulations to each for a specific job well done. I couldn’t make out the details of his thoughts to the others, but it made them glow for a few seconds. Literally.

“Any other questions?” Rod asked.

“Am I to continue to try to find a ‘gathering of the minds’ type of conference for the scientists to attend?” asked Sheila. “Or should I focus my energies in another direction?”

“You are most certainly on the correct track in finding such a meeting. Many other teams are working all over the world to do just what your team is doing. If any or all of you are able to achieve just part of the goal, a meeting of all the world’s physicist’s is the best way to get the entire world cooperating to solve the problems of humanity and the earth. By all means, continue to encourage your charges to go to such meetings,” Rod answered.

“What about the risk that some of the open minded members of Jacob’s congregation could be hijacked by impersonators?” asked Bill. “How can we protect them?”

Anne sighed, and answered, “That, unfortunately, is a major problem. An open mind is very vulnerable. We have many infants on standby for ‘open moments’ just for that reason. Most of the time, they reach the person before the counterspin representative does. Those people at highest risk are the ones in conflict; those who are looking to religion for salvation, not guidance. If you sense that one of the congregation, usually a newcomer drug in by his or her friend, feels too desperate, send a signal for a younger soul trained in that particularly grave situation to come and take over.”

“How do I do that?” Bill asked.

“Just a thought will do. Even a simple ‘uh-oh’ will be picked up. Souls with the level of training to protect these people are finely tuned to receive even the most subtle worry

from a heavenly onlooker.” Anne didn’t look as hopeful as her words sounded. She added, “I just wish the people in conflict were as easy to tune.”

Al, Tom and Mary nodded their thanks to the coordinators. Rod told us to open our minds when we have questions while on the job and the proper soul in Mission Control may be able to answer if we’re too stressed to tune in to the Fuzz. He nodded as he indicated that we were all to hold hands.

We were back in the meeting room in an instant. All of us older souls looked dazed.

“What just happened?” George asked. “Why do I feel as though I’ve been in the presence of royalty?”

“Because of the aura of their abilities and the depth of their understanding,” Mary explained. “There is a great temptation to worship them because of the sense of awe they induce. But they do NOT want to be idolized. They do NOT want to be considered any better than anyone else. They are who they are, and we are who we are. We all have our place in heaven and our own set of skills. If we worshipped them, we would be denigrating ourselves and everyone else in heaven.”

“But they ARE better than us,” I said, a bit annoyed. She sounded like one of those ‘feel good’ teachers who didn’t want any of her kids to feel badly about themselves.

“Yes, they are better than we are. Their gold is much stronger, and the amount of silver with any semblance of power in them is miniscule. They are VERY MUCH better than we are. And so are millions of infant souls. They worked hard and suffered greatly to get to the point they are now. But they can be incredibly good and incredibly strong, and still have respect for those of us who are immersed in the struggle along the path to purity. And they have abundant empathy for us as well. They LOVE us. They care about us and want to help where and when they can, if we’ll allow. If we were to fall down on our knees and praise them, they would be devastated. That is NOT the purpose for their

existence. It would NOT make them happy, as only the forces of silver demand and enjoy such subservience. So, PLEASE don't insult them by treating them like royalty. Respect is appropriate. Worship is not." Mary was actually shaking with emotion as she spoke.

She looked towards me and added, "The 'feel good' teachers have good intentions, but mistake false complements for constructive guidance. They do no favor for those children they convince are doing just fine when they could coax much more out of them. I thoroughly agree with your thought." She smiled and added, "You don't think we've been coddling YOU since you've died, do you, Ian?"

'*Cheeky young'un,*' I thought. The others laughed, enjoying Mary's 'gotcha!' because they knew I couldn't disagree.

## Back to Work, Newly Focused

“Okay troops. Everyone back to their stations, then?” asked Al.

“Not so fast, there, Al,” Tom said. “You and Mary know what your specific goal is, but I don’t have a clear idea of what we’re supposed to do. I guess I should have asked one more question, huh,” he added a bit chagrined. “So, I’ll take Rod’s advice, and open up for an answer.”

He only took a few seconds in a trance-like state to get directions. “PGS is so much faster and easier to use here than on earth.”

“Okay, then, let’s go!” He put his hands on Larry’s and my elbows, and with a nod to the others, off we went.

We popped into a restaurant very similar to the one where the oilmen and woman met.

“It is the same restaurant,” said Tom. “We are to be the ‘bridge team’. When people from other groups meet, we are to fill in the gaps. Ian probably recognizes Verna, over there in the corner booth. She’s with Rick.”

“Then they are both from the science group.” I didn’t quite follow Tom’s logic.

“Yes, they are both technically from the science group, but remember that Verna is also connected to the religion group. This meeting may have important implications about the ultimate goal of getting Rick to be open to George. Let’s listen.” Tom held his finger up to his mouth, and we focused on the conversation between Verna and Rick.



“I know you haven’t seen Rodney for years, Rick, but maybe with your encouragement, he’ll be able to stand up to Crane,” Verna was almost pleading.

“You know very well that Rodney just doesn’t have the fortitude to hold his ground against even a mild mannered boss. There’s NO WAY he’s going to make any headway against Crane.” Rick looked more than a little annoyed. “If you had helped me talk him out of taking this job, he wouldn’t be in this predicament.”

Verna didn’t have the same stern mannerism she demonstrated at the meeting with Icky. She looked downright timid. “Yes, but the project we’re working on needs his expertise. Without his brains, we wouldn’t be making any headway for Crane to even have to bother shooting us down. And if YOU were to join us, too, there’d be no stopping us!” Her compliment was not flattery, and Rick knew it. “YOU could handle Crane. AND defend Rodney.” She sighed, then continued somewhat under her breath, “But I know you’ll never agree to join our team.”

“D--- right, I won’t!” Rick was now rather angry. “And if you wouldn’t be there to help the b----- get grant money, he’d have no power to do ANYTHING! So don’t try to get me pulled into your dungeon! I’ll stay in my poverty stricken state and work independently rather than sell my soul to the likes of that demon!”

“Okay, okay. I hear you. Don’t make a scene.” She looked around awkwardly and smiled worriedly.

She changed the subject. “Have you decided what you want to order?” She began to study the menu.

Rick stared at her angrily for a few seconds before he followed her lead, and looked over the menu as well. “Why don’t they ever try something new, here? I’m fed up with the same offerings time after time.” He was in a very foul mood.

*‘Actually, he is generally a crabby person at baseline. It’s one of the major reasons these two have never become romantically involved, besides their age difference. They care deeply about each other, but they also repel each other like the same poles of a magnet. Their mutual respect for the*

*other's abilities is what holds them together as friends,'* Tom offered.

They were quiet for quite some time after the waiter took their orders. Both seemed to be deep in thought about their prior conversation. It looked as though Rick was cooling off.

His jaw was still a bit set, however, so Verna knew not to say anything about work. "So, how's your mother? I heard she had to have a biopsy," She ventured.

"She's fine," Rick grunted. "The results were okay."

They sat silently again, since Rick obviously was not going to offer any details. It was a bit uncomfortable to watch. It reminded me of some, if not most, of the dinners with Lenny. Irene would try every which way to get him to tell us about his day. All he did was grunt monosyllable answers.

The food arrived, and they began to eat. "Do we have to stay here and watch any longer?" I asked impatiently. "If they didn't talk before the meal, they surely won't say much while they eat."

"Just shut up and watch, Ian," Larry said irritably. "You might learn something."

I looked at Larry in shock. Why was he so cranky lately? He's usually the one to keep everyone else from getting into snits. And here HE was, snittier than I'd ever seen him. Tom tapped me on the shoulder, nodded his head toward the other end of the restaurant, then floated away. I followed.

"When he's ready, he'll fill you in on what we saw while watching the other oilmen. You'll understand then," Tom said. "He's still too sensitive about it to be able to let you read his mind right now. Try to be patient. For Larry's sake." He had an almost pleading look.

"How can Larry be too sensitive to share something with me? I'm the one who doesn't want to be transparent. Larry's always so 'in control'. What could he have to hide?" This just didn't make sense.

“There are things in his past he’s not shared with anyone. Things so painful he didn’t even let them into his consciousness. Watching Arthur and his family has uncovered these feelings, and he has to deal with them head on for the first time since his childhood. He’s too raw to deal with it effectively just yet. He’s not even ready to admit it to himself. You may be sorely needed by your friend when he IS ready to share.” Tom looked worriedly over to Larry who didn’t seem to notice we were no longer right there with him. The look on Larry’s face was fierce.

“He can’t be that angry about what’s going on between those two, can he?” Both Rick and Verna were basically good people. Rick was cranky, but not evil. If cranky people made Larry so angry, he’d have killed me more times than not during the course of our friendship on earth.

“No, it’s not so much what he’s currently watching. It’s the prism through which he’s watching it,” Tom explained. “He’s feeling angry at baseline, so he’s going to see the negative side of whatever he’s exposed to for a while.” Tom looked me full in the eyes, and added, “He let you have the luxury of being cranky for most of your earthly friendship. Please afford him the same luxury now.”

“I had never felt that being cranky was a luxury. What are you talking about?” I asked, puzzled.

“You never thought of it as a luxury because you didn’t worry about other people’s feelings. You were and are still a very self-centered being. Larry was much more in tune with the needs of others. He was careful to not step on any toes unnecessarily. He enlisted huge amounts of tact and self-control to express himself adequately without unnecessarily upsetting other people. Now he needs to allow himself room to just be cranky.” Tom didn’t seem to be at all concerned that I may take being called self-centered as an insult.

But I didn’t. Because he was right. And his explanation actually made some sense. It gave me a feeling of respect for Larry’s character; a sense of the importance of Larry’s friendship. All those years he really wanted to tell me off, and didn’t. I thought he just didn’t have a temper. “Yep,

Tom. I owe him MORE than that luxury. I owe him big time.”

I floated back over to Larry. “So, what do you think about these two, Larry?” I asked innocently.

“I think he’s an arrogant b----- and she’s a sniveling weakling. It’s disgusting. And they’re supposed to be educated.” Larry’s lip was curled. His eyes were slits. “It’s a d--- good thing they never got married. Their kids would have to suffer through watching this pitiful imbalance of power.”

I tried to remember if Larry had ever told me anything about his family. I couldn’t remember if he ever even told me if he had any siblings, or where he grew up.

“That’s because I didn’t. I never told anyone. Drop it, Ian. It’s none of your business.” Larry’s gaze was still towards the unhappy couple.

“Right. Will do,” I responded, honestly. I forced myself to focus on the couple and not think about Larry’s past and his current uncharacteristic foul mood.

Verna and Rick ate quietly, as I had predicted. The tension abated quite a bit. By the time they had finished the meal, they were ready to converse more civilly over a cup of coffee. This time Rick cooperated with the small talk initiated by Verna.

After things were flowing more smoothly, and Rick was less cranky, Verna ventured onto a different touchy topic than the first one.

“Have you reconsidered joining me this weekend for a meeting of minds, so to speak?” she asked gingerly.

“Are you sure it won’t be a sappy, feel good type of discussion? You know how those types of gatherings get up my nose.” Rick didn’t look too enthusiastic about the whole idea.

“I don’t like those types of meetings, either, so you know I wouldn’t be going if I thought it wouldn’t be interesting. Just because I met this bunch of scientists at a church doesn’t mean it will be a religious type of topic. Philosophy is not

faith-based. It's based on logic. And from my brief discussions with these guys so far, I get the impression that they blend in just the right amount of physics to spice it up. It should be fascinating to listen to their theories," Verna said calmly.

"I'll see how I feel at the moment. Don't depend on me showing up." Rick didn't sound too likely to join them.

They finished their coffee, Verna paid the bill, and Rick left a tip.

We followed them out of the restaurant. They parted ways uneventfully, each walking to their vehicle alone.

## What's the Matter with Larry?

We popped back into the Lounge to wait for the others to show up. Larry was still in quite a funk. I continued to do my best to not question him, in thought or in words. Tom indicated he had somewhere he had to go, and faded out.

I floated over to the window to watch the souls on the rides. Even though the same types of comical things were happening, I didn't feel amused. I pondered the rather sudden turn of events, wondering if I could handle the new assignment. Larry was now in need of help instead of being there to help me. I might have to listen to a philosophical discussion spiced up by physics (two of my least favorite subjects). And there was a very real risk that I may end up in a church-like environment. I didn't believe Verna's reassurances any more than Rick did.

I debated whether or not to take a break and visit with the guys. I wasn't sure I wouldn't slip up and let on about Larry's issues. Plus, he may need me here. I looked back to Larry. His deAger, Barry, was there with him, giving him some warm, fuzzy support.

I could go to my mossy bank and get some rest and recharge, but I didn't feel tired or weary, just deflated. I felt 'blah'. I decided to ask Julia for her opinion on what I should do next.

She came a few seconds after I had made the decision to call for her.

"Yes, Mr. Burns?" she asked. "What can I do for you?"

"I don't know, little one. I guess I need direction. I don't know what to do to regain momentum. I don't like the direction this mission is going. It's boring and confusing and scary all at the same time. Larry's out of sorts, and I may

have to go to a meeting where my three least favorite topics will be discussed,” I complained. “I don’t know what to do. I just know I don’t want to do this anymore.”

Julia just floated next to me, not saying or doing anything for quite some time. She didn’t seem to be in communication with the higher-ups, either. She was just there.

“So, what do you think, then?” I asked her, a bit put off by her lack of response.

“This may be a good time to sharpen your ability to wait, and watch. You can beef up your patience. Larry may need you for emotional support.” She wasn’t being very helpful. She knew I couldn’t handle the pressure of being needed for anything, let alone emotional support. I had no idea what ‘emotional support’ even was. How could I possibly give any?

“Don’t sell yourself short, Mr. Burns,” Julia said reassuringly. “Don’t you remember the excellent job you did helping Emma adjust to transparency? You have the perfect combination of skills to help Larry to work through his anger.” She smiled and added, “After all, who better deserves to be the recipient of his raw, unedited crankiness?”

I threw her a sideways glance, acknowledging the rib. “But how does being cranky help him deal with his past? All it did for me was make me crankier. Why doesn’t Kenny take him to his bubble? That’s what Arnie and I have to do.”

“That’s a good point, but Larry’s issues are different than yours. You and Arnie have built in temper problems. Larry’s is acquired. So the best way to help him is to help him relive it, in a sense. And you have the perfect history to be the one to help the most. You and Irene.” She glanced at me for my reaction to bringing up Irene’s name.

I was a bit puzzled. “Why Irene? She doesn’t deserve any more crankiness than she already put up with in our lifetimes.”

“Precisely,” Julia responded. “And that’s just what Larry needs to see. Let’s ask Larry if he wants to go along with us to visit her.”

Before I could disagree, she was over with Larry and Barry. Larry looked up at me with a frown, but Barry agreed with Julia.

I floated leisurely over to them. I shrugged my shoulders, and said to Larry, “D--- if I know what they’re up to.”

Next thing we knew, we were at the campground. I could tell Larry was relieved to see none of the guys around. Irene was visiting with Emma. We floated over to the trailer.

Irene greeted us with, “Welcome back, world travelers!”

Emma thanked me profusely for getting her off to a good start. She blushed a bit when a butterfly flew out of her mouth with one of the complements. “Sorry about that. I still backslide sometimes.” She was already as young as Irene. No surprise there.

We sat down on lawn chairs and discussed some of our mission with the ‘women’. After a bit, Julia and Barry left. Emma felt a tug from an earthly connection shortly after that, and also poofed out.

“Let’s go for a walk, shall we?” Irene suggested.

“Sure, why not,” said Larry, sounding a bit downhearted.

We headed out on the wide path. We followed Irene past the mountain path, past the path to the Watering Hole, and past the path to the river. None of us spoke.

After what seemed like miles, Irene took a smaller side path. It wasn’t long before we emerged onto a cliff overlooking the most spectacular view anyone could imagine. It was a combination of every stunning portrayal of mountainous scenery all put together. It took our collective breaths away. Even Larry seemed less grouchy at the sight.

We settled onto the edge of a rock and basked in the beauty.

Larry was the first to speak. “Irene, why did you put up with Ian’s abuse all those years? And now you’re subjecting yourself to him again. I don’t understand.”

I cleared my throat loudly to remind Larry I was sitting right beside Irene, in case he didn’t notice. Not only did he



not acknowledge it, but Irene ignored me as well, answering his question as though I were invisible.

“It wasn’t easy. There were plenty of times I probably should have left him. Especially after he ran the kids out of the house. But I guess I could see something hidden deep inside of him that most others couldn’t. I knew he was trying desperately to hide a soft spot. And a painful spot. He really wasn’t as mean as he seemed. He never hit me or the kids, and the verbal abuse was just when he was upset about someone else, or something at work. It didn’t hurt my sense of self because I knew he was just lashing out at the target he knew was going to tolerate his indulgence. I didn’t take it personally. Most of the time, anyway.” Irene stared out over the canyon. “Since I’ve been here, though, I’ve seen the folly in playing that role. If I had been stronger; if I had stood up to him, he may have been able to see the errors of his ways in time to salvage some sort of positive relationship with the kids.” She looked at Larry. “I messed up. Big time. I regret behaving like a spineless, doting wife. But I’m not sorry for me. I’m sorry for the kids.”

Larry’s eyes filled with tears. He began to sob. He and Irene held each other and cried. And cried. And cried.

I felt most awkward. I floated up the hill a ways, pretending to check out the scenery from various perspectives. But I really was trying to figure out what the h--- was happening to Larry. ‘*And why are they acting as though I’m not here?*’ My ear puff was a wisp of light blue, and blended quickly into the baby blue of the sky.

I tried to remember anything I had known about Larry’s family. If his parents were like the Kiln’s, and seeing the family interactions brought back all his unpleasant childhood memories, why would Irene and I be able to help him deal with them? If we were as bad as his parents, why would he have wanted to be around us at all?

Eventually, they noticed I wasn’t there with them on the rock anymore. They floated up to join me. “You don’t have a clue about what’s going on, do you, Ian?” Larry asked.

“H--- no!” I answered. The small thumbtack was medium blue. “And it’s about time you two notice I’m still here!”

“Come back down to the rock, and we’ll try to explain.” Irene turned and floated back down to the rock. I was starting to feel put upon, and being told what to do didn’t sit well with me. Larry followed her, but I didn’t.

When they reached the rock, they sat and talked as though they weren’t expecting me to be there, anyway. “The h--- with them, then,” I muttered, brushing away the dark blue sand that snorted out of my nostril. I floated higher instead of floating down to them.

I watched them talk. They intermittently laughed, hugged, and cried. Irene had been good friends with Larry’s wife, Lori. She was still alive. She had remarried a few years after Larry died. I wondered if they were talking about her.

Not surprisingly, my curiosity got the better of me, so I floated closer to be able to hear their conversation.

“He was more like a spoiled brat than a man, to tell you the truth. A spoiled brat in control of the household. So he was worse than having another child. But he wasn’t evil. He was just too self-centered to see what his actions were doing to the rest of us. Lori tried to tell me how bad it was for the children, but I didn’t have the guts to confront him. She never said specifically that she knew about your family, but she suspected it was similar to ours. She said you used to accidentally refer to Ian by your father’s name when you described a particularly harsh encounter between Lenny and Ian. I always wondered why you were so set on getting Ian and Lenny to reconcile. I see now that you could identify with Lenny, but how did you deal with Ian?” Irene asked Larry.

Larry glanced up at me, so I knew that he knew I was able to hear his reply. “He was just a fraction of what my father had been. He was bearable because he wasn’t calculating. He didn’t plan to make the kids’ and your lives miserable. He just didn’t know any better. And didn’t notice.” He paused. “So, I guess I was subconsciously trying to control my father when I tried so hard to get Ian to see the pain he

was causing. I didn't realize what I had bundled up inside of me until I had to watch the Kiln's home life. Arthur Kiln and my father are evil beings. Ian is just a pain in the a--."

I sat down on a small rock above them, and thought about what I had just heard. I couldn't be angry. I always knew I was a pain in the a—to most people. And Larry had said I was nowhere near as bad as his father.

They talked a bit more, then started to float back to the larger path. I was actually grateful that they didn't ask me to join them. I still wasn't sure how I felt about all of this. Did Larry feel angry with Irene all these years because she had no backbone, like he described Verna? And is Irene saying she wished she would have stood up to me for the sake of the kids all it took to take away all of Larry's anger? So where exactly do I fit into all of this? Why did I have to be a part of this interaction at all?

Julia popped to my rescue. "Your presence was important for Larry to process his anger, even though they didn't acknowledge you most of the time. He knew you heard what he thought and felt. He needed you to know that. He needed to feel as if that fraction of his father that you represented to him heard him out. You helped just by being here and listening at key points of the conversation."

*'Well, that was easy,'* I thought. "Glad I could be of assistance. Now will he be back to his usual self, or will I still have to deal with his newly discovered cranky side?"

Julia looked at me and shook her head. "You never cease to amaze me, Mr. Burns. That remaining silver has a very tight hold on your small supply of selfless gold."

"Yes, I know I'm selfish! And if one more soul points it out to me, I'll..... I'll..., d----- it." I hadn't thought about it until now, but I really had NO power to control anyone here in heaven. I couldn't even come up with a viable threat to intimidate properly. Julia deftly dodged my dark dart.

"But you CAN control YOURSELF, Mr. Burns. You'll get used to being more flexible with time. Adjusting to your environment rather than adjusting your environment to you

is MUCH easier.” Julia sounded so optimistic. “And besides, it’s much better than the alternative, wouldn’t you agree?”

I let a surge of annoyance fizzle out, too weary to continue to be angry, and then responded in a non-sarcastic tone of voice, “If I knew what the alternative was, I’d be better able to answer your question.”

Julia apologized, “Sorry, Mr. Burns. I thought you were aware that controlling others was only in the realm of the silver counter-spin forces. People with an overwhelming need to control others do not come to heaven. They can’t handle the stress of allowing others to have choices. To them, this is hell, not heaven.”

*‘That explains why I took so long to be convinced this was heaven and not hell.’* I sighed. “There is hope for me, then, little one?” I asked weakly. “Will I eventually be able to drop some of my silver so I can be more comfortable here?”

“As soon as your mission is accomplished,” she answered brightly.

I looked at her for a few seconds. “So, that is my motivation to get back to work, is it?” I sighed heavily. “Let’s go for it, then.”

## **A Meeting of the Minds**

By the time Larry and I returned to the meeting room, Tom had filled the others in on what we saw at the restaurant. Mary's team already knew about the meeting Rick and Verna discussed, naturally, since Verna was suckering Rick into going by not letting on that it was a bunch of church members that were meeting, not scientists.

"Oh, no, Ian. It IS a group of scientists that are planning to meet. They invited Jacob and Joan to THEIR meeting, not the other way around. Verna was not lying to Rick. They plan to discuss philosophy as it interacts with physics, just as Verna said," Mary quickly corrected my cynical thought.

"Why would a pastor be interested in something so logical?" I asked flippantly, not expecting an answer.

Bill couldn't resist ribbing me, though. "I agree. Religious people are such irrational daydreamers. Why would they want to let anything as sensible as sound judgment interfere with their neat and tidy world?" He winked at Shirley and Mary. "One can't properly brainwash anyone who is firmly grounded in logic."

Larry gave Bill a high five, and everyone started laughing. I just grinned sheepishly. "Just seeing if you were paying attention, Bill," I said.

Al and George were chomping at the bit. This was definitely of exceptional interest to them. They started to explain something they wanted to eventually convey to Rick about the substance of afterlife; something about dark energy and dark matter. Strange pair of guys, those two.

Sheila was deep in thought. She looked worried and pale.

"Is Rodney going to be there, Sheila?" I asked her when I was able to get her attention.

“Yes, I believe he will be there. Why do you ask?” She replied.

“Oh, just wondering. You looked so preoccupied. Are you worried about him even when he’s not in Icky’s clutches?” I still had no idea why I was so aware of the connection between Sheila and Rodney.

“I don’t know why there is such a strong connection, either, Ian. And yes, I am worried, but I can’t figure out why. I just have this sense of impending doom. I can’t shake it.” She was beginning to look as ghostly as when she was in the presence of Icky for a few seconds.

“Have you been visiting Icky?” I asked.

She looked at me with surprise in her face. “No. Why do you ask?”

“Because you look almost as bad now as you did when you showed him to me.” I was starting to worry as much as she was.

By now, the others noticed that Sheila and I were dead serious about something major. Their moods took a decidedly somber turn as they stopped their bantering to listen to us.

Sheila was barely able to whisper, “Byron Crane is not invited, but I’m afraid he’s planning on being there.” She looked around at the others. “Will he be visible to the people there? If they have no idea that such an evil being is in their presence, can they risk being open-minded?”

Mary shuddered. “We’ll have to call for the infants to run interference. We can’t let the scientists have a bad experience their first meeting.”

Bill suggested we try to get the meeting site or time changed without Crane finding out about it. Tom felt sure that wouldn’t work, since Crane was probably aware of a meeting somewhere. He’d be sure to find out where and when it would be in the end.

“Is there anything my silver can do to block him?” I asked hopefully. “Since I don’t feel so badly affected when I’m around him, maybe I could trip him up, somehow.”

“And I can warn Joan,” Shirley added. “If she knows something is amiss, she can keep the meeting to discussion only, and postpone any ‘open mind’ attempts until the coast is clear.”

Al agreed. “We can’t stop the meeting. We don’t have that kind of influence. Do you think Ian’s silver can shield us, too, Tom?”

“How about the three of us tune in to Mission Control for some specific guidance,” Tom replied.

Within a few receptive moments, they had a plan. We were all to attend the meeting with our antennae up and ready for signals. Not only were we to be conduits for information to get to Mission Control, we were to be open to guidance at the same time.

As soon as Icky was spotted or sensed, I was to position myself between him and the people at the meeting. I was also to block him from our group of souls if at all possible.

The others were originally going to settle in beside a receptive person and wait for an opening. Now, however, that plan was scrapped, as it would only help Icky and Proteus pick out the vulnerable people. Instead, they would hang back and watch.

Apparently, the fluidity of time was at work, as I knew only hours had passed since we saw Verna and Rick at the restaurant, as the coaches were preparing everyone to begin this part of the mission at once.

When everyone was ready, we held hands. In an instant, we were in a large living room. It was tidy, but not spotless. It was not formal; the furniture was a hodge-podge collection of unmatched but comfortable recliners, sofas and overstuffed chairs. End tables were of the useful type—the kind you could put a glass on without a coaster. User friendly. The entire room was comfortable and inviting, warm and lived in. The owner of this home was definitely not of the pretentious sort.

As people began to arrive, I watched to see if I recognized any of them. Rodney was one of the last to come.

Rick was the absolute last one in, several steps behind Verna.

The hostess offered everyone drinks of soda, tea, Kool-Aid or coffee in disposable cups. Some of the couples brought homemade desserts. The host was trying to keep his Saint Bernard, Tiny Tim, out of the living room, but the gate put up at the archway to the living room was no match for the behemoth beast. I wondered why they even bothered to try it. Eventually, the dog was banned to the basement. I just hoped the basement door was thick. It sounded like claws of a mountain lion were scratching on the other side of the door.

Eventually people found seats and settled down for the start of the discussion.

Larry poked me in the ribs with his elbow and pointed to a couple I hadn't previously noticed. "Isn't that one of the oil guys? Isn't he the one who was furious with the others for not standing up to Danny and Arthur?"

"Yeah, I think it is. I thought Ralph was the one who knew physicists from college. Why would Andy be holding out on them?" I wondered.

"These physicists aren't involved in research," Bill explained. "They teach at local high schools and colleges."

Jacob was not taking charge of the gathering, so I guessed that Mary was right about it not being a religious meeting. One of the guys I'd not seen before started the more formal part of the gathering by banging his plastic fork on his plastic cup. It took a while, but soon everyone noticed his futile attempt to make noise, and stopped talking.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Chad and Stephanie's humble abode." As the host and hostess bowed, a pitiful howl from the basement literally shook the house. "You two don't have a barn to put that small horse in, do you?" the man suggested playfully.

"Anyway, we're here to discuss the Physics of Philosophy, or the Philosophy of Physics, depending on your perspective. I hope everyone had a chance to skim through the little bit of reading assigned in preparation for this



evening.” He grinned broadly as he struggled to hold up a two inch thick textbook with one hand. Everyone chuckled.

“Put away the props, Nat. And sit down. We need someone with a more mature outlook on life to lead the discussion tonight.” The woman sitting next to him grabbed his belt loop and tugged him back into his seat. “Someone take over quickly, while he’s seated!” she added as he plopped heavily onto the sofa beside her.

Andy spoke up next, “May I suggest that someone who can keep the topics to their absolute basics begin the discussion? I haven’t thought about philosophy since college, and I never did understand physics. Are any of you elementary teachers?” I could tell by his grin that he knew they were all high school level, at least.

One of the older men offered to start by summarizing his ‘Intro to Philosophy’ course for liberal arts majors who just want to fulfill a requirement for graduation without a lot of work. “Basically, I just tell them to ponder the reasons for being,” he said. “I usually have at least one wise guy who asks if that means we are going to do some ‘naval gazing’.”

“I know what you mean, Walter. Even when they get to the higher levels, and ARE interested in the subject, it can be too uncomfortable to take too seriously,” one of the older women said. “Especially at the beginning. It can be rather depressing.”

Nat’s wife, Nan, changed the subject by asking a scientific sort of question. “You know, especially since all this talk of unimaginably small nano particles started to pop up, I’ve been wondering...” She paused, then continued, “Wouldn’t it be interesting if everything were like the ‘nesting dolls’? I mean, what if atoms were like solar systems with the planets being the electrons, and molecules were galaxies, and the universe was just a collection of molecules in an object, and so on? Infinity would REALLY be infinite!” She looked around the room for anyone with a look of comprehension. Rodney and Rick, and the other scientific sorts looked skeptical at best, derisive at worst.

Jacob and Joan, and the other philosophical looking sorts looked pensive.

Nan focused on the doubters. “Now, you guys have to pretend you don’t know all the little facts that make the idea completely absurd, if you want to try to imagine what I’m talking about. Don’t be literal. Can’t you see it? What if all those teensy weensy muons and fermions are the building blocks of a tiny universe inside an atom? Maybe the ‘Big Bang’ was really just the nuclear explosion of an atom.” She was digging her hole deeper and deeper, as far as I was concerned.

The woman sitting with Andy came to Nan’s rescue. “I don’t have a clue about what Nan’s talking about. I’ve never heard of muons and fermions. But I do know what she means about looking beyond the facts. If one doesn’t know how wireless communication works, which I don’t, all today’s technology is like magic. Actually, even radio and TV is magic to those of us unable to grasp the concept of frequencies or whatever. So, unhampered by facts, we can imagine the potential of the human brain to be exponentially greater than we currently realize.”

“But this isn’t just about ESP,” Angie continued, despite the look of disdain from Andy. “It’s about learning how to use ALL the potential in our brains. Think about it. Some people are geniuses, while others are barely functional. Something in the structure of the brain allows some people to do amazing things. For instance, people with some forms of autism can figure out the day of the week someone was born within seconds of hearing a birth date. It’s almost as if that part of that person’s brain were a computer. Who knows? We may someday learn how to communicate without all of our electronic gadgets! Wouldn’t that be great! We could e-mail a message without using a computer!”

Now even the philosopher types wore puzzled looks. Joan, however, looked very uncomfortable.

That was when we noticed the intruder. Icky was hovering above Angie’s head looking downright sleazy. He was almost salivating at the thought of getting into her mind.

I zoomed to the rescue. I slid horizontally feet first between Icky and Angie, facing the dastardly demon. I thoroughly enjoyed watching the look on his face change from lewd to confused. He had no idea what had happened. He just knew he was no longer in contact with Angie's thoughts.

I dropped my head back to look upside down at the other souls, to see how they were doing in his presence. I had a split second of panic when I didn't see them before I realized that they had to skee-daddle faster than I had to slide into place in order to remain unnoticed by Icky. *'I wonder if I could flatten myself out to be able to shield the entire room. Then the others could come back in and help me.'*

When I looked back up towards Icky, HE was gone, too! I panicked. I looked all around the room. I whizzed under couches and tables, and through lampshades. I finally spotted him in a corner behind the chair Rodney was sitting in. Actually, I didn't really spot him until I noticed the terror in Rodney's face. I zoomed into place between Icky and Rodney.

This time I did notice when Icky left. He oozed through a vent in the floor to the basement.

Almost instantaneously, Tiny Tim's barks filled the air and shook the house.

*'This I have to see,'* I thought, and quickly oozed through the vent right after him.

The sight was priceless. I floated to a corner, and stretched as big as I could, then called my peers to see, one at a time.

Icky was terrified. Tiny Tim wasn't able to see him, but he could sense him, and everywhere Icky went to try to escape, Tiny Tim followed. And Icky went into some pretty tight spots. The crashing of lamps and banging of furniture was difficult to hear over the volume of the vicious barks. Once, Tiny Tim actually bit through Icky's waist! I laughed so hard I almost forgot I was responsible for hiding Bill, who happened to be behind me at that time. Icky's top half had to venture back to Tiny Tim to rescue his lower half.

After that incident, Icky tried desperately to empty his pocket of a most uncooperative wad, which I suspected was Proteus. When he finally managed to throw the clump across the room, Tiny Tim ran after it, and Icky quickly oozed out of a crack in a small window.

I debated for a second whether to stay with Proteus, or follow Icky. I decided to keep tabs on Icky.

I didn't have to go far. He was leaning up against the house panting as though he had just run a marathon. He looked rather pitiful. And powerless. All because of a 'tiny' dog.

I looked back in the window to see how Proteus was faring. I saw Chad and Nat come slowly down the stairs, shot gun and baseball bat at the ready. When Tiny Tim noticed the men, he settled a bit, but he was still growling menacingly, eyes fixed on a corner behind an upturned chair.

"What is it, boy?" Chad asked in a whisper.

Tiny Tim's tail wagged a few wags as he growled, punctuated with ear splitting barks.

"I don't see anything, do you?" Chad asked Nat.

"Not a thing. Did your dog get hold of some loco weed, or something?" Nat suggested, his tone serious.

"He's never acted like this before. Maybe he saw a mouse. He's not used to being down here by himself." Chad straightened up from his stalking pose, no longer worried that there was an intruder in his home. He walked over to Tiny Tim and patted him on the head. "Now, Tiny. A mouse is nothing to be afraid of." He looked around the room. "Boy, will Stephanie be upset when she sees this!"

While this was going on, Proteus must have oozed out of another window. He rounded the corner of the house taking long, angry strides on his tentacles in mid air. I flattened myself against the window, afraid to move.

"What the h--- did you do that for? I could have been KILLED!" Proteus screamed at Icky.

Icky curled his lip and growled through clenched teeth, "You're already dead, you ----- idiot. And it's YOUR job to keep ME safe, you useless excuse of a slimy servant."

They glared at each other until the sparks literally flew between them. Again.

*'Oooo. This is intense,'* I thought. Then I remembered we were to put up antennae for guidance when we needed direction. I backed away from them a few feet before I dared try to make contact.

The first thought after I opened my airwaves was *'the others will be able to watch the meeting as long as I can keep these two out of the house.'* The second thought was *'pay attention!'* Icky and Proteus were no longer in a face off, and were eyeing the window to the living room.

I managed to shield the window just in time. This time, though, instead of being confused, Icky turned on Proteus. He was sure that his useless servant had purposely kept him from entering the house for spite. He grabbed Proteus by the neck and jerked him so close their snotty huge noses touched. "You are the most pathetic ----- I've ever laid eyes on. You don't deserve to be in my presence. Go to hell."

Icky's long fingers around Proteus' neck began to twitch. Proteus' expression was pure terror. He began to flail his 'legs' and pulled at Icky's hands in a fruitless attempt to loosen the death grip.

Icky's expression was pure evil. His laugh was heinous. He prolonged Proteus's torture, savoring every moment. Then, with one quick clench of his fist, Proteus' head detached from his body, screaming horrifically. His body convulsed. Then both parts faded into nothingness.

There was NO WAY I was going to let this horrifically evil guy back into that house. He tried the window I was shielding again, cursing and swearing something about Proteus not being smart enough to spite him from hell. Still muttering, he tried the other windows, but he was much too slow to beat me to them. He flew to the chimney, but I was there first.

Eventually, he gave up, and sat on the steps to the back door and fumed. "All those opportunities. Gone. D--- that b----. What ever made me think he would be a good slave?"

The subordinate a-----. I'd be better off if I'd never bought him. Next time I shop for a servant, I'll be sure to get a guarantee that there's no hidden gold contamination."

He perked up when he heard the door lock click. 'AH! I can get into their minds as they leave! It won't be as easy, since they'll be concentrating on getting into their cars, and driving home, but there may be a weak moment!'

He turned to see who was coming out, and shrieked in terror. It was Tiny Tim. He was on a leash, but a very small woman was at the other end of that leash. Icky flew over the backyard fence, but Tiny Tim effortlessly pulled the leash out of Stephanie's hand, and he was over the fence, hot on Icky's tail; his sonic boom barks filling the alleyway.

Hum, I thought. I didn't know Saint Bernard's could jump six feet..... I guess it's all in the motivation.

## Got ME Thinking

I hovered around the house to be sure Icky didn't decide to come back. I thought about what the women had said about ignoring the facts and just using imagination to sort things out. It reminded me of one of my business courses about paradigms. The point of the course was to beware of being caught up in routine: 'It's always done this way' is not a good reason to continue to do it that way. I had brushed the course off as a leftist commie plot.

Maybe I shouldn't have been so old fashioned. Tradition can be a warm blanket, giving comfort in knowing what is supposed to be. But it can also be used to suffocate, to stifle new ideas.

Suddenly, I held very still, shifting my eyes to my right, then my left. I then looked over my shoulders and between my legs. I straightened up, listened intently, then quickly turned 180 degrees and struck a karate pose. I knew there had to be someone or something near me to make me think like that. I NEVER let anyone try new ideas. The old ways were fine, thank you very much.

Lucky for my sanity, people started to leave the house, so I was kept too busy to think philosophically. I had to zoom around to be sure Icky nor Proteus were nearby.

After everyone was gone, Larry came out to look for me. "Boy, you missed it! It REALLY got intense after you left. Angie blew the deal with Tiny Tim so out into left field, that the physicists had a time defending why there was no way that a stupid dog could 'pick up' on airwaves, or signals, or whatever, to be able to detect anything supernatural. She almost had Rodney convinced that she had a point. Andy was trying to shrink back into his chair, he was so

embarrassed. Tom decided to follow Andy and Angie home to see how they ironed out their differences, and Al and George followed Rodney, Rick and Verna. They had met at a bar before the party, and drove to the Laddetts together. Very convenient, huh?" Larry was so excited that he hardly stopped for breath. Not that he needed to breath.

"So, what about Mary and the religious set? And Sheila? What are they up to now?" I asked.

"Shirley followed the Sheppards home to console Joan. Joan had been able to sense something was VERY amiss, and was most upset. Downright frightened, actually. Seeing her like that really egged Angie on about something actually being in the basement. Bill and Mary are inside trying to help Sheila deal with HER intense reaction to the brief exposure to Crane." Larry paused, looked at me and asked, "How did you get Crane into the basement? We couldn't see what was happening after that quick glimpse of the b-----. We were whisked to the kitchen, and not allowed to reenter the living room until we got 'the coast is clear' signal. Then we heard the commotion downstairs and you called us to come see Crane cornered by Tiny."

"You know," I said pensively. "'Icky' isn't a bad enough nickname for that filthy, hateful, horrid creature. He's much too evil to refer to lightly." I felt more serious than I had felt in recent memory. As I stared into the distance, I added, "You have no idea."

I decided to leave it at that, and refused to give any details despite the barrage of questions from Larry. I didn't want to think about it anymore.

I was rescued from Larry's curiosity when the Laddetts left their house by the back door to look for Tiny. They called his name and went through the gate into the alleyway behind their house. I zoomed to their side. I needed to know what had happened to the evil b-----. I suspected he was driven off by Tiny, but I couldn't be sure. He may have found a way to kill the poor beast.

"Where could he have gone?" Chad asked Stephanie.



“He JUMPED the fence, Chad. I wouldn’t believe it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes. I had no hope of stopping him with that flimsy leash.” She turned around and pointed, “This is where he would have landed.” She shone the flashlight on the road, looking for signs of an impact. There were some scattered bits of gravel and some white lines that could be from his nails. From the angle of the scratches, it looked as if he had headed north.

As they walked, they discussed the meeting. “It didn’t go anything like I had expected, thank goodness,” Stephanie said. “I was afraid the guys would start talking scientific jargon, and I’d be sitting there with glazed-over eyes. And I thought Nan and Angie’s ideas were fascinating. Farfetched, but fascinating.”

“I actually don’t think the ideas were really any more farfetched than some of the current nonsense being bantered about, like the string theory, and parallel universes, and 11 dimensions,” Chad said pensively. “It all depends on if it makes sense to the right people.”

“I wish I understood math. Rodney and Rick really lost me when they started to talk about how Nan’s idea may actually fit into some formula. Why does everything have to be worked out mathematically, anyway?” Stephanie sounded rather frustrated. “If people’s brains really work like computers, I guess I just never bought the software for calculus!”

Chad chuckled at the thought. “And I never got the software for cooking!”

“Or cleaning, I might add,” Stephanie jabbed, and the conversation took a lighter tone for a while.

When they reached the end of their block they could find no more clues as to where their pony-sized dog had gone. They decided to walk back on the well-lit street, in case any of the neighbors had seen their dog, and would see them walk by with an empty leash. They debated knocking on some doors, but decided it was too late at night.

When they reached their house, they went back inside to call animal control to keep an eye out for Tiny. I sat on the front door step.

It felt as if the whole thing was a flop. *‘D--- that eviler than evil Crane. How does a god get away with pretending to be human, anyway? There should be a law....’*

Larry oozed out of the door. “I saw the Laddetts were back without their dog, so I figured you’d be around here somewhere. So, what do you think?”

“About what.” It wasn’t a question. It was a statement that meant ‘leave me alone’. He didn’t take the hint.

“Ian, I told you what we saw. Why can’t you at least think a complete thought about what you saw so I can at least have SOME idea of what you’ve been through?” He pleaded. He sounded rather pitiful.

I looked him straight in the eyes, and said, “CRANE IS AN EVIL B-----.” I looked away, into the distance, and continued. “He has absolutely NO redeeming features. He squooze the head right off of Proteus, savoring every scream, every painful grimace, every gesture for release. Just because he thought Proteus was the one keeping him from the meeting. Then he tried to get back into the house by any tiny crack or crevice he could find. I hope Tiny found him and tore him to shreds.”

“Well, the dog COULD sense his presence,” Larry reminded me. “So unless Crane can somehow just disappear, maybe Tiny found him.”

“We can only hope.” I smiled weakly, remembering the look on Crane’s face as he ran around the basement hiding in fear from the ‘tiny’ Tiny. “Thanks for reminding me of that part. THAT was enjoyable to see. The dog even tore him in half, at one point. Then Crane dislodged Proteus from his pocket, and used him as bait to lure Tiny away long enough to escape out of a crack in the window.”

Larry was quiet for a while before he asked, “So, you were affected by Crane this time, then.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, honestly not understanding what he meant.

“You had said you didn’t feel any particularly bad sensations when you were around him before. Judging from your current mood, he got to you, at least a bit, this time.” He looked worried.

I thought about it. *‘I didn’t feel much while I was in his presence, keeping him out of the house. Even now, I don’t really feel BAD. I feel numb. Actually, I feel defeated.’*

“But you weren’t defeated, Ian. You won. You kept him from getting into Angie’s mind. And it was WIDE open, just asking for a paranormal fiend to enter. We never needed to call for infant back-up. YOU did it, all by yourself, Ian!” He was not flattering me and I knew it. But still it didn’t feel like a success.

I felt drained. I felt hopeless. I felt profound sadness.

I looked at Larry. And tears began to flow. I felt Larry pull my head to his shoulder, and put his arms around me.

And we cried.

## My Shield Is Shattered

We were helped back to the Lounge by Bill and Mary. Sheila didn't appear to be in any better shape than I was. But Bill was radiant.

"That went exceptionally well," he gushed. "All things considered, the discussion followed a most productive path. The philosophers held their ground against the stuck-in-the-mud schoolteachers. Of course, having Rodney and Rick there helped to keep the scientific crowd open to new ideas. People in research are in research to find new things, not just rehash old theories. It was great!"

Larry brought Bill back to the moment by asking him about me and Sheila. "Why can't THEY see how well things went?"

Mary looked puzzled. "I understand why Ian would be drained. His energy HAS to be zapped after all the shielding he did. Rather effectively, I might add. But I don't understand why Sheila is so badly effected by Byron." She paused as though listening for an answer.

Her puzzled expression melted into a knowing, thoughtful look as she nodded to herself. She held Sheila's face in her little hands, and gazed into her eyes. As bad as I felt myself, I could still sense the warm fuzzies Mary was radiating into Sheila's soul. ....I hoped I would be next.

Tom popped in, saw what was going on, and waited patiently and respectfully for Sheila to be strengthened.

I was waiting patiently, too. I was too tired to be jealous that Sheila got a fuzzy first. I was too tired to worry that I wasn't jealous, which may mean I lost too much silver in that last boo-hoo session to be of any use to anyone any more.

Tom looked at me worriedly, then at Larry. *'You both look like you need a warm fuzzy,'* he thought. He took us both by the hand, and we floated blissfully surrounded by heavenly fuzz.....

When we returned from the fuzzy, everyone was there. Sheila was refreshed, back to her pre-mission self, as though she'd never seen or heard of Byron Crane, or worried about Rodney. Bill was happier than ever, as was Mary. Al and George were chattering past and over each other, they were so eager to tell their success story.

Larry looked as though he felt much better, and so did I, which was a bit worrisome. I felt less conflicted, less irritated than I'd ever felt before.

I looked at Tom for the answer. *'Yes, you've lost a good amount of your silver. You won't be able to shield against Crane anymore, but you are definitely not useless,* he thought. *Listen to Al and George.'*

"It was TOO easy! All THREE of them tuned in to EVERY thought I was sending their way!" George was losing years before our very eyes. And doing cartwheels, and flips. "They got so engrossed in discussing the possibilities if NOTHING is considered constant, that by 3 AM, a policeman patrolling the area had to actually knock on their car window to get their attention. They explained to the cop that they were in an intense discussion. After he was convinced they weren't on drugs, or drunk, he let them be. But their focus had been lost, so they agreed to meet at Rick's lab in the morning. I can't wait!"

Al looked like a bobble head, nodding in agreement. He gave George a high five as he hollered, "YeeeeHaw!!!"

"If Rodney and Verna leave Byron's team, and join with Rick, we won't need to deal directly with Byron anymore," Tom said to me and Larry. "So this is where Andy and the oilmen come back into play. We need to see if we can help get funding for Rick's research. Since Lenny is in charge of Danny, you can help us with Arthur and Henry."

“What about the others?” I said. “Where do they fit in now?”

“I’m not sure. We’ll have to play it by ear,” Tom answered.

I looked at Larry and thought, ‘*are you ready to face Arthur again?*’

“I’d rather not. How about I keep tabs on Andy?” Larry asked Tom.

“Okay,” Tom said. “And Ian and I can take turns following Arthur and Henry.”

“Why do we have to take turns?” I wondered. “Wouldn’t it be better if we stuck with one or the other?”

Tom looked at me for a bit, then answered, “Okay. Which one do you want to follow, then?”

“Remind me what you found out about Henry. I may sympathize with Arthur too much.” I glanced at Larry with a half smile, feeling out whether or not he was desensitized enough to joke about it.

“No, Ian. You don’t need to worry about sympathizing with that b-----. Remember I said you were only one tenth as bad as he is. But you’d be better off with Henry.” Larry was still VERY serious.

‘*Whatever,*’ I thought.

Mary’s team had given up trying to calm Al and George enough to get them to discuss a plan, so they just discussed the options with Sheila. It looked as if they reached a conclusion about the same time we did.

Mary nodded to Tom and Sheila, and we all faded out at the same time, leaving Al and George alone to bask in their success.

## Back to the Oil Gig

We found ourselves in the office building's corridor outside the conference room. People were busy with various projects visiting each other's offices and making small talk. We walked up and down the hallway to see if there was anybody we recognized.

It didn't take long to find Andy's office. It was the busiest. We found Bob and Randy's offices nicely spaced at opposite ends of the hall. Most of the other's offices were scattered here and there. Arthur, Henry and Brad were nowhere to be seen, however.

"I don't remember seeing any other offices up on Danny's floor," I said. "But I didn't look very hard. Should we have a look?"

"Sounds like a plan," Tom agreed, and we headed to the elevator, leaving Larry with Andy.

As soon as we oozed into the wide luxurious corridor we could hear a less than polite conversation going on at top volume. Danny's door was open, and we could hear the melodious voices of the two top guns of the company reaming each other out. We floated to the door but we couldn't get close enough to look in. The repulsive forces were much stronger than I remember.

"No, Ian. Remember, you have less silver now to shield you from it," Tom said.

Puzzled, I asked Tom, "If the strength of the repulsion is dependent on the amount of silver you have, how are YOU able to be this close?"

"There are techniques we can learn to overcome some of the repulsion, but we can never get as close to them as can the souls with more silver, such as the amount you

previously had,” Tom explained. “This is as close as we can get. Let’s listen.”

“If you weren’t such an a----- we could have manipulated the situation, but nooooo... you had to blatantly say the first thing that came into that pea brain of yours!!” Arthur was furious. “Now we have the media to deal with, AND a small mutiny on our hands!”

I wished I could see the look on Danny’s face. I imagined that he was smirking, enjoying the anger he created in Arthur. “Tsk, tsk. Isn’t that just toooo bad. Now poor little Arthur has to actually do some work,” was the demeaning reply.

There was silence for several uncomfortable minutes as I imagined the two men staring each other down. I knew Arthur would lose. No matter what Larry had seen Arthur couldn’t be as evil as Danny.

I was right. Arthur huffed out of Danny’s office, took long, angry strides to the other end of the corridor, and slammed the door to his office behind him. I felt a whiff of repulsion as he passed. Tom moved back several feet.

“Do you want me to go into Arthur’s office and see what’s up?” I asked. I got the feeling that Tom’s method of coping was wearing out a bit. “I can manage on my own.”

“Yes, Ian. That would be most helpful.” Tom sighed, and tried to muster up some strength. “I think most of his mistreatment of his family is displaced aggression. As you saw, he is not able to completely defuse onto Danny what is rightfully Danny’s. His family pays the price.” Tom looked depressed thinking about it.

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks, Tom.” I felt uncharacteristically polite. I wondered if I had enough silver to be able to get close enough to do any good.

“You do, Ian. Arthur is not pure silver, and his silver is not as potent as Danny’s. I’m sure you’ll do fine. And



remember, if you need guidance, tune into your PGS.” He nodded, and oozed down through the floor.

I floated rather slowly towards Arthur’s office. I oozed through some of the other doors I hadn’t checked out before. We still had not located Henry’s office. He didn’t seem to be in the same tier of importance as Arthur and Danny, but he didn’t fit in with the others, either.

The other rooms were just more large storage closets. Actually, I think they had been offices, but either these two didn’t want to share their floor, or nobody, even Henry, could stomach being here.

I took a deep breath, and oozed through the door into Arthur’s office.

It was neat and tidy, as I had expected. It was almost like Crane’s, but with more expensive looking furniture, and there were actually some piles of paperwork. The keyboard to the computer was center stage, and he was typing away madly.

“There! That’ll show the \*@#^%\$--- b-----!” and he hit one last key, presumably the Enter key, to send his message. “Jan’ll kill him, then *I* won’t have to!”

I floated around to see if I could get close enough to read his message. I got a glimpse of ‘keep an eye....other women’ before he logged off. I wondered if I should try to let him know somehow that Jan already knows, and has already dealt with one of the women. And she let Danny-boy live.

He walked over to his window, and studied the view for a while. Every now and then, he would smile and nod, as though he had a good idea, or saw something good.

I was able to get to the edge of the window the farthest away from him, but I couldn’t handle the repulsion to get close enough to see if he was watching anything in particular, or just using the scenery as a distraction as he contemplated his next step.

The phone rang. It was Jan. She wanted to meet with him as soon as possible, in private, but inconspicuously. “Sure, Jan.” He looked pleased with himself. “I know just the

place.” He gave her directions to what he described as a busy dive of a restaurant across town, and added, “Dress down, so we won’t stick out. Wear your oldest jogging suit.” He hung up the phone, and chuckled. An evil, deep chuckle. “Bye, Bye, Danny,” he said, teeth clenched.

He went to a relatively small door in his office and looked through the clothing hanging in it. He picked out a golf shirt and a pair of Khaki’s. He folded the clothes neatly, took papers and his laptop out of his briefcase, and placed the clothes in it instead. “Now, let me find my old shoes.” He rummaged around in the back of the closet, and came out with a worn pair of casual shoes. He put them in with the clothes, taking care to keep the soles away from the clothes so they wouldn’t get dirty.

He closed the briefcase, and strode to his door. As he walked to the elevator, he whistled a merry tune, being sure Danny could hear him. As soon as he was in the elevator, he burst into a sinister chuckle. He pushed the express button, so the elevator wouldn’t stop to pick up any other passengers.

In the lobby, he nodded to the guard, and walked out the front door. He walked calmly towards a car, past the limo drivers. “No need, Charles. I’ll drive myself this time,” he said to one of the chauffeurs as he passed.

I hurried to the car so I could whoosh in to the passenger side when he opened the door. I lucked out. He opened the back door first to deposit his briefcase on the back seat, so I had plenty of time to slide right in. I settled in for the ride.

We made a pit stop at a fast food restaurant. He went into the bathroom and changed, then bought a drink, and we were back on our way to meet Jan.

The restaurant was one of those cafeteria-style types, and it was very busy. As he had obviously planned, there would be little chance that they would be noticed. I wondered how they were going to notice each other, actually, because it was so busy.

Not to worry, though. He bought a newspaper, and sat on a bench at the entrance, pretending to read it, but really keeping an eye out for Jan.

He started to get antsy after he finished ‘reading’ the paper and she still hadn’t arrived. He pulled out a cigarette. As he slowly smoked it, he calmed down a bit.

He watched the people walking by and going into the restaurant with a sneer. He was obviously disgusted by their appearance. He was particularly offended by a large couple waddling by. He almost snarled and his left upper lip quivered as he eyed them with contempt. He had a similar reaction to a group of teenagers with nose rings and spiky purple and orange hair.

I was beginning to think he’d barf from ‘people watching’ if Jan didn’t show up soon.

He got up to see if there were any different newspapers he could buy when she hurried up to greet him.

“Arthur! I’m so glad to see you!” she exclaimed as she held out her hand for a shake.

He reciprocated less enthusiastically, and nodded. “Nice to see you, too, Jan. Shall we?” he added as he motioned to the restaurant door. He didn’t want to stay outside with her longer than necessary.

They engaged in small talk as they waited in line to get their tray. Even in their ‘casual clothes’ they looked very out of place. Jan forgot to remove her diamond earrings and flashy necklace. Arthur forgot to remove his ‘airs’. His haughtiness was too engrained for him to even pretend to be relaxed here.

They made it through the line without a major incident, although there was a touchy interaction with one of the less than helpful cafeteria workers. Arthur couldn’t understand his question, and asked him to repeat himself without all that s--- in his mouth. Of course the kid didn’t, and Arthur bypassed whatever dish the now glaring kid was scooping out. The up tic of the corner of Arthur’s mouth gave away his self-satisfaction at getting the kid’s goat. “Rotten punk,” he muttered under his breath.

They settled into a booth in the back of the restaurant to eat. Or to think about eating. They looked at their plates with disgust.

“We have to eat some of it,” Arthur said. “If we don’t, we may stand out and be noticed.”

Jan shot him a glance, then scooped up a microscopic portion of her mashed potatoes. She gingerly placed it in her mouth, paused a moment as if getting her nerve up, then quickly closed her lips around the fork as she jerked it from her mouth. She looked pleasantly surprised. “These are REAL. Well, I’ll be. Maybe there is hope for the world’s peons,” she declared.

“So, you got my e-mail?” Arthur asked.

“Sure did. Caught my attention.” She took a few bites, then added, “Even though I already knew he was sneaking around.”

“Oh?” Arthur’s eyebrows raised in surprise. “You knew?”

“Oh, yes. I’m not completely blind. But,” she hesitated, “I thought it was one woman, not women. Was that a typo?” she asked, but not too hopefully. She knew it wasn’t.

“No, it wasn’t, I’m sad to say,” Arthur answered, looking relieved that he was able to tell her something that she had not previously been aware of. “I know of at least two.”

Jan’s jaw set. “I should have killed the b----- when I had a chance,” she muttered under her breath.

“Pardon?” Arthur said. “I couldn’t hear you.”

“Nothing important, Arthur. Are you able to tell me who they are?” Her face was getting redder by the moment as she began to realize how she had been had. Danny knew he had another damsel on the leash to replace the one she strangled the whole time he sweet-talked her into not shooting him.

“I don’t know their names, but I can tell you where to find them,” Arthur offered. “Or rather, I can tell you how to catch him in the act. He meets one of them at the Paris Hill Hotel lobby. I believe he has a night lined up for tonight. Did he tell you he had to work late tonight?”

“Yes, he did. He said there was a press conference he had to attend. He said something about having to clear up a

misunderstanding.” Her eyes were slits. “Lord knows he’d do everything BUT clear up anything. He loves to muddy things up. The muddier, the better. It’s his favorite technique to get his way.”

“That, and saying outrageous things just to rile people up. He keeps me busy just stomping out fires he starts,” groused Arthur.

Jan’s expression began to transform into a look of revenge. Her grin was sinister. “I’m about to light a fire under HIM that no one can put out.”

Arthur waited expectantly for her to explain her plan, but she wasn’t about to share it with him. She finished her desert, and got up to go. “Excuse me, Arthur. I’ve got some pressing work to do.” She gracefully avoiding patrons and their food laden trays as she quickly made her way out, leaving him with his food half eaten, and hers barely touched.

## Making Connections

I stayed there for a bit, wondering if I should follow Jan, stay with Arthur, or see how Tom and Larry were doing. This soap opera between Jan and Danny, now with Arthur and yet another woman thrown in was interesting enough, but it didn't seem relevant to the overall plans, so I decided to see what Larry and Tom were up to. Besides, the company is probably where Arthur will go after he finishes his meal, and from where Danny would leave to meet his other concubine (and Jan).

I popped into the hallway where most of the conference goers worked and floated around in search of something interesting. As I passed Andy's office, I caught a glimpse of Ralph. I back pedaled, and went in to check things out.

"I caught up with my buddies from college," Ralph was saying. "One is working for a horrid man who tries to sabotage their work regularly, but they at least have some funding. The other has freedom to work on whatever projects seem most fruitful, but he has no access to adequate funding."

Andy sat upright in his chair with a look of recognition in his eyes. "Would that horrid man by any chance be Byron Crane?"

"Rodney only said his name once, and I'm awful with names, but I believe that may be his name." Ralph was most definitely not sure.

"Rodney. Your friend Rodney. Does he live near here?" Andy was wishing he had asked for last names at the meeting at the Laddetts. "And what is your other friend's name?"

“Rodney is living in a small town about an hour from here. Rick is here in town. Why?” Ralph was suspicious of Andy’s degree of interest.

“I may have met them the other night at one of the most embarrassing gatherings Angie’s ever dragged me to. They were the only two scientific sorts who took Angie seriously. And there was a woman with them. Verna, I think her name was. Do you know her, too?” Andy asked.

“Rodney has mentioned a woman who is the only one their boss shows any respect for, but, G—I’m so awful with names....” Ralph replied. “What was the topic? Rick had said something about having to go to some silly meeting with a friend of his from college.”

“It was about the physics of philosophy, and yes, it was silly.” Andy nodded his head. “You know my wife enough to agree she can be a bit flaky, right?”

Ralph shrugged. “I thought she was sane enough.”

“Well, she was crazy at that meeting. I wanted to melt into my chair.” *‘Andy and Angie apparently still don’t see eye to eye after that meeting. I wish I had asked Tom how their trip home had gone.’*

“Well, if it was the same meeting, I’ll find out what Rick and Rodney thought about her behavior, and I’ll let you know.” Ralph smiled as if he knew something he wasn’t letting on.

Andy didn’t catch it. “You do that. And if they were the guys you know, I won’t hold my breath waiting for them to discover anything useful. Anyone who takes Angie’s paranormal postulates seriously has got to have a screw loose. And there was another woman there with ideas even screwier than Angie’s. They even took HER hallucinatory ‘what ifs’ seriously. It was a very weird meeting. It’ll be a cold day in h--- before she drags me to another one, that’s for sure.”

“I’ll keep you posted, Andy,” Ralph said as he got up to leave. He stopped at the door, turned around, and added, “You don’t know too many physicists, do you?”

“No. Why?” Andy responded. “Should I?”

“I’d recommend you go easier on Angie. If Rick took her seriously, she may have a point.” Ralph grinned that devilish grin again, and left.

I left a puzzled Andy and followed Ralph. The first thing he did when he got back to his office was to call Rick. He tried his home number first, and left a message for Rick to call him as soon as feasible. He then tried Rodney, again without success.

He checked his drawers for his handwritten phone number list. He found a card with various numbers for Rick. He tried the cell number.

“Rick, this is Ralph. How ya doin’?” The length of the pause suggested Rick wasn’t giving him the canned, ‘fine, how are you’ answer. As he listened, Ralph’s grin got bigger and happier.

“YESSS!” he said, hitting the desk with his fist. “Perfect!!! Listen, Rick.” After a short pause, he hollered, “LISTEN FOR A SEC, WILL YA!! One of my more powerful coworkers was there, too. He thinks you and Rodney are all wet for taking his wife seriously! Can you believe it!!!?”

Rick apparently settled down after that, as Ralph was able to get a word in now and then. “If we can figure out how to fund you guys, we’ll be home free!” and then, “So, you WOULD take any money we could give, even if it came from JK Petro?” Ralph was too excited to stay seated. He stood up and ribbed, “I thought your ethics would have gotten in the way. So, you’re immoral then, huh.” He laughed heartily. “Let me get back with you after I talk with Andy again. Meeting over dinner sounds great! See ya!” He put the phone down and did a rather uncoordinated sort of dance around his desk before he hurried back to Andy’s office.

Andy had obviously never seen Ralph that happy. “Are you okay?” were his first words at the sight of him.

“H--- YES!!!” Ralph was a completely different person from the one I saw at that conference. “And your wife



deserves a Nobel Prize!!” He did a victory ‘yesss’ gesture with knees bent, hands in fists, right elbow jerked firmly to his side.

Andy’s mouth hung open. “Are you SURE you’re okay?”

Ralph leaned over towards Andy with hands on the desk, arms straight. “I’m 100% sure! Rick and Rodney are really on to something. Something so different, something so far out there, it’s gotta be the answer! AND HE SAID HE’LL TAKE MONEY FROM SATAN HIMSELF to follow it through. So, let’s get to work on our Satan’s, then!”

“Whoa, now Ralph. Slow down. Speak English. What the h--- are you talking about?” Andy was beginning to look annoyed. “You want to send money from JP Petro into some black hole of far-out-ness? ARE YOU CRAZY?!!!”

Ralph calmed down. “I guess when you put it that way, it does sound crazy. But everyone thought Einstein was crazy when he came up with his theory of relativity.” He paused and asked, “You HAVE heard of Einstein, haven’t you?”

“Of course I’ve heard of Einstein, you idiot,” Andy snarled sarcastically. “But your friends aren’t Einstein. We can’t fund just any physicist’s quirky ideas.”

“We’re planning to get together for dinner tonight at the S&M Diner. Why don’t you join us and hear for yourself. I’ll go tell Brad and the others.” He turned to leave, hesitated, then added, “Well, some of the others.... Nah, just Brad.” And off he went.

I followed him to Brad’s office, which was on the floor below. He ran down the stairs, taking two at a time. I didn’t think he looked that agile. I guess you don’t need to have good posture to be able to bound down stairs.

He burst out of the stair well almost hitting a passing secretary. He turned his head to apologize to her as he walked briskly towards Brad’s office, and ran into Henry in the process.

“Watch where you’re going, you sniveling hair-brain nerd!” Henry snapped.

“Fancy running into you, Hot Air Henry!” Ralph hollered over his shoulder, not stopping to enjoy the look on Henry’s face at the extremely out-of-character insult.

Henry watched curiously as Ralph fairly skipped down the hall to Brad’s office.

Tom popped up near the elevator with a finger over his mouth as if to tell me to be quiet.

I furrowed my brow. No one can hear or sense us, I thought. Why should we need to be quiet?

Tom pointed to Brad’s office and nodded for me to go see.

Puzzled, I followed Ralph. By the time I caught up with him, he was halfway through his explanation of why he was so excited and Brad was as confused as Andy had been. But Brad got up as he asked Ralph to take a seat, and closed the door to his office.

“Now, Ralph. Calm down and tell me who saw you run, or should I say, skip, into my office.” Brad looked confused AND worried.

“Just Hot Air Henry. Why?” Ralph was clueless.

Brad sighed. “Ralph, I wish you had as much common sense as you have scientific smarts. Think. Has Henry ever seen you this happy about ANYTHING?”

“I doubt if anyone’s ever seen me this happy. I’ve never been this happy before. This is a major break through! At least a potential breakthrough. Rick and Rodney could be the next Einsteins!” Ralph didn’t see any connection between his happiness and Henry.

Brad went to his office door, and opened it quickly. Henry almost.fell.in.

“May I help you, Henry?” Brad asked coolly.

“I dropped my tie tack,” Henry offered lamely, touching his hand to his tie. “I had just found it, and leaned on your door to help myself up.”

Brad didn’t ask to see the tie tack. He knew there was none in Henry’s hands nor on his tie. Henry didn’t wear them to the office... “Be more careful in the future, Henry,” he said through semi-clenched teeth.

Brad closed the door and walked slowly around to his chair. “Ralph, let’s discuss this further at a later date.” He winked at Ralph, signaling to be careful of what he says.

This time Ralph caught both the wink and the meaning of the wink, and just nodded. He got a pen and a piece of paper on Brad’s desk, and wrote the time and place of the planned dinner meeting.

“Why there?” Brad whispered.

Ralph drew a large dollar sign on the paper, and wrote ‘my friends aren’t rich..... yet...’ He grinned broadly as he pushed the paper to Brad.

Brad looked hesitant, but he returned the thumbs up gesture Ralph gave him as he got up to leave.

Brad followed Ralph to the door, and surveyed the hallway as he watched to be sure Ralph walked calmly back to the steps.

As Brad returned to his desk and sat down, I wondered where Larry was. I looked up and down the hall for an open office door in case someone else we knew from the meeting was on this floor as well. All the doors were closed. Tom was gone.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and spun around. “Boo.” Larry said, smiling. “Gotcha.”

“Hee, hee. Very funny.” I was not amused. “What’s going on here? Why did Tom want me to be quiet, and where have you been?”

“We started out in Brad’s office, and I stayed there for a while, but then I had to go to Henry’s office while Tom waited outside. Tom wore himself out being in the same room with Henry for too long, so I did double duty. Then we were both headed back to Brad’s office when Ralph, with you on his heels, shot out of the stairwell.” Larry was being obtuse on purpose. “Just checking how much silver you have left, Ian. Are you feeling annoyed yet?”

I wasn’t as peeved as I would have been a few tears ago, but I was still annoyed. “So, what really happened?” I said, arms folded across my chest.

“Henry and Brad had a heavy debate. A power struggle, actually. Brad got the better of Henry, and Henry left in a huff. So, what’s up with Ralph?” Larry asked.

“You didn’t answer MY question yet, bozo. Why did Tom want me to be quiet?” I was irked at him not telling me.

“I don’t know, either,” Larry said rather huffily. “Ask him.”

“How the h--- am I to ask him when I don’t know where the h--- he went,” I said through clenched teeth.

“Could you two hold it down out there, or I’ll have to close my door again.”

Larry and I froze. We looked at each other, eyes wide and eyebrows to our hairlines. *‘Surely Brad can’t hear us, can he?’* We plastered ourselves up against the wall and looked up and down the hallway moving only our eyes. “Who’s there?” we whispered in unison.

Brad got up, sighed, and closed the door.

Tom reappeared laughing. “Close your mouths, guys, you look like tourists,” he said. “No, Brad can’t really HEAR you, but he can sense you when you are talking or moving. His brain has some of the circuits needed to pick up some of our frequencies, but he can’t make things out clearly enough to understand more than just nuances. Sorta like a cheap radio has lots of static. He can tell he’s got a station, but can’t quite tune it any better than to tell if it’s playing music or commercials. Brad can tell if the soul he senses is basically good, or basically bad, and if there is more than one at a time.”

“So you sent me to his door when Ralph was there so he’d be warned to look out for Henry? Did he sense my remaining silver?”

“Yes.” Tom looked a bit pensive for a few seconds, then added, “Angie’s not as good at picking up silver signals, though. I’m afraid she’s a bit too vulnerable to being high jacked.”

“So Angie’s not just interested in the paranormal, she can actually pick up some of our signals too?” Larry asked.

“Yes,” answered Tom. “But her circuits pick up mainly the gold signals, which is probably why she hasn’t yet been caught by the counter-spin. She hasn’t had a good scare. I would have felt better if she had been more upset the other night, like Joan was. But then again, maybe she IS safe if she has NO reception sites for the silver frequencies.”

“So all those crazy people who claimed to see ghosts really did see ghosts, then?” I asked incredulously. “I thought it was just the TV folks trying to up their ratings.”

“It’s really more complex than I’m able to explain for you. I don’t understand all of it myself. But I do know enough to tell that Brad can sense when we are around. So, unless we want to change something he’s doing, thinking or saying, it’s best if we keep our distance.” Tom seemed to think our interference might not be helpful.

“What is he working on?” I asked. “What were he and Henry arguing about?”

“Brad is holding his own about how to spend the profits, and Henry is trying to get things lined up to spend it quickly on new drilling sites. Brad is pointing things out about need for maintenance for the oil rigs that are getting old, and raising employee morale by giving raises. Henry is furious. He has Danny and Arthur breathing down his back to get everyone in line with expanding the search for new deposits,” Tom replied.

“What does Henry want to do? I mean if he weren’t sucking up to the bosses,” I wondered aloud.

“He agrees with the bosses, but for different reasons. Danny wants more money. Arthur wants more control. Henry just thinks it’s stupid to look for ways to spend perfectly good oil money on anything but more oil.” Tom sighed. “How anyone can be so short sighted is beyond me.”

## What about Henry?

I told Tom and Larry about Arthur and Jan. “So, should I follow one of them, or do you guys need me to follow Henry?” I asked, kinda hoping I could follow Henry. Those rich snobs were getting tiresome. I had better things to do than worry about a spoiled jealous woman and a backstabbing business partner. Of course, this was Danny getting stabbed in the back, which would be nice to see....

“You can follow anyone you chose to follow,” Tom said, then when he saw the look of irritation on my face at that phrase, quickly added, “But we really could use your help with Henry.”

“Where is his office?” I asked, looking up and down the hall.

“It’s down two floors. He has twice as many people answering to him as Brad and Andy have, so he needs two floors of offices to house them all.

“Okay, then. Wish me luck.”

Henry’s office was rather nondescript. He was at his desk on the computer. There were stacks of papers with various topics like ‘the cost of exploration’ and ‘developing a new rig’. Basically, it was the office of someone who was in charge of an oil company. I could see now that he was the one of the three head honchos who did the hard work. That presentation he did was the culmination of months of research and distilling of information. I could see why he would need two floors of helpers.

Of course, I hadn’t really seen what Brad and Andy’s underlying jobs were. I had the sense that this ‘Green Project’ was a temporary assignment, and was about to be

snuffed out. Ralph was likely the only one hired specifically to follow developments in non-oil energy.

I nosed around the office a bit more. Nothing of special interest caught my eye.

I floated behind him and looked over his shoulder at the computer screen. It was a jumble of technical and accounting jargon and figures. He must really be smart.

I suddenly realized he was not at all repulsive. He was actually quite comfortable to be around. It was almost as if our gold bonded, and our silver synchronized. He was not a bad guy at all. Well, not by much, anyway. What's a little mean streak among friends? If he was of the identical amount and strength of silver as I am at this point in my heavenly development, I must REALLY have had a mean streak. Poor Irene. Poor kids. Poor Auto Parts, Inc. workers.

I went out into the hallway to look for some excitement. People were in their offices on the phone and at their computers. A few gathered around the water cooler, which was next to a small dinette of sorts, with a coffee pot, tea bags, hot water, microwave and refrigerator. At least the management tried to keep the employees physically happy.

Henry hit a button on his office phone, and called for one of the guys in a nearby office. "Jimmy, bring the spread sheet. The printed version. These d--- computer screens are useless to show the big picture!" he growled. In stereo - I could hear him from his office as well from Jimmy's speakerphone.

Jimmy reached around the back of a cabinet, and grabbed a cardboard cylinder. He then picked up a stack of papers from the corner of his desk and headed for Henry's office.

"Here you are, sir," he said politely, laying the papers on Henry's desk. He opened the cardboard cylinder and removed the chart. He unfurled it on a table next to Henry's desk. He put paperweights on the corners to keep it open.

Henry studied the chart for a bit, then pointed to the bottom right hand corner. "So, this is the bottom line, then. If Harvey and crew hit pay dirt, this is the amount we have to

budget to get them into production. I trust you double and triple checked all these estimates, Jimmy?"

"Yes, sir," Jimmy replied. "And if you look closely, in the bottom corners of each cell are the best and worse case scenarios. And the totals for both extremes are also in this 'bottom line' cell."

"Very good. I'll be sure to put in a good word to the higher-ups about your work." Henry sounded sincere. He WAS a good guy after all. He just happened to be working for a couple of real jerks.

I decided to try to ooze through the floor to see what was going on upstairs. It took a bit of effort, but not much more than going through a wall.

This level was no different than the others. Just more offices.

I continued up one more floor to check in with Tom.

I snuck a peek in Brad's office first. I swear I saw him shudder a bit. I wasn't THAT close, for Pete's sake.

Tom wasn't there, so I wandered around looking in various offices. Carol and Lawrence looked appropriately busy. Daniel and Pete were twirling pencils while laughing on the phone.

I went into Lawrence's office to check out the topics he was working on. Looked like he was on the refinery end of the line. So Brad must be in charge of processing the oil, then.

Not finding Tom anywhere, I continued upward. No one was in Andy's office but Andy. He didn't seem to notice me, so I looked around. He was not very organized, so I had a hard time finding anything that would tell me his area of work. Looked like a little bit of everything.

Bob's office was tidier. His project was overseeing possible refinery upgrades.

Ralph's office was tucked away in the far corner. It was larger than some of the others and he had two computers. He was happily going through papers, sorting out ones of interest given the new developments.



But no Tom or Larry to be seen.

I decided to check the big boys before I wished myself to the Lounge. Just curious, I told myself.

I forgot this floor was reinforced and very thick. My head pancaked on my first attempt. I backed down, and reshaped my head, then tried again, more slowly. It was a strange sensation, almost like squeezing through a too small pipe, but the pressure wasn't just around my perimeter. It was all through me. Interesting.

I decided not to even try going into Danny's office, now that I had too little silver. I went into the closet next door, and listened. I could hear him on the phone, talking in flirtatious tones. Probably lining up his rendezvous for tonight.

I went to Arthur's office. He was absentmindedly looking through an official looking binder.

*'This is boring. Time to phone home, ET,'* I thought, and poofed back to the meeting room.

## Moving Right Along

Mary, Bill and Shirley were there, discussing something in earnest with Sheila. They looked most intense. They didn't seem to notice I had arrived.

"The Open Prayer Group meetings are every Tuesday night, so it can't be then," Shirley said. "And tomorrow night is too soon. Wednesday looks like the soonest we can try to get them together again."

"I guess that will have to do. That would give them at least one day to process any new ideas before they have to leave for the conference," Sheila responded.

"So you're sure they'll go to the conference, then?" Bill asked.

"The guardians of the people I had contacted at the beginning of the mission have come through brilliantly. They said something about making a bet over how many times they would have to say the name of the conference to their charges before they'd get through, but they lost count." Sheila chuckled, and added, "They really enjoy their jobs."

"So Sheila, could you fill us all in on why this meeting is so important?" Mary asked. She had a good idea, but wanted the others to fully understand as well.

"If we can get Rick, Rodney and Verna together with Ralph and Andy again before the conference, it may help them all have a better grasp of the long term goal," Sheila explained. "Rick has the independence and Rodney and Verna have the means, more or less, if they can fend Crane off for a few more weeks, anyway." She laughed. "You know, Crane hasn't been back to work since that Physics/Philosophy meeting. Rumor has it that he had to have major surgery after being attacked by pit bulls!" She

looked at Mary and asked, “Can you explain how that could be, Mary?”

Mary’s eyes glowed mischievously. “After Tiny Tim chased him into what he thought was a park, he figured that if he ‘materialized’, Tiny would be confused, and leave him alone. Well, that part worked, but the ‘park’ turned out to be the backyard of one of those mansions just down the road from the Laddetts. While he was ‘demonic’ he had bounded easily over the eight-foot high hedge. He zoomed up a tree to get away from Tiny, and that was where he was sitting when he resumed his human form. Tiny saw him up there, but didn’t put two and two together, so he went off towards the house sniffing for the ‘ghost’ he had been following.”

“After Tiny Tim was out of sight, Crane climbed down out of the tree, planning to hightail it around the hedge to the closest street when Tiny came running for his life from the dogs guarding the premises. Tiny knocked Crane over as he jumped the hedge. Before Crane had time to do anything (I’m told spiritualizing from a human to a demon is not as straight forward as from demon to human.), the dogs were on him, trying to tear him to shreds. Lucky for Crane, the grounds’ guard had started to run towards the barking dogs as soon as Tiny was spotted, so he was able to spare Crane too much damage.” Mary tried not to smirk, but without success. “But the best of it is that Crane was arrested for trespassing! He’ll probably get off without too much trouble, but it’s nice to think it could still be on his record, and he had some explaining to do as to why he was in that area to start with.”

Wonderful! That was the best piece of news I had heard in a long time!

“So, what meeting were you all talking about when I arrived?” I asked after we all had a good laugh.

“We need to get the key players together again before a big conference so they can present a united front,” Bill explained. “Angie is the leader of the Open Prayer Group, so we can’t try to get them together on Tuesdays, and tomorrow won’t give Shirley enough time to get through to

Joan, so we'll all try to keep the calendars open for Wednesday, then."

"Where does Joan fit into the 'key player' group?" I asked.

"She's our communication connection. She's able to pick up many of Shirley's suggestions to set up meetings. Shirley stands next to Joan, thinks about the topic of the meeting we think would bring out the ideas that would be most helpful, and Joan feels the proverbial light bulb of a great idea go off in her mind, and when she sits down to write up a list, Shirley stands behind her thinking the names. She usually gets very close to listing all the people Shirley thinks about. She and Shirley did a great job with the meeting at the Laddetts." Bill nodded Shirley's direction and added, "Thanks, Shirley."

"So, I'll see if I can get Joan interested in gathering the 'open minds' together with the 'scientifically curious' minds. It may be challenging to get Andy to agree to come, though. I'm counting on the connection between Ralph and Rick to keep his arm twisted," Shirley explained. "We want them all to get together so they can see the potential of combining all of their assets. It could be phenomenal."

"Um, you lost me somewhere. Why would Angie have anything to offer to the group of scientists?" I asked.

"Sorry, Ian. We forgot you weren't able to be in on the Philosophy of Physics meeting. Thanks, by the way, for keeping Crane out of the way. It was invaluable." Mary looked a bit embarrassed about the slip.

"No problem," I said proudly.

"Anyway, it was Angie's open mind that got Rick and Rodney thinking about the possibilities, and helped them be open to George's thoughts. She has to be there to keep them from falling back into the old mindset. Andy has to be there with Ralph to be reminded that these are not just some flaky ideas so he'll be more likely to work hard for funding from his oil company to support the development of the ideas," Bill explained.

“I have to fill you guys in on what I just found out, then, unless Tom and Larry already told you, that is,” I said excitedly. “You NEED to include Brad. He’s actually able to sense our presence. He has a VERY open mind.” I stopped, furrowed my brow, and added, “By the way, do any of you know where they are? The last I saw them I was on my way to check out Henry’s role in the oil company.”

Mary zoned out for a second, then said, “They are following up on Bob and Sandy Bourne, and Carol and Gary Citrine to see if they would be able to offer any specific help. And, thanks, Ian, for the info on Brad. We had an idea he may be a good receiver, but no hard evidence until you three clarified it. Could you tell us what you found out about Henry?”

“He’s harmless. He’s focused on spending money developing new oil rigs, and finding new reservoirs. He’s just grounded in the here and now. He sees oil as the end all and be all. But he’s not evil. He has no more silver in him than I do.” I noticed a few half smiles, so I added, “What? Are you thinking I still have too much silver?!” pretending to be indignant. “I’ll have you know I spent a good chunk of what I had dealing with that crafty Crane. Why, I bet I barely have any more silver now than Larry!”

“You are definitely making progress, Ian,” Mary agreed. “But you are still a formidable alloy.”

“Ally, you mean. And formidable is usually used to describe a foe, not a friend,” I corrected rather huffily.

“No, I meant alloy. As in a mixture of metal. Very well blended, I might add. It will take you quite some time to separate out all the silver still spinning side by side with your gold. But you will reach a point of maximal comfort soon. You are almost there already.” Mary seemed to enjoy being obtuse.

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever. I just thought you would like to know Henry is nowhere near the level of evilness of Crane or Jackaston. Arthur is hateful, but he wouldn’t be so bad if he didn’t have to work so closely with the Jack---. Henry is just a cranky, ‘get the work done’ kind of guy.”

“If he has his mind set on spending lots of money for oil projects, he still may be a challenge, even if he’s not overly laden with silver,” Sheila worried. “But, we’ll have to let Andy deal with that, if Rick and Rodney can convince him it’s worthwhile.”

“And Brad. Don’t forget about Brad. He’s much more level headed than Andy, and he has a wide open mind.” I hoped they wouldn’t leave him out. “Ask Tom and Larry, if you want a higher gold karat opinion.” I felt a bit put off at the thought that they wouldn’t believe me.

“We will. We also want to know about Bob and Carol before the meeting is finalized. Joan is relatively flexible in her communications with Shirley. If Shirley wants to add to the guest list, she just needs to stand beside her while she’s folding clothes, or doing dishes, or some other mindless task during which she has a wonderfully open, fluid mind, and ‘pop!’, Shirley’s message gets through.” Mary seemed to have things under control.

“It may be harder to get her to invite people she doesn’t even know exist, though, Mary. I may need some help there.” Shirley said worriedly.

“If you think something like, ‘other willing company folks’, or ‘open it to special guests’ would she get the idea that she could expand the group that way?” Mary suggested.

“I could try,” Shirley said.

The four of them decided they were ready to get on with their plan. “Are you okay here by yourself, Ian?” Shirley asked.

“I’m a grown man, if you please. I think I can look after myself,” I said huffily.

“You aren’t TOO grown, though, so I think you’ll be okay,” Mary said with a twinkle in her eye. “But we should conjure up a playpen for you in case you have the urge to wander too far.”

“Hee, hee. Very funny.” I didn’t appreciate the way she reminded me of my age. “I thought age discrimination wouldn’t be such a problem in heaven.”

I plopped down into the overstuffed chair in a half-hearted huff as they faded out of the room and went on with their mission.

If something exciting doesn't happen soon, I'm quitting.

## I Asked For Excitement....

I decided to check in with the guys at the campground, and in an instant, I was there. But hardly anyone else was. I headed for the Watering Hole, floating so I had time to enjoy the scenery. I began to notice a change, sorta like ‘fall in the air’. Some of the trees had leaves turning colors, and there were some crunchy leaves on the trails. I hadn’t thought about the change of seasons in heaven, but nothing would surprise me anymore.

The Watering Hole wasn’t very full, either, and the souls who were there weren’t very energetic. I didn’t recognize anybody. As I started to worry, Julia appeared at my side.

“You wished for something to happen, so in effect, you chose to be part of some very important events as they are seen from heaven’s perspective,” she explained. She took my hand, and we appeared in a sea of souls watching far-away mountains. The storm around the mountains was enormous. The flow of gold to the ocean seemed to flood the mountainsides.

“What’s happening?” I asked Julia.

“A large earthquake caused a huge tsunami that devastated the shorelines of Indonesia, Southwest Asia, India, and all the way to the horn of Africa. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed.” She was very sad. All the souls watching were very solemn.

“Is there anything we can do?” I asked.

Julia just shook her head. “Natural disasters occur according to nature’s timetable, sometimes with the help of counter-spin. All we can do is make the best of the results. All the suffering those souls endured has created a large amount of gold, and it is flowing to the ocean to join forces



with the souls from prior disasters in hopes of slowing the spread of counter-spin throughout the Middle and Far East.”

“Did you say ‘slowing’ and not ‘stopping’ the counter-spin? That’s a bit defeatist, isn’t it?” I asked.

“I wish we could stop the forces of the manipulators everywhere. There is more hope in some instances than others, but certain areas are overwhelmed.” She sighed. “We just have to do the best we can with what we have.”

*But we’re in heaven, I thought. ‘Isn’t God all-powerful? Can’t he do better than that?’*

Julia looked at me, deep into my eyes for the few seconds that I could bear the intensity. But that was all it took to remind me that that was not the way of the clockwise force. Using power to MAKE things happen would not allow people the freedom of choice.

I looked back at the mountains. The storm was over so many of them. And the gold was glowing; shimmering its way to the ocean; on its way to fight the proverbial evil: the counter-spin forces of ‘the manipulators’.

“How long does it take an infiltration of gold into a silver spun being to work its magic and deliver a reformed silver soul to heaven?” I asked, obviously thinking of my son.

Julia sighed. “Remember, time here is fluid. What feels like years here can be only a second on earth, and vice versa. Time in hell is also fluid, but for most souls there it seems to be an eternity. Getting an earthly assignment is a coveted perk for most who reside there, and it is the souls likely to be sent to earth who are infiltrated by our most potent gold. Once on earth, time, by comparison, flies by.”

She seemed to have danced around my question. “So, are you saying that compared to eternity, a decade or so is not a long time to suffer in an evil being’s being?” I asked with more than a touch of annoyed incredulity.

“Yes. That is what I am saying,” she responded sadly. “But remember, the gold has access to support from high, clockwise spin. Even though it sounds like a horrendous undertaking, the strength of their character combined with refreshing contacts with the clockwise forces of the fuzz

keeps their ‘chins-up’, so to speak. It hurts us more to think of what they are going through than it burdens them.”

“Do you know anyone who was able to bring their silver soul here?” I asked.

“Yes, I do.” She stopped for a few minutes, deep in thought.

She sighed again, then added, “My father was killed in World War II before I was born. When I arrived in heaven many years later, I learned that he was on such a mission, and was near completion of his task. He was able to find me when his silver charge was convinced by a particularly skilled gold retriever to give up his ghostly life, and come to heaven.” She paused, then continued with a wistful smile. “His form was just like the pictures my mother had shown me. He was all that I had ever imagined, and then some.” A tear ran down her cheek. “He gave me a hug that literally replaced all the hugs he never had a chance to give me in life.” More tears flowed, some with traces of silvery glitter. “He was wonderful.... He was incredibly loving and caring..... He was perfect.”

Neither of us said anything for some time. I glanced at her several times, trying to give her some privacy to remember her father, but I was unable to avoid noticing her become younger and younger before my very eyes. My heart ached for what I imagined she had been through; a life’s worth of feelings about a father she never had a chance to know all bundled up into a moment in heaven. Literally. It was too much. I was soon crying as much as she was.

Of course, my tears had much more of a silvery shimmer. I looked at my hands and noticed the wrinkles filling in, resulting in a much more youthful appearance. But somehow age didn’t seem to matter much anymore. There were so many more important things.....

She was eventually able to continue to tell me about her father’s experience in hell and living in a silver spun soul. “He was truly amazed to find out how many earthly years he had spent in such a state. He thought it was more like one or

two years, not decades. He was kept too busy focusing on the tasks at hand to notice the passage of time. And he never felt alone. He described the brief time in the fuzz on his first arrival in heaven as so intensely powerful that he was filled with enough love and warmth to last him an eternity, even if it would have been an eternity in hell.” She laughed as she recalled him quickly adding, “But, boy, am I glad I’m here instead!”

She went silent again, and a new, more glittery stream of tears ran down her cheeks. I knew she was remembering him say how thinking of eventually being able to see her here in heaven was his greatest motivator for completing his mission. They spent the next few heavenly days with each other before they moved on. They still keep in touch, but they’d shared so much in that time together, they really feel as if they are still together.

I sighed. I still felt conflicted. I still couldn’t believe so much suffering was really necessary. There must be a better way.... Thinking of the amount of work ahead was just too overwhelming for me to handle.

I thought about the tiny piece of the puzzle my team and I were putting together. How can one group of scientists and one even somewhat properly motivated oil company make any difference in the long run? A sense of hopelessness overcame me.

Julia was able to notice the gloom that emanated from me even as she was reminiscing about her miraculous meeting with her father. She took my hand, and we were on my mossy bank.

I felt a bit better as I settled onto the moss. My curiosity was back, too. “Why is it, little one, that whenever I need to ‘refresh’, this particular spot is always vacant?”

“It is your ‘little bit of heaven’ in heaven,” she explained. “And you don’t even need to file a deed in the clerk of court’s office.” She had her twinkle back in her eyes, too. “Enjoy!” she added as she faded out slowly, blowing me a kiss as she went.

## Fast Forward

After a sufficient amount of time in the fuzz, I was ready to find out how my team was doing. I consciously chose a time to return to the Lounge to maximize the amount of information I would glean from their conversations. I was too impatient to trudge through all those tedious earthly interactions. I wanted to skip to the last chapter of the book, so to speak.

The looks on everyone's faces told the story. They were elated. They were relieved. They were proud of a job well done.

It didn't take long for Larry to notice my arrival. "Ian! Where have you been! You missed the best part of the mission!" He slapped me through the back, and pulled me over to the group. I was beginning to regret my choice to skip to the end of the mission. I felt just a tad of guilt.

"No need to feel guilty, Ian. If it weren't for your sacrifice, we wouldn't have been able to do what we needed to do. The information gained by your interactions with Danny and Byron was critical, and your ability to keep Byron out of the meeting made important connections possible. We were home free after that!" Tom fairly gushed.

It was embarrassing. I hung my head and pretended to kick at a pebble in front of me and said, "Aw, shucks. It was nuthin'."

They encouraged me to take a seat, and proceeded to fill me in on what had happened since they made their plans to have a meeting of the scientists, some of the oil people and the Open Prayer crew.

“The meeting went better than we imagined in our wildest dreams!” Mary began.

“It was like a snowball rolling downhill in 3 feet of wet snow! Angie and Joan kept minds open so George was able to get almost all of the heavenly physics facts planted into both Ralph’s and Rodney’s minds. Rick was a bit challenging, but Verna helped keep him from getting too put off by any religious or philosophical overtones. Ralph managed to keep Bob focused on the physics, and Bob’s gut level PGS was very helpful. But Brad was the most helpful of all. He was pivotal in keeping the oil folks open to the possibility that these ‘crazy’ new theories were really possible. It was awesome!” Al beamed.

“Oh, and get this!” Larry interrupted. “You’ll never guess what happened to dastardly Danny! He was arrested for murder! He tried to say it was in self-defense, that his wife was trying to kill him, and the gun accidentally pointed towards her chest during a struggle, and fired! How lame!”

“So, anyway,” Sheila interrupted Larry, “the World Physics Conference went off without a hitch. Not only did OUR scientists have time to work out solid theories supported mathematically but other teams from around the world were able to get heavenly physics facts through to enough of THEIR scientists so that the theories were taken seriously right from the get-go! With everyone on the same page, something useful may be right around the corner!”

“I overheard Rick talking with Rodney, Ralph and several other physicists about capturing energy from the sun before it enters our atmosphere and converting it into tiny but potent anti-matter ‘batteries’ that could supply enough energy to keep an average household running for months, or years!” George was beaming. “They even had ideas about how to make these tiny packets perfectly safe, and how to keep the technology from being misused for weapons.”

“And Brad AND Andy were open to the possibilities. They were willing to work for funding to help with the expensive hurdles, like building the space ladder, and the space foil.” Tom joined the excitement. “With Danny

focused on his murder defense, Arthur was more approachable and Henry's arm was twisted to give up some of the profits for the project. It may not be enough, but it's a start. If they have enough success to convince the government that it is a necessary investment, we may be in time to save the earth!"

This last statement landed like a lead balloon. The gaiety was transformed to the somber realization that the war was still not won. There were still many ways for counter spin to manipulate matters to slow or snuff out any hopeful developments.

"Sorry, folks. I didn't mean to sound so pessimistic," Tom apologized.

"We needed to be brought back to reality, eventually, Tom," Mary said. "We still have much work to do." She looked to Bill and Shirley. "This is where Jacob and his church come in. We must help him use the structure of the church to spread the 'Open Mind Message'. If we can get more and more people to learn how to be open to heavenly influence, we may be able to free more people duped by the counter spin forces. If they are able to feel the difference between the coercive teachings of the manipulators trying to control them and the tender thoughts of the clockwise forces trying to guide, we will greatly reduce the unfair advantage silver spin has on the good people of the earth."

"If we were able to free the immense amount of gold present in people all over the earth, silver spin would be so outnumbered, even the greatest of the manipulators should be overwhelmed!" Bill was honestly optimistic. "I've seen so much true, loving goodness in people over the years as a pastor, that I KNOW if it were set free of the obtuseness of so many of the useless religious and societal mores, there would be NO hope for the strongest of the silver spin agents to have enough input to stop the 'March of Gold to Glory'! We could make life on earth so heavenly, the SS agents would prefer staying in hell!"

HIS last statement brought smiles back to everyone's faces, even mine.

Until I remembered: My son is in one of those silver spin agents!

## Leo, Lenny and Larry

I floated away from the group towards a different window than the one overlooking the park. Through it I could see the huge lake bordering one side of the park and lots of souls enjoying their boats, water skis and jet skis. Some of the scenes were almost as comical as the ones on the park rides, but I couldn't focus on them.

I was worried about Lenny. Larry said Danny was arrested. *'Does that mean Leo is in trouble with the counter forces for failing to keep Danny out of trouble? If so, what does that mean for Lenny? If Leo fails, he could be suspected of treason, and be 'cast out of hell' to life as an unhappy spirit on earth. That would mean that Johnny and the gold retrievers could convince Leo to come to heaven, and he would bring Lenny's gold with him.'*

Larry followed me to the window and stood next to me, listening to my musings. "We can go and have a look. Or you can go by yourself. Danny's not in jail. He was able to post bail without a problem and he's home in his mansion working on his defense with a horde of lawyers."

"But I don't have enough silver to let me to get close enough. I had to hide in a vent the first time, and I have much less silver in me now." I wasn't very optimistic.

"Maybe the type of silver you lost was just the 'chicken' variety. Maybe you still have your useless silver that made you feel conflicted for no good reason. That may be enough for you to get close enough to a mere human." Larry was actually doing a decent job encouraging me, even though we both knew my silver shield was gone.

I sighed. "I guess there's no harm in trying."



We popped into the hallway outside a study in Danny's mansion where a meeting was taking place. Danny was not happy, by the sounds of it. Larry and I decided to ooze through the door and watch. The room was huge, so we were far enough away from Danny to be able to stay in his presence.

"You useless b-----s!" Danny was berating his team of lawyers. "I could come up with a better defense by myself!"

"I wish you luck, then, Mr. Jack---, um, I mean Jackaston," one of the men said as he stood up to leave.

"Good riddance! You're the most useless idiot of the bunch!" Danny hollered after him.

"Mr. Jackaston, may I suggest you learn to better control your temper. If you allow a jury to see how angry you can become, you'll be toast in the first few minutes of deliberations." The woman lawyer had sternness in her voice. "Any woman on the jury would recognize the abusive tendency in a heartbeat."

"Isn't that rather sexist of you, Ms. Bondaire? The men on the jury would see right through your attempts to stigmatize me," Danny said with an air of victory.

"May I remind you that I'm on YOUR side, Mr. Jackaston. If you are able to conceal your ill, spoiled brat nature from the jury, you MAY have a chance. Otherwise, I highly recommend plea bargaining." Ms. Bondaire was being very straightforward with the raging lunatic.

"OUT!!!" he bellowed; face as dark red as a beet. "I said I'll have nothing to do with any plea bargaining, and that's what I meant!"

Ms. Bondaire stood, nodded her head in his direction and said, "Very well, Mr. Jackaston. May I suggest you start gathering addresses of some of your friends, if you have any, so that you'll have someone to write to from inside your prison cell." She didn't turn to leave until she had a chance to enjoy the look of pure contempt on his beefy round face. She seemed to savor it. When she did turn to leave, we got a better look at her expression; it was a mixture of disgust and disbelief.

She closed the door quietly behind her, leaving only three others in the room with Danny. None of them seemed anxious to speak next. They wisely waited while Danny was obviously using every last ounce of self-control he had, which was basically none, to refrain from throwing a chair at the door through which Ms. Bondaire had just passed. The only thing that stopped him was the weight of the chair he attempted to pitch her direction, but the effort seemed to have a bit of a calming effect on him. Just a bit.

“So, what do you three have to say for yourselves? Are you going to be as full of helpful suggestions as your G—D-- -colleagues?” he growled through clenched jaws.

“I’d like to hold my comments for now,” one of the meeker appearing men said. “I’ll wait until you feel a bit more receptive to suggestions.”

“May I suggest the name of a good anger management counselor?” said another.

“OUT! OUT with both of you!!!” Danny’s eyes were now as red as his face. Made him look rather demonic, actually.

When the two rose to leave, so did the third.

“And where the h--- do you think you’re going?!!” he glared at the third man.

“I value my life over any amount of money you could offer me to take your case. Good day, sir,” he saluted sarcastically, and marched out behind the others.

As soon as the door was closed, objects smaller and lighter than the chair began to fly. A paperweight was the first to go – right through a window. Books ‘frisbeed’ across the room hitting pictures, knocking them askew and breaking their glass. Larry and I reflexively ducked when anything flew close to our heads, even though we knew whatever the object was would go right through us.

We decided to hide out under a sofa table until his tirade was over. “Wow,” Larry said. “He IS evil. Or at least very hateful. Is this how he was when you saw him in his office?”

“I heard the crashing and saw the damage, but I didn’t get to see the action. He definitely does have a temper problem,

though, doesn't he? Puts mine to shame, doesn't it?" I asked rather sheepishly.

Larry just smiled. "But did you notice we're both in the same room with him, and I don't feel any repulsion. Do you?"

"No, I don't, but we're not that close to him right now." I listened for the next crash. I waited. Larry and I looked at each other.

"Do you think he's done?" Larry asked.

CRASH!!! Something landed on the table we were under and knocked over the lamp. It shattered all over the floor next to us.

"Guess not," I answered.

We decided to settle in for a while, and develop a game plan.

"When he's not so obviously evil, see how close you can get to him before you sense repulsion," Larry suggested. "I'll stay here until I hear from you."

"Oh, send ME out to the wolf, huh?" I teased. "So you can hide here safe and sound?" Then I remembered the last message I had received from Lenny's gold. When I wasn't feeling angry toward Danny, Lenny had to send me messages by whooshing by my ear to warn me that Leo may be able to pick up on my thoughts. He basically warned me to stay out of his way.

I reminded Larry of this warning. "Do you think Leo would be able to pick up on my thoughts then, too?" Larry wondered.

"If it was the gold part of my thinking that he could sense, then I would expect that your gold thoughts would be just as easy for Leo to pick up on," I reasoned. "And it may not be worth the risk to Lenny to see if my silver is still strong enough to hide me from Leo."

"Did Danny and Leo talk at all? Can we just sit here and listen?" Larry asked.

"I don't remember, to tell you the truth," I had to admit. "But what else can we do?"

We sat in silence for quite a while. Danny had settled down, or at least he wasn't throwing things anymore. We could hear him muttering, but we couldn't understand what he was saying.

I glanced at Larry. He looked like death warmed over! He looked almost as bad as Sheila had looked when she was in the presence of Byron. "I have to get outa here," he said weakly just before he seeped through the floor and disappeared.

D---. Now what. I wondered if I should go, too. But I felt no repulsion. I basically felt nothing. No fear, no hate, no attachment, no sentiment. I felt like I did when I was in the presence of Byron when my shield was fully functional.

I slowly and carefully raised my head above the table to have a look. Danny was sitting at a desk with his back to me. Leo was beside him, whispering in his ear. Funny, I thought. He's not a 'slurry' like he was before. He looks more like Proteus did. Pure evil.

I began to panic. Where was Lenny?! His gold spin was the reason for the push and pull I had felt before! If Leo was now pure silver, what happened to Lenny's gold spin?!

My knees went weak and wobbly. I sank to the floor. I slowly seeped through the floor, just like Larry did.

*'My son...where is my son.....?'*

"Pops!" It was Larry coming towards me with arms wide open in preparation for a humongous hug, but it was LENNY's voice. "Pops! It's me!" Larry's mist engulfed me with warmth and love. "I've asked Larry to let me use his form for a while so I can let you know in person what is going on. Oh, pops, I love you so much!" Larry's face was beaming. And his eyes were literally shining gold.

It really threw me for a loop, listening to Larry sound like Lenny saying things the earthly Lenny wouldn't be caught dead thinking, let alone actually saying.

“I’m so sorry for the way I acted, Dad. It was stupid and childish of me. I knew you didn’t really mean what you said. You just didn’t know any better.”

I bristled a bit at being reminded that I was stupid.

“You were being human. I can see that now. I was being human, too. But I could have managed my genetic balance in better ways, more productive ways.” Lenny’s voice cracked a bit. “We missed so much by not handling things differently. But I’ve learned. I know now. And I won’t play mind games with you or anyone else anymore. I want you to know that I’m truly okay on my mission, and I’m confident that I’ll be in heaven soon.” His voice broke and tears streamed down his cheeks. “I’ll be able to see Mom, and make things right with her. I was a horrible son.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked incredulously. “She knew you loved her. She knew it was me who kept you from coming home. There was never any doubt in her mind that you were a perfect son.”

“If I had been a perfect son, I would have overlooked my differences with you and wouldn’t have isolated myself and my family from her just to avoid you. I would have talked to you about what had happened instead of leaving in a huff. But, never mind all that right now. Let me fill you in on what I’m doing with Leo and Danny.”

His tears dried quickly. I noticed some sparkling silver on his cheeks. *‘I thought he lost all of his silver before he left on his mission.’*

“It is some of Larry’s silver. Since he’s being so helpful by letting me borrow his substance, the least I could do is shed some silver for him,” Lenny explained. “I did lose all of my silver, most of it in the fuzz, and the rest as I progressed down the hill to the big bubble. But not the memories, so I still have the capacity to regret what I’ve done and what I’ve missed. We victims of tragedies do get off easy in some ways by having our silver removed for us on arrival, but we still need to deal with past issues to truly be at peace. Without the silver gene of impatience, though, we’re able to wait until that time when we are back in heaven.”

“Now, let me fill you in on what’s happening with Leo and Danny.” Larry/Lenny’s expression changed to one of amusement. “Right now I have very little to do. Danny’s self-destructing all by himself. Leo is actually trying to get him to behave like the grown man that he supposedly is. Leo had advised him to do as his lawyers suggested, but obviously Danny didn’t listen. Now he has to figure out what to do without a lawyer. Leo is trying to tell him that his only hope is to flee the country and hope he doesn’t run into Schmitt on his way to get some money out of his bank in Switzerland. Do you want to go watch?”

At that instant, Larry/Lenny’s expression changed to pure fear. I sensed a *‘we can leave you here, Larry’* as I noticed a slurry in the air around Larry.

“Sheez, that was too close for my liking, Lenny. Don’t scare me like that,” Larry said in his own voice, wiping his forehead with his forearm. “I just can’t handle being in the presence of that,” he paused and shuddered, “that embodiment of evil. How can you bear to actually exist INSIDE that awful creature?”

The slurry of air zoomed in one of Larry’s ears and out the other, and Larry’s face quickly changed to a look full of mischief.

“What did he say?” I demanded to know.

“He just teased that being in MY head wasn’t all that easy, either!” Larry grinned and added, “But he did confer that it’s not as bad being inside a demon’s mind as one would think. Actually being able to influence things to the clockwise direction makes it all worthwhile. And he also said that your silver shield is still effective against Danny and Leo. When you were in the presence of both Byron and Proteus, you were basically facing twice the amount of evil, since Byron isn’t really human. And Danny is too stupid and childish to be able to cause anything more than a relatively minor repulsion.”

“Did he tell you why you and Sheila respond so severely when in the presence of the demons and the others didn’t?” I

knew I had been okay because of my ‘chicken’ silver shield, but what about the others?

“We weren’t exposed to Byron as long as Sheila apparently had been. Once exposed, a soul is sensitized to the demon. I was okay with the glimpse of Byron, but the prolonged presence of Leo, even though I couldn’t see him, drained me of all of my strength.” Larry paused, trying not to be overcome by the mere memory of the feeling. “Anybody with a good percentage of gold, and not enough silver of sufficient strength would eventually feel the same.”

About that time, I noticed the slurry of air around my head and sensed, “Come on, stubborn old slow poke!”

We oozed through the floor and floated behind the couch. Lenny’s slurry stayed at my head. He had to stay behind my shield. If he wasn’t actually in Leo, he had to be careful to not be sensed.

Danny was in a worse frame of mind than when he was cursing at the lawyers, which I didn’t think was possible. He looked almost as evil as Crane, but being only human, he was not at all threatening to Leo, who was chewing Danny out worse than Danny ever chewed anyone else out.

I could see why Lenny wouldn’t have much to do at this point in time.

While we were watched, Lenny’s slurry answered some more of my questions. He paused inside my head, unlike the quick ‘fly-through’ he did with Larry. I knew it was because my reception was not as good. It was because most of what was left of my silver was busy shielding me from Leo that he was able to enter at all.

What I could make out was that Leo would eventually be kicked out of hell for not keeping Danny out of prison. If Danny flees to Switzerland, it may take longer for authorities to get him than if he stays here, but eventually he has to slip up. And if Danny doesn’t end up in jail, Leo will get another assignment when Danny dies and goes to hell.

In response to my *‘What! That could take forever!’* thought he sent a feeling of calm, indicating that time is not an issue. It will pass quickly if that is what Lenny wants. He

doesn't need to actually be present for all the time that Leo is in Danny's pocket if nothing of importance is happening. He can 'fast forward' to the next time Danny summons Leo for support. Since Danny is so overly self-confident and thick, those times are few and far between. Danny is packed with silver and so feels the need for assistance to be a sign of weakness. Plus he never quite figured out how to open his mind to call for help. Usually, he does so accidentally, generally during one of his hissy fits, which he is somehow able to contain until he is alone. Then Lenny can 'rewind' if something happened in the interim that turned out to be important in retrospect.

He also helped me to understand what had actually happened that first meeting with me in Danny's office. My silver hadn't figured out at that point in time how to shield me from Leo, so I had to physically hide behind a solid structure, such as the wall, or the ceiling in the vent. He was pleasantly surprised that I was able to pick up any message at all when he whooshed by my head. He wasn't sure it was worth the risk of Leo sensing him, but he had to try. '*Glad you did, son*' I thought.

'*You're welcome, Pops,*' was the last bit of his transmission I was able to pick up before I again noticed his slurry around my head. I guessed he was getting too uncomfortable in there with all my remaining silver to stay much longer. Though I didn't sense a complete thought, I knew his slurry was letting me know that I had guessed correctly.

I returned my attention to the conversation between Leo and Danny. Danny was resisting Leo's orders to flee:

"I'll be d----- if I'll leave all this behind just because there are no competent lawyers in this god forsaken city! Go find me a lawyer with enough guts to stand up to these G—d--- false accusations! That's if your feeble powers are strong enough to do anything so useful," he added with a sneer.

Leo stiffened and set his jaw tightly, obviously trying to refrain from a snide retort but his glare let loose some of the



anger he was trying to suppress. Then he began to appear wavy as the slurred look returned in full.

Lenny had gone back to work.

Apparently he noticed that Leo was changing tactics from a frontal assault with all of his evil bared to a more diplomatic approach. And Leo was in definite need of help to maintain any sort of control over his anger.

“If you are through with me, oh mighty master,” Leo muttered sarcastically through clenched teeth, “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Go, then, you useless excuse of a demon! It’ll be a cold day in hell before I ask you for suggestions again,” Danny continued with his degrading accusations of incompetence. “I’ll do just as well without you!”

With that, Leo’s slurry turned into a tornado with its funnel tip whipping madly about the room. After a few of the loose objects stirred up by the tornado’s tail hit Danny with sufficient force to knock him off balance, it slowly faded out. I got the idea that Leo could have faded out instantaneously, but he wanted to give Danny a parting blow.

Soon after Leo left, Larry oozed up through the floor to join me. “Wow,” was all he could say. I nodded in agreement.

We watched Danny go to his computer and log on to the Internet. “There’s gotta be a site that describes lawyers’ abilities and personalities. If I can find one that sounds mean enough, I’ll meet with him even if he doesn’t usually do murder cases,” he said with a self-satisfied smirk. “Meanness should be a prerequisite for admission to law school.”

Larry’s eyes narrowed. His daughter was a lawyer, and she was anything but mean. He was used to lawyer jokes, but this got to him. “The b-----,” he muttered.

“What do you think Len is up to?” I asked, changing the subject.

“How the h--- should I know,” he answered testily.

I looked at Larry, puzzled. He glared back, daring me to ask him anything else. He was thinking in slo-mo, so I

couldn't figure out what was wrong with him by thought reading, either.

Danny was cursing the PC for not cooperating. It didn't give him the best site for finding a mean lawyer on his first search. Larry's fists clenched.

"Did Lenny accidentally take some of your gold with him?" I asked cautiously.

The question seemed to calm him a bit. "Let's go. I can't take this anymore," he said rather weakly.

## Larry's Pet Peeve

When we arrived back at the meeting room, the others weren't there. "Must have gone to work on their follow-up plans," I suggested.

Larry was still most cranky. "D--- meddlers. We should just let people self-destruct. The h--- with them all."

As I looked at Larry in disbelief, Barry appeared at his side. Barry began to radiate the warm fuzzies to him. I could see the tension leave Larry's form as his posture went from erect and stiff to relaxed, and even a bit slumped.

"Go ahead, Barry. Tell him what's wrong," Larry said calmly.

"He had been suppressing resentment towards people who bad mouth lawyers. Seeing Danny's interactions with the lawyers was okay because they didn't take any of his abuse for very long, but seeing the look on Danny's face as he searched for a mean lawyer, and insinuated that all lawyers should be mean, was too much. It was the last straw and let loose all his pent up anger. Now that the feelings are out in the open, he'll be able to better deal with them, and he can control them rather than the feelings controlling him," Barry explained.

"What harm were the feelings doing while they were bottled up? He seemed to be doing just fine before this." I felt more than a little irked. *'We don't have to deal with ALL of our pet peeves, for Pete's sake. What kind of wimp can't manage to suppress SOME of their negative feelings?'*

"It takes valuable energy to manage the suppressed feelings. Letting them out and acknowledging their presence takes relatively little time and effort. Sharing them with valued friends is very therapeutic, too. That is if the friend

doesn't have the same peeve, in which case they could end up feeding on each other...." Barry seemed to be having second thoughts about telling me any more details. "I'm beginning to get the feeling that you will only fan the flames of his anger. Never mind." And they both faded out quickly.

*'Well, if that isn't rude,' I thought bitterly. 'And of course I agree with Larry. People who think all lawyers are bad deserve to be trounced on. What was I supposed to do? Say 'Now, now, Larry. Don't hate the mean people.'? How useless and stupid could that be?!'*

*'This is all stupid. Heaven is supposed to mean 'home free', 'no more worries', 'eternal peace'. This is almost as bad as being alive, if not worse. I just had to watch my son zoom out of a madman's home in a demon turned tornado, and now my best friend has gone soft. And he's going to get 'help' by 'talking it all out'. Jeez. Scotty, beam me up,' I thought.*

I arrived at the campground just as the guys were getting ready for a card game. They were rounding up the correct number of players, and I happened along at just the right time to complete the second foursome. "All right!" I said happily. "I sure could use a nice relaxing game right now."

"Where's Larry?" Harry asked.

"Don't ask," I mumbled.

"What? Did you say something?" Arnie wanted to know.

"I said, don't ask. Okay? Just drop it, okay?" I wanted to play cards, not undergo the third degree.

"H--- no, we won't drop it! Larry is our friend, too. What have you done with him?" Johnny looked much younger than the last time I saw him, but he still had plenty of gumption.

"He's busy with Barry, his deAger. I don't know where they went. He was mad about something one of the guys we were watching said about lawyers." I decided to tell them enough so that they'd stop harassing me. "So, let's play cards."

It worked. “He always did tense up whenever we’d tell lawyer jokes,” Harry offered. “Just because his daughter was a lawyer shouldn’t make him so touchy. What happened to his sense of humor?”

“Well, that’s his problem to deal with. It’s actually nice to know that even Larry has a bad feeling to deal with now and then,” Arnie added. “He’s had it too easy, if you ask me. We’ve all had to deal with tempers and such, and he just watched us suffer. ‘Bout time he pays his dues.”

The others murmured their agreement, and the game began.

But our hearts weren’t in the game. We were all worried about Larry. Especially me. I couldn’t concentrate on thinking in slo-mo, so the other team caught me every time.

Arnie was furious. “Ian! Get your head in the game, or get out!”

I glared at him over my hand of cards. “You aren’t doing so well with staying in slo-mo yourself, old man.” Now that I noticed, HE didn’t look much younger than the last time I saw him.

Harry and Johnny looked back and forth at me and Arnie with worried looks on their faces. They had no idea how to defuse the situation. Larry would have known.

“I’ve got to check on Larry,” I said abruptly.

“So do we,” the others said in unison.

“How do we find him?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know. The last I saw him we were in the room where we all meet to discuss our mission. He was upset, and Barry was explaining to me why, when all of a sudden Barry changed his mind about telling me any more, and they disappeared. Do any of you guys know if he has a bubble, or a favorite spot to go to when he needs to be alone?” I was beginning to feel guilty for not being nicer to Barry.

“If he’s in a bubble or his favorite spot to be alone, then we shouldn’t try to find him there, should we?” suggested Joe, who was in the other foursome. He apparently wasn’t concentrating very well either, if he was listening to us. “I

mean, if he went to a spot to be ALONE, then we should let him be ALONE, don't you think?"

He had a point. We decided to go to the Watering Hole and discuss events over a few drinks.

We had no trouble finding a table big enough for the five of us. The other three found a replacement for Joe without much trouble. We ordered up our drinks, and sat back, sipping in silence.

"So Johnny, how's gold retrieval going?" I eventually asked. I knew it was too soon to even hope for Leo to be kicked out of hell, but I decided I may as well get an idea about how the job was going, in general.

"Not so good. They're starting me off with ghosts that are so wishy-washy to start with, I barely have to suggest to them that it may be a good idea to follow me to heaven, and they practically lead ME to heaven," Johnny complained. "There's no challenge to it at all. I don't know why they don't just let me move on to the ones that need a little bit of convincing."

"Aren't they at least giving you hope that you'll be promoted soon?" I asked encouragingly.

"It feels as if they're just stringing me along, actually. If I hadn't lost so many years already, I'd have given it up by now. But I must be doing something right. They tell me that the ghosts I bring come with me so easily because I'm so good at it, but I think they're just trying to butter me up." He still sounded gloomy, but his expression brightened just a bit as he added, "At least there weren't any pretty pink butterflies coming out of their mouths with their complements." He sighed. "So, I guess I'll just hang in there for a little while."

"Well, I hope you're the one to eventually bring the silver spun being my son has infiltrated here to heaven. I know you'll do an excellent job of it." I said this before I had time to think it through. I had no idea what the job really entailed, or how good Johnny was at it, but somehow I just felt that if

Leo were ever to be convinced to give heaven a try, it would be by someone like Johnny.

“What are you talking about, Ian? Where is your son? Larry had just told us you were on some escapade to explore the sea. He said you saw your son go down the hill and into a humongous bubble. He told us he saw your son, too, after he was killed at the World Trade Center, so we knew you weren’t crazy. He said he tried to stop you. We went outside to have a look, and sure enough, there was your shiny bald head bobbing up and down in the ocean. Next thing we know, Larry’s gone too, and then you show up with a full head of hair.” Harry was on a roll. “So, fill in the gaps for us, would you please?”

They all did look rather interested, so I filled them in, all the way down to my trip to hell with the infant. They were having difficulty believing some of what I was telling them even before that part, so I wasn’t surprised that they didn’t believe a word about my trip to hell. And I left out the mushy parts with Irene, and all the times that I broke down and cried. They didn’t need to know those parts for the question I asked Johnny to make sense.

“D---.” Arnie was obviously impressed with what I did relay to them. “How do I get assigned to a team like that?”

“Me, too,” added Harry and Joe in unison.

“I think you just convinced me to keep on track with my work on the gold retrieval team. I have to agree that I may just be the one to bring Leo and Lenny here to heaven when the time comes.” Johnny was almost beaming. “Thanks for the motivation, Ian. I’ve always liked your son.” He smiled impishly and added, “And I always did wonder how he put up with you as long as he did. I’d be honored to be the one to bring him back to us.”

“So, what do we need to do to get on a team, then, Ian?” Joe persisted.

“I guess you just ask your deAger. They have the connections to help you do whatever is reasonable.” I got started on my mission by Irene, but Julia probably could have done the same thing.

“Irene? Did you just think something about Irene?” Arnie caught me.

“Yes, I did. She was actually the one to get me started in the fast track for the impatient souls. She got tired of me bombarding her with questions about how heaven worked,” I smiled, seeing an opportunity for some kidding. “So she sent me on a mission to get me out of her hair!”

The guys laughed, knowing Irene would never have done such a thing, especially after all that she had put up with in our marriage. No number of questions would have fazed her. But they figured she just didn’t want to put up with me for all of eternity.

“So, how did you find Irene? I’d have thought she’d have wanted to hide from you as long as possible!” Harry jabbed playfully.

Joe was serious, though, when he asked how I found her. “Honestly, tell us how. I’d love to be able to see some of my family. Jill is still alive, but I’d like to see Uncle Gus. I really missed him after he died.”

“Julia took me to her.” I hoped that would be enough of an answer. “Why don’t you ask your deAgers about all of these things? I’m sure they’ll tell you all that I know, and then some.”

“Good idea, Ian. Except for one thing,” Arnie said solemnly. “Kenny usually wants me to do something I don’t want to do before he’ll help me do anything fun.”

“Yeah, now that you mentioned it, so does my deAger,” said Harry.

“Mine, too. But I think I’d be willing to compromise if it meant being able to see Uncle Gus,” Joe said thoughtfully. “Thanks, Ian. I’ll ask Dennis next time I see him.”

“Just ask for him to come and you can see him now, if he’s not too busy at something else.” I was surprised that they didn’t seem to know it was that easy to contact their deAgers. I had figured it was common knowledge. I was really beginning to feel rather advanced. Maybe that was why I had lost so many more years so much more quickly



than the other guys. Maybe it WAS worth all the aggravation I'd gone through.

Except for one thing. "Uh, listen, guys. I have to warn you about something, though. If you start to ask too many questions, you will lose some of your 'innocence'. With knowledge comes responsibility." I couldn't believe those words actually came out of my mouth, and neither could the guys. "I wish I hadn't seen as much as I did. I wish I had just stayed with you and worked in random dreams. If it weren't for my blasted curiosity and bullheadedness, I could still be having fun playing cards and swimming in the river without a care in heaven."

"Oh, I don't know about that, Ian. Seemed to me you weren't too happy when you were being followed by that dark cloud, and almost went up in a tar." Arnie was serious. "And we're not all that happy just doing dreams. It gets old after awhile. And, by the way, some of us are pretty good at picking up partial thoughts. We know you left out a lot of the painful, soul-searching parts of your story. Maybe its time we all did some of the painful things all of our deAgers have been urging us to do, to get on with our 'deaths', so to speak." He patted me on the back, and added, "Thanks, Ian." Then the twinkle returned to his eyes, and he hollered, raising his glass, "If Ian can do it, ANYONE can do it!!"

"Here, here!" the others raised their glasses in a toast. "Here's to Ian, the crankiest, most useless guy we know, turned almost human! Just took him to die to get there!" Johnny, of all people, was the one to give the toast.

"How do you figure I'M the most useless, Johnny? YOU had to bribe the fuzz to even manage to stay in heaven!" I reminded him, grinning broadly.

"Okay, then. Here's to the most useless crowd of guys this side of heaven, on their way to 'useful-hood'!" Johnny laughed heartily. "So, if I'm the SECOND most useless guy, it must be saying something that even I'm considering doing what my deAger has been nagging me to do since I got here." He didn't go into slo-mo fast enough, however, to

keep us all from hearing him think, *'I've got to go apologize to my wife and kids.'*

The mood became much more somber and the others all confessed aloud what their deAgers were trying to get them to do. Arnie had to find his dad, and clear up some major misunderstandings, almost as bad as between Lenny and me. Harry's task wasn't quite as daunting. He had just been too distant for his family to feel loved. Joe really didn't have many hard feelings left behind, but he did feel guilty about not helping his sister with their father before he died. He hadn't realized he could go see people who were still alive. He thought that Emma and others like her were allowed to go because they were guardian angels.

I was beginning to wonder if their deAgers were incompetent, when Julia showed up at my side. Shortly thereafter, the other's deAgers popped in, too.

*'Good job, Ian'* she thought. *'Let's go.'*

The next thing I knew, we were on the mossy bank. I was full of questions, as usual, but she put her finger up to my mouth before I could get the first one out.

"First, let me point out again, in case you forgot, that you are a very unique person with a unique set of needs and skills. You have learned so much more than your friends because you were driven to know. If I hadn't told you, or showed you all that I did as quickly as I did, you'd have popped in a zit." She sighed. "I would have liked to let you enjoy yourself with your friends for a few years, but you would have nothing of it."

I couldn't disagree with her. "So the other deAgers were moving along slowly to allow the others time to enjoy death without overwhelming responsibilities? And you would have moved just as slowly for me if I would have allowed you to?" I was beginning to feel rather sheepish.

"Yes, Mr. Burns. The pace of deAging is set by the soul with the silver to leach. We don't push anyone to lose silver he or she is not ready to part with." She smiled, and

acknowledged that she did sort of push me at times, but it was only because she could see that she needed to move me on to the next step, or I'd regress.

"So, is there any hope of me being able to relax and enjoy myself now, after all that I've seen and learned?" I was weary.

"Yes, Mr. Burns. You have done such a good job in helping to get your friends motivated, among all the other things, that now you can just sit back and watch things unfold. The rest of your team is moving right along with spreading the message about 'open mind prayers' and helping people to see when they've been usurped by the counter forces instead of the gold they were seeking. It is taking years by earthly time, but just a blink of an eye compared to all the earth has been through over the millennia."

"So, can I fast forward to see what happens?" my impatience gene was obviously still fully intact.

Julia just laughed and gave me a quick peck on the cheek before fading out.

## Danny's Last Chance

After another long, warm bask in the fuzz, I decided to just stay on the bank and relax. Julia had said I wasn't really needed anymore, that things were moving along nicely since I had jump-started them. I felt proud to have been able to help. Not 'full-of-myself' proud, but proud that I had been useful.

I watched the clouds, listened to the water flow and soaked up the warmth of the sun.

I got bored. Surely there was more for me to do. Maybe I COULD be of use for Larry to work on what ever was bothering him now. I decided to see if I could find them.

I faded in next to Larry in Danny's home office. He and Tom were listening to Danny's half of a phone conversation with a potential lawyer. Larry's crankiness had morphed into resolve. He was concentrating on every word as though there were a hidden meaning in them somewhere, somehow.

"I need you to be an a----- to the d--- prosecutors, not ME!" Danny was bellowing, his fat face bloating like a bullfrog. After a brief pause while he actually listened to the lawyers' response, he began to laugh a most evil, hideous laugh. "That's right! That's an excellent point. Great thinking! I like the way your mind works. When can you come by, then, to discuss the details?" he was like the proverbial Jekyll and Hyde.

"Great! See you then." The grin on Danny's face was sickening. He hung up the phone and rubbed his hands together menacingly. He pulled open a drawer of his desk and removed a rather large glass. He then got a key from the same drawer and went to a locked section of his bookcase.

He unlocked it and gently opened the door downward, forming a little table. In the cabinet were liquor bottles, mostly various sorts of whiskeys with an occasional rum and gin bottle thrown in.

He spent some time perusing his stash, deciding which he was in the mood for. He decided on a double malt, kissed the bottle, held it high in admiration, then rather ceremoniously poured himself a large double shot.

He waddled over to a plush recliner, and sat down, or I should say, plopped down. Luckily, it was a well-made, sturdy recliner. He pushed a button and the footrest popped up. He took a large sip and smacked his lips, then purred, “Ahhhh, now THIS is whiskey!”

“He treats his booze better than he did his wife when he wanted her to do something for him, like not shoot him,” I whispered to Larry.

Larry nodded silently.

I waited somewhat patiently for Leo to materialize, but Danny hadn’t been in a rage, so maybe he wouldn’t call for his evil sidekick.

“No, Ian. Leo is no longer in Danny’s pocket. He was sent to find an evil lawyer, remember?” Larry corrected me.

“Oh. That’s right.” I didn’t notice any edge in Larry’s voice as he corrected me, so I hoped that he managed to get his suppressed anger back under control.

“It’s not completely under control yet, Ian. But I AM dealing with it. I’m facing it down rather easily, too, I might add. Barry was right again, the little bugger. All I needed to do was to think of the usual lawyer bashers as people who were just making a joke. They don’t really think of lawyers as mean. It’s really lawyers like the one Danny is looking for who give all lawyers a bad rap. So, I’m really anxious to meet the b-----. Once I can properly direct my anger, I’ll no longer be haunted by suppressed hatred for lawyer jokes.” Larry sounded brainwashed.

*‘Surely he doesn’t believe seeing one hateful lawyer is going to set him free from seething anger, does he?’*

“No, I don’t believe it. Not yet. But it’s worth a try.” He wasn’t at all upset by my thought. He was back to the normal Larry I knew and loved. “I am back to the normal Larry, but soon to be minus one minor flaw.” He looked at me and grinned broadly. “I can soon be able to listen to lawyer jokes without having to grit my teeth and pretend to be okay with them. I may actually be able to enjoy them.”

I looked to Tom for some assurance that things were going along okay.

He laughed and said, “Ian, you do have some interesting expressions. That mixture of disbelief and worry with a dash of hope you just displayed was precious. Did you ever think of going into acting?”

I hadn’t. No one ever seemed to notice that I had a wide range of expressions while I was alive. I wondered why I would just start to have that ability develop after death.

“You did have a wide repertoire of expressions in life, Ian. But you had such a strong permanent frown underlying them that they were harder to read,” Larry explained. “Heaven has really loosened you up. And I must say, I am glad to see that you are nowhere near as conflicted now as you were in life. You’re much easier to be around.”

“Well, gee thanks for the complement, Larry,” I said with a touch of huffiness. “I wasn’t THAT hard to be around in life. At least not for the people with any backbone.”

Now it was Larry’s turn to bristle. “I HAVE a backbone, thank you very much. One can be sensitive to other’s feelings without being a pansy, I’ll have you know.”

“Okay, now gentlemen. Let’s not get into a snit. Stuff that silver into the background and let’s get back to work.” Tom nodded toward the monitor in the corner of the study. “I believe that’s the lawyer being cleared by security at the gate.

We watched as a middle-aged man driving a Mercedes handed the guard some identification. The guard went into the guardhouse and buzzed the study. “A Mr. Harding to see you, sir. Mr. Richard Harding.”

“Send him right in, James. To my study,” Danny barked almost pleasantly.

“Yes, sir,” James replied, looking a little surprised. He must have picked up on Mr. Jackaston’s good mood, which had probably not been visible since his wife’s murder.

Danny got up and closed his liquor cabinet. Then he polished off the rest of his whiskey in one large gulp, enjoyed the burn of the alcohol as it went down his gullet and sat at his desk. He put the used glass back in the drawer with the key. “I’ll offer Mr. Harding some if he really is as good as I think he is. Or I should say as MEAN as I think he is.” The evil laugh that followed this comment caused Larry to stiffen a bit.

“Force of habit,” he muttered out of the corner of his mouth before I even had a chance to comment. “I’ll be free of that, too, soon.”

A knock on the study door instantaneously flipped the security camera to the outside of the door. Mr. Harding was stocky, average height and impeccably dressed.

“Come in!” Danny bellowed as he pushed a button on his desk. The door opened without Mr. Harding needing to touch the knob.

“Very impressive security system you have, Mr. Jackaston. Indicates a man with a lot to steal. Or a lot to hide. Or both. Maybe we should discuss fees first.” Mr. Harding sure didn’t beat around any bushes, now, did he?

Danny eyed the man sternly for what felt like a full minute. Mr. Harding looked back at Danny full in the face with absolutely no sign of intimidation.

Finally, Danny smiled. A malicious smile. “I like you, Mr. Harding. I like your style. Sure, have a seat, and we’ll discuss money first. Would you care for a drink?”

“Certainly,” Mr. Harding nodded as he strode self-assuredly to a seat near the desk.

Danny got his key and two glasses. He didn’t bother asking what Mr. Harding wanted to drink. He poured a double shot of the same whiskey for them both.

As he took the glass to Mr. Harding, he bragged about where the bottle was purchased and how rarely he offers any to visitors.

“Don’t waste your time trying to butter me up, Jackaston,” Mr. Harding said with little emotion as he took the glass. He took a rather large sip, played with it for a bit as if analyzing its flavor like an expert, and slowly swallowed. “Not bad for a Scottish brew. I prefer Irish, myself.”

*‘Oh, this is going to be fun!’* I thought as I watched the red creep up Danny’s neck.

“You’ll drink what I give you,” Danny growled through clenched jaws.

Mr. Harding responded with a self-satisfied smirk, and set the glass down. He reached for his briefcase and said, “Let’s get started, then. I don’t have much time.”

Danny turned to walk back to his desk with a sneer followed by a silent mock of Mr. Harding’s ‘I don’t have much time’. The face he presented to the lawyer, however, was most cooperative.

“I reviewed the charges against you, Mr. Jackaston. It doesn’t look good. There are no witnesses, and the autopsy report indicates that the wound was inflicted from at least 3 feet away. There was no sign of struggle at the scene. There was no gunpowder on Mrs. Jackaston and none of her fingerprints on the gun.” He opened his briefcase and started up his PC. “So, Daniel. How do you propose to slay your little Goliath?”

Danny glared at the smug face on his perfectly hateful lawyer. With his eyes mere slits, he growled almost under his breath, “That’s what I’m about to pay YOU to figure out.”

Mr. Harding burst out into a demonic laugh. It was so wicked even Danny looked shocked. “Ah, but you are so naïve! So stupid! So PITIFUL!” he managed to get out between his guffaws. “There IS no way to prove your innocence! We have to BUY your freedom. Why do you think I wanted to settle my fee first? I’ll need my fair share



before I start to direct you to pay off those in powerful positions. Now, get me your last five years worth of tax returns, if they are accurate. Then, I'll need to see all your tax shelters, legal and otherwise. I'll see if you'll have enough to buy sufficient influence to get out of serving ANY jail time."

Danny couldn't believe his ears. He was too shocked to respond, even with anger.

"Close your mouth, Dan. It makes you look even more moronic." Mr. Harding was thoroughly enjoying this interaction. "I thought you were a tough, no nonsense sort of man. I had heard that most people are afraid of you. Hah!" he snorted. "You're a mere pussy cat!"

"OUT!" Danny was finally able to speak. "GET THE H--- OUT OF HERE before I kill you too!" His face was fairly flushed. "I am NOT going to give up ANYTHING! I am going to be found innocent! I am going to be able to continue with my life as is! I REFUSE to be coerced out of ANY of my caches by the likes of you!"

Mr. Harding didn't move. His grin was villainous. "So, what other plans do you have, then, Mr. Jailbird? You know where they put wife killers, don't you? And you know what the other inmates do to wife killers?"

Danny was beyond burgundy now, moving towards a putrid purple. His eyes weren't quite as bulgy red as they could get, however.

The fiendish laugh of the lawyer filled the room again. I was ready for Danny to explode from anger at any moment. "You are so incredibly immature," Mr. Harding wasn't about to let up. He seemed to be daring Danny to hurt him. "I hear you like to throw things. I hear you have little hissy fits when no one of importance can see you. Don't you realize that someone has to clean up behind you? Do you think all your servants are blind, dumb and deaf? EVERYONE KNOWS what you really are, Mr. Jackaston. And 'smart' is nowhere in the description. YOU ARE A F----- IDIOTIC A-----!"

Before Danny could censor himself, he flung his whiskey glass with deadly precision. It hit Mr. Harding squarely on the forehead.

“Thank you, Mr. Jackaston.” It was almost as if Mr. Harding had not felt the blow, but a bruise and some swelling were already visible. He got a handkerchief from his briefcase and bent forward to pick up the unbroken glass. “This should be sufficient evidence.” He studied the glass. “Ah, yes, and if it happened to hit me with the embossed side, I may even be able to show WITHOUT A DOUBT that you assaulted me.”

Danny was more scared than angry for a few seconds, but then he furrowed his brow and glared at Mr. Harding. “How much do you want, you snake.”

“Oh, name calling, now, are we?” Mr. Harding continued to agitate. “I don’t know if you have enough to buy ME off, Danny Dumbo.”

He closed his briefcase, and rose. “I’ll think about your offer, Mr. Jacka--. I’ll let you know what I decide.” He took long, slow strides to the door. With his hand on the knob, he bid Danny a fond farewell and left. Danny was too dumbfounded to think to lock the door to prevent him from leaving. Or maybe he wanted him to leave before he really DID kill him. We could hear Mr. Harding whistle as he walked the long hallway to the front door.

By the time he made it to the driveway and his car, Danny had come around enough to think to turn the security system on to follow Harding. We could see him put his briefcase in the trunk, and then get in the car. One of the cameras focused on him as he drove down the long driveway. It looked as though he were talking to himself.

Larry and Tom looked at each other and nodded.

“Come with me, Ian,” Tom said, and he took my hand. We popped into Mr. Harding’s car’s trunk. “Put up your shield, and we can ooze into the back seat.”

I did as I was told, wondering why Larry didn’t come with us, and why we needed my shield.

My answer was sitting in the front seat with Mr. Harding.

It was Leo.

## Leo and the Lawyer

“Great job, Dick!” Leo gave Mr. Harding a thumb’s up. “I couldn’t have done better myself. And lord knows he deserved it.”

“Thanks for some of the insights. I think that bit about throwing things was key in getting him to lose it.” Mr. Harding didn’t seem so bad now that he wasn’t with Danny. “And I told you to call me Mr. Harding.”

Never mind. I guess he did have a mean streak, or at least a pompous streak.

“Okay, Dick. I’ll call you Mr. Harding.” Leo did some agitating himself.

Mr. Harding wisely chose to ignore the dig, and asked, “How is it that you know so much about Danny? Were you in his back pocket?”

Leo stiffened. “I was not ‘in his back pocket’, I’ll have you know. I was his advisor. And since he is obviously not good at taking advice, I demanded a different assignment.”

“Interesting that you should be assigned to me. Would getting back at your former boss be part of your motivation for the switch?” Mr. Harding was good at putting two and two together. “Did I live up to your expectations?”

“Yes, sir!” Leo’s pleasure was evident. “And I’m looking forward to more very pleasant interactions. I can’t wait to see him behind bars.”

“Now, wait a minute. My job is to keep him OUT of jail. You aren’t going to sabotage my work, now are you?” Mr. Harding asked rather blandly. “Because if you are, I’ll have to fire you.”

Leo had to think about that issue for a while.

At that time, they had reached the security at the entrance to the estate. The gate was closed. The guard walked out to the car, and demanded that Mr. Harding get out of the car. The guard was not used to sounding very authoritative, so the 'demand' sounded more like a suggestion. Mr. Harding didn't budge.

"Please, sir. My boss has asked me to search your car. He's missing a valuable collector's glass. Did you inadvertently take it with you?" James was clearly out of his league. And he was whispering, so it was clear that Danny was watching and listening, or trying to listen, to the interaction. James' posturing looked a bit more stern than his words sounded, so he may have actually been able to fool Danny.

Mr. Harding said, "Oh, well if that's all it is, I'll check my briefcase." He got out of the car and opened the trunk. He got his briefcase and put it on the hood of the car in plain site of the security cameras. He located the glass, uncovered enough of it to hold up in the handkerchief for the camera to make out what it was. "Here it is, Danny. And I certainly do thank you for your wonderful offer!"

He then put the glass back into the briefcase and put the briefcase back into the trunk. "Now, then, James, open the gate." Before he got back behind the wheel, he quietly slid the man a folded bill.

James went back into the guardhouse and when he saw the denomination of the bill, he gasped. He only paused a second before he pushed the button to open the gate.

"Who says people can't be bought?" Mr. Harding said with a sneer. "Everyone has his price."

"So, Leo. Tell me more about yourself. What are your abilities? Can you do more than try to influence me? Can you cause any mischief on your own, like a ghost can?" Mr. Harding sounded sincerely interested.

"No, I can't do any mischief myself. And now that you mentioned it, I could probably do more on my own as a ghost. All I can do as an agent from hell is advise people and offer support to keep my charge on a strong, self-centered,

self-serving course. Since I died, all I've heard is how much better it is to be in hell, but that we should feel honored if we get to go on a mission to earth. And we're threatened with being thrown out of hell if we fail to help our assigned person cause enough trouble, or if we let him get caught." Leo paused for a while, mulling something over.

"I'm beginning to wonder if I've been lied to all along. As a ghost, at least I could do as I wanted, not what some evil b----- in hell wants me to do." At this thought, a fiendish smile spread over Leo's face. "You know, when I went back to complain about Danny's stupidity, I was told my goal was to keep Danny out of jail. No matter what. I was made to feel like a failure because Danny kept messing up. But what I really want to do is to cream the a-----! I not only want him to go to jail, but I want him to be as humiliated as possible in the process."

Mr. Harding seemed to be enjoying this spark of independence in his agent from hell. "So, what do you propose, then?"

"Well, if you REALLY want to keep Danny out of jail, I'll go back to hell, and tell them I want another assignment. If they interpret the request as a failure, and I get kicked out of hell, I can haunt Danny as a ghost to my heart's content!" Leo's eyes flashed with hate. "And you could get a properly attentive agent to help you with YOUR goal."

"And if I don't want to keep the Jack--- out of jail either?" Mr. Harding asked.

"Then we can work together. I can let you in on more of the secrets I'm privy to, and between the two of us, we could really cause him pain!" Leo was getting rather excited at the prospects.

"So, what would be in it for me if I try to get him put in jail? I have a lifestyle to support, after all. And aren't you supposed to keep ME on the strong self-centered course rather than me reminding you that I need to make money in the deal somehow? I don't do evil just for the sake of evil. I'm not dead yet." Mr. Harding didn't need an agent from hell to stay focused on himself. He was already a pro.

Leo looked at Mr. Harding for a minute. Then he watched the road for a few minutes more.

Mr. Harding began to whistle an eerie tune. I couldn't place it, but it sent chills up and down my spine despite my shield.

'Dante's Inferno,' Tom thought. '*He's getting Leo kicked out of hell.*'

Leo's form, which had been rather misty to begin with, became less see-through. The look on his face began to show fear as he realized what was happening. He had heard all sorts of horror stories about what ghosts have to endure and now he was about to find out if all or any of them were true.

He decided to try to escape before the transformation was complete. He knew he couldn't open the door to the car as a mere agent from hell, but if he were already set free from his assignment, it just may work. He reached down and grabbed the handle. He was surprised to find that he could actually feel some of the cold from the metal. He pulled upwards.

The door opened!

In a moment of joy, Leo wisped out of the car, now as full of hope as he was of fear just a few moments earlier. '*If all that I've been taught in hell is a lie, then being a ghost will be like heaven! Well, maybe not heaven, but just being free to do whatever evil I feel like doing will be wonderful!*'

Tom and I exited the car soon after Leo and followed from a safe distance, but still close enough to get an idea of what he was thinking and planning.

He was like a juvenile delinquent set free in an amusement park. He spun around tree trunks. He whizzed over dogs' heads and laughed with glee as he roused them into a barking frenzy. He whooshed past people, stirring up leaves and messing up hairdos. He harassed the geese on the pond in the park and caused an old lady to lose her balance and fall into a pile of geese droppings. He thoroughly enjoyed wrecking havoc at every turn.

He eventually settled down on a bench overlooking the pond, and pondered his fate. '*All this time I've been duped by Hermes and his cronies. I believed them. I worshiped them.*

*The f----- b-----.’ He oozed hate and began plotting revenge. ‘I’ll find out where more of the agents of hell are posted, and let them know they’re being duped, and what they’re missing. Those controlling f----- b-----.’*

Tom and I looked at each other. *‘Can he really do more harm as a ghost than as an agent from hell?’* I thought. *‘Do we need to alert the gold retrieval team ASAP?’* Not even Johnny could convince Leo at this point to go to heaven. He was MUCH too full of hate. I wondered if Lenny’s gold was still in there anywhere, and if so, did he have any hope for subduing Leo’s seething?

Tom assured me Lenny was doing his job. *‘He’s most likely the reason Leo was so open to becoming a ghost. You may not always be able to feel the tug or see the slurry, but he IS aware of what is going on, and he’s biding his time for maximal impact.’*

We watched Leo explore his newfound freedoms. He experimented with trying to ooze through objects, first less dense things like the volleyball net, then more solid things like tree trunks. He was thrilled! He had only been able to go wherever Danny had gone, except for some breaks to go back to hell. Now he felt as though he were free to go wherever he wanted!

*‘I wonder how I can get to darling Danny’s mansion.’* He thought.

He didn’t have any idea how to do so, however, sorta like me when I first arrived in heaven.

*‘Do they have any DeAger equivalents to help ghosts learn the ropes?’* I thought.

Tom smiled. *‘They have a training team that eventually shows up. Ghosts have rather severe limitations on their mobility. They can’t will themselves very far at all. They can pop from one side of a room to another in order to scare someone. But they can’t go further than they can see. So even if he does get help from other ghosts, it will still take him some time to ‘pop’ to Danny’s mansion just a few hundred yards at a time. That’s why most ghosts just stay close by where they died to haunt innocent victims rather*



*than work to get to a certain target. There really are very few interactions between ghosts in general. But I think Leo has enough motivation to make the effort to get back to Danny.'*

By now, Leo had mastered the popping technique. He practiced it over and over again until he had frightened everyone out of the park, then he sat; ankle on knee, arms spread out over the back of the park bench. He was extremely self-satisfied.

*'I'll just wait by the road, and when I see Dickie heading back towards Danny's, I'll just hitch a ride. Then I can make BOTH of their lives miserable! I'll figure out how to find other agents from hell to tell them about all the lies we are told later.'* Leo was most happy.

## Larry's Observations

Tom and I went back to see how Larry was getting along with Danny, but he wasn't there. We popped into the Lounge. No one was there.

Tom got some vibes from outside the pod, so we went to the entrance.

A huge crowd was watching another massive cloud raining gold glitter on a different area of the Middle East Mountains. Larry was among the throngs of souls, along with Arnie and the rest of the guys.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Another natural disaster, this time an earthquake in the mountains. Thousands more were killed," Larry answered sadly. "And Arnie said there has been a rather steady drizzle over that range for years by earth time."

Joe pointed to mountains in a different direction and added, "I've seen lots of gold storms over those mountains, too, for years. Probably thousands, if not hundreds of thousands more souls arrived there overall, but the storms weren't as big; there were just many more of them. It wasn't as noticeable because of that, I've been told."

I looked at the range Joe indicated. There were clouds and a steady rain of gold, but the storm was not the size of the ones I had seen over the Middle East Range. "What else have you been told, Joe?" I asked.

"I felt useless following that punk around, so I went to see what other line of work would be interesting. I ended up in foreign affairs. It was too busy in the Middle East section, and Asia in general was tense as well. When I checked out the other areas, Indonesia was still dealing with the fallout of the tsunami, and Europe was dealing with a few terrorist

attacks of their own. The Australian and South American folks weren't too busy and looked relatively happy, but the African group looked downright depressed. I went in to see what was going on, and I really got an earful." He paused, and sighed. "Seems they hadn't been able to make any productive connections with the foreign affairs department in the African mountains, and the lack of communication was severely limiting their ability to get anything helpful done. They were more than a little frustrated. I think I'm leaning towards a career in that department."

I watched the African Range for a while, then turned and looked at the horizon in all directions. There were a lot more ranges that had fair weather than stormy weather, so overall, the earth must not be doing too badly.....

Gradually, souls began to get back to their usual activities. As the crowd thinned, I saw Johnny and told him that Leo/Lenny was now a ghost on earth and asked him to keep an eye out for him. Arnie and the rest went back to classes they had started. Other than Joe, they didn't have any idea just what direction they wanted to go, but they were now 100% sure they were ready to grow young.

Larry and I went back to the Watering Hole. It was almost deserted. It was really eerie. The three of us sat nursing our drinks in silence for quite some time.

"So, Larry, how are you doing with the lawyer jokes," I tried to lighten the atmosphere with a feeble attempt at a rib.

"I was embarrassed when I realized how simple it was to understand. When I saw the interaction between Danny and Dick, I knew right away why some lawyers were mean. SOMEONE had to be able to put the Danny's of the world in their places. Not that Mr. Harding was a pleasant human being, but he did at least serve a good purpose in this case. Anyway, I don't even remember anymore why I was even bothered by the jokes." Larry stared off into nothingness as he said this. "Especially when I think about everything else that I just saw...."

Larry obviously knew a lot more than the crowd watching the storm. He started into a monolog full of sadness: “While I waited in Danny’s study when you and Tom followed Mr. Harding, I watched the news on his huge plasma screen TV. He had it tuned onto a political talk show where grown men were shouting at each other and interrupting each other like kids fighting about something on a playground. And it was as if there was no purpose to the interaction other than to keep true communication from ever occurring. But that wasn’t the worst of it. The topic of the argument was nuclear weapons in the hands of Iran and North Korea. Did you know that India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons, too?” he asked.

“Yeah. I guess that happened after you died. Why?” I answered.

“Well, they were talking about some guy in the Pakistani program selling the technology to other countries. The one guy was getting shouted down, so I had a hard time being sure I understood his point, but the gist was that these unstable countries were feeling the need to defend themselves from an invasion by the US. They were afraid that if they didn’t have ‘The Bomb’ to use as a deterrent, that they would be next. He said something about Iraq and an ‘Axis of Evil’ speech given by the United States president. So they had to develop their defenses while the US was overextended in Iraq AND Afghanistan or it may be too late to protect themselves.”

After a lengthy pause and a deep sigh, he continued. “And the guy suggested that these countries may even attempt to start up their own little agitations even before they have nuclear capacity to further drain the US’s resources. He suggested that the head of the group that attacked the US actually WANTED President Bush to be reelected because he knew he could entice him deeper and deeper into violence. His goal was to beat the US by sucking us dry. He didn’t need to actually attack the US again to do significant harm. The US president was draining the country himself, so this Osama guy could just sit back and watch the western

world implode. Bush and his cronies fell for every trap that was set for him...”

“Why are you so worried about this one man’s opinion?” I wondered.

“He was the one who was trying to converse, and the others were doing their best to not let him say what he wanted to say. Any time that I’ve ever seen that type of interaction, the ones trying to keep the others from talking were trying to hide something, big time.” He smiled weakly, and added, “And Danny was rooting for the big-mouthed interrupter.”

Larry sighed. He looked at me and tears began to overflow the brim of his lower eyelids. “After I had seen all I could handle on the TV, I came back to the Lounge. Al and Mary were here, deep in a conversation. They saw the look on my face, and invited me over to join them. They had just been to Mission Control for some specific advice, and were deeply concerned about what they were warned may happen in the relatively near future.” He sighed again. “Apparently, the current momentum is towards more and more conflict. They’re preparing for an onslaught of storms throughout both the Middle East and Asia. And, just like Joe said, Africa’s not doing so well, either. We may have a rather large storm here as well.”

“WW III?” I whispered.

“I believe that’s what they were implying. The amount of violence in Ares realm is causing a very heady celebration in that area of hell. They are more and more able to recruit people to listen to their silver spin. The strength of the gold forces is being snuffed out. It’s only a matter of time...” Larry had never looked so depressed before, even in life.

We sat silently again for what felt like hours. We didn’t know what else to do.

## Change of Heart

After a while, we thought we ought to see what Tom was up to. He may know what we could do other than just sit here and mope.

Tom was where we figured he would be. He was at another meeting in the oil company's fancy conference room, but this one felt much less formal. The only difference in attendee's was Danny's empty seat, but Arthur actually looked human. And Henry looked a bit flustered instead of Ralph.

*'They're discussing the problems with the price of oil and the problems in the Middle East, Venezuela and Africa. Even they can see that loss of these sources of oil can destabilize the country. I had thought that they'd be ecstatic about the price of oil being astronomically high, but they are actually worried. Listen,'* Tom thought.

"So, it's decided, then. Ralph and his contacts will be the benefactors of a large grant from our company in order to use their new theories to develop new sources of energy. And Carol's husband will see to it that every thing is out in the open, and above board." Arthur was apparently comfortable with the decision.

But Henry was most agitated. "I once more want to express my disagreement with that course of action. I feel we need to use every last penny to find every last drop of oil available to us here in the United States, so that we won't be dependent on foreign oil. WE can supply all of our needs ourselves," Henry's face was a bit flushed.

Brad spoke up, "But you know how long it takes from discovery of a large reserve to actual production. If things

keep up as they are, we won't have enough time to beef up supplies to save the economy. Can you imagine the country with only one third of the necessary amount of fuel available? It would collapse in chaos. At least with the ideas that Ralph and his friends, we have some hope of faster development with the added benefit of the energy being renewable. And portable."

"And remember that one of the options is a system capturing the sun's energy even before it enters the earth's atmosphere," Ralph added. "We'd have the bonus of reducing the sun's heating of the oceans and may be able to fix some of the problems created by global warming."

"What I like the most about their ideas is not having to deal with putting power lines back up after every major hurricane," Pete opined. "I NEVER want to go through another hurricane. I had no power for 8 days. EIGHT DAYS! I never thought I'd survive."

"We really have no choice but to pursue this possibility of a better system. If it's as good as it sounds, we'll be left behind with lots of oil and no one who wants it decades from now after all the transitions are complete. A decision has been made. Meeting adjourned," Arthur said.

"Wow," I said. "Was this really the same set of guys we saw here just a short while ago? What happened?"

"Things are looking more and more unstable in the world, especially the Middle East. There's a very real possibility that oil will be used as leverage against us. If not worse...." Tom's voice trailed off, and he had a distant look on his face.

"Do you know what Mary and Al know?" Larry asked Tom.

"Yes," Tom answered, but offered no further information.

"What now?" I asked. "We were asked to see if we could get more funding for the science guys, and it looks as if that's already been done. What else can we do?"

"Well, Danny is keeping quite busy trying to figure out how to keep Mr. Harding happy," Tom said with a hint of a smile. "So we won't need to worry about him. Larry may be

interested in seeing the difference in Arthur's home life, if he needs some cheering up." He looked to Larry for a response.

"I don't think I'm up to it, Tom. I've dealt with too much lately," Larry said sadly.

"Yes, but do you know how much younger you look!" I had just noticed myself that Larry looked as if he were in his early twenties. "Don't you think it was worth it?"

"No, actually, I don't. I really don't feel that much better." Larry was REALLY down in the dumps.

"I'll take Larry with me, Ian. You check on Henry. He still has some power to derail the funding plans." And without waiting for me or Larry to respond, they were gone.

*'Well, I'll be...' I thought. 'Tom sure has been acting strange lately.'*

I went into the hallway to see where Henry had gone. He and Arthur were still just outside the conference room door, still discussing the grant. Henry was a persistent little weasel.

"I've told you, Henry. Danny is too preoccupied to have any contact with any of us. He hasn't been to work since his wife's death, and quite frankly, YOU are the only one who misses him," Arthur turned on his heel, and headed for the elevator. Henry just stood there and fumed.

I was too curious about the change in Arthur's attitude to make myself follow Henry. I slid in the elevator with Arthur instead.

As the elevator door opened on the top floor, I could already see the difference. The lights somehow seemed brighter, and Arthur actually began to whistle a rather happy tune. He was pretty good, too. I actually recognized the song.

He walked with a spring in his step. He was most happy. He opened his unlocked office door and savored the fresh air in the office. He sat at his desk and checked his e-mail. "Wonderful. I was hoping she'd be interested in going. Oh, life is so good without that b----- breathing down my neck." He looked VERY human. "I do feel badly for Jan, though. I really hadn't meant for things to happen the way they did. But...."



He got up, got a casual sweater from his closet, and left, whistling his way back to the elevator. He stopped whistling when we stopped to let someone else on at a lower floor. The person looked shocked, but Arthur just smiled, and said, "I'm not in a hurry. I didn't need to take the express today." But he didn't resume his whistling. I believe the poor lowly employee would have had a heart attack if Arthur acted any more out of character than he already was.

I followed the employee for a bit after we reached the lobby. She rushed up to a friend, and whispered to her about what just happened. "Well, sure, you dingbat. He's raking in the dough. Of course he'd be happy."

Oh. I hadn't thought of that. I really was thinking his good humor was due to Danny's absence. Well, I may as well go back to see how Henry's doing.

I wasn't sure which floor his office was on, and I didn't remember his last name, so I had to wander around a bit before I found him. I was glad I did, because I got a much better sense of the change of the entire company. It didn't feel like the greedy happiness of making lots of money, though. Even with a hefty profit there would be tension as the staff that didn't benefit as much as the top tier managers usually had a chip on their shoulders. But the atmosphere felt warm and loving.

When I located Henry's floor, however, it was a bit tense. They seemed relaxed enough when Henry wasn't there, but as soon as he stepped out of the elevator they became quiet, and busied themselves such that Henry wouldn't try to interrupt them. He apparently was desperate to find someone to help him fight for more funds for discovery of more oil deposits, and his workers wanted to avoid yet another interaction with him about the issues...

I really didn't see the need to follow him any more. He had no support to stir anything up, and Arthur seemed determined to go ahead with the funding.

I returned to the Lounge.

## The Unthinkable Begins

Everyone was there but Tom and Larry. No one looked happy.

“Good news!” I said as enthusiastically as I could after seeing their faces. “JK Petro is definitely going to fund the work of Ralph’s friends, which I presume are Rodney and Rick, minus Byron.”

I got no response. Shirley, who looked as if she’d been crying for several hours already, burst into a fresh batch of tears. Sheila was trying to be stoic. The guys were too upset to talk.

“Israel has been hit by a nuclear bomb,” Mary managed to get out.

“Wha....? No. It can’t be.” I refused to believe her. “How do you know?”

“I have a friend who works in the division that communicates with Israel,” Mary answered. “It wasn’t as big as the bombs dropped in Japan, but it did a tremendous amount of damage to central Israel. It was aimed it so that the surrounding countries wouldn’t get much of the radioactive fallout.”

“Jeez. Now what?” I asked.

“Well, the United States is already in the region, and is expected to respond, but probably not with a nuclear bomb. And Israel still has all their nuclear capacity intact, so far...” Mary seemed to fear that a violent retaliation would eventually occur. She just didn’t know who would be the retaliator.

Tom and Larry popped in at that moment. Their eyes were wide with fear. “Did you hear about Israel, Japan and Kabul?” Tom asked breathlessly.

“Japan? Kabul?” the others and I said in unison.

“We knew about Israel, but we hadn’t heard anything about the others. What happened?” Mary asked.

“North Korea bombed Northern Japan, and the Al Qaeda and Taliban groups at the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan bombed Kabul. We saw it on the TV when we went to one of the oilmen’s homes. We came right back to see if there was anything we could do to help. I can’t see how our little mission is going to be of any use now.” Tom said. “I’d like to go to Mission Control for some guidance. Mary? Al? Do you want to go with me? We can call for the others if they are needed.”

“Sounds like the only option we have right now,” Al agreed. The three of them faded out.

The rest of us sat in silence. We were in shock. This couldn’t really be happening.

“I’m going to go check out the other mountains. I don’t know which ones are the Japanese and Israeli ranges, but if there are big storms over unusual mountains in addition to one over the Middle East, maybe I’ll believe that some of this may be true.” I couldn’t imagine anyone in heaven starting such a rumor. But still, I had to see it with my own eyes.

The crowd watching the storms on the other mountains was hysterical. Most souls were crying. Some of the older guys were cursing, threatening to get the b-----. Some of the youngest began to filter back into the pod. Many of the deAgers were rapidly joining up with their charges.

As we watched the storms and each other’s reactions to the news of what had caused them, a very unusual brightness gradually increased in intensity until all of us had noticed it. There was not one source of light. It seemed to be coming from everywhere, but yet from nowhere. And the feeling it gave us was similar to the wonderful warmth of being in the mist of the fuzz. It filled us with an understanding about what was happening on earth. And we were given choices.

We could choose to help a specific person on earth, or we could do a specific task in heaven. Or we could just accept whatever assignment needed to be done. Whatever our choice, we would be capable of carrying out whatever it was we decided to do.

Those of us who had gathered to watch the storms were transformed into more appropriate combinations of metals and spin for the choices each soul made before popping to the new jobs. And as fast as souls were popping out, others were popping in to fill their space. The word was getting around very quickly that a VERY important, MAJOR undertaking was underway. Even the grumpiest of the old men that just arrived knew, and were in awe. Everyone was 'reporting for duty'.

I worried less about my son now than I did my daughter and her family, and Lenny's family. Irene popped up right next to me at that thought. "I'll be looking after Susan and Sam and their kids, and Cindy's father is going to look after her and their kids. You could join Johnny and his team and see if you can help get Lenny here with Leo." She smiled. "You and Leo do still have a lot in common, so it should go well."

Now that she mentioned it, I used to have a lot in common in general with souls who would not want to come to heaven if they were given the choice. And I did know quite a bit about what Leo's been through lately. "Thanks, Irene. I think that's just what I'll do."

She gave me a little peck on the cheek, and popped out.

Within a nanosecond, I popped out, too. I popped into a classroom full of people about my age. Johnny was there. He waved to me and motioned to an empty space beside him. I popped over.

"What's the matter? Didn't think I was good enough to bring Leo and Lenny to heaven by myself?" he said with a grin that let me know he was joshing. "You'll love this job. I finally got to work with some of the more difficult characters, so it's not as dull as it was when I started. And I understand you got to 'jump to the front of the line' by

having a little ‘fuzzy adjustment’ rather than having to work to learn the trade.” His grin was broadened as he patted me through the back. “Welcome, Bud.”

The soul at the front of the class was filling everyone in on what had just happened, and what heaven was doing in response. “We don’t have the luxury of lots of time anymore. We still have some of the heavenly fluidity so that we can take breaks to refresh ourselves and regain our strength. But it is no longer limitless. We have to bring ALL of the spirits remaining on the earth to heaven, even if they have only one molecule of gold with the weakest of clockwise spin. And we have to do so before the earth is blown to smithereens.” He didn’t look as worried as I would have thought at the notion that the earth was going to be destroyed.

“I know most of you are wondering how the earth is going to meet its end. Well, the counter-forces now have so much momentum that they most likely will succeed in wiping whomsoever they don’t like off the map. The earth can take only so many blows before something has to give. It may take centuries, but once the damage is done, there’s no going back.” He sounded too sure of the end result. Nothing can be that certain.

I was beginning to wonder who the h--- this guy was, and wondered if they let any of the lesser Greek gods in heaven accidentally, when Arnie popped in between me and Johnny, and nudged me in the ribs. “Didn’t think you could get rid of me, did you?” he said lightly.

“Well Arnie, fancy seeing you here!” Johnny said, slapping Arnie on the back a bit harder than he did me. Arnie didn’t seem to notice Johnny’s hand halfway to his sternum. “Who do you want to bring to heaven’?”

“My dad. He’s still hovering around his accident sight, watching over the others he left behind so that they don’t make the same mistake. Dad was so dedicated to his job in life, I guess I wasn’t surprised to learn that he never made it to heaven so that he could stay at work for eternity!” Arnie’s smile did not fit his sad face. “He should be easy to convince

to come join us as soon as he knows how much more good he could do here.”

“So, your dad is one of the good ghosts, then?” I asked. I never knew Arnie’s dad. He lived in another state, and Arnie didn’t go visit often, so I didn’t hear much about him, either.

“Yeah, I guess you could say that,” Arnie said with a sigh. “He’s not an evil ghost, but he’s really not that good, either. He’s about the same as just before he died.”

Johnny interrupted us. “You two should be listening to Nat. He’s got some important things to tell us.”

“So, until that time, we have a lot of work to do. And with all the violent deaths, and the need for revenge, we’ll have lots of convincing to do and more than enough challenging ghosts for each and every one of us.” Nat went to the set-up at the front of the room, and turned on the power point.

“Here is how we will try to stay organized. I know a lot of you will get sidetracked by ghosts other than the one you were specifically sent to retrieve, and that’s fine. Any time you see an opportunity to bring someone to us, go for it. But when you’re at a loss for what to do next, here is the roster of groups and their overseer. Just ask any of them for your next assignment,” Nat added. “So, everyone to your stations!”

“Do you mind if I go along with you to fetch Leo and Lenny?” Johnny asked me.

I was a bit surprised by the question because I thought I was going to help HIM, but I answered, “Sure.”

Johnny grinned mischievously. “You sure did lose some silver, didn’t you, Ian. You would normally have ruffled feathers at an offer of help.”

“But this is important. Just so we get Leo and Lenny here, is all I’m worried about.” But I did have to admit; I was not just surprised by the question, but also by my quick agreement to the offer. Johnny was right. I wasn’t “me” anymore. “So, let’s go, shall we?”

## Gold Retrieval, On Steroids

Arnie wanted to get right to work on his father. He stood at attention and gave us an exaggerated salute as he faded out.

“If I’ve ‘jumped line’ and got some skills that you had to work hard to achieve, are YOU going to be upset with ME?” I asked Johnny before we started on our task at hand.

“No, sir! I’m a changed man, too, you know. Haven’t you noticed my age?” Johnny asked, trying to sound indignant.

I paused and really looked at him. He looked MUCH younger than the last time I saw him. “You’re right. Sorry, Johnny. I’m not very observant, am I?”

“Uh, Ian?” Johnny asked a bit hesitantly. “Could you not be so polite? It scares me.”

“You want me to back-slide, then, do you?!” I answered pretending to be in a huff.

“Much better. Thanks.” Johnny actually did look relieved. “Just give me more time with the old Ian. I’ll eventually adjust to the new version.”

We popped into the park where Leo was when Tom and I left him. “Hasn’t he been able to find his way to Danny’s yet?” I asked Johnny.

“Apparently not. He must not be too smart. Most ghosts with enough bottled up hate would have found a way there by now. By my calculations, he’s had a few weeks, earth time, at least,” Johnny said. “So, that could be good, or it could be bad.”

I tried to act annoyed, as the ‘old Ian’ would have. “Quit playing games, Johnny. Out with it. What the h--- do you mean.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Well, it’s good in that a less intelligent ghost can be easier to persuade, but bad in that he hasn’t had a chance to get any of his anger out yet. It may be best to help him get to Danny. If we try to get him to come to heaven right off the bat, he won’t trust us. If we help him to do some evil first, he may be more likely to believe us,” Johnny said, deep in thought. “Let’s see...”

Leo was sitting on a park bench, looking rather dejected. It was nighttime, and the park was empty except for the occasional nocturnal animal. *‘I’m bored to tears,’* Leo thought. *‘I’d almost prefer having to deal with Danny the Dense than to sit here hour after hour. Haunting the occasional passerby is getting old.’*

“I can help you find Danny, if you’re interested,” Johnny said, having alit on the bench next to Leo. “But only if you want to haunt him, not help him.”

After an initial startle, Leo looked at Johnny for quite some time. “Who are you and where did you come from? Why should I trust you?” He glared at Johnny for a bit, then added, “And how do you know I wanted to find Danny?” he finally said.

“Good questions, all of them,” Johnny said rather condescendingly. “But it seems to me that you are in no position to ask any of them. If you don’t want my help, then you can just sit here and rot.” With that, Johnny faded out, but didn’t leave. At least I could still sense him there. I wondered if Leo could, too. Now that I thought about it, this was the first time I was able to sense the presence of a faded soul. I wondered if it was because Johnny was older than I was.

With a poof, Johnny was back beside me with a none too happy look on his face. “Would you please keep your thoughts to yourself? You’ll give me away.” He then noticed my confused expression, and added, “You can sense me there because I’m trying to shield all of my gold with my silver. Since silver is not as transparent, you are able to sense me. So it’s not because I’m still older than you are, my pompous pal. It’s because I’ve now got lots of gold to hide.”



He then gave a sly grin, and admitted, “But having a larger supply of silver does make me more effective.”

“Okay, then why doesn’t Leo know you are there? And can he sense us here in the trees?” I asked.

“No, he can’t sense us when we are this far away. And I wanted him to have the feeling that I was still there, so he’ll know he can still change his mind and ask for help. Didn’t they teach you anything in your crash course on how heaven works?” His demeanor was such that I knew he was joshing. If he had really meant to insult me, he would have had much more feeling behind his words.

“Why don’t YOU fill me in on the basics for this line of work, so I don’t mess anything up for you,” I suggested. “We didn’t get into the details of communication with ghosts, if you must know.” I tried to put some indignation in this last statement especially since the first statement was uncharacteristically ‘bite free’.

Johnny just smiled rather sadly. “Nice try, Ian. But I can tell your heart isn’t in it any more. You really have lost quite a bit of silver. I had heard you had quite a strong shield at one time.”

I thought about my shield before Byron and how I had still been able to shield against Leo. “It WAS pretty good at one point, but a night of hard labor against a full fledged demon wore it out. Now I can only shield against the likes of Leo.”

Johnny studied me for a second or two, then looked towards Leo, who was looking under and behind the bench as if he were searching for any signs of Johnny. “Stay here for now. I’ll work on getting Leo to Danny’s. We can work on a game plan later.” He zoomed back to Leo.

Leo’s eyes lit up for a second before he could censor his true reaction when Johnny appeared back on the bench. When he was able to contain his relief that Johnny had not gone, he growled, with his jaw set and his eyes slit-like, “Don’t play with me, you slimy b-----. Tell me how you know Danny.”

Johnny's expression was more evil than any I had seen while he was alive. And he had plenty of evil expressions, especially during some of the more heated card games.

"Why should I tell you anything, you little peon."

They sat glaring at each other for a few minutes. Johnny won the contest.

"Take me to Danny, then, you flaming a-----," managed to escape from Leo's gritted teeth. "I'll deal with your f----- attitude later."

I was afraid the look of arrogant triumph on Johnny's face would make Leo change his mind. But it didn't. '*D--- Johnny's good.*'

They disappeared in the next second. I panicked at first, before I remembered that I was now pretty good at fading in and out by myself. I just wished I were at Danny's to see the excitement, and poof! There I was.

The man Danny was talking to had his back to me, but from the look on Leo's face I knew he wasn't good news. Leo was cowering in fear, hiding behind Johnny's shield.

My knees started to feel weak. I felt drained. I practically melted into a puddle and seeped through the floor. I felt defeated. I felt hopeless. I felt empty and hollow. I felt too sad to cry.

Julia was there in an instant, as was Tom. Julia started to radiate a warm fuzzy to me; I could barely feel it.

Tom, speaking in a quiet voice, started to fill me in on what was going on. "Byron is here, Ian. Byron Crane." He put up his hand to stop me from my feeble attempt to whisper, 'WHAT!' "Save your strength. I would normally wait until you were restored by a fuzzy, but," he paused to smile weakly, "I know with your curiosity, you can't feel better until you know what is going on. And we may need your help. And your friend Johnny's help. His shield is as strong as yours used to be, so if you were to stay behind it, maybe you could tell if there is a replacement present for either Leo or Proteus. We need to know what we're up against." Tom's look was pleading.

Larry showed up, looking frustrated. “Ian, is that a ghostly Leo behind Johnny?”

“Yes,” I managed to get out. My strength was not returning very quickly despite Julia’s best efforts.

“Does he know you’re here?” Larry asked.

“No,” I squeaked weakly. Julia threw Larry a maternal glance that was meant to let him know to be easy on me.

So he and Tom moved off to discuss the situation out of my usual range of reception. But there was no hope of me being able to pick up on their thoughts in my present condition, even if they had stayed where they were.

“Don’t worry, Ian. They can manage the situation. You just rest and regain your strength,” Julia said soothingly. I’ll fill you in on what is happening as your strength returns. You will not be left in the dark. Your current condition is your response to Byron just as Sheila had responded. Tom is going to try to get Johnny’s attention without Leo’s knowledge to let him know about the task at hand. You’ll be strong enough to resume your part by the time everyone is in their proper position.”

Julia was fantastic. She knew just what to say to soothe my curiosity and sense of urgency so that I could relax and return to usefulness. I took a deep sigh, and closed my eyes. I felt myself on my mossy bank AND in my hammock, AND in the fuzz....The dreadful deadness that had overcome me in the presence of Byron gradually faded far into the distance until it was not even in my memory....

“Come on, you lazy b-----!” Johnny was looking down on me, grinning broadly. “We got work to do! YOUR work, of all things. You brought me here under false pretenses! Now I’ve been sucked into YOUR mission instead of doing my job rescuing your son!” A pink tack floated gently down from his mouth and landed on my chest.

I blew the tack off and stood up. “Funny how things can work out, huh, Johnny,” I answered cheerfully. “Now YOUR evilness is REALLY in demand. It’s good you didn’t bribe the fuzz with the wrong silver!”

“Come on, you two. Get moving.” Tom interrupted to get us back to task. “The sooner we find out who, or what, is in that room, the sooner you two can return to retrieving Leo and Lenny.”

I got behind Johnny, and we oozed up through the floor to Danny’s den.

“I’ve warned you about this, you idiot!” Byron’s face was crimson. “Why the h--- didn’t you get you’re a— into your office and do something about it before it got this far?” If looks could kill.....

“How was I to know Arthur was a f----- puffball? Between him and Henry, I just knew there was no way those greenies could get any money out of the company. I was sure of it!” Danny’s eyes narrowed. “Besides, why should I believe the likes of you? How do I know you’re not just making this up? Are you trying to get money out of me too?”

Byron’s snicker was as evil as ever. “Don’t flatter yourself, Mr. Jackaston. I’ve no interest in your small wad of cash.” A look of malice crossed his face before he made a futile attempt to look helpful. “What I am trying to do is save your company from a very an asinine adventure. I have a lot of stock in JK Petro. It’s in my interest, too, to keep it afloat, and I have inside information that the project the scientists want your company saps to fund is an utter and hopeless waste of time. If you can’t do anything to stop them, I’ll call my broker first thing in the morning to sell ALL my stock. I highly recommend you do the same.” Byron stood to leave. “Good night, Mr. Jackaston. Sleep well.”

Danny did not take his proffered hand. Bryon smiled wickedly at the slight. “Suit yourself.” He turned on his heel, and walked haughtily to the door. Before exiting, he turned back to Danny, and performed a most exaggerated bow.

Danny’s hand was on a paperweight, ready to fling it at his obnoxious guest when something stopped him other than his own will power.

The next scene was right out of the Little Mermaid, when Ursula got Triton to sign away his power to her. The mansion literally shook with the evilness of Byron’s almost

hysterically victorious laughter, and he seemed to grow, filling the entire doorway. And the doorway was not a small one.

“You cannot DARE to let your new master fail, can you PROTEUS!!!?” he mocked with intense enjoyment, savoring the look of hate that filled Danny’s face. “You are such stupid a#\$ %\$%f^\$^--- a-----s!!! How could some useless lump of an excuse for a human do ME any harm!!!”

Still laughing, Byron turned down the hall, and with each pompous stride, morphed into the evil demon he really was and disappeared in a swirling tornado.

“Stay here with Danny, Johnny,” I whispered. “We need to see if it really is Proteus in his pocket.”

I could sense the confusion among the shock and awe in Johnny’s reaction to what we had just witnessed, but he did as I asked.

Danny was shaking with anger, but he managed to NOT throw anything. I think he was shaking too much to control his limbs. He plopped into the nearest chair.

“Proteus!” He growled through gritted teeth. “What the h-- was that all about!?”

The now familiar slurry appeared, slowly materializing from Danny’s coat pocket.

Proteus was also shook with anger. “That \*@\*\*”%\$ f- \*^&\$%#-- b-----! I’d do ANYTHING to be able to snap his head off with my bare hands, MUCH more slowly and painfully than he did to me!” His eyes seared through Danny until the chair he was sitting on started to smoke.

“D--- you, a-----! What are you trying to do? Kill ME!?” Danny hollered as he jumped up from his seat. “D--- you! What the f--- was that was all about!”

Proteus wasn’t listening. He was deep in thought.

Danny started towards him, with his hands out as if to grab his new demon by the shoulders.

But those shoulders quickly began spinning as Proteus turned into a tornado, knocked Danny to the floor with his tail and spun out of the window.

“Now, let’s find Byron,” I whispered to Johnny. “Oh, and, by the way, where is Leo?”

“I took him to the basement and told him to stay there until I found out what was going on here. What IS going on here? Is this the mission you said you were on that was so boring?!!” Johnny looked very impressed.

“By the way, how did you know we needed you?” I asked.

“I could sense someone trying to send me a warning signal; a signal to my gold. So, I guessed it was best to dump the ghost and find out what, or who was trying to contact me,” Johnny explained.

I bristled when he referred to Leo as ‘the ghost’ to be dumped like a useless object. Johnny noticed it and apologized. “I forgot Lenny was in there. It just seems that Lenny is too smart to be hiding in such a stupid ghost. Sorry.”

We went down the hallway Byron was in before he swirled out one of the windows. We oozed through the window, and hovered outside, surveying the scene.

“Any ideas as to where he would have gone?” Johnny asked.

“fraid not,” I answered. “Maybe we need to consult with Larry and Tom.”

We returned to the room, or rather the storage area, beneath Danny’s den. Julia had gone, but Larry and Tom were still there. Larry looked very pale and weak. Tom looked very worried, and not too healthy himself.

I told Tom and Larry what we saw, filling in enough gaps so that it made a little more sense to Johnny.

“Where do you suppose they went?” Larry could barely manage a whisper.

“Byron is probably still somewhere nearby. He most likely wants to see if Danny responds in any way to his threats. And since Proteus left without being instructed to do so, my bet is that he chose to be a ghost rather than continue to be subservient to anyone. Not being able to let Danny

throw the paperweight probably made him realize the only way to even hope to cause any misery for Byron is by being a ghost,” Tom explained. “So, now there are at least two very vindictive ghosts and a very powerful demon nearby. This should be interesting.”

“Do you want Johnny and me to see if Byron found a replacement for Proteus?” I asked Tom. “If we can find Byron, that is.”

Tom thought for a moment in a rather receptive stance. “Yes, see if Johnny can sense him anywhere. You stay behind Johnny’s shield. You may not do well if exposed to Byron even for a split second. You’ll have to give Johnny a crash course in spirit spying, Ian,” he added with a weak smile. “Good luck. It’s safer for Larry and me to go to the company. We may not be able to survive an accidental encounter with the spirits now haunting this mansion. We’ll try to help Brad and Andy to resist any attempts on Danny’s part to do something to stop the transfer of funds to the project.”

He and Larry were gone before I could ask him for any pointers.

And before I could turn around, I knew why.

Johnny quickly turned and whisked me behind his shield, but in that split second of exposure to Byron, I had turned to putty. Johnny held me up with his hands behind his back as he eased slowly to a corner of the room.

Byron had entered the room under the door. He was obviously looking for Proteus, as he was muttering and cursing under his breath at his former slave. “No use in hiding from me, my hapless fiend. I know you can’t be far.” He laughed with self-satisfaction. “I knew I could get you to do something so foolish as deserting your new post. Now, you’re stuck here in this reeking mansion for the rest of eternity!!!”

As he came closer and closer to our corner, he could sense a presence he knew was not Proteus. “Who’s there?” He

growled. When he got no response, he demanded, “Make yourself known, or I’ll let loose the horrors of hell!”

To my amazement, Leo materialized. He was terrified and shaking so that his mist shimmered like glittery wiggly Jell-O. His knees gave out and he slid to the floor as Byron’s evil grin evolved into his horrific laugh.

As Byron approached the melting blob of gelatin Johnny slipped his shield between Byron and Leo’s puddle. I managed a weak smile as I recognized the look of confusion that overcame Byron’s face. Only this time he apparently had no one new to blame for the sudden block between him and his goal. He had blamed Proteus for keeping him out of the Laddett’s house, so the fact that he didn’t automatically blame a new slave for the problem was a strong indicator that he was alone. I sighed with relief that there was not yet another evil spirit here in Danny’s dungeon to face down.

A wicked smirk slowly took over Byron’s face as thought he’d figured out what, or who, was blocking him from Leo: “Proteus, d---- you. Did that new idiotic boss of yours actually ALLOW you to leave him in a time of need?” he hissed. “Did you convince the moron to tell you to follow me to the door so that you could stymie my very productive plot? How clever. How out of character for an imbecile like you, pitiful Proteus. YOU’LL PAY DEARLY FOR THIS, my fearful fiend.” He raised his arms as wizards in fairy tales do when they are ready to zap a spell out of their wands onto a hapless victim.

The next thing I knew, we were in heaven.



## The Ultimate Catharsis

I didn't recognize where we were in heaven, but I knew heaven was where we were. Johnny was met immediately by the overseer for our group, and Julia was by my side in a blink of an eye.

Simultaneously, a child and Irene appeared and surrounded the puddle of shimmery gel that had once been Leo. Out of the shapeless mass arose two complete beings: a heavenly version of an elderly Leo....,

And Lenny. A perfect, adolescent, beaming Lenny.

Between Irene and I, there was no force of physics, heavenly or earthly, that could pull our son from our arms.

The next thing that happened was the most fantastic, most feeling filled, most transforming event imaginable. It was wonderful. It was painful. It was overwhelming. It was exhilarating. It was relief. It was pure, unadulterated, and intense.

It was love.

When we finally were able to detach, we looked at each other first with shock, then burst into spasms of laughter. Irene had progressed to an infant, and Lenny was a preadolescent. I was a teenager.

Words couldn't describe how good I felt.

I eventually noticed that Leo and the child were talking with Johnny. Leo looked more than a bit cranky, and Johnny

was apparently trying to assure him that heaven was really NOT this sappy everywhere.

“Ian, I’ll see ya later. Some of us still have work to do! Jean is going to help Leo find a more appropriate pod before he decides he’d rather deal with Byron!” Johnny said lightly. He took little Irene in his arms and gave her a gentle hug. He then gave a manly handshake to Lenny, paused a second, then picked him up and gave him a not so gentle hug. He then gave me a fake salute and faded out. The child took Leo’s arm and they faded out also.

Irene, Lenny and I faded to the mossy bank where we reminisced about both good and bad times. We laughed. We cried. As we grew younger and younger, communication became easier and easier. Lenny was able to fully understand his mother from the onset, but I was not young enough at first to fully appreciate all of her unspoken, wordless messages. Lenny had to pretty much interpret for a while.

I could have stayed there with them for all of eternity.

Eventually, however, just like the rests with the fuzz came to an end when the urge to ‘wake up’ and do something productive became too strong, the three of us decided it was time to make use of our skills and compositions. There was a world full of good beings out there that needed our help.

Time to get back to work.



## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Ian Burns**  
**Irene**, his wife  
**Susan**, his daughter  
**Sam**, Susan's husband  
**Lenny**, his son  
**Cindy**, his daughter-in-law  
**Karl**, his guardian angel  
**Julia**, his deAger  
**Arnie**, his best friend  
**Larry**, his friend  
**Barry**, Larry's deAger  
**Harry, Johnny and Joe**, his friends  
**Matt**, the college 'buddy' Ian hated  
**Pat**, the Boss  
**Gail**, the airhead  
**Mark**, the punster  
**Dick**, the zit popper  
**Kenny**, Arnie's deAger  
**Emma Athy**, the woman who died trying to save Ian  
**Ted**, Mr. Athy's guardian  
**Little Richie**, his son who died in infancy  
**Steve**, the instructor  
**Leo**, Lenny's 'alter ego' in hell  
**Sheila**, College Dean  
**Shirley**, church lady  
**Bill**, preacher  
**George**, heavenly physicist  
**Rick**, earthly physicist  
**Jacob** pastor of the Unitarian Church  
**Joan Sheppard**, Jacob's wife  
**Mary**, Bill and Shirley's coach  
**Tom**, Ian and Larry's coach  
**Al**, George and Sheila's coach  
**Arthur Kiln**, arrogant oilman  
**Dan Jackaston**, the pompous oilman

**Jan Jackaston**, Dan's wife  
**Ralph**, the oil company's physicist  
**Henry**, third in command at JK Petrol  
**Andy**, supervisor at JK Petrol  
**Angie**, Andy's wife  
**Pete** Dillon, the cynic  
**Lawrence**, the ladder-climber  
**Carol**, the oil woman  
**Randy**, one of the 'doorstops'  
**Daniel**, the other 'doorstop'  
**Bob**, a born again Christian  
**Brad**, the unflappable diplomat  
**Joe Schmitt**, the chauffeur  
**Rodney Anteenio**, the physicist Byron hounds mercilessly  
**Verna**, woman with the backbone  
**Byron Crane**, the human form of a demon, nicknamed Icky,  
for 'Icabod Grinch'  
**Proteus**, the demon helping Icky  
**Stephanie and Chad Laddett**, the host and hostess of the  
Philosophy/Physics Meeting  
**Richard Harding**, Danny's lawyer

## COLOR CODE

WHITE - fear or mild feeling

BLACK - evil

YELLOW - happy

RED - playful; mischievous

BLUE - sad

GREEN - envious

PURPLE - excessive feeling of self-worth

BROWN - a mixture of all other colors to various degrees

## VISUAL AIDS

### FOR THOUGHTS:

FROM THE NOSE - a 'bad' word is thought with anger

FROM THE EARS - a 'bad' word is thought with annoyance

FLUFF - mild, rather innocent word

SAND - a coarser word

FROM EVERY PORE - represents an all encompassing feeling

### FOR WORDS:

FLUFFS OR PUFFS - neutral bad word

THUMB TACKS - a mildly bad word

DARTS - a word associated with a strong feeling

DAGGERS - a word said with intense feeling

BUTTERFLIES - flattery; untrue complement