

Illusion and Reality

by
J. W. Coffey

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The excerpt of *A Wager of Blood* is used with permission of Edin Road Press and will be released as a reprint edition in 2011.

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Dedicated to...

This book is dedicated to Janice Lester Katherine Coffey, the "most bootifullest Mommy in all the cosmos."

I love you, Mommy.

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## ***Table of Contents***

[Dedication](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Your Hand in Mine](#)

[Thirsty Boots](#)

[The Ballad of St. Anne's Reel](#)

[A Kiss on the Hand](#)

[An American Prayer](#)

[Karmic Justice](#)

[An Act of Faith](#)

[And then again...](#)

[The Salt of the Earth](#)

[Introduction To . . . .](#)

[Excerpt from \*A Wager of Blood\*  
"The Don't Pass Bet"](#)

[The Author](#)

[Coming Releases](#)

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Foreword

An author is a visitor to your home. You invite us in for that short span of time that you spend reading the story we've placed in your hands. You bring us in for coffee and cake, and we give you a few moments or hours of entertainment in the many forms in which we write.

The work you're about to read has all been the product of my rather overactive imagination, the culmination of the last five years, of all of the time that I spent in between writing my books. Some of these have been published in *The Writers Post Journal*, some have only been seen by friends and family. But this is the first time I've ever put these together in one book. I hope you enjoy them.

I want to thank you for inviting me into your home. I love what you've done with the place. May I have another piece of cake while you read?

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*Illusion is in the eye of the believer...  
Reality, the eye of the bewitched...  
Perceive as you will, young one  
But keep thy vision true...*

*Thom Fury*

*le 19 Juin 1987 upon meeting my namesake for the first time*

~~~~

Your Hand in Mine
In Memory of Thom "Fury" Michaud

He hated hospitals with a passion. They were cold and unfeeling places, impersonal and uncaring. It always seemed to him that he came here warm and left freezing. *Has to be the disinfectant that fills your clothes with the stink of sick*, he thought. *Maybe it's that hollow click of heels on the tile, the one that always echoes and makes me feel so alone and lonely*. He drew a deep sigh and looked around the room. He thought, *at least they could paint these walls something warm*. He hated the sickly, pale green—so cold!

He looked over to where she was sleeping and got caught up in the watching. Her face was pale in the fluorescent lighting, a luminous shimmer to her skin. Her blonde hair fanned across her shoulders like shimmering strands of spun gold. He watched her delicate lids flutter as she slept, lost in her dream. He felt a sense of pure love that filled his soul. In all the years and all the hospitals, he had never gotten over her vulnerable beauty. She was always so fragile and he had loved that quality in her. It made him want to rescue her, made him feel . . . *heroic*.

He watched her for a time, watching the rise and fall of her chest, before turning to the window. It was the wee small hours of the day but the sunrise was still far away on the horizon. He wanted to watch the moonlight on the lawn. He moved closer to the panes to see beyond the

harsh reflections of the room. He spotted a rabbit dashing across the lawn, and watched it stop to investigate a patch of vegetation before hopping along on its merry way. There had to be a wind blowing across the blades because each one moved and shimmered in the pale glow. He stood there, caught up in the rapture of it.

It was a moment or two before he realized she was gazing at him. He turned away from the moon glow and the grass, the bunny and the images of the room and bed and machines. He turned to look into those green eyes of hers, the ones he always got lost in.

He came back to where she was. "Sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to wake you." He sat down beside her. "You must be exhausted."

She gave him the smile she always saved for him alone and a little hum. "You didn't. I felt you. . . . I wanted to spend time with you."

"Then, we'll do that," he said, returning the smile. "Just you and me, okay? For as long as we can."

Her face clouded at that. "This sucks . . . *bad!*"

He nodded. "Yes," was all he said.

"It's too early," she protested, fiercely. "I'm not ready."

"We never are," he answered.

She barely moved her head as she answered, "No, I suppose not." The green eyes locked with his, a frown on her brow. "It's not fair. *It's not!* There's so much more, so much! It's too soon to leave."

"I know, darlin'. I know."

Her face began to work, as she tried to hide the tears that were just below the surface. He hated it, to see her cry. The tears had always burned inside of him and he'd been far too short with her when she cried. He always felt like the scum of the earth afterward but it was something he seemed powerless to stop. He heard the plaintive sound of her voice as she spoke, and he willed the impatience back down.

"I'm not ready to let go. I don't *want* to. We have so much to do still."

"Songs to sing," he added.

"Music to write," she said, smiling in spite of the tears. "We were gonna sing again."

"We will," he said, more assurance in his voice than he actually felt. "We will, I promise."

"No, we won't." She shut her eyes against the grief that threatened to spill from around her lashes. "This really sucks! I'm not ready!"

He chuckled under his breath. "And you call *me* stubborn," he said.

It was enough to make them both laugh. It was good to hear her laugh again, knowing it was for the last time. When she'd calmed again, he went on.

"You know, *I'm* not ready either. I don't want to let you go. You ever think of that?"

"I know! *I know,*" she blurted out. The serious look on her face was almost more than he could take. "I know you don't want it either," she said, with a sigh of resignation. "It is what it is, I guess."

The moment lay there with neither knowing what to say. Without warning, he filled the space by blurting out, "Do you know how much I love you? *Do you?*" There was a sudden look of surprise on her face, and he almost laughed. "I do, you know. I love you very much."

"Do you?"

He nodded. "I always have, darlin'. I always do."

“You know, I always loved you, *always*,” she said. “I think I loved you . . .” She took a deep breath. “You know? I keep thinking . . .” Her voice trailed off and a distant look came into her eyes.

“What,” he asked. “What are you thinking?”

She turned her head away with a great amount of effort, a look on her face that he couldn’t quite interpret. He watched her, not sure if she was really going to answer him or not. She lay there, silent. Just as he was ready to give up, she opened her lips and spoke to him.

“Do you ever wonder,” she asked. She turned her gaze back to him with the same exertion. “You know; what it would have been like? You and me?”

She was watching him now, a cautioned scrutiny as if she were waiting for him to laugh at her. There was no chance that he would—he *had* thought of it. And often. He had wondered what it might have been like to have loved her in that way; the sight of her closed eyes and the taste of her lips. He *had* wondered about the feel of her body pressed to his. There once was a time when he wanted it, craved it. There had been a time when it almost happened.

He was sixteen, still showing the signs of youth. His face retained the baby fat of his childhood, the only part of him that held it. He was properly called “lanky” that year, that glorious summer. He had been pale from being inside so much, but time in the sun had started putting a tan on him. The time in the sun had also meant time with his best friend—*her*.

She had blossomed that summer from her own coltishness to womanhood. She had become a fresh faced seventeen and begun to lose the gangly appearance of her childhood. He watched her bloom from that gawky, insecure child to a beautiful woman. He had been drawn to her, that day in the music room—drawn by a mutual love of John Denver and the guitar. But that summer—that incredible summer—he had fallen in love, completely and irrevocably. It was the summer of his youth, the last summer of boyhood—and she had been all his.

“You remember?”

He came back to the here and now in her question, and lost himself in the green eyes again.

“Do you? Do you remember,” she asked again.

“I do,” he answered. “Remember the picnics we had?”

“Yeah, and your catsup fetish.”

She laughed and he joined her. They had often joked of his “one true affair,” that of the french fry and catsup bottle. Once, she had called him the poster child for Heinz 57 and it seemed to have stuck. His favorite shirt had a bottle of the stuff and he wore it constantly.

“We went everywhere, that summer . . . you and me,” he said. “We went every where and did every thing.”

“We did,” she sighed. “My best friend, my only friend. You always knew what I was thinking, what I wanted.”

She was walking into dangerous ground again. He had to turn it away. “Remember running in the forest? Hiding in the trees?”

She gave her musical laugh again. “My brave warrior. And we pretended we were natives, running from the white man. You kept me safe from harm. You always did.”

He shook his head at the memory. “My parents had a cow, you remember that? So did yours.” With a deep sigh, he said, “We did it anyway, didn’t we? We didn’t care. We were together and having fun.”

“I remember.”

He relived that memory of warriors and maidens, of stalking deer for food and a makeshift dwelling of dead branches and blankets. He turned the smile to her again. "You were one beautiful maiden, darlin'. You really were."

"And you were my handsome warrior."

He warmed under the praise, felt the flush creep to his cheeks. "I did m' best."

It was her turn to bring a bit to the memory. "I had finally won the right to stop wearing my hair back in braids," she said with a rueful smile. "My mom was so strict about that. Here I could finally wear it down and you had me braiding it again! For you!"

"You never cut your hair. You never did."

"Oh, *yes* I did," she smirked and giggled again. "You just weren't around when I did it!" She winked at him. "But I didn't that often. You were the only one that cared enough to ask me not to, to ask me to grow it."

"I love your hair," he said, simply. "I always loved braiding it, so soft and golden." His hand flew out and came back. *I can't . . . I just can't.*

"I'm sorry you cut yours," she said. "I miss braiding your hair, I miss"

Again on dangerous ground.

"It was a great summer," he answered, filling the space again.

"I loved that summer," she sighed. "Running with you in the forest. That was my favorite moment, that summer."

"You know what mine was?"

"No," she said, turning her gaze back to his. "What was it?"

"Remember Hampton Beach?"

Her eyes widened and she sighed again.

So lovely, so fragile.

"Oh my, yes. I do!"

"We went to the beach, remember? You wore that yellow bathing suit, and I had my favorite khaki shorts. We stopped and got double decker ice cream cones. You had chocolate and I had strawberry. They dripped down our arms, and you kept licking your hand."

He closed his eyes and, for a moment, he could hear the waves crashing on the shore. He smelled the salt spray and he almost felt it on his skin again.

"We walked the whole length of the boardwalk, 'til we got to the shore. We spent the rest of the afternoon just sitting by the water and watching the birds."

He heard her sigh a third time and the *whoosh* of the surf was replaced by the steady *beep-beep-beep* of the heart monitor, the whirl of the respirator. He opened his eyes and saw that she was watching him intently.

"You held my hand," she said, a single tear threatening to escape the bounds of her lashes. We sat by the water's edge, and you reached out and held my hand. I remember."

He gave a slight snort at the thought of his bravado. "Where I got the nerve to do that, I'll never know." He looked down at his hands, the calluses on the fingertips of his left hand, from the guitar strings. "I was such a skinny nothing then." He ignored her sudden intake of breath, as if she were going to protest. "No, I really was. Man, I was so shy. I was afraid you were going to laugh at me."

"You knew I wouldn't."

He smiled at her. "Well, maybe a little. I just remember I wanted to, real bad. So, I just did it. Before I could think about it, before I knew what was going on, I just reached and took your hand. It was so soft, so warm. It felt right, you know?"

She nodded. "I know."

He nodded in return. "So right."

"I never laughed at you," came a whispered voice. "Never. I could *never* laugh at you."

"No," he answered, "You never did. But I remember that part of our summer. That is my best memory, sitting with you like that and you holding my hand." He looked back down at his hands again. She deserved to know the truth. "Yes, I thought it, what it would have been—you and me. What we . . . how we . . ."

"I would have loved you," she said. A single tear slipped down her cheek. Suddenly, there was no anger or impatience, just a sad longing at what could have been. "I would have loved you all my life," she repeated.

"I know you would have," he answered, tenderly. "I would have loved you, too. And we would've torn each other apart."

She opened her mouth to deny it; he knew it in his heart. He silenced her by raising his hand.

"We would have and you know I'm right." He lowered his hand again. "We were too passionate, darlin'. We were too alike." He watched his hands again, as the confession spilled out, "I was too stubborn and demanding, and you know it. I had to do it my way or not at all. You were too gentle and demanding on your own." He chuckled. "I used to dream about it, about being with you . . . and that day you held my hand."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I loved you too much," he answered. He saw the grimace come over her face and felt the pang in his heart. "Yeah, I know, sounds stupid, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does."

"Darlin', please understand. I couldn't do that to you. I loved you too much to make you be near me during the bad times—and there were too many that you don't know about." He looked to the sleeping form of his wife, slumped over on the end of the bed with her head cradled on her arms. "It was enough that I had to ask *her*. I never wanted her to live through it, but she did. She didn't take it from me, always fought me back."

"She loves you, you know."

He nodded. "I know. I fell in love with her the moment she sashayed into my life. She knew how to throw it right back at me, my moods and stupid times. She made me laugh when I wanted to cry. She held me when I *did*. *She* never laughed at me, either." He turned back to the other, the one he always thought of as his first love, and with a widening grin, said, "Besides . . . as I recall, you met your husband not too long after that."

She smiled again. "Yeah . . . *my* grounding. I used to tell him that he was my anchor to reality. I kept him from sinking into the ground and he kept me from flying off the earth."

"*She* does that to me, you know."

"I know," she answered. "I guess we made the right choice after all, didn't we?"

"We did. The moment you married him, I knew you were gonna be ok. I knew he'd take care of you. I never worried about you again."

The concerned look came over her face. "I never *stopped* worrying about you," she said. "I still do. I worry you don't take care of yourself. I worry that you don't eat or sleep enough. I worry that you push yourself too hard."

"Shh, darlin'," he cooed to her, "don't do this. I know you love me. You don't have to worry about me anymore. Everything's done . . . it's ok. I'm ok."

“I’ll *always* worry about you,” she said, fresh tears threatening to burst forth. “*Damn it! it’s not fair!*” She tried to turn her face away, but the exertion was too much. “I’m sorry, I know you hate it when I cry. You always did.”

“Only because I could never fix it, darlin’. Only because . . . only . . .” He couldn’t say anymore.

“I don’t want to lose you. Not now. *Not ever!* Damn!”

“You can’t,” he answered, meaning to reassure her. “I’ll always . . . I . . . I will . . .” He felt his own tears start now, hot and blinding. He wanted to reach out to her, touch her, let her know it was ok to let go. He wanted to comfort her and didn’t know how. The monitor decided for both of them.

The steady *hiss* of the respirator was starting to slow, followed by a warning beep from the heart monitor. His attention focused to the machinery as another red light flashed, then began to blink in a steady rhythm. That one was doing all the breathing, now. *They’ll be coming in a moment. It’s time.* He gazed back to her and saw that she knew. His mouth opened to say something, anything . . . and he didn’t know the words to say. The look in her eyes told him that he didn’t need any. *Maybe there are none.*

He stood up and walked to the side of the bed, watching the red light of the respirator go a non-blinking red. *Not long now,* he thought. He looked down at his body, lost in the coma. They had been pumping a steady stream of fluid and morphine into him, trying to make him as comfortable as possible. The body had bloated beyond recognition. For a moment, he wasn’t sure how to react. It surely wasn’t the graceful exit he had wanted but it was still going out with a fight. He knew the odds when he came in; and they were against him all the way.

But I made the try, I fought the last fight. I didn’t lay down and die like a good little boy. No regrets at all.

He heard a small noise behind him and turned back to see she had gone back to her sleep state. *Think she’ll remember this visit?* He snorted at his own question. She’d never forgotten anything, from how he drank his coffee to his favorite cup, from the moment they met to the very first song they’d ever written. He had always been welcome in her home as part of her family. She was his best friend and had been for all of his life, it seemed. *Yeah, she’ll remember. She’ll remember this.*

He looked to the sleeping form of his wife, now showing the first signs of rousing thanks to the warnings. They’d already rehearsed this little song before. They’d said all there was to say, at least he had that much. They’d said goodbye, cried their tears, and said the “I love you” part so many times in the last days. She was his soulmate and his comfort, his light at the end of the tunnel. He hoped he’d told her enough times, he hoped . . .

He turned back to the sleeping blonde who’d been his friend, his confidant, his music collaborator—so much more than he could ever say in words. They hadn’t had enough time for this one. It was a lousy way to say goodbye, but it was all they had. It would have to do.

The respirator stopped then, the alarm sounded in earnest. He’d run out of time. He felt himself drifting back to his body, felt the comforting fog beckoning him forward. Before he completely joined with the black, he voiced one more thought.

“I love you, darlin’. See you there. I’ll be waiting.”

* * *

The hand gripped her shoulder and shook it, rudely bringing her up from the doze she'd lost herself in. *Damn it, go away. Leave me alone! If I wait here, he'll come back. I'll be there again. I'm not done. There's more....damn it, leave me alone!* Another shake, this one more insistent and she opened her eyes. Her name was being called repeatedly. She bit off a sarcastic retort and looked up into brown eyes brimming with tears. A shaky voice said all there was to say at that moment.

"It's time. He's going."

"No! God, not yet." A shake of the head, and this time, she let the tears come. "I was dreaming about him."

"Were you? What were you dreaming?"

Her hand flew to her mouth for a moment, as if to hold back the flood of emotion. She swallowed the crying jag, admonishing herself. *Not yet, not now. She needs me to be strong. She needs me to help her hold on. I'll do this later. Not now...please, not now.*

"I...uh...um...we were saying goodbye. He was telling me about . . . about"

"What," his wife begged. "What was he telling you?"

She shook her head. "Memories," was her only answer.

She watched the back of the priest, heard his intoning of the Supreme Unction for the Ill. *God, I can't watch this, I can't.* But she had to. He had asked for the few of them to be there for the end, only the precious few.

"He wanted you here, you know."

She looked back into the gentle brown eyes. "Did it ever bother you, that he and I were that close," she asked.

"It did a little, at first," the other woman answered. "I was jealous of you for a long time, you know."

She smiled through the tears. "Yeah, seems you and my husband felt the same way."

The other smiled. "I know. But you two were closer than brother and sister, and it was only because we didn't understand. You spoke to each other in ways I could never speak to him. I was always grateful for that."

The hand squeezed hers, and his wife said, "You became my friend, too, you know."

"And you, mine," she said. They both looked back to the bed, and the man about to leave them. Suddenly, she knew what to do. He had told her. He was waiting for one last time between them.

The priest finished his rite and stepped away. The wife stood by the other side and watched. She sat down on the side of the bed, and the rest of the room disappeared. It was only them.

She took the bloated hand in hers, holding it softly, tenderly in her own. "I remember, darlin'. You go now. You wait for me, ok? Sing with John and Jim, and wait for me . . . *for us.* Walk on the beach for me." The tears flowed again. "Go on, my friend. Go. Remember me, okay?"

There came a sudden spike on the monitor and the hand closed around hers. The nurse turned off the respirator and they all stood, watching the heart monitor as it slowly came to a stop. She held his hand as the nurse turned off the machines. She held it while his wife took the necklace he had always cherished, his bear fetish. She held it and cried, and said goodbye.

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## *Thirsty Boots*

*Inspired by the song, "Thirsty Boots"*

*words and music by Eric Anderson*

*Performed by John Denver on the I Want To Live CD*

When he was three weeks overdue, she began to worry. He'd never been this late before. Her mind began to play tricks, little games with her heart. *He was dead*, it told her. *He had been murdered by the highwaymen*. No, she answered, no. It will not be. *He has found a woman, cast you aside*. No, she countered. He will not forsake me. And so she filled her days with the work at the tavern, drawing the pints and pitchers of ale and beer. She spoke with a saucy air to the customers, flirting and flitting around them. Anything that kept her mind from its cruel teasing, anything that kept her from believing what must surely be a lie.

"Molly, darlin', a pitcher for me and the mates and step lively!"

She had finished wiping off a table and turned to the boisterous caller. "You sit yourself down, Ned Biddle, and stop calling like this was a bawdy house. I'll get your bloomin' pitcher, never you fret."

She barely heard the hoof beats outside, as she took the pitcher from the table. She stopped only long enough to allow Ned a pat of her bottom before heading to the cask. There was a quiet thud as the front door of the inn collided with the wall, but she paid that no mind either. She drew the pitcher, replaced the bung, and turned back to the table.

And she saw him there, framed in the doorway and standing in a pose that suggested that he was wearier than she could possibly imagine. For a moment all she could do was watch him, take his presence in with her eyes. With the light shining from behind, it was hard to see much. But she could tell that he was woefully thin and his steps were labored.

She set the pitcher down on the table, turning a smile at the men sitting there. They all knew. When he was here, they all knew where her heart lay; with him. There was no teasing, no flirting when he was here. She left the pitcher and ran up the steps—two at a time—to the room that was always reserved for him.

She quickly set several buckets of water to heating in the cauldron. The oak tub was there, waiting to be filled. She went about setting things to right, drawing the covers of the bed for later. He was a creature of nature, loving the out of doors. She lit the candles for the extra illumination, but pulled the curtains so that he would have the last of the day's light. It was here that she was standing, tying back the fabric, when the door opened softly behind her.

The green eyes were deeper than before. And the face was streaked with the dust of the road, he was haggard. The black hair had been haphazardly tied back with a piece of leather; wisps and tendrils had been pulled loose and hung listlessly around his face. He was dirty and disheveled, but he was here. He was finally here, safe and sound. He was home.

"Wylor?"

He gave a fatigued smile, closing the door behind him. "I suppose you thought I had gone for good," he said.

"Don't be silly, you cannot leave me," she answered smartly. "You know my company is too dear, you'd miss me far too much."

That drew a chuckle from him. It was enough to break the spell and she crossed the room to him. "Come now, I shall draw a bath for you and help you bathe this dust from your body and hair. And I want to hear all the news. You must tell me everything."

"Molly . . ."

She moved to take his doublet, but he deftly caught her hands. For a moment, she was lost in his eyes. Yes, they were deeper. There were small lines in the corners and he couldn't bring his eyes to meet hers.

"Come now, Wyler, let me take this. You can't go into the tub in your clothes." He wouldn't let go of her hands. "I *have* seen you naked. Surely, it's not modesty."

He bowed his head, staring down at the floor in a deep study.

"My love. You've been out in the world, singing the news and entertaining those who would listen. You've been riding far and wide. Knowing you, you've not slept in a decent bed in too long, choosing the trees and that saddle."

He slowly shook his head.

"What is it, Wyler?"

"Did you not wonder where I have been?"

Her heart sank. *He has found another. He has taken another.*

When she couldn't speak, he took that as a sign of his own. He released her hands and turned away. Slowly, he began to shed the doublet, taking his time to pull it from his arms. It wasn't until he removed the garment that she saw his shirt had been torn to tatters, dried blood on the rips.

He tossed the doublet to the floor and turned back. "I have been in prison, Molly."

He seemed to be searching her face for something, some word of comfort or acknowledgment. She took a breath and fixed a smile on her face. She held out her hands, taking his and holding held them to her heart.

"I was scared, Wyler, more afraid than you will ever know. But you are home now. You are here." She kissed the fingers of both of his hands. "First, you will have a bath and wash away the dust and grit. Come, into the tub with you. You are here now and I am with you."

She helped him out of the doeskin trews and saffron shirt, laying them on the bed to fold after he was in the tub. She caught her breath seeing the criss-cross of barely healed welts on his back. His strong back that had not seen the sun for some time, his back was still showing bruises and those whip marks. She turned back to the cauldron and began pouring the hot water into the cold, heating it until it was steaming. He stepped into the tub, settling gingerly as she poured the last of the hot water. From a box, she pulled a ball of sweet soap wrapped in a piece of oil cloth.

"Now, we shall see if that handsome face is still under that dirt. But first, your hair needs attention, sir."

She pushed his head forward and dutifully, he bent it. She took an old pitcher and poured the water over the blue-black locks. With the ball of soap, she began to work his tresses into a lather.

"Molly?"

"Yes, my love?"

He gave a heavy sigh, almost as if it came from his toes. His lips parted several times, as if he wasn't sure what to say or how to say it. She said nothing, only working the soap through his hair with her fingers and gently teasing out the tangles. It was some time before he did speak. She waited patiently.

“How can one man be so cruel to another? All for . . . words.” He gave another heartfelt sigh. “I know, I know. You have often cautioned me to watch my tongue. You have counseled me much for the control of it.”

“Have I, my love?”

“I could not see the injustice and let it go unnoticed. I could not.”

She took the pitcher and rinsed the soap from his hair. “What did you see, my love?”

“I saw a man beaten so that another could have his land. I saw the fatted lord of the shire laughing as it happened. Too many suffer for greed, Molly. Too many cry from hunger and disease and it would seem there are none who care.”

He pushed the wet hair from his eyes and sat back as she soaped the cloth. He closed them while she cleaned the dust from his face and rinsed it. He kept his lids shut as she began to gently scrub his arms and chest. But he talked on.

“I sang of what I saw. I meant only as farce, only to tease. But the duke took affront. He bade them to throw me in the dungeon until such time as I had learned my lesson. But first, I was tied to a post and whipped for my slander, he said. So they did. Ten lashes for my crime and two weeks in the dark recesses of the gaol.”

She gently washed the healing wounds on his back, angry stripes that rose from his perfect flesh. The blood had since dried, but the skin was still an acrimonious red. She patted at the lesions as softly as she could, but she heard each hiss of his breath. He never cried out, never made another sound other than the sudden inhales through his teeth. She carefully cleaned the dirt and grime from the lash marks, then rinsed them.

“There, now,” she whispered, as if soothing a child. “There now, all clean and that will heal nicely. I’ll get one of Mother Morton’s unctions to put on those and they will no longer pain you.”

He only nodded.

“Are you hungry, my love?”

He nodded again.

“Then, I shall feed you. You are far too thin, my love. And so weary from it all. I shall care for you now. I shall heal you and take care of you. You will grow strong and well again. All of that is past.”

His eyes met hers. “Molly?”

“Yes, Wyler?”

“Are you not shamed of me?”

“For what, my love?”

“I am . . . I have been to prison. I have . . . committed a crime.”

“To speak the truth and give voice to the oppressed is not a crime, my love. Because an old, fat, uncaring tyrant could not have the truth spoken to him? Because he drew insult from having his own shameless deeds thrown back in his face?”

She took one hand in hers; she could see that the knuckles were bruised. She kissed them, stroking the back of his hand as she did.

“No, sweet Wyler. I am *proud*. Proud of you for standing up to such vile behavior. Proud of your big heart and gentle ways. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

He smiled so sweetly at her that she felt her heart filling up, felt her whole being warm with the glow.

“Now,” she said, “there is a night shirt on the bed. I shall go fetch your supper and a pitcher of ale. And I wish to hear all about the wondrous parts of your journey. Of all the villages you saw and the people. You must tell me of the gossip of the court and the land.”

She left the lambskin where he could reach it; use it to dry his body with.

Tears spilled down her cheeks as she entered the hallway. *They threw him in prison; threw Wyler in prison. A gentle man with no more thought to hurt anyone and they beat him like a dog. Oh, that I were not a woman and could right the wrong. Oh, that I . . . I . . .*

She went wordlessly about as she carved the lamb from the bone. She laid the slices on a platter and heaped the carrots by the side. She cut thick slices of the hearty brown bread and laid that on the platter as well. All that was left was to pour the ale; but in the middle, she stopped. Carefully setting the pitcher back on the table, she buried her face in her hands and wept.

*Wyler, shut away . . . how could they? And whipped him . . . why? He's a simple bard, a gentle soul. Why?*

She wiped the tears away and finished pouring the ale. She found the jar of ointment and, balancing a mug on the platter, managed to get the lot upstairs. She was forced to set the pitcher on a nearby table to get the door open, but she was in the room just in time to see him belting up the treads again.

“Now, you sit down, my love,” she said, setting the platter down on the table. “I’ll get the ale and then I’ll tend t’ your back.”

He did as told, sitting before the platter but not eating it; he picked at the food, moving it around. She poured the mug of ale and set about to dressing the cuts.

He caught her hand only once. The little boy look on his face both amused her and broke her heart.

“Will it sting?” he asked.

She kissed the tip of his eyebrow. “No, it will not sting. But it will lessen the pain.”

He began to eat the food before him as she tenderly applied the contents of the jar. She was dismayed to see his ribs standing out against his skin but made no mention of it. Of course he was too thin; they’d done that awful thing to him.

“It was terrible in there, Molly. Animals, they live like animals in cells. Dark and dank, chains and manacles.”

“I’m sure it was horrid.”

“They spat on us, called us wicked names, foul things. There was no privacy, no . . . they beat one poor sot. He bled to death, right there in the cell, and they left him.”

She finished with his back, laying the jar aside. “Wyler, I’m so sorry. You were never meant for that place. It was just wrong.”

He stuffed a piece of the bread and meat into his mouth and sat chewing in somber silence. Molly reached out, taking his free hand in hers, drawing his attention.

“I wish I could take it all back. Make every moment gone. I would do that for you. But I can’t.”

He swallowed slowly. Taking a deep breath, he said, “I won’t go back, Molly. I will never go back. I’m shut of it all. I’m shut of the road, the tales. I’m shut of singing the news and being pelted with rot. I’m . . . done, I tell you, done.”

“Shh,” she cooed. “My love, it is what you are. You are a bard, a bringer of story and song. You have that in your blood and you are the best of them.”

He shook his head. “No, no longer. I wish to settle now. I wish for a home and children. I wish to make my life mean something, be respectable.”

“You are respectable, my love.”

“No, I’m just the itinerant who wanders, telling the wrong tales and insulting the wrong men.” He stared at the table. “I am the man who has disgraced you.”

“I do not feel disgraced.”

“You should.”

“No. I should not.” She reached and pulled his gaze to meet her own. “You are a very respectable man, Wyler Bain. And I will not hear other. If you truly choose to settle, then you have a home here. If you want it.”

The weight lifted from his shoulders and she watched his body ease its burden from his soul.

“I choose it, Molly.”

“What will you do, my love?”

“I have a fair hand with the lathe and chisel. I’ve been carving things, making small toys. I could apprentice with the wheelwright. I should like to make furniture and mend things of wood.”

“Then that is what you will do.”

“That is what I shall do,” he repeated, the smile curling his lips up and setting the emerald eyes to twinkling.

“But, surely you will play for me?” she asked shyly. “Some times when the night is warm and I should like to hear the beautiful voice singing songs of love? You will sing for me?”

He pushed himself back from the table, pulling her into his lap as he did. “I shall sing for you, my dear.”

She stroked his face. “And you will not miss your travels?”

“Molly—”

“Wyler, you will not miss them?”

“I have missed you far more.” He took her hand to kiss the palm. “I thought only of you while I was in that place. I could not hope you would wait for me.”

“Then, you must kick off your thirsty boots and stay for a while. Rest and eat and sleep until you are ready to take the travels again.” He opened his mouth, but she was faster, stopping his speech with her hand against his lips. “No, my dear. You are not a woodwright. You are a bard. It is in your soul and I will not keep you from it.”

He kissed her fingertips. “You do not. I want to come home, Molly. I want to stay here, with you. Please? May I?”

Her answer was the kiss she gave him, his lips soft and yielding. His hands crept around her waist like agile mice that meandered in the soft places and firmly held her close. Her arms went around him, careful to avoid the rips in his skin. The taste of the sweet carrots and the salt of the meat was on his tongue and she savored the spice of it.

He lifted her up and carried her to the bed. With his deft fingers, he plucked the laces of her gown and tossed the cloth aside. His treads joined the pile on the floor, then he was under the quilt with her. His hands—his musician’s hands—were strong from the strings of the lute but soft and gentle as he touched her everywhere. He seemed to revel in her and she let him take his time.

She found the places on his body that made him shiver and moan with the joy of it, the places that tingled and brought him pleasure. She had washed away the pain of this journey, now she would fill him with her heart. She stroked and kissed the muscles, exploring still others that seemed to go rigid and eager.

She wanted to play the vixen, to bite and scratch. But she was not that way; he was different, she couldn't be that way. When he took her, he filled her with his pleasure. They rocked in a single rhythm, her hands clasped around his neck. He whispered her name as they moved as one. And when the moment came, he stiffened in her arms and then released against her shoulder. She stroked his arm, whispering his name, and kissing the side of his jaw and neck.

When he rolled over to lie on his back, she saw the tears on his cheeks.

"Wyler? Wyler, is it your back? Have I done something to pain you? Wyler? What is it?"

He sniffed back the tears. "No, it isn't my back. You've done nothing wrong, Molly. You've . . . you made it all well again. You gave me back myself. My pride." He reached to her, pulling her close. "I have seen much, lost much. But you gave it back to me."

She kissed his lips again. "I gave you nothing you didn't already have, my love."

"Then, allow me to give you something."

"What is it, my love?"

He turned over, reaching into the bag that had been tied on his belt. He pulled out a scrap of cloth and shyly handed it to her. When she opened it, she saw a band of silver carefully wrapped inside. Her eyes widened as she looked up at him.

"It is for you, Molly. If you will have me. If you will honor me."

Now, she burst into tears. He held her close and let her know it was all well. He held her close until they slept, wrapped in each other's arms.

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The Ballad of St. Anne's Reel

Inspired by the song, The Ballad of St. Anne's Reel
Words and Music by D. Mallett,
performed by John Denver on the *Autograph* album/CD

Welcome t' PE Island, sir. How can I help you, eh?"

Jack nodded to the clerk. "My freighter isn't here. I'm looking for the Mandy Lee."

The young man inside the cage looked down, shuffled papers for a few moments, and then looked back up with an annoying smile on his face. "Uh, she's not in dock."

Jack gave a nervous cough, planted his hands on the counter, and answered, "Yes, I know she's not in dock. That's why I'm here. She supposed to be at dock three and she's not. *Nothing* is in dock three."

"Oh, er . . . um . . . hmm." He looked back down, shuffled the papers again, and looked back up with the same smile. "Well, then, she's had a bit of a delay, eh? Sorry, that."

Jack was fast losing patience. "Sorry? Look, mate, I have to be on my ship in three days. The Mandy Lee is the only one going to the States and if I'm not on it, I miss my ship. If I miss my ship, I'm in dutch with the captain. Understand?"

"I'm sorry, sir—"

“Sorry? *Sorry?* Look, buddy . . .” Jack took a deep breath. There was no sense berating the man. “Look, *I’m* sorry. I need to make that ship. Did she dock at all?”

“No, sir. She hasn’t come in to port.”

Jack nodded. “Then, she will.”

“Perhaps she’s just delayed, sir. Perhaps there was a squall or something, eh? Circuit’s a bit dodgy this time of year, eh? She’ll make berth, you’ll see.”

He gave an exasperated sigh. “Looks like I’m stranded here.” Another thought struck him. “Look, this is a port of call. Is there any ship scheduled to get in sooner, going to the same place?”

“Um, let me look, sir.” This was followed by the shuffling of more papers, but this time the young man opened a ledger. One well bitten nail traced down the column, stopping at the bottom. “Yes, sir. The Bonnie Mary. But she’s not due to sail out until morning, sir.”

Jack exhaled hard, closing his eyes. He really didn’t have to be aboard until the morning of the fourth day, but he’d wanted a day to relax, do a little sight seeing, before resuming his duties. “Has there been any radio contact at all?”

“No, sir,” the young man answered, rather apologetic at the news. “Should I go ahead and book passage, sir? Just in case?”

Jack nodded. “Just in case.”

“She’ll be in, sir, you’ll see,” the clerk assured. “She’s just late, eh? Bit chancy, is nothing more. She’ll be in. But I’ve booked your passage.”

Jack gave a confident smile to the young man. He hoped it hid the frustration inside of him. “Well, looks like I’m a guest of your village. Any place I can go get a cup of coffee? While I wait? For the Mandy Lee?”

The clerk’s face lit up. “That’s the spirit, eh? Keep a positive mindset! Well done.”

“Coffee?”

“Oh, sure, down the street a bit, sir. Hotel. Got plenty o’ hot coffee, eh? You go straightway there and I’ll have the boy come down to fetch you when Mandy comes to dock. Eh?”

Jack loosed a short sigh, nodding as he did. He crossed to the door and looked out on the bleak December evening. The snow was falling, silent and frigid. The small village was a print right out of a story book, the most angelic place he’d ever seen. It did nothing to improve his rapidly building frustration or mood. He tugged his cap down further over his ears, the lapels of his coat up over that, and pulled the door open. He left the warmth of the office and walked out into the bluster of evening.

He’d only walked a few paces before realizing he’d not asked the clerk which way the hotel was. He crossed out into the empty street, looking up and down the road. There was no hint, no clue of any hotel. He was about to give up when a sudden bump turned him around. A gentleman, wrapped in a thick fur coat, stopped. The woolen scarf was wrapped around the man’s face obscuring anything below his nose. It wasn’t until the gentleman had pulled the wool down from his face that Jack saw the smile that brightened the man’s eyes.

“Hello, friend. You lost?”

Jack nodded. “Yes, where’s the hotel?”

The gentleman held up a mittened hand, gesturing in a direction. “That way, five doors down. Can’t miss it. On other side of the street there, eh? You head there; they’ll take good care of you.”

Jack looked in the direction the man had pointed in. He could just make out the posts and gate in front of the hotel. He turned back to thank the gentleman, but the man was gone. Jack

watched him scurry off across the street and off in the same general direction. Jack went back from whence he came and then, proceeded to the hotel.

The wind made it a bit rough and it took him several minutes of fighting to get to the entrance. Breathing a sigh of relief, all he wanted to do was go inside and sit down. A cup of coffee was sounding real good at this point; something warm and hot in his belly and he could wait for the ship. Even if he took the ship in the morning, he'd make it. It would be ok. The captain wouldn't have an excuse to dock his pay.

But as he made the turn to go into the gate, something stopped him. His hand, numb from the cold, paused in the act of opening the gate. There was something . . . some sound, some . . . *music*. He heard the sound of a fiddle, soft and sweet, under the ferocity of the wind. It was jaunty and plaintive at the same time. It took a few seconds of listening, but he could pick out small snatches of the music. He turned around to face the street and saw the lights in the building directly across from him. Maybe it was nothing; maybe it was something. The music seemed to be coming from there. *What the hell*, he thought to himself. The worst that could happen was there was no music and he'd go back to the hotel and have that coffee.

He fought the wind as he crossed the street, his hands now in the pockets of the old peacoat. He stepped up on the wooden sidewalk, clomping across the surface. Every step brought him closer to that door. Every step and he could hear voices now, laughter. There was a yellow glow to the door, light spilling out from around the cracks. He put his cold fingers to the door knob, turned and pushed.

The moment he stepped inside, the music swept around him; a gentle kiss of warmth. No wonder the streets were deserted; they were all here. In one corner, coats and hats had been piled into a huge stack. The room was filled with people; some dancing jigs and merry steps in the center while still others stood on the fringes of the room, engaged in conversation and laughter. A small band was in the opposite corner, the fiddler standing on an old soapbox. His arm sawed away, the fingers dancing over the strings.

"Hello, friend. Welcome."

He turned to another man, who was walking by.

"Uh, thank you."

"You look lost."

"No, no," Jack answered. "I . . . uh, what's going on?"

"Village holds a dance, once a week, eh? Gives everyone a chance t' socialize, see one another. Hard week o' fishin' leaves a man lonely and a woman empty."

Jack nodded, watching the room. "Yes, it does."

"You from around these parts?"

Jack turned back to the man. "Excuse me?"

"You from 'round here?"

"Oh," he answered. "No, no I'm not. I'm from Norfolk. Virginia. In the States."

"Ah," came the jovial reply. "What brings ya t' PE Island?"

"I came to see my sister and her husband. They live on the mainland. I have to catch a boat back and the only one going back was leaving Prince Edward . . . oh, hello."

She crossed over to him, carrying a steaming mug. "Albert, you've been standing there talking to our guest and I'm sure you haven't made one offer of a cup of coffee at all."

Albert mumbled something, Jack was never sure what. From the moment she had walked up to him, he'd lost all thought of anyone else. She had long, flowing hair the color of summer wheat—the yellow tresses pulled away from her face, then spilling over one shoulder. Her eyes

were the color of emeralds in a clear pool of water. She had the sweetest smile on her lips. Looking down on her face was like glimpsing the sun in all its warmth and tenderness.

There was a tug on his trouser leg. Jack looked down into the face of a small boy, holding one hand up expectantly. "Excuse me?"

"Take your hat, sir? And your coat?"

Jack smiled. "Sure. Yes, please." He wriggled out of the coat, handing that to the boy and following it with his cap. The child smiled and ran off to the corner. He wasn't sure why it mattered but he ran his fingers through his tawny hair, smoothing it down. Maybe he'd look less like a country bumpkin now.

"Here," she said. "You look like you could use this, friend."

"Thank you," he answered with a chuckle. "I could. Dam . . . uh, *very* cold outside."

"It is that. But why don't you come in and be warm. Have some coffee. Got some food over there, too, if you're hungry. I'll get you a plate, if you like."

All of a sudden, he didn't want her to walk away. "No, please," he said, perhaps a little too vehemently.

Her eyes widened a bit, but she didn't move.

"Your name," he sputtered, suddenly feeling very stupid. "What is it?"

"Laura," she answered. "Laura Anne Davidson. Everyone calls me Laurie."

"Jack. Uh, well . . . John, really, but *everyone* calls me Jack."

"I like John, better. May I call you John?"

He nodded, smiling

"Drink your coffee before it gets cold."

He took drank deeply of the delicious brew, the warm spreading from his belly outwards.

"It's good."

"Thank you," she answered, giggling. "I made the coffee. You'd better like it."

"I do," he said, taking another gulp.

"Thank you. Well—"

"That song," he said. Anything that would keep her from walking away. It was the first thing he thought of. "That song is . . . it's . . ."

"You like it?"

"I feel like I know it. I" He let his voice trail off, listening to the fiddler.

"Yes?"

"I've heard it somewhere. I just . . . I don't remember where. Another town, another dance? My mother, maybe?" He shook his head, the memory just wasn't coming. "It's beautiful. I don't think I've heard anything as beautiful as this."

She laughed. "That's St. Anne's Reel. I used to love that one as a child. Still do."

He stopped talking, listening to it. Watching the couples whirling on the floor, his foot began to tap in the rhythm. St. Anne's Reel? The sweetness of the music filled him, it didn't matter where or when. There was only now. She stepped closer to him, listening with the same sweet smile on her face. After a moment, she looked up at him.

"Care to dance with me?"

"Uh . . . well . . . I really . . . uh . . ."

"John? Please?"

He gulped. "I can't."

"You can't?"

With a heavy sigh, he confessed to her. "I'm a sailor, miss. I'm a bull in a china shop on dry land. I can't dance."

Her giggle was soft and musical. "Nonsense. You just need the right partner."

Her deft fingers plucked the cup from his hand, setting it on a nearby table. Her hand crept into the crook of his arm and she led him out onto the dance floor. She turned to him and took both of his hands in hers. With a confident smile, she began to nudge him this way and that. She led him in the high spirited reel; before he knew it, his feet were moving along in the steps. In moments, he was laughing along with her, the clumsiness gone.

St. Anne's Reel led to another unnamed tune and he worked up the courage to touch her. With one slender hand in his, he put his hand to the small of her waist. They danced, kicking up their heels and whirling around the room. Not once did he tread on her tiny feet. Not once did he stumble or trip over his own. It was like he was at sea again.

Another tune and then another; they kept dancing. Several other young men came up but she would only nod at them and dance him off in another direction. Her smile, the sparkle of her green eyes were his alone. There was no need for words, only the movement of their bodies together in the dance.

They didn't stop until they were winded and sweating. This time, he took *her* arm, leading them back to the table where she'd set his mug. He pulled the chair out for her to sit in, then poured them both a mug of coffee. He placed one in front of her and then sat in the other chair.

She picked up a napkin, gently dabbing at her face. "Well, that was lovely," she breathed. "Thank you, John."

"No," he answered, "thank *you*. It's been a long time since I danced; and that was at my sister's wedding some ten years ago."

"Not your own," she asked coyly.

"No. I'm not married."

"Hmm," she mumbled into the cup, taking a sip. She swallowed, her cheeks rather pink. Without meeting his eyes, she said, "I should have thought a handsome man such as yourself would have the ladies falling all over you."

"Never had time for ladies," he answered.

"No? Why? If I'm not being too bold."

"Well," he started, suddenly more absorbed in his own mug. He was starting to feel the flush of his own cheeks; something he was quite sure *wasn't* due to the exertion. "My folks died when my sister and I were very young, you see. I'm older than she is. And, well . . . I was sixteen, she was only ten. So she went to live with my mom's family, *her* sister."

"Didn't you go?"

"Oh, no, I was too old. They couldn't care for both of us."

"What did you do?"

"Well, I joined up with the merchant marines, you see. I've been sailing all my life. Only come home to see my sister and then, I'm usually off again."

"Ah," she sighed. "A lady in every port then."

"Oh no," he hastened to correct her. "I don't . . . uh . . . I mean, I'm not . . . well, you'll laugh."

"No, I won't."

"I've . . . only been with one woman, and she . . . uh . . . well" Maybe it wasn't a good idea to tell the lady that the only time he'd ever lain with a woman was for his twenty-first

birthday. And that had been with a lady of the evening in Barbados, a birthday gift from his captain and crew. He felt the deep crimson stain of his cheeks and quickly gulped from the mug.

The only answer was the sound of the fiddle again. He put the mug down and blew out a breath before taking a guarded glance out of the corner of his eye. She was watching him, thoughtful and shy. He was scared of what she would say.

When she finally did speak, all she asked was, "You've never been with another woman?"

He shook his head. "Never thought it was proper. I'm a gentleman."

Her answer to that was a sweet smile.

"What about you?"

"Oh," she answered with a bashful exhale, "I'm widowed. My husband passed away a few years ago."

"I'm sorry," he said simply.

She waved it away. "He was doing what he loved the most, fishing in the open waters. It was just his time."

"Well, I'm still sorry." He wanted to reach across and take her hand but it just didn't seem proper at the moment.

"Thank you."

Conversation lapsed and they both held on to the mugs before them. It felt right, comfortable. She made no move to leave his company, still turning away potential dance partners. They simply sat, listening.

It was magic; that was the only word he could think of it all. The music seemed to hold him completely spellbound, watching the fiddler's arm sawing back and forth to the sweetness of the tunes he played. The dancers responded; clogging in the rhythm and laughing. The whirl of blue suits, brightly colored dresses resembling Easter gowns, filled the dance floor with a spectacle of color and light.

This town is magic, that's what it is. There's magic everywhere. It's here . . . because of her.

One song blended into another, the dancers never losing their steps and never leaving the floor completely. It was a moment before the gentle hand on his wrist brought him back around. He looked into her green eyes, seeing the mirth there.

"You were smiling."

"Was I?" Now he felt brave enough to cover her hand with his own. "Magic. That's what it is. And the company."

"Feel like another dance?"

This time he was leading *her* out. Her hand floated into his, the other perched on his shoulder. They danced for what seemed like forever. There was no talking, no need for words. He never felt more at home than he did right now.

"Sir . . . *sir!*"

They both froze in mid-whirl as the young boy ran up to him.

"Sir, it's the Mandy Lee. She's berthed, sir. You have to hurry; she'll be making for the trade in less than an hour. You have to go, sir."

He swallowed the curse in his throat. He turned back to the green eyes. "Damn, that's my ship."

She nodded. "You have to go."

"I don't want to; you know that, don't you?"

"I know."

She walked with him to the corner. He pulled his coat and cap from the pile and shoved them on with no ceremony. She reached up and straightened the knitted brim, settling it around his ears to keep them warm.

“Laurie?”

“Yes, John?”

“How do I find you again? How . . . how do I find you?”

She pulled a scrap of paper from her pocket. He produced a stub of a pencil from his own and handed it to her. She painstakingly wrote an address on it, then handed him the paper and the stub. He carefully folded it and placed it in the worn leather wallet.

“I’ll be back,” he said. “I swear it. I’ll come back. Two months and my contract is up. I’ll be free. I’ll be back.”

“I’ll be here,” she answered. “Waiting.”

It was the only time he’d ever done something untoward to a lady in his entire life; he reached for her hand. Softly kissing her lips, he held her close; memorizing the smell of her hair and the feel of her skin. When he released her, he drank in her face as well.

“Two months. I’ll be back in two months, I swear it. I was going to re-sign with the crew, but not anymore. Two months, I’ll be back.”

She smiled, the beginning of tears in her eyes and waved goodbye to him as he left.

Two months. I’ll be back, I swear it, Laurie. I’ll be back!

* * *

“You say you grew up around here?”

“Yes, I did.” Shannon walked into the dilapidated building behind the real estate agent. “I was just a kid when my folks moved back to the mainland, but I used to spend summers here, with my grandparents.

“Ah,” the woman answered. “I thought you knew your way around here real good.”

The room was in a terrible state of disrepair. The floor boards were full of dry rot and there was at least an inch of dust on everything. She noticed a hat rack in the corner, barely hanging by the single nail that was still there. A hat was still on it, waiting patiently.

“So, how do you know about this place?”

“My Grandparents said you all used to have a dance here every week. They used to come and dance, have coffee. Doesn’t look like there’s been one in a long while.”

“Oh no,” the woman answered. “Stopped those long about ’55, I think. Just no one interested much anymore in town dances.”

“My grandparents were.” Shannon stopped and turned back to the woman. “Whatever happened to the musicians?”

“Oh, well,” the woman answered, “let’s see. Most of ‘em got married and just drifted off, but I remember that the fiddle player, he went off t’ fight in the war, if memory serves. At least that’s what Maribel says.”

“Maribel?”

“His granddaughter, her papa is the mayor, ya see. It was *his* papa that was the fiddler. I know she still has the fiddle.”

“Does anyone still play it? My Grampa always said it was the sweetest music he’d ever heard.”

“Oh, I don’t ‘spect so. I think they lost the bow long time ago, and I believe she said strings all broke. Neck’s surely warped. No, I don’t ‘spect so.”

Shannon nodded. “That’s too bad. I would have liked to have listened. My grandparents said that’s how they met, dancing to that fiddle music.”

“Married a good long time then, eh?”

Shannon smiled. “They were married fifty years, until he died of a heart attack. She passed soon after. I think she just missed him.”

“Who were your grandparents, if you don’t mind m’ asking?”

“John and Laurie Abbott. They met right here, while he was still in the Merchant Marines. He got stranded here for a bit and found this place. Came in to get warm and wait for his ship. That’s how he met Gramma.”

“Oh? Sounds romantic.”

“It was. He came back two months later, just like he promised, and they were never separated again. Only death did that.”

The agent smiled. “And death brung ‘em back close again, eh?”

“It surely did.” Shannon wiped a single tear away. “Well, thank you, I’ve seen enough. I don’t think I want to buy this place. It needs too much work. But thanks anyway.”

“Well, I do have some other places, if you’re interested.”

Shannon followed the woman, getting to the doorway to the outside when something stopped her. She was never quite sure, but it felt like a gentle kiss across the back of her neck, where her Grampa always used to tickle her. She froze in her steps.

It came soft and gentle, flowing like a warm current on a winter’s day. A plaintive melody played in her ear, almost too quietly. She turned around, half expecting to see the dancers on the floor, whirling in gaily colored dresses and blue suits. Then, the tune picked up; she could really hear it now. It was a ghostly melody, one that she knew very well.

St. Anne’s Reel . . . that’s the song, St. Anne’s Reel . . .

“Eh?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You mumbled something.”

She turned her focus back to the room, but it was silent again.

“I said, you know, maybe I might take this place after all. I like a fixer upper just fine.”

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### ***A Kiss on the Hand***

*Inspired by, and dedicated to, the Lady Fylbrigge, who’s just as twisted and warped as I am!*

**Josh** took out the polishing cloth and went to it.

“Long day at work, Mom. Sometimes I really hate it, you know? I mean, hey . . . it pays the bills but I never really knew how big a pain in the ass people are until I took this job. I swear, they need to give people IQ tests before selling them computers.”

He stuck a corner of the cloth in the cream, then began working it around on the brass.

“I mean it, total idiots. I mean, I like Dave, okay? He’s a great boss. I can talk to him about things, you know? But when it comes to databases, totally lost. It’s not like it’s all that hard to maintain, but when you have half a dozen salesmen and one computer dummy boss dipping into the input . . . well, it just gets lost. I guess that’s why they hired me, huh?”

Josh sat down again on the gazebo bench.

“I wish you were here, Mom. The garden is gonna be really pretty this year. I’m taking real good care of it. I put in a rose garden, like you always wanted. I don’t think I’m doing something right though. The guy at the garden center says it takes a little time, but something inside me—”

“What are you doing?”

His head jerked up at the sound of the voice, his hand pausing in the act. “Huh?”

Myra stood at the base of the steps, the long suffering expression on her face. “Joshua, wha—!” She shook her head and came up to sit beside him.

“Honey, don’t start—”

“Start?” With a glance, she surveyed the gazebo. “You gotta know this is really sick.”

“No, it’s not,” he retorted, standing to replace the urn on the top shelf.

“Oh, right. Everyone in the world stores crematory urns of dead relatives in the gazebos in the back yards of the houses that their mothers used to own. *And* comes out to polish said urns every night while carrying on discussions with said dead relatives.” She rolled her eyes. “Josh, honey, it’s not exactly what I would call sane.”

He took a deep breath, trying to maintain his cool when what he really wanted to do was rip into her with a vengeance.

“Myra, I can’t just turn off my feelings, okay? This was . . . I mean . . . Mom kept the memories of the family alive.” He turned back to face her. “Look, I know you think this is cracked, but Mom always kept this going. It was our history, our memorial. She didn’t have to go to some stuffy mausoleum. They were out here in the garden. What better place than a garden to come and remember?”

“Uh, honey, they make *memorial gardens* for that.”

“It’s not the same, Myra.”

“Excuse me?” She was about to adopt that sarcastic tone, he could hear it coming. “Not the same? Hmm . . . it’s a garden and they put the urns in there and you walk in with flowers and sit by the urns and . . . what am I missing here?”

“Myra . . . .”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. Your dead mother didn’t live in *that* garden. Gotcha! It only counts if you can screw your wife in the same bed that *you* were conceived in.”

“Bitch!”

It got deadly quiet behind him. He couldn’t face her right now. He’d called her that name, something he swore he’d never do. But she’d crossed the line too. He just kept staring through the urns to the roses and the wisteria beyond them.

He heard the weariness in her voice. “Yeah. Well. I deserved that. I have to give you that one. But you know I’m right on this.”

Josh shook his head. “You just don’t understand. I can’t . . . I mean . . . I just can’t, okay? I just can’t.”

He heard her soft sigh as she came up behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist. “Sweetie, I know it’s hard for you to let go. I *know* it is.”

“Myra—”

“But, Josh, *you’re* still alive. You still have your life ahead of you, of us.” She gently turned him around. “I’m here, Josh. *I’m* still here. *I* need you. *I* love you. Be with *me*.”

Josh took her hand and kissed the palm. It was a move that never failed to melt her like an ice cube. It had the desired effect now, but she was not going to be turned away.

“Look, honey, I didn’t argue when you wanted to move in here,” she went on. “It’s no secret that your mom and I never got along, but I didn’t argue. I knew this was your home. And I’d have less respect for you if you didn’t love and honor her.”

He began to kiss her fingers. “I know this was hard—”

“No, you don’t,” she answered, pulling her fingers away, which got his complete attention. “You don’t *know* how hard.”

He knew she had a point. “Alright.”

“Look, I’ll stay here. My place is with you and where *you* go, I go. But, damn it; there’s gotta be some concession on your part. Josh, you gotta meet me halfway here.”

He had a sudden sinking feeling that he knew where this was going. “How?”

“The family archives have gotta go!”

“But—”

“No, I mean it,” she said, an emphatic tilt of her chin. “The urns and ashes have to go. Sweetie, there are all kinds of really great places to have them interred. You can go every weekend. Hell, I’ll go with you.”

She began to pace the gazebo floor. “I’ll live with a lot, honey. I’ll sleep in that bed. Live in this house. I’ll even put up with the pictures of every mother, father, grandparent, aunt, and uncle you have, all over the bloody living room.” She stopped and faced him, her hands on her hips. “But I can’t live with the mausoleum in my back yard. Josh, they gotta go.”

“Myra—”

“Josh,” she started, then quickly stopped.

Her lower lip was beginning to quiver, her breath came in hitches. She was about to say something and he knew that he wasn’t going to like this any better than the other.

“They go . . . or I do.”

“NO.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t mean that.” A grip closed over his heart. “You don’t. I know you don’t.”

“I mean it,” she answered. “If I never mean anything else, I mean this.”

“Myra . . . .”

“I love you with all my being. But I have to know you love me, too. And I have to be first, Josh. Me. And I can’t live like this anymore.”

He nodded, blindly staring down at the wooden floor. “Okay. Okay.”

The voice brightened. “You mean it? Really?”

He nodded again.

“Oh, honey!”

Her hands came to his cheeks as her lips pressed against his. The tight grip on his chest began to ease up. It was fine between them again; she wasn’t going to leave him. He took both of her hands in his, resuming the earlier activity. She was much more responsive now.

“You know,” she cooed. “You still owe me something.”



“Hmm?”

She gave a throaty giggle. “That ring finger you’re kissing. You’ll notice something lacking?”

“Mmhmm,” he agreed, and quickly forgot about it.

“Honey?”

“Hmm?”

“Can we . . . uh . . . do this *inside*, please?”

He smiled into her blue eyes. “You won’t leave me, right?”

“I’ll stay if they go.”

At that moment, he would have agreed to anything she asked. But in the light of day, sitting in his office and having coffee with Dave, it was a different story.

He spilled the whole thing out, every bit of it while watching Dave’s expression. He half expected the other man to call Josh sick, too. But his boss didn’t do that. Dave just listened, nodding in the right places and asking the right questions to prod the rest out of him. When Josh was finished, he sat and waited.

He didn’t wait long.

Dave’s sigh was deep and heartfelt. “What is it about chicks, man? Always got a problem with your mom, like . . . well, I don’t know. What is it, jealousy? Scared about that pot roast recipe not measuring up? What?”

Josh wanted to hug the man, but swallowed that fast. He simply shrugged and sipped his coffee.

Dave nodded. “Well, it *is* kinda . . . I mean I can kinda see what she means.”

“You think it’s sick too?”

“Oh hell no,” Dave assured. “But she’s right, man. You’re still living, dig?”

“I guess,” Josh begrudgingly agreed.

“So, what are you gonna do?”

Josh shrugged. “Find some nice mausoleum that’s gonna take about twenty urns and hope I have the money to put them in the same freaking section.”

Dave put his hands through a mass of dark brown curls, linking the fingers together behind his head. He leaned the chair back until it was standing on two legs, then propped one booted foot on the edge of Josh’s desk.

“Well, you could, I guess. But, you know, there’s other options out there, my man.”

Josh raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Oh yeah, a lot of ‘em.”

“Such as?”

“See, there’s this company in California, see.” Dave got a smile on his face, the brown eyes sparkling. “They take the ashes and make stuff out of ‘em.”

Josh was horrified. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah. Like, they mix the ashes with concrete and make these sorta fake coral reefs. Then, they take the things out to the middle of the ocean and put it with the other reefs and it’s supposed to, you know, build up the natural structure until the coral can make new and give the fishes a place to live. It’s all real environmental, dig?”

Josh moved beyond horrified. “You . . . you’re joking, right? Please tell me you’re joking.”

“Oh hell no, man.”

“Oh my God.” Josh bolted out of his chair and began to pace. “No . . . no!”

“What?”

“Dave . . . that’s . . . no.”

“Oh come on, man,” Dave cajoled. “We spend too much of our earth dumping carcasses in the ground. All that embalming and shit? We spend more money to preserve a corpse than feed the living. I mean, think about it.”

Dave started clicking off the options on his fingers. “First, they drain the blood, then pump the corpse with chemicals and shit. Then, the body gets dumped in a box made of pressure treated wood and paint, *padded* to boot. That gets dropped into a concrete lined hole in the ground, with another slab dropped on the top—so the wood won’t rot from the water in the ground, okay?”

Dave clucked his tongue, shaking the mass of curls. “Now, with the natural order of things, you tell me *that* ain’t sick. Come on, ain’t no one in that shell anymore. Why do you wanna keep it preserved like a freaking pickle? Huh?”

Josh stared at his boss. “And she said *I* was nuts.”

“Man, all I’m saying is, that’s a lot o’ money to keep a hunk o’ decaying meat and bones safe from the way things are supposed to be. It ain’t natural. And I don’t think any God in any pantheon, Judeo-Christian or Pagan, meant it to be that way.” Dave leaned forward, a finger pointing at Josh. “If God meant for our bodies to remain on permanent loan to some karmic museum, we’d have been born with formaldehyde instead of blood, okay?”

“Okay,” Josh agreed. “There’s a twisted logic in that. I still say . . . uh, okay, so?”

“Soooo,” Dave continued, “your family’s been going about it the right way, man. Cremation *is* the best way. I mean, we can’t have dead bodies just laying around stinking up the place either. That ain’t an answer. This ain’t the middle ages.”

“Uh huh.”

“But shit, man, some marble chest o’ drawers ain’t it either. And neither is the Inna-gadda-da-vida you got going on in the back yard.”

“And you think turning my family into a giant coral reef is?”

“Sure, man. Come on, think about it. They can’t be fish food, but they can provide housing.” Dave’s smile was a satisfied one. “That’s kinda cosmic, you dig? I like that. Urban development for fishes! That’s really cool.”

“That’s nuts.”

“Come on!”

“No, David, that’s seriously screwed up.” Josh sat back down and drained the coffee cup.

“Yeah, but you’re thinking about it,” Dave answered, chuckling.

“Yes, I am,” Josh said. “I think that makes *me* screwed up too.”

“No, you ain’t screwed up,” Dave consoled. “You’re just stuck between Scylla and Charybdis, man.”

“Huh?”

Dave chuckled. “The rock and the hard place, man. Lose your old lady or lose your roots. That’s a toughie.”

“Yeah,” Josh agreed with a sigh.

“Well, I got your rescue right here, man,” Dave said. He jumped up and crossed to his desk. “I got this in the junk mail about a week ago; almost toshed this in the garbage. But something said, no, man, hang on to this. So I did.”

He fished something out of his desk and brought it back, handing it to Josh. “Here, man. This’ll fix everything.”

“What is . . . oh my God.”

“That, my friend, is a catalogue of all the stuff you can do with cremation ashes,” Dave bragged. “It’s really cool. See? You can do those reefs and other things.”

Josh felt his eyes almost burst from his head. “It’s . . . it’s . . . *a bird bath!*”

“Yeah, wicked shit, ain’t it?”

“A *bird bath?*”

“Think about it,” Dave said. “A nice place for the little birdies to come and revel in the sun.” He sat down again in the chair, picked up his cup and winked at Josh. “And, it keeps the family in the back yard, man.”

“But I . . .” Josh snapped his mouth shut, his teeth coming together in a loud click.

“See? You get to keep the family ashes in the garden—keep the memorial—and your old lady don’t know shit.”

It was like the light suddenly dawned on the marble head.

“Hey,” Josh breathed. “Yeah . . . *yeah!* I mean, Myra can’t get pissed at garden gnomes and statues, right?”

But she *could* get pissed at the price. Four urns and a couple grand later, he was setting up the new bird bath in the back yard and she was staring at the bill.

“Joshua Jacob Winslow! You spent eighteen hundred bucks? *For a bird bath?*”

Josh laid the level on the pedestal and tried not to let her see his eyes. “Yeah, yeah . . . I know . . . but, it’s . . . well, it’s special.”

“But, Josh . . .”

“But it’s got a fountain in it, honey,” he answered, still shoring up the base. “You wait, you’ll love it.”

He heard her snort and could just imagine the shake of her blonde head, followed by her eyes rolling heavenward. “Fine . . . but a lobster? You get a bird bath with a lobster fountain?”

He didn’t say it, but he thought it. *Hey, Uncle Will always called himself the Lobster King. Now he really can be.*

What he actually said was, “Trust me, honey, you’ll love it.”

“Trust me,” she retorted. “The two deadliest words in the English language.”

“Myra, come on,” he answered in a pained voice. It was only then that he risked the look in her eyes.

She really wasn’t amused. “Uh huh.” But she had to get one last dig in before turning to go back into the house.

“You can spend eighteen hundred bucks on a pissing lobster bird bath, but you can’t get me a diamond ring.”

The slamming door was the only answer between them.

“Okay, so I can’t get any more statues,” he told Dave the following Monday. “She went through the roof on that. And I can’t really afford it either.”

“Hmm,” the boss answered. “I’ll put you in for a raise. In the meantime . . .”

They pulled the catalogue out again.

“Hey, man,” Dave answered, pointing to a page near the back. “Check this out. And you can do this yourself, dig?”

“You’re joking, right?”

“No, bro--and if you’ll pardon the pun--I’m dead serious on this. It’s cheap and you can do it.”

“But . . . but . . .”

“Here, says how, see?”

“But,” Josh sputtered.

“But what?”

“I can’t do that! I can’t walk on my relatives. That’s freakin’ creepy.”

“No, it ain’t,” Dave said. “Come on, man. You’re making the mortar for the bricks. Think about it. It’s poetic, that’s what it is. The glue that holds the family together is love, right?”

Josh sighed.

But the next weekend, he was in the back yard filling a wheelbarrow with bags of cement, sand, and stones. And when he was sure that Myra wasn’t watching out the window, mixing several urns of ashes in, as well. Josh added the water, stirring with the trowel until it was the right consistency . . . he hoped.

But when it came time to do the deed, he froze. He had the stones laid out in a natural pattern for a walkway and a small enclosure around the bird bath. All he had to do was start laying the mortar . . . all he had to do . . . was just drop it down.

“I can’t,” he sighed. “I can’t do this.”

“Do what?”

He jerked around with a start. “MYRA . . . uh, I . . . uh . . . what are you doing sneaking up on me like that?”

She giggled, getting down on her knees beside him. But then, the look on his face must have told her he wasn’t joking.

“Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry,” she quickly apologized. She set a pitcher and two glasses down on the grass and put her arms around his neck. “Oh, honey! Josh, I’m so sorry. I honestly didn’t mean to scare you.”

He forced himself to breathe more slowly, nodding to her.

“I just saw you out here in the garden. You’ve been out here all morning, working so hard on this pathway. Oh, sweetie.” She kissed his lips. “I just wanted to surprise you with some lemonade. Please don’t be mad at me. Please?”

Josh looked her with a wary eye. “You . . . saw me? You were . . . watching me?”

“Well, not watching. I did go out shopping for a while.” She winked at him with a lascivious grin. “If you talk nice to me, I have a little number to model for you later.”

“You . . . uh . . . .”

“I just got back. And I saw you out here, sweating under this hot sun. I figured you haven’t been back inside since you started.” She poured the lemonade into the glass of ice and handed it to him. “Here, now. I made it just like you love it; mixed a little lime juice in it, too.”

Josh really was thirsty, so he raised the glass to his lips . . . *and saw the urn laying on the other side of the walk*. His eyes darted to Myra, who was pouring a glass of lemonade. How the hell was he gonna hide that now? If she saw that; if she even suspected—she’d definitely have him locked up. Or worse, declare him totally and completely mentally deranged. Why, she’d leave him . . . in a heart beat. What to do, what to do.

“This is going to be beautiful, honey.”

“Huh?”

“This walkway, it’s gonna be so beautiful. I can’t wait to see it. And that little retaining wall around your birdbath.”

“Uh . . . uh . . . yeah, uh huh.”

“You know,” she said, surveying the area. “We could make that a raised planting bed. Put your bird bath in the center. Plant some nice flowers around it. That would be lovely. Don’t you think so?”

“Uh . . . I mean . . . yeah, sure. Yeah, baby, yeah, That would be . . . I like it.” *Shit, now I have to do this.*

“Okay, so it’s a lobster,” she went on. “It could still be rather nice. And maybe some of those lights; you know?”

“Uh . . . uh huh.”

“You okay, honey?”

“You know, I’m thinking it’s time for a nap,” he blurted out, getting to his feet. “I’m kinda tired.” He took her elbow and helped her up. “And I wanna see you model that new outfit. Come on.”

It wasn’t much but it was all he needed to divert her attention away from the area. He managed to kick out with his left foot, knocking the urn back into the stand of day lilies at the base of the gazebo.

“Josh, don’t be silly.”

“Huh?”

“Sweetie, you’ve already mixed the mortar. It’ll dry out. We need to do this now or you’ve wasted your money on the whole thing.”

“That’s okay,” he said, his words jumbling out as fast as he could say them, “I think I changed my mind anyway. I don’t like it. Come on, let’s . . . I’ll dig it back up later.”

“Josh.” She kissed his lips; he could taste the sugar on them, the citrus on her tongue. “It’s a great idea and you are not going to dig this up. I love the idea. Besides, I want to help.”

“You . . . what?”

She gave him one of her sweetest smiles. “You always say I never help in the garden and I really want to do this. With those urns gone, it’s not so creepy out here anymore.” One arm crept around his waist. “Besides, if you can make a concession, so can I. And my concession is coming out here and learning to love this garden with you. And helping. Okay? Please? Let me help?”

*What was it he said about Scylla and Charybdis?*

It only took them three hours to lay the mortar and build the small retaining wall. She was right about one thing; when it was done, it was spectacularly beautiful. All he had to do was fill in the place with the dirt and they could plant all kinds of—

“Josh? Honey?”

When he turned back to her, he felt his heart drop into his shoes. She was standing with the urn that he’d kicked away.

“Josh, wasn’t this your grandfather’s urn?”

He felt the blood drain out of his face, his eyes fixed on that piece of molded, beaten brass. *Oh God . . . oh help.* He nodded limply, unable to say anything.

“Oh my God, you didn’t.”

His eyes flew open wide. “Uh . . . uh . . . it was Dave’s idea! I mean . . . uh . . . .”

“Joshua Winslow, that is the sweetest thing. You put his ashes on the roses, didn’t you?”

“Huh?”

“I remember you told me once, your Grampa Winslow had the most beautiful rose garden. You tossed his ashes on the roses, didn’t you?”

What else could he do? He nodded emphatically.

“And your Gramma Winslow?”

Another vehement nod.

“And your uncles and aunts?”

“Uh . . . well . . . uh . . . the wisteria and the . . . uh . . . fruit trees out front.”

“That is so sweet.”

“Uh,” he sputtered, then struggled to pull himself together. *Come on, man, she doesn't suspect the truth. Come on!* “You, uh, you're not . . . grossed out?”

She looked around the back yard. “Well, to tell you the truth, it is a *little* creepy. But if you think about it, not really. I mean, it's not like you built the walkway or bird bath out of them. *That* would be seriously freaky. That's kinda sick, to be honest.”

He quickly grabbed a glass and poured more lemonade, his hand shaking badly. He gulped it down, as fast as he could, trying to get control again.

“But it's a nice tribute, honey. I guess . . . well, all I'm saying is, it's natural,” He felt her cheek against his back, one hand stroking his arm. “At least it's not looking at those urns, and it's giving something back to the earth. I think they'd like that. I think I would like it too.”

Josh let go of a huge sigh of relief. She didn't know the truth and he wasn't going to tell her. And it was all done. He was finished and he'd kept his promise.

“Honey?”

“Yeah?”

“What about your Mom's urn?”

He had no immediate answer for that. But he did agree to get the urn out of the house; after all he had promised that *all* of them would go. So, Josh took it to work with him on Monday.

“Man, you know that can't stay here. Right?”

“Come on, Dave,” he pleaded. “What am I gonna do? Okay? I swore to Myra that I'd get it out of there. But . . . man, I can't just throw out my Mom.”

Dave shrugged. “Yeah, I can dig that. I mean, it *was* your Mom.” He gave an apologetic look to Josh. “But you can't keep a cremation urn here, man. I mean, we got potential customers coming in here. Talk about seriously creeping out the clientele. Not cool, man.”

Josh was irritated when he asked, “Okay, Einstein, then you tell *me*. What do I do? Huh? What do I do?”

Dave didn't take offense. He just pulled out the catalogue again. With a smile, he asked, “Did you take a serious look at page thirty two?”

“Huh?”

Dave chuckled. “I thought not.” He flipped the magazine open to the correct page, turned the book around, and flopped it down in front of Josh. He stabbed at the page. “There, man. There.”

Josh read it, looking up only once at his boss. When he'd finished reading the blurb, he sat back. Dave was still smiling.

“They're right here in the state, man. Hell, I'll even help out a little. You got your raise, by the way. I got the max for ya, an extra five grand a year.”

“What?”

Dave shrugged. “Hey, the way I figure it, you've saved us three times that amount on a monthly basis.” He pointed back to the magazine. “So, you got the cash. You can do it.”

Josh smiled. What the hell, this was an easy one. It *would* kill two birds with one stone. And there was a small irony in it.

*Create a lasting monument to those you love. We can take the ashes and turn them into a precious gem. Your choice of setting, in 14 or 24 carat gold, sterling silver, or rich platinum. For a reasonable price, you can have a remembrance that will never fade . . .*

\* \* \*

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today, in the sight of God and these witnesses, to celebrate the renewal of the vows of this couple, Joshua and Myra Winslow . . . .”

Myra and Dave were right. He had to let go, move on with his life. He was still living; he needed to rejuvenate himself and rejoin the human race. True to her word, Myra had made a big deal of helping him with the flowers and the gardens. She had taken over the area around the bird bath, making it a real show place. It gave them something to do together, something to enjoy. As the flowers blossomed, so did their relationship. And, he knew the family would understand; they were part of this idyllic place now and in ways that they would approve of.

Yes, it was time to be alive, to look to the future. And what better way to do that, than to renew his vows with the lady he chose to spend the rest of his days with—right in this garden. So, he invited the remaining members of his family and hers to the back yard. He asked Dave to be his best man. Myra asked her sister to be her matron of honor. The minister joined them and they stood in the gazebo with the hanging pots of flowering geraniums. The guests stood among the roses and lilacs, smiling and happy. No one suspected a thing.

And this time, he slipped the diamond on her finger as he promised to love, honor, and cherish her. She was smiling through her tears, promising to do the same to him. The minister proclaimed them man and wife, that he should now kiss his bride.

As she threw her arms around his neck, the sparkly flashing on her finger, she whispered in his ear. “Oh, Josh, it’s so beautiful. Thank you, thank you.”

“You like it, my lady?”

“I *love* it!” She giggled, adding, “They truly *are* a girl’s best friend, you know.”

*And mine, honey*, he thought to himself. *And mine!*

~~~~~

An American Prayer

For John and George

Yes, Melanie?”

“This isn’t Melanie.”

“Who are you, mister? And how did you get this number?”

“Just wanted to tell you that the Middle East has exploded.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, and the polar ice caps have melted. You should be feeling the rise of water any minute now.”

“Who is this?”

“Also, the ozone is gone. Kiss the air good bye.”

“All right, whoever you are, this isn’t funny! I don’t know what game you *think*—”

“It’s no game.”

“Who the hell is this?”
“That would be wrong, son. Wrong direction.”
“Huh?”
“You said hell. Wrong direction.”
“But . . . bu—. Who is this really?”
“It’s God.”
“God?”
“Big G, the Almighty, the Seer of men’s souls. Just wanted to tell you that I give it up. You win.”
“Scooter? Is that you? This isn’t funny.”
“It’s not Scooter. It’s God.”
“God? Scooter, I mean it. This ain’t funny.”
“It’s not Scooter.”
“Dick? Is this one of your crazy voices? Dick, come on now, a joke’s a joke.”
“Not Dick, not Scooter, not even Colin. It’s God.”
“Right. Sure.”
“Look, I’m not joking. The day of judgment has come. Armageddon, Babylon fading . . . no more feast of friends. This is the end, beautiful friend. Goodbye, so long.”
“Mister, you don’t know who you’re messing with here.”
“Don’t believe me? Look outside your window.”
“*Holy Mother of . . . uh . . .*”
“God? That would be Mary. Good one. But she won’t answer about now. Those little children in Guadeloupe are keeping her busy.”
“That’s . . . that’s”
“Lightning, yes.”
“But . . . but”
“You wanted a little flashier? I can make it loud.”
“N-n-n-n—”
“You’ve messed with my planet. You think it was easy making that? You think it was easy with the fishes and the giraffes and the birds?”
“You . . . you”
“Created the earth in six days. Tell you the truth, it only took the one, but I decided to give it a little test drive for the other five. I thought I made it perfectly--until you came along.”
“Oh my God.”
“Well, sorry, but not just yours. All my children, Muslims included. I don’t suppose you thought about that first, did you?”
“But . . . I . . . they struck us first.”
“Always with the ‘he hit me first’ or ‘she started it.’ No one is ever making with the other cheek. Well, it’s too late now.”
“What do you mean?”
“That with the radiation and the fossil fuels and the not caring about the animals or the air or the water, you’re dying. That with the bombing and the shooting, I’m getting too many children up here. Babies. Babies don’t need to be in war. Babies need to be playing with their toys.”
“I need to sit down.”
“You need to make with the praying. Truth is, you’ve not much time. Seems that one of these little places thought Israel put you up to it. There’s about three nuclear warheads heading

your way about now. And the word is ‘new-CLEE-er,’ not ‘new-CUE-lar.’ The least you can do is pronounce it correctly.”

“I . . . I”

“You know, I thought with the hurricanes, you’d get the hint. Ah well, wasn’t for lack of trying on my part.”

“Wait . . . *wait!*”

“Yes?”

“Is there no hope? I . . . I can fix it. I can . . . I can”

“You can what, sonny?”

“I . . . I can work on cleaning up the air. I can make the environment my priority.”

“And?”

“Uh . . . clean the water, follow the Kyoto pact. Put more money in the hydrogen fuel cells. How would that be?”

“Hmm. Well. I don’t know.”

“No . . . wait! I can . . . I can . . . I can make changes to the policies. No drilling in ANWR. We’ll stop shipping our domestic oil and start using it more—”

“Son, you’re going backwards.”

“NO WAIT! We’ll . . . we’ll start using less fossil fuel and more . . . uh . . . *solar!* And I’ll give tax breaks for recycling. And, shucks, why . . . those auto companies are already making hybrids. Why, I’ll just give more tax breaks for buying and using hybrid cars. That’s worth something, ain’t it?”

“Junior, if that’s the best you got—”

“*Please!* I’ll lead all the nations in re-signing the Kyoto pact.”

“That’ll upset your little oil company buddies.”

“They’ll get over it. Besides, we’ll use the petroleum to make plastics, we need those.

And . . . uh . . . other uses besides burning.”

“It’s a start.”

“And I’ll fund better forestry research and ban clear cutting.”

“Hmm . . . you’re making a good effort—”

“And no more war. I’ll spearhead a peace movement. I’ll put the money in peace initiatives and pull the troops out as fast as I can.”

“Go on.”

“Work *for* the Iraqi, not . . . uh . . . we’ll be there for *them*, not the other way around.”

“And the babies?”

“Better health care. We’ll stop paying farmers *not* to grow and we can use that food to feed children all over the world. And others in need.”

“I don’t know, sonny. Your heart just isn’t in it.”

“I’m serious. You don’t believe me?”

“Not really.”

“Look . . . look, God. See? I’m dialing the outside line. I’ll do this. Watch me.”

“Making with the phone calls? And how do I know that you won’t go back on your word if everything is fine again. And by the way, you’ve got ten minutes. left. That air raid siren is going off.”

“I can do this. Watch me. Just hold the bombs and the water and let me have a chance. Please, just hold it all back until I can prove myself.”

“All right, junior. Show me what you got.”

* * *

“There, phone calls made, everything’s in motion. See? Everything’s started.”

“Took too much time, four hours. I can only hold things off so long, you know. They’re still hovering over the capital, the bombs. Nasty things, bombs. Too much hurt. Too loud.”

“I’m sincere. God, you can see in my heart, see that I’m sincere.”

“Well . . . I’m not sure if I’m willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. Ice melting, waters rising. No time to build an ark. You do know how to swim, don’t you?”

“The treaties are back on. You heard me give the orders. I’ll have the bills on my desk in the morning. I’ll sign them. I’ll meet with every head of state. I’ll apologize for all of it. I’ll make it right with all of them.”

“You promise?”

“I swear on my heart, God. I won’t fail. I’ll . . . please, stop the bombs. Stop it all. You’re God, you can do that.”

“And if I do, you won’t go back on your word?”

“No, I will not! I’ll follow through on everything.”

“Because I’ll know if you don’t. I won’t be able to stop it again.”

“God, please. Stop it all. Please! Don’t let the bombs land. Please. Don’t let my people drown. Please, don’t kill the innocents.”

“You’ve done that already.”

“I’ll make it up to them somehow.”

“Not that easy, you know.”

“I’ll find a way. I’ll find it. I know I can. I can turn it around, God. I can.”

“Weeeeeell”

“Please.”

“Since you asked so nicely.”

“Thank you, God. Thank you. I’ll keep my promise. I won’t fail you again.”

“See that you don’t. Oh. And sonny boy?”

“Yes, God?”

“April Fool!”

. . . *click* . . .

~ ~ ~ ~

Karmic Justice

“But I don’t understand, Mother. How did it happen?”

The woman turned to the questioner. “I don’t know, Miriam. Omnipotence is not one of my virtues.”

Miriam blushed. “Mother, what do we do now?”

“Have we set the arrivals apart?”

“Yes, Mother,” answered another voice. She, too, joined the circle. “Angela and I have removed them to a small room. They are asleep for now.”

“Asleep, Gwendolyn?”

“Yes, Mother,” she answered. “Until you choose to wake them.”

The one called Mother nodded her approval. “It is well, daughter.”

Miriam spoke again, through a growing murmur of questions. “Mother?”

Mother raised her hand to silence them all. “My daughters, the one who perpetrated this deed is cloaked. I confess, I am at a loss as to what to do.”

A dark haired woman walked forward, moving to stand by Mother’s side. “This will cause issue, Mother. Confuse everything and prevent us from resolving this.”

“Do you know what to do, daughter?”

The dark haired woman nodded. “I do, Mother. In life, there are ways—*non-magical* ways—to determine these things. We must touch nothing, move nothing. We must have a . . . what one would call a *professional* to attend to this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” she spoke, faltering a bit. “Mother, we must have one of *them* come. One of *them* will be able to see through the magical haze.”

Miriam spoke again. “But, Aiobh, we cannot. No breather has ever come to this plane; you *know* this. It would . . . it would be . . . it would cause much chaos.”

Aiobh nodded again. “I understand, my sister. But the need is far greater than hiding behind the Veil.”

Mother called for silence again. “Aiobh, do you know of someone? Someone who will practice discretion, can be trusted with the knowledge of who and where we are?”

“Yes, Mother,” she answered. “I know of one who would benefit from answers that only we can give him. One who can resolve this issue for us.”

“Very well,” Mother replied. “Give me his aura and I will bring him here.”

Aiobh closed her eyes, passing the globe of light to Mother.

“Thank you, my daughter.”

“Mother,” Aiobh quickly uttered.

“Yes?”

“I was thinking . . . perhaps it is wise that this breather not see our faces, see who we are.” Aiobh paused, waiting for the whispers to quiet again. “For his own good, remove temptation.”

“Temptation, my child?”

Aiobh nodded.

Mother smiled. “Ah, yes,” she answered. “I understand. Well, to keep your sisters from worrying, I see no reason why you should not be masked.”

There were murmurs of gratitude around the room. No one heard Mother as she leaned close to Aiobh and whispered in her ear, “Fear not, my daughter. This is a place of safety, despite this recent event. And it is a place of peace. All who come will find it.”

To the rest of the group, she said, “We must do *something*, my daughters. Or the gateway will close forever and their kind is doomed.”

* * *

“Twenty-third precinct, Detective Cullen speaking.”

He turned a jaded eye to the press of humanity in the room, only half listening to the sad tale of woe on the other end of the phone. He really didn't need to hear any of it. It was the same old same old; someone had threatened the old broad with a knife, stole her purse and she wanted to file a report. It was the same crap, common as the grass outside.

"Yeah, yeah, lady, but did you get a good look at the guy?"

Of course, she hadn't. He tried to swallow the sigh, managing to make his voice sound halfway convincing as *concerned*.

"Yes, ma'am. I understand. Seems to be going around. Okay, I'll send a uniform out to you. Where do you live?"

He quickly jotted down the caller's address, assured the woman that he'd get right on it as soon as the uniform returned with the information. It was definitely an exercise in futility, but what the hell. Calling in a favor, he asked a rookie just going out the door to check it out. The kid said sure, then left to take care of it.

Charlie sat down with a groan. His back was threatening to give out again. It was always something, he thought. He gave the band around his ring finger another twist. Yeah, always something. On old bat calls about a purse snatching that will never get solved. Some punk gets high, sniffing the glue or smoking the ecstasy, and runs a car into a nice young family man. A wife gets tired of being married to a cop and takes off while said cop is on duty. The same old, same old.

Of course, the beautiful brunette that walked into the squad room was very *out* of the ordinary. No, strike that, he thought. She didn't just walk, she *sauntered*. She had a swing that she could put on his back porch at any time she liked. When she stepped up to his desk, Charlie was thanking every lucky star in the sky.

Being the gentleman he was, he stood up again.

"Hello . . . uh . . . miss . . ."

"Detective . . ." She looked down at the nameplate on his desk. "Detective Charles Cullen?" She turned liquid chocolate eyes back up to him. "Is that you?"

"Uh . . . yes," he stammered. "Yes, I'm Detective Cullen."

She nodded again. "I've come to ask for your help, Detective. I'm afraid that our situation is a bit odd, but . . . well, I've been assured that you are the man for the job."

"Oh? And what can I *possibly* help you with, uh . . . Miss . . ."

She seated herself in the chair on the opposite side of the desk. "Murder, unfortunately."

He reseated himself, the chair groaning as he did. "I see. And who's the victim?"

"Her name was Claire."

"Where's the body now?"

She smiled, a secret in her eyes. "Well, it's where she fell, you see. We were told to move and touch nothing, so that you could come in and find our murderer."

He sat upright, reaching for the phone with one hand and a pen with the other. "You mean, this just happened? Why didn't you call 911?"

"Hmmm," she hummed. "That would have been a bit difficult, you see."

Charlie paused in the middle of dialing. "Why would that be difficult?"

"Well . . . you see . . . it's *where* we are. I'm afraid your policemen won't be able to assist you with this. I can only take one of you with me, and you are the one that came recommended."

There was a gruff "Hello?" on the other end. Charlie was equally gruff.

"Hang on, Sarge." He looked across the desk at the still smiling woman. If she hadn't been drop dead gorgeous . . . if she hadn't looked like . . .

She raised her eyebrows, looking at him with an expression of waiting.

“Uh, Sarge. I got a potential homicide on my hands. I need you to dispatch a couple of squad cars to” He mimicked her expression, hopeful that she’d understand the gesture.

She didn’t get it.

“Missuh . . . what’s your address?”

When she laughed, it was like music playing in his head—a sweet sound of a long forgotten tune from his childhood. When she stood up, then walked around the desk, it was like watching the gracefulness in a candle’s flame.

“I’m afraid, I can’t tell you, Detective,” she said in her lyrical voice. “I can only show you.

She took his hand and the heat radiated from her skin hot enough to make the world around him melt and his body to drop to the ground. After that, it was simply flying so fast that even thinking was too slow—through the tunnel, find the white light, fly toward it.

* * *

The vertigo was a killer. But what really tweaked his muffins was the fact that he had no substance. When he finally gathered his wits about him, Charlie reached out to help himself to a glass of water *and his hand passed through the glass*. That was enough to really put him over the edge. But the woman was still with him. And there were other women. A whole *lot* of them; all of them wearing full masks that covered their faces. The shapeless robes they wore didn’t disguise the presence of breasts and shapely hips. That much settled his nerves again.

“Detective.”

She caught his gaze again, smiling as she did.

“Where am I?”

“You are here in . . . well, I suppose you would call this Akasha. It really has no name. It’s simply where we exist.”

Charlie looked around again, taking in everything. He had a very loose grasp of certain things, but if his memory of that Hercules TV show was right, those were Greek columns. And, he was pretty sure that was gold and silver inlaid on the chairs. The floor seemed to be made of blue and golden stones. The blue would be sapphire, but that yellow. He pulled a memory from a long ago gift he had given her. Yeah, that would be topaz. The floor was nothing but sapphire and topaz tiles.

“It’s beautiful,” he whispered, awed as he was.

The woman seemed to be pleased. “Thank you. We had no hand in creating it, but thank you.”

That snapped him back.

“Am I dead?”

“No,” she answered. “Not dead. Just . . . traveling. For now, you’re here on our plane because we have need of your services.”

“Are you . . . are you an angel?”

Her laugh was musical. “No, no, far from it. I suppose you would have once called me a Goddess.”

“Goddess?”

She bowed before him. “A Goddess. Once upon a time, in your long distant past, I was the Celtic Goddess of the flame, of poetry and music. I was the inspiration of many a bard. I was called Brigid.”

He really wanted to sit down, but with no body, that was going to be a bit hard. So, he contented himself with asking another question.

“You said you *were* called a Goddess. What do they call you now?”

“They call me Mother.”

“Oh, okay,” he said.

How much of this Goddess stuff he was buying wasn’t really sinking in yet. What *was* sinking in the most was that the women and this Mother chick were solid. *They* had substance, flesh and bones.

“You sure I ain’t dead?”

“I am most positive,” she answered with a laugh.

One of the women came forward. “Mother?”

For a moment, just the one word caught him and held him. There was something familiar there, something he should know. Then, it was gone.

“Yes, daughter?”

“Mother, we should quickly attend to this.”

Brighid nodded. “You are quite correct.”

“Whoa, wait a minute,” Charlie interrupted. “Someone gonna tell me what’s going on?”

“I am,” Brighid answered. “The reason I have brought you here. As you have guessed, this is not a place for the living. This place is . . . well”

“It’s Heaven?”

“No,” she answered. “More of a gateway. You see, when those who breathe on your side have ceased to be, they are brought here. The tunnel I brought you through.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. Like that life after life shi . . . stuff.”

“Yes, but this is not life. Not as you know it.”

“But you said I ain’t dead,” Charlie stubbornly declared.

“You’re not. Your body is in a state of suspension while your soul is here to assist us.”

“Uh, not to be rude but what can I possibly help *you* with?”

Brighid’s face lost its smile, the corners of her mouth now quivering in a semblance of something else. “It is one of my children. On your side, you would call it a murder. On ours, we speak of it as a . . . *a vanishing*.”

“A what?”

“A vanishing. Souls from your side cross here, then go on to their respective next levels. For most, it is to go on to another plane; whatever they are drawn to as their Heaven or afterlife. They come to this library, resolve their karmic debts, and move on. Some will go back or to other planes, to have more lives to pay off any debts owed.”

“But you said someone was . . . a vanishing?”

Her voice was straining, trying to keep steady. “You choose your fate, your time. You choose where you wish to go and when you wish to go there. When that choice is taken away; on your side, it is called murder. On ours, the soul is vanished.”

“So, someone killed someone else?”

Brighid shook her head. “Not killed. We are not living here, you see. We cannot be killed. But we can be vanished. The choice to stay here has been taken away.”

She gestured around the room, at the others. “As you can see, in this plane we have bodies that have substance. Here, we are solid and you are the spiritual. But as you must surely have noticed, we do not exist as you do on your plane. We do not breathe. We do not have heartbeats. Our bodies are merely the shells of our souls.”

“Oh. Okay,” he answered. “I get it now. So, it’s not really murder.”

“Exactly. The shell of our sister was destroyed and her soul was vanished; was lost in the akashic.”

“You mean destroyed?”

Brigid shrugged. “It is possible, yes. It is also possible that she was pulled into another plane and simply birthed there. There are several planes that your kind would call hell. She may have been pulled there. We will have no way of knowing until her time comes to return.”

“That sucks,” Charlie answered, more to himself than anyone else. When he realized that he’d spoken aloud, he felt embarrassed. The nods and murmurs of agreement dispelled that feeling quite quickly.

“Okay,” he said again. “I get that, but now I don’t get why I’m here.”

The woman who had walked up beside Brigid had stayed quiet after her initial statement. She now decided to rejoin the conversation.

“You are here because whoever has done this has done so under a cloak; a shield of the newly arrived. There were many who arrived at the same time.”

Brigid took over. “We have a constant state of arrivals as souls pass from your plane to ours. Whoever has done this would be in with the others who crossed at the same time.”

Charlie was confused. “But you said you were a Goddess. So, uh . . . can’t you, like, *divine* it or something? You know like that magic shit?”

“We tried,” the Goddess answered. “The mingling of the energies has masked anything we might be able to pick up. So many souls. We will not be able to do this by traditional methods, I fear.”

That cleared it up.

“Gotcha,” Charlie said. “That’s almost funny, that you need *me* to figure it out.”

“You came highly recommended,” Brigid answered. “And if there was ever a time when other-divined assistance would be needed for *us*, that time is now.”

He started to laugh—the idea that his intervention could be considered “other-divined” and then decided against it. For some reason, this just didn’t seem to be the moment. Maybe later.

He nodded as best as he could, considering that his head was smoke. “Alright then. I’m on the case.”

Brigid beamed. “Aioibh was right about you. She said you could help us, that you would know what to do.”

“I’ll do my best,” he assured her. “I still don’t think you . . . um, did anyone move anything, touch anything?”

“No,” Brigid said. She gestured to the woman who’d been standing beside her. “Aioibh here told us that we mustn’t disturb anything.”

“Good, good. Were all of you in the room here?”

“I was attending to another issue. I was called after it had happened and those who had crossed were put in suspension.”

“Suspension?”

Brigid nodded. “Yes, what you breathers call ‘suspended animation.’ A *sleep*, if you will. To keep them from crossing until we could find who had done this.”

“Great!” Charlie knew they had it in the bag. “Then, I need to talk to the eye witnesses. Find out what they saw.”

“I’m afraid that will be impossible. No one saw anything.”

“You mean this guy offed one of you and no one noticed? There are no witnesses at all?”

“My dear detective,” she began, an almost condescending tone to her voice. “My daughters are constantly greeting those who come through the gate. There is no time to watch each other. We’ve never had trouble like this before, never needed to watch. The crystals relay anything that we need to know. Otherwise, we are working with our charges.”

Charlie mentally swore; so much for the easy way. He turned his attention back to the woman with Brigid. “You’re, uh . . . Aiobh?”

She nodded.

Charlie wished he could see her face. There was something about her; even her name. He should know it; he should be able to put his finger on it.

“Have we met?”

“You’ll want to see . . . the crime scene,” she answered. “Come with me.”

“Uh, excuse me?”

“Yes, Detective?”

“Uh, how?”

Brigid answered that. “Aiobh will pull you along. All you will need to do is will yourself to float and you will.”

“Like a balloon.”

“Perhaps.” Brigid looked thoughtful for a moment before nodding. “A balloon will suffice as an analogy. Be a balloon and float along.”

Charlie thought about that a moment. “Yeah, yeah. I can do that. Okay.”

“Well, then,” she agreed. “I shall leave you with my daughter, Aiobh. I must attend to the other newcomers and help them on their way. Aiobh will explain the rest.”

She turned and left them; one standing still and watching the other who was a puff of vapor still trying to figure out how to float like a balloon. For Charlie, it was a bit surreal. Okay, it was a *lot* surreal, but somehow a normal act would fix that. He hoped.

So, he did as he was told—pictured himself as a balloon blowing gently in the breeze—and damned if it didn’t work! He followed along as the one named Aiobh walked along the floor. But they didn’t go far. Evidently, the murder--no, make that *vanishing*--had occurred close to the entrance. He should have noticed the line of women that had been standing in perfect formation. It wasn’t until they parted that he understood why, when he got his first glimpse of the crime scene.

That Brigid chick was right on the money, nothing touched or out of place. He floated down next to the body (*shell*, he reminded himself, *shell...body is a shell...right!*) and looked up and down the length of it. She’d been left, lying on her stomach with one hand outstretched and the other seemingly under her stomach. Charlie was betting that she’d grabbed either the wound or the object that had killed her. Without thinking, he reached down to her shoulder to turn her on her back.

“Shit,” he muttered as his hand passed through the flesh.

“May I be of assistance?” Aiobh was looking down, watching closely. “Perhaps I can be your hands.”

He smiled his thanks. “That would be great.”

She gently turned the body over. The eyes were a spectacular green, seeming to look as if they were watching the ceiling with rapt interest. There were no bruises, no marks . . . until he found the other hand. There wasn’t anything like blood on the body; not that there would be without a heartbeat. But there *was* something. There was ash in a spray pattern around a gash in

the material of her dress and the wound. Her hand seemed to be clenched around something protruding from the gash.

“Evie, honey,” he started. It was an absentminded gesture that took him by surprise. He looked over at the masked face. No, she wouldn’t get it. “Uh, sorry . . . *Aiobh*, would you mind doing something for me?”

Aiobh nodded.

“I need you to move her fingers away from whatever that is. I need to see the murde—uh, *vanishing* weapon.”

“Of course,” she answered. Gently, she unclenched the digits and pulled the hand away.

“What is this?” Charlie floated down to get a closer view. “I didn’t think you could take it with you when you went.”

“You can’t,” Aiobh curtly confirmed. “The objects of your side *stay* on your side. There is no polluting of our pure atmosphere or idyllic place.”

“Hey, hey,” Charlie sputtered. “Look, I didn’t mean anything by that.”

“Whoever did this used something from our plane and fouled it.”

“Okay, uh . . . what is that?”

“It is a crystal. *Her* crystal. On your side, you would call that tourmaline.”

Charlie nodded. “Is that something . . . look, am I pissing you off or something?”

Aiobh sighed, then slowly shook her head.

“Is it me?”

“No, it’s not you. It’s been too long since we . . .” She caught her self, jerking her head upright. “It’s this.”

“What about this?”

“This is her crystal, it is her link, if you will,” Aiobh began to explain. “This crystal, we *all* carry one. We use the crystals to sense one another, call one another when we are not close to each other. This crystal carries our energy and protects us.”

“Got it.” Charlie gave it a long, hard look. “That powder, what is that?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “We have never had this happen here.”

“Well, my guess is that’s blood or what would pass for blood, since you don’t bleed.”

“Quite possibly.”

He really wanted to touch her, comfort her. She seemed to be barely holding it together.

“I’m sorry.”

He could see her blue eyes widen behind the mask.

“Sorry? Why are you sorry?”

Charlie shrugged. “Because in my world, I’m used to this. I know all about murder and death, hate crimes and sex crimes. I’ve seen more done to the human body than you can know. To me, this is just another hunk of meat.”

She turned her head away from him.

“But I can see this is hurting you,” he continued. “*You’re* not used to this. I would say she was a friend, someone you cared about. *That’s* why I’m sorry. Because you lost someone close to you.”

The blue eyes turned back his way. “Have *you* lost someone like this?”

“Well, let’s just say I lost someone and leave it at that.”

“Someone close?”

He nodded.

“What happened?”

Charlie shrugged again. "She left me. I came home and there was this note to her Mom. She hated being a cop's wife. That's what she said, anyway. Always alone, she wrote. So many times she was tempted to leave. I guess she got tired of being tempted and just did it."

"You said it was a note to her Mom?"

"Yeah."

"A note she obviously never sent."

"Yeah. So?"

"Perhaps . . ." Aiobh's voice hitched, like she was trying not to show any more emotion than she had already. "Perhaps it was unfinished. Perhaps . . . perhaps it was a note to just blow off steam, that she never meant it to be read anyway."

The blue eyes were staring intently at him, pleading.

"Doesn't matter," Charlie grunted. "She left me. After that, it was just me and the job." He looked back down at the body. "Funny thing is, she was the reason I *took* the job. You know? Took it to keep her safe, keep others safe."

"You love your work?"

"Not anymore. Now, I just do it because I can't do anything else. I'm over that crusading hero crap." He shook his head, reassuring himself that, in some part, he meant it. "Now, back to this."

He pointed to the crystal. "Look, I know this is hard for you, but I need you to do something for me."

"Of course."

"You said that crystal has your essence, you can reach out to each other."

"Yes, I did."

"Then, I need you to touch that for me, sweetheart. See if you can pick up anything off the crystal. But do me a favor, just touch an edge. Okay? Don't get any more of your prints on that than you have to. Just the tip edge of the crystal."

Aiobh closed her eyes, did as she was told. She put her finger to the crystal and with a hesitant motion, touched it. He watched her as she dipped her head and waited. With no sense of time, it was hard to know how long she stayed in that position. But when she raised her head, it was easy to tell that she'd picked up nothing.

"Well," he said. "It was worth a shot."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't you worry your pretty head about it" Charlie floated up, looking around the body. "Let me see your hand, sweetheart."

"My hand?"

"Your hand. I want to see if you have anything else that's different from a living body."

She held up her right hand, the palm facing out. Charlie floated forward scrutinizing the flesh. He saw what he needed and grinned as wide as the proverbial Cheshire cat.

"What is it?"

"Honey, I need you to do something for me."

"Of course."

"Rip a piece of her dress off and see if you can pull that crystal out of her. But be very, very careful. I don't want you to clean it at all."

"I don't understand."

He tipped a wink at her. "I know, honey. You don't have fingerprints. I'm betting that a newly crossed dead man might. If I'm wrong, that's ok, we got other ways. But if I'm right . . ."

He watched her follow his directions, waiting until the crystal was pulled free. “Good girl. Now, just wrap that cloth around the crystal and don’t touch it again until I tell you to. Maybe there *is* a little bit of magic left.”

“But I tried, there was nothing.”

“Oh, don’t worry, doll, I got plenty going on here.” He floated back down to the body.

“Sweetheart, come here. Something else I need you to get.”

Aiobh followed his form to the feet. “What is it?”

“Right here . . . looks like a print. Did anyone come through wearing shoes?”

“All of them, I believe.”

“Any one barefoot?”

“I didn’t notice. Is it important?”

“Footprints, honey. Footprints and fingerprints are unique.” He floated down until he was close enough to see every nuance of it.

“But, aren’t feet all the same?”

He grinned again. “Not this monkey’s feet. Look here.”

She bent down next to him. “Oh! Oh, yes, I see,” she exclaimed. “I see it.”

“Good girl.” He floated back up to standing level. “One more thing, sweetheart. If you’ll be very careful, you’ll find something in her other hand. From here, it looks like a scrap of cloth.”

“I’ll get it now.”

“Let me ask you something,” he said. When she looked back at him, he went on. “Why are you wearing masks?”

“Why?”

“Yeah, why. I’m guessing you’re a lovely girl. But why masks?”

As she worked the fingers, she talked. “The masks were a precaution, you see. You are seeing things that you should not be seeing yet. You will now know things that you should not know; not until you have passed beyond the Veil and come here legitimately.”

“That’s too bad,” he said with genuine regret. “Not that I give a crap about knowing or not knowing, seeing or not seeing. But you remind me of someone, and I was just curious if you looked like her. That’s all.”

“You’re right.”

It took him a minute to realize what she was agreeing with; then he saw the scrap of material in her hand.

“Clothing counts or doesn’t count as stuff we leave behind?” he asked her.

“It is perception only, detective,” she answered. “These robes are only what you expect to see. We don’t wear them for our own benefit. Clothing is only for the living and only because of convenience. Nothing more.”

He laughed out loud this time. “Now I know you’re just like her. That’s what *she* used to say.” When he got no reaction, he pointed to the scrap of cloth in her hand and went on. “That’s your killer . . . *vanisher* . . . whatever.”

“Yes it is.”

“Come on, then, honey. Take me to where they are and let’s get this done.”

“Mother!”

Brigid appeared beside him.

“The seal is holding still. They will not leave us.” She clapped her hands twice. “You may release them from suspension.”

Another masked figure was standing about a small group of lifelike statues. She waved her fingers and the statues came to life—each one confused, frightened, and talking.

“*Quiet down now*,” Charlie shouted. He was met with immediate silence. “Good, line up now. And hold out your hands.”

All save one did as asked. Yeah, this was going to be easier than he anticipated.

He floated quickly to the one, just by thinking of where he wanted to be. This balloon stuff was getting handy. Sure enough, the man was barefoot.

“You,” Charlie said. “You just come here?”

“Yeah.” The other man looked nervous.

“Do I know you?”

“No, you don’t.”

“Okay, so can I see your hands?”

“Why?”

“Just checking something.”

The hands were covered in a sooty residue and a piece of his shirt had been torn away.

“Aiobh, honey, come here quick with that scrap of cloth.”

Aiobh was at his side in a flash, but the cloth never came forth. She gasped as if she’d been struck. “*I know you!*”

Charlie turned to her. “*You know this guy?*”

With one hand, she reached up and pulled the mask from her face. Now it was Charlie’s turn to be shocked. *It was his wife, Evie, standing at his side.*

“*I know you*,” she repeated. “*I remember you . . . and a blackjack to the back of my head. I remember you tying me up, gagging me. I remember you carrying me out of the apartment to your car. I remember the knife as it plunged into my chest and I remember watching you toss my body in the landfill.*”

“*You . . . you didn’t leave me?*”

There were tears in her eyes. “No, Charlie. I didn’t leave you. I never had intentions of leaving you. But I never got a chance to finish that letter.”

“*You . . . you . . .*”

“Charlie, I hated being a cop’s wife, not *your* wife. I *loved* you.” She sighed deeply. “The only way I would ever leave you is if I was dead. I would never have taken away the thing that made you complete. You’re a cop; a damned good one. You help people.”

“*Evie . . .*”

“Help us now, Charlie.”

“You don’t need me to help, honey. This is your man. You got the piece of his shirt. His hands have her *essence* on them. And the jackass is barefoot, see?”

With no words, the killer grinned at them. He aimed a punch at Charlie, the fist traveled through the air. It was enough to confuse him for a brief moment. Charlie tried to grab at him, but it was no use—he was just the mist in the picture.

“*Bitch, you shoulda stayed dead!*”

The killer aimed a punch at Evie, who ducked and jerked backwards. But he jumped on her, gripping at the crystal she had in her hand. Charlie screamed as loud as he could. The place erupted into chaos.

Then the real divine intervention stepped in. Brigid snapped her fingers and the killer froze in mid-grasp. Evie wiggled out from under him with no effort. She came to stand by Charlie, who was busy eyeing her body.

“You okay, honey?”

Her smile was warm. “I’m fine, my love.”

“Aiobh? Are you truly well?” Brighid crossed over and put her hand on Aiobh’s shoulder. “Truly?”

“I am, Mother, I swear it.”

She smiled to her daughter.

“Uh, excuse me,” Charlie interrupted. When he had their attention, he asked, “What about him?”

Brighid put her hand forth, a white light emanating from her fingertips. The killer started to glow, a deep blood red that was tinged with black. The glow grew until it was blinding, the body shrinking up into the size of a child’s ball. Brighid reached forth and took the ball into her hands.

“It is done.”

“What are you gonna do with him?” Charlie asked.

“His debt is need of repayment, his soul is black and without remorse.” Brighid began to caress the ball. “He will go now to begin again from the bottom of the karmic chain. He must start as the lowest form of life and work his way up again to his humanity. When he has paid the debt, learned his lesson, then he can evolve and ascend.”

With a pop that was felt more than heard, the ball disappeared into thin air. Brighid smiled at the others.

“The shield is down, the Veil is open. Thanks to our friend, we can welcome our charges again.”

No sooner had she spoken than a din of voices started to build. Charlie watched as soul after soul began to cross through a threshold, walking into the room with expressions of awe and confusion on their faces.

“So,” he whispered. “That’s what it’s like to die.”

“Yes, my love,” Aiobh answered. “That’s what it’s like.”

He turned back to her. “And you didn’t leave me.”

“No.”

He made another attempt at nodding, this time more successful. “All this time, I thought I’d lost you because . . . oh, Evie, I’m so sorry.”

She shushed him by raising her hand. “Charlie, if I’d seen that letter, I would have thought the same thing.” She put the hand to her heart. “Believe me now, when I tell you, that I love you. That I would *never* leave you willingly. That the only reason I am here, helping Mother, is because I have been waiting for you.”

“Waiting? For me?”

Aiobh nodded. “Right here. And when you cross, I’ll be bringing you right here. We’ll go to our own heaven, to our place of peace.”

He smiled at her, the gold of her love flooding his soul. “I want that. I want it very much.”

“Just don’t rush your time, Charlie,” she warned. “That’s against the rules too. All you need to know is that I watch over you and I’m waiting patiently.”

“Promise?”

“I swear it.”

“Then, I won’t rush,” he swore to her. “And I’ll be looking for you when it’s time.”

“Come, my son,” Brighid said to him. “You must go back now.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Back to what I’m good at.”

“Yes,” she answered. “Back to taking care of those souls who need protection.”

“Evie?”

“Yes, Charlie?”

“I love you.”

“I love you, Charlie.”

“Come, my son.”

* * *

When he woke up, he was still sitting in the chair. The phone was in his hand, the woman still talking about her purse snatching. For some reason, this felt normal, as if nothing had really changed or happened. But it had. He remembered. They’d probably never find the guy’s body, but that didn’t matter either. Justice was served. And now he had a chance to pick up where he’d left off a long time ago.

“Yes, ma’am. I don’t know that we can do anything, but I’ll sure give it a try. What’s your address again?”

He jotted the information quickly, then dropped the pencil back in the cup.

“All right, Ms. Martin. I’ll be right there. We’ll do our best. I’m on my way right now.”

He hung up the phone, picked up his coat, and left to help another who needed him. He made a promise. He wouldn’t rush his time. He’d make her proud.

After all, he’d solved a murder in the Akashic Gateway to Heaven.

~ ~ ~ ~

An Act of Faith

All I can remember is being here. That is all I know and all I can ever hope to know. It was as if a birthing had happened and I became aware of here. This room, this chamber, the sparse setting of it. The dark, dank walks of stone are lit with torches that have never gone out, thus making it impossible to know the passing of time. Would that one had gone out, had flickered—even briefly—or had shown some sign of exhausting its fuel. But nothing of the sort.

I was free to walk about the large room. Nothing hindered me from the table with its devices laid out to be used—the tongs, the awl, the forceps, the thumbscrews. The knives were laid out, each to a purpose—this one to remove a digit, that one to remove a limb. This piece to bridle the offending mouth of the enchanter. That piece to effectively break bones but not the skin. *The pear* to forcibly open vagina, anus, or throat. There; there was the fireplace creating the heat that filled the room and made the walls sweat. There were at least three rods banking nicely, more than enough to raise the welts, singe the flesh.

I know this room well, you see. It was the interrogation room of the dungeon; it was the play ground of Tomás de Torquemada, Inquisitor General and the beloved of King and Queen. It was the place I last saw *him*, my father. It was the last place I saw anything at all, you see; the last place before my body became consumed with the ague that took my life. But why should I be here? Why this place? What had it to do with me? It was for the punishing of the wicked, the godless . . . and others.

There is no way of knowing how long I have been here. An eternity perhaps? Days? Weeks? Months? How long? I have screamed, called, whispered. I have sung, stamped, shouted. There has been none to answer, none to come to my aid. There is only this place. Only the silence as my company; well, the sound of my own voice and the fire's crackle, but they hardly serve as companionship.

But there is also the pain. The heat is maddening, but the pain makes it unbearable. It is the pain that wears upon me, upon my nerves. The never-ending sensation of ripping, tearing and the chilled sense of burning. Always when I approach the chair, that damnable chair; that is when the pain wells up inside of me as if my chest were being ripped apart by claws of molten steel and jagged ice. I cannot go near it or I fear that I will come undone.

And yet . . . I wonder

As there is nowhere else to sit in the room, I am often forced to go to the chair. The floor is filled with refuse, blood, vomit, feces; the detritus of the need for these instruments. I have given thought about lowering the *strappado*, but the bloody leather was only for the dropping of the wicked. It was not meant for the likes of *mi nalgas*; I have left it hanging from the ceiling as it is. The table, likewise, is covered in the blood and gore, with straps at either end to pinion a body and prevent flight. The racking instruments on either end that stretched the limbs and forced them from the sockets of the shoulders and hips. It, too, is not fit to seat myself upon. Nor would I want to. I know what deeds have been committed upon that table. I saw . . . some.

The pain begins as I approach it. My fingers grip the arms, moving the leather strapping to the side. I lower myself onto the hard seat, feeling the raised studs that are meant to keep me awake. But I cannot sleep, so it is a wasted effort. The pain begins in earnest as I lean back against the wood that is covered in the same studs. Fortunately, there is no one to strap me into this chair—to pull the bindings tightly and force the stud into my flesh, to bruise. Else would I go mad from the confinement. The pain in my chest is bad enough.

I sit for as long as I can, to give my limbs a rest from the endless pacing, and then I can stand it no more. I will leap from the damnable thing as though I were on fire, running to a cool wall. The slimy stone against my cheek and breast will begin to quiet the agony, cause the wrenching to subside slowly, slowly—as it always does. Then, the heat will rise up again, and I must walk to keep the fire within me quenched.

But oft times, I will spring from the accursed monster to trip over the boot that lays at the foot of it. The boot that caused many legs to rupture, gushing blood, as the limbs were forced together, squashed within the wooden structure as it encloses around the feet and ankles. I will trip over it, falling to the floor and always into a congealed puddle; of what, I can only guess and do not wish to have confirmed. I will quickly rise, looking for some water—something—to wash this disgusting stench from me, momentarily forgetting the pain.

It feels as if it has been forever and yet, only a brief time. Perhaps . . . perhaps, I have only been momentarily forgotten. Perhaps . . . perhaps it has all started again; whatever that should mean to me, I know not. Only that one thought, that is has started again. I know that I have passed on . . . but perhaps, this is my just reward. I have not gone to Heaven, not in this room. Surely this could not be Heaven. But I was not wicked enough for Hell. Surely, this is not

“Well, technically speaking, you're not *in* Hell properly. You're only in that top layer. What we affectionately refer to as *Limbo*—not quite good enough for Purgatory, not quite bad enough for the real thing. We're still trying to decide if you're worth saving before we toss your ass in Hell.”

At first, I am not sure if I have heard this voice, if I am not dreaming it. I have had no such sound in . . . how long? But, I am not sleeping, I cannot sleep. I begin to search this chamber, searching in vain for the one who spoke.

“Who,” I stammer. “Who . . . ?”

I hear a chuckle that seems to echo in my ears. “Who am I?”

“Yes.”

“Not someone you will want to play games with, that is for certain.”

“But . . . *donde . . . dónde están . . . ?*”

“Where am I?”

“Sí.”

“Around . . . everywhere . . . nowhere. Haven’t decided if I want to come in for the full visit yet. Let’s just say, you’ve not really convinced me of the need.”

“But . . . but” I stop trying to find the unseen visitor. I waste too much time, if there is time to waste. “As you will.”

“*As you will,*” the voice answers, a smirk in it. I can hear him, it is a smirk I hear. “Well, you’re a polite little thing, I’ll give you that.” It chuckles again. “*As you will.* Like you have a choice or any control as it is.”

I say nothing more on the chance that there are times when it is best to be silent.

I hear him laugh, low and intimate. Then, he says, “Well?”

“Well? What do you mean?”

“I mean, you haven’t asked me where *you* are. Or why you’re here. Or what’s going on? Or what’s stopping me from throwing you to the ninth level?”

He knows my thoughts.

“You obviously know the questions, why should I repeat them?”

“Well I’ve already told you that you’re in limbo. Why? I think you might have a clue, but I’ll be glad to fill you in. What is happening?”

I hear the smirk in its voice again.

“What is happening and what is stopping me from throwing you to the ninth level is pretty much the same thing, I suppose.”

“And? That answer is?”

“Do you remember this place? This room?”

I cannot help myself. I gaze around it. “*Sí, yo lo sé.* I know it well.”

“Such a lovely little time, don’t you think? The wages of sin bringing about the cleansing of the population.”

“It was necessary. It was divined by God.”

The laugh was beginning to be an annoyance. “Well, possible. Perhaps. But doubtful at best.”

“The heretics needed to be driven out,” I protested with a great deal more vehemence than I truly felt. “The One True God demanded it.”

“The One Greedy King and his simpering wife demanded it. Talk about your matches made in the lap of the Pope. I saw enough of that greed and believe me, I saw it all.”

I felt my cheeks grow as hot as the fire but held my tongue. I would have debated this fool if I could only see his face. If I could know that he was not of divine origin.

“You know all about greed, don’t you?”

“I will confess to a certain amount of coveting of wealth, certainly. All do. But I would not call myself a greedy man.”

“No?”

“No.”

“But isn’t that why we’re here? Isn’t that why you were in this place?”

“I came here . . . for the *auto de fe*!”

He laughed again. “The auto de fe was a joke, little poppet. There would be no last minute reprieve. But why do I tell you? Wouldn’t you like to see?”

A cold chill ran through me. “See? See what?”

“Why your little auto de fe was such a laughable farce. The truth of why you were here, why *we* are here.”

They slowly entered the room, quietly and with purpose. I recognized the Inquisitor General immediately by his curled lip and overly erect stance. Torquemada motioned only once, pointing to a spot on the floor. I saw them bring my father in and stand him in the very spot. Papa looked so tired, so weary; and yet he looked so angry, defiant.

One man sat at the table, fingering the instruments lying there. Another sat at a safe distance, pen and parchment poised and at the ready. The Chief Inquisitor sat on a chair that had been produced for his ease. My father was given nothing but the glares of his captors.

“Señor Guillermo de la Martinez, you stand accused of heresy before the King and Queen of Spain. Confess, señor,” he said to my father. “Confess your heresy.”

My father turned a pleading eye to the man. “Por favor, most holy man. I have done nothing wrong. I do not know what you speak of. *Please . . . por favor.*”

“You have spoken heresy. We have witnesses!”

“No. No es posible! Who are these men who accuse me of this? Make them say this to my face.”

“The witnesses will be kept secret, it is not for you to know.”

I saw the look in my father’s eye. He was confused, but he was angry.

“You must allow me to speak to these witnesses. What heresy can I make? Eh? I am good Catholic. I say my rosary. I speak confession to priest. You bring priest. He know, he’ll tell you.”

“Confess!”

“You bring my son! Where is Orlando? You bring him. He will tell you I am innocent. He will tell you the accusations are false. You bring him!”

Torquemada was not to be turned. He said one word only. His eyes were hard, steely as the sword I wore at my side. His face was ugly, stone. One word . . . only one.

“Confess.”

My father’s anger was not to be denied. His only answer was to spit upon the ground.

Torquemada looked pleased at this. He motioned again. The men holding my struggling father began to strip him, ripping the clothing from his body until he stood naked.

“Confess,” the Inquisitor repeated.

My father shook his head. “You bring my son! You bring Orlando. He will save me. He will tell the truth.

This time, the Inquisitor nodded. With a jerk, my father was thrown onto the table with his legs and arms parted. They strapped his wrists and ankles with supreme efficiency. I watched them shave his lithe body, every inch. I watched them pull the awls and begin poking him, looking for the witch marks.

“Confess,” was the only word spoken.

The only sounds from my father were his screams of pain as his nails were ripped from his hands, as the stilettos left bloody trails down his flesh.

I found myself standing at the right hand of the Cardinal, the hated Inquisitor. “Well, Señor de la Martinez, you have done well.”

I hear myself saying, “Gracias, Cardinal. It was my duty.”

“Sí, sí. We must rid our land of the heretic,” he said, speaking to me in between my father’s screams. “Your co-operation has secured your lands for you, minus a small portion for the crown. But still, half is better than none, eh?”

“And my fortune? The money?”

“Well, the money must pay for my assistants, señor. It cannot be helped. But, you can make your own fortune, make your own money, sí?”

Everything froze at that moment, before I could answer him.

“Ah, you see?” My unseen friend spoke at last. “A certain irony in that, yes? You did this for the money and yet you lost it to that bastard. Rather amusing, I think.”

“Amusing? You find this amusing?”

“No, I find it disgusting.”

“He was a heretic, my father.”

“He was an old man who wanted to live in happiness. He wanted to marry again, wed his Lorena, and live out his remaining years in peace.”

“He . . . he blasphemed.”

“He wanted another child.”

I could take no more. “So? What of it?”

“Too bad you couldn’t declare him a Jew. *Then*, you could have really had him flayed alive. But then, that would make you half a Jew and therefore suspect. Then, *all* of your lands would be forfeit, as well as your money.”

“You are wrong; he was a blasphemer, a heretic. He swore untruths, blasphemed the word of God.”

I heard another scream split the silence. The scene resumed, some time later it appeared. Torquemada was no longer in attendance, only the two men who held my father captive. They hoisted him up on the strappado, his arms bound at the wrists behind his back, until he was twice the height of a man. Then, in a sudden jerk of the wheel, my father was sent crashing to the stone floor again. Twice, I heard the sickening crunch of the bones as he landed. Twice I saw the blood pour from his nose and mouth.

“Confess,” said the tall one, preparing to lift my father again. “Confess.”

My father’s confession was not forthcoming. His only cry was my name. “Orlando! You bring me my son. He will tell you! He will tell you I am innocent!”

I watched as they threw Papa on the table again, pulling *the pear* from the bloody table. Thrust into *el extremo de mi padre*, the small, fat captor twisted the ornate key at the end. I didn’t have to know what it was doing to my father. I could imagine. I could hear the screams.

"Dios mio, por qué? *Por qué?*" *My God, why? Why?*

The scene froze again. “It’s a good question, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“He died not knowing who the sole witness was against him, didn’t he? You never told him, did you?” I heard the sound of snapping fingers. “Of course not, how could you tell him? But then you weren’t here for this part, were you? You missed all of the interesting bits leading up to the auto de fe.”

I wish I breathed still.

“Well, then, let’s go to that lovely day, shall we?”

I ball my fists against my eyes, trying to shut out the horror of what I will see. But I cannot stop my ears. I cannot help but hear it.

“Bring in the heretic.” The Inquisitor General has returned for this important moment. It is his final moment, though *whose* final moment, I am suddenly not sure.

I am standing by the dank, bloody wall. The smell that rises from it turns my stomach and makes my skin crawl. It is the smell of rotting flesh torn from the bodies, the stench of excrement and urine as the wastes were released by the tortures . . . *the punishments*.

I remember this day. I take my hands from my eyes to see them bringing my father in. He can no longer walk. His legs are a mass of fractured bones and mangled flesh. His hands have long since stopped bleeding, but the fingers are twisted beyond recognition. His nose has been broken, one eye swelled shut. But I can still see it in his face; still see the defiance written there. The poor bastard still thought there was hope.

The fat one, I later learned, was named Martillo—the hammer—because of his huge fists and cold soul. It is all a game to him, all a source of amusement. He and the tall thin one—who’s name I never knew—strap my father into the hateful chair. Martillo giggles as he tightens the straps as hard as he can. My father’s only good eye turns in baleful anger. The Hammer whispers something in his ear, then kisses my father on the lips. Papa tries to spit, but I can see that he has none.

“Six days. Six days and they could not break him.”

“No,” I answer.

“Enjoyable show,” says the unseen.

“It is not,” I answer. “It is pathetic. Why do you show me this?”

“So you know, little one. So you understand.”

I see them file in, so many. The priests and cardinals stand to one side of the chamber while the judges and generals stand to the other. The room quickly fills with a combination of legal and holy men. They have come to witness the auto de fe, the *act of faith*.

“What’s wrong, mi hijo?”

I feel the unseen as if he were standing in the room with me. I strain to see if I can find him, but all I have is the smell of the room, the lights from the torches, the men watching.

“Eh? What is wrong?”

“I do not want to see this. I know what I did. I know why I did it.”

“But the why is a lie, isn’t it?”

“No, it is not.”

“Come now, they say confession is good for the soul. And, by the way, do you think it would have saved *his* soul? What would he have confessed, Orlando? Hmm?”

“Señor Guillermo de la Martinez, I give you one more chance to confess,” Torquemada said.

“I make no confession, I sin only in loving my God and my country.”

“Come now,” the Inquisitor purrs. “All of men sin, none are pure before God.”

“I do not sin before God. I make no heresy. Who accuses me of this lies, *he* commits the heresy. *He* makes false witness before God.”

“This is your last chance, señor. Make your confession before God and man, and you will die mercifully. Make it not, and you shall perish in the flame.”

My father’s defiance remains strong in him. “You bring my son,” he says, his voice croaking in his throat. “You bring me my Orlando. He speak the truth. You see.”

The Inquisitor puts out his hand to me.

I hear the voice of the unseen say to me, "It's time for your dance."

My feet move of their own accord. I walk until I stand at the right hand of Torquemada. I see the light in my father's good eye, the sense of hope. He then looks at the monk, suddenly sure of what I will say.

"So?" Torquemada bids me speak. "You are here to speak the truth, sí?"

"The truth," I hear myself saying.

"Your father says he has spoken no heresy. That you will clear his good name."

I have this moment; this one moment belongs to my choice of action. I can find it within myself to speak the words that will free my father. But I will lose my lands to the child who is coming. I will be forced to share everything that I have worked for to succeed—the vineyards, the lands, the money. I will have to acknowledge my father's second wife as my mother and give her the due she does not own.

Or I can continue the charade. I can continue to speak the words that brought him here. I can keep up the story of his heresy, his blasphemy. I will lose the money, yes. I will lose half of the family holdings. But is it not better than losing all to this child?

All eyes turn to me. Waiting.

"Perdóneme, but I cannot lie," I hear myself saying. "It is true. My Papa has committed heresy. He—"

I see the good eye widen in shock. Why is he surprised? I am his son, after all. I do only what would have been expected of me. To be the good son, follow the laws. The words tumble from my lips of the pretended indiscretions that I have witnessed; the desecration of a holy shrine, the taking of the Lord's name in vain, the embracing of the Muslim and Jew as friend.

When I am finished, the room is silent. I can only watch my Papa, watch his reaction. He stares at me, disbelieving. Then, something shocks me. I see . . . I see the single tear slip from his eye, coursing down his cheek. He ducks his head, to see me no more.

"Gracias, Orlando, gracias," the Inquisitor General says to me. "But I must be sure that you are without the sin of your father. I must know that you, too, are not a heretic."

Fear grips me; the pain in my chest begins anew—as if I were sitting in the accursed chair again. I clutch my breast. "No, no, General Torquemada, I . . . I do not follow my father's ill ways."

"Then, you must renounce him before God and all assembled. Do you renounce him?"

I feel my head nodding.

"You must speak the words, señor."

It is now my turn to bow my head. "I do renounce him. I renounce my father and all of his sins. He is my father no more."

I hear the groan from my father and there is no more.

"Confess, Señor de la Martinez! Confess your heresy and we will be merciful."

Martillo pulls a heated rod from the fire, pressing it against my father's face. He screams from the pain, but no words. The rod is pressed a second time, against the closed eye, and I hear a popping hiss as the eye is punctured. Again, my father screams but speaks no words. And Martillo only laughs.

A third time, the rod is pressed against the other eye and my papa will see no more. This time, he speaks. He screams.

"Saaaaaantaaaaaaa Mariiiiiiiiiiaaaaaaaaaa!"

The scream chills the room, my blood freezes in my body. The last act I witness is when the Martillo rips my father's tongue from his head, holding between the tongs. I squeeze my

eyelids closed against it all. I can see no more.

“Oh yes, you can,” says the unseen.

“No, you cannot force me to watch this.”

“You will watch what should have been!”

“No!”

The laughter is now cruel. “But this is what you wanted. This is what you started. For all your hard work, surely you can reap the reward.”

My head is turned to the room, my eyes are forcibly held open.

“My dear judges,” Torquemada says, again his voice purring like the wicked cat before it pounces. “He has not confessed, there is nothing more we can do. I give him to you. We, of course, will extend mercy . . . unless there is a further crime that we know not of. In which case, it is not of our jurisdiction.”

I know the man who steps forward. He is the judge assigned by the king and the Inquisitor General, Armando del Reyes. He bows to Torquemada.

“We find Señor Guillermo de la Martinez guilty of treason. The court demands the auto de fe, the burning to save his soul from torment and hell.”

Torquemada bows. “As you declare, sir. As you declare.”

“Noooooo!!”

I cover my eyes with my hands, screaming. Screaming.

“Oh stop, you witless bastard, stop.”

I look up to see that, once again, I am alone in the room as it was before.

“I’m sorry . . . and I hope you will forgive my skepticism, but I find it hard to believe that you feel any remorse.”

“I do not feel anything.”

“How true,” says the unseen. “A heartless bastard such as yourself, one who would send his own father to burn in the fires of the auto de fe. And tell me, what did you gain? Hmm?”

I cannot answer.

“Land that eventually had to be sold to cover your gambling debts. Your family fortune given to the good Inquisitor General and his minions. Your stepmother was reviled, persecuted. She and the unborn child died soon after, of grief and poison. Administered by her own hand, I believe.”

I could only whisper. “Not my fault. He . . . he . . . heretic. Blasphemer.”

“And you are a liar!”

“But . . . I heard”

“You heard what? Plans to cut you off, perhaps? Because your father knew you were gambling and whoring in the village? To stop you from destroying yourself?”

“NO!”

“YES!”

He knows, the unseen knows, and I cannot hide it anymore. I can only scream out my guilt.

“YES! YES I LIED! I GAVE UP MY OWN FATHER TO SAVE MY FORTUNES, MY LANDS! AND I LOST THEM ANYWAY! YES! I AM GUILTY OF IT ALL! ALL OF IT, LIES. ALL OF THE ACCUSATIONS WERE LIES! I CONFESS! I CONFESS!”

“Yes, lies,” speaks the unseen. “And the death of three innocents.”

I can only weakly nod at this.

“Heartless . . . heartless bastard.”

“Yes.”

“Well,” the voice answers cheerfully. “As long as you confess”

It takes only a blink of my eye before I am slammed backwards into the reviled chair. I feel every painful stud digging into my flesh. The straps are tightened against my arms.

“Perhaps, they’ll be easier on you, *mi hijo*, than they were on me.”

My vision is blurring, but the face that looms before me is still familiar. With a dawning horror, I realize who this unseen is. I realize who has been speaking to me.

The scars, the badly mended bones; his face is still as mangled as the gnarled hand that reaches up to touch my face. But he can see. His eyes have been restored. And I see a look of pity and regret.

“Papa?”

“Orlando. Why? Why did you do this? For greed? Because of what I had done? This was how you punish me?”

For once, I will speak the truth. “Yes, you foolish old man, yes. You would cut me off without home, without money. I could not have that.”

“*Mi hijo* . . . my son.” He kisses my forehead. “I did not write you from the will, Orlando. I only cut off your spending. To help you see what you were doing to yourself. To make the leeches flee from you, to save you. All of it was still yours.”

I am afraid to believe him. The anger in me is still there, the pain in my chest has not taken that.

“Now it is *you* that lies.”

He shakes his head. “No, I do not lie. The child that was coming would have inherited his mother’s lands and money. You would have lost nothing.”

“Papa”

Then, the face that I had loved as a child, the man who had been my teacher, my father, my confessor; the look of regret turns to one of hate. The change is swift and sure.

“And now, we have lost everything,” he says to me, a bitterness in his voice. “We are both damned to eternity in hell.”

“What?”

“I had to choose, my dear little brat. I died without confession, without absolution. I was sent to purgatory, to pay for this. I was not yet lost, you see. But you? You were bound for hell.”

“But what changed?”

“I came here insane, my dear, *dear* son. Quite insane, raving and foaming at the mouth. Screaming of vengeance.” His smile is cold and hard. He laughs again, that sound of broken glass upon the skin. “I could choose to stay in Purgatory, keep my madness, remain un-avenged. Or, I could sit in judgment of the ones who wronged me.”

The twisted fingers gently touch my cheek. “But they did not tell me, the demons who dwell within purgatory; they did not tell me that should I choose the vengeance, that I, too, would be damned. For I chose the hell you now dwell in, my dear, sweet son. The hell that we are both compelled to burn in forever.”

I suddenly understand. I suddenly see clearly as never before.

“It is your turn in the cycle, my son,” he says, his bitterness like a hair shirt upon my skin. “And I will be the accuser before the Inquisition. And it will begin again.”

“NO!” I cannot help but scream. “NO! You lie. There is no cycle.”

“Oh?”

“Why do I not remember it?”

“The curse of hell, my son. Because then, you could stop it. No, the accuser retains the memory. The accused lives in tortured ignorance. Until the last moment of sudden lucidity and pain.”

And then, I hear him; that booming voice that I had heard before.

“Señor Orlando de la Martinez, you stand accused of heresy before the King and Queen of Spain. Confess, señor,” the Inquisitor General says to me. “Confess your heresy.”

And as I begin to profess my innocence, I can hear only my father’s laughter; the insane cackling that fills my soul and makes the empty place in my chest ache all the more.

He called me heartless. As the fire licks at my body, cooking my flesh, I remember now. When I came here, I became the thing I was accused of. The first time. My punishment was also to have it ripped from my chest. It begins again.

* * *

All I can remember is being here. That is all I know and all I can ever hope to know. It was as if a birthing had happened and I became aware of here. This room, this chamber . . . the sparse setting of it. The dark, dank walls of stone are lit with torches that have never gone out, thus making it impossible to know the passing of time. Would that one had gone out, had flickered—even briefly—or had shown some sign of exhausting its fuel. But nothing of the sort.

I was free to walk about the large room. Nothing hindered me from the table with its devices laid out to be used—the tongs, the awl, the forceps, the thumbscrews. The knives were laid out, each to a purpose—this one to remove a digit, that one to remove a limb. This piece to bridle the offending mouth of the enchanter. That piece to effectively break bones but not the skin. The pear to forcibly open vagina, anus, or throat. There; there was the fireplace creating the heat that filled the room and made the walls sweat. There were at least three rods banking nicely, more than enough to raise the welts, singe the flesh.

I know this room well, you see. It was the interrogation room of the dungeon; it was the play ground of Torquemada, the beloved of King and Queen. It was the place I last saw him, my son. It was the last place I saw at all . . . before I went completely mad.

~ ~ ~ ~

And then again....

Every good collection needs at least one novella. I started this one as a short story and changed my mind about halfway through the piece. There was just way too much fun to be had with the whole scenario, too many funnies available.

So, with that in mind, I give you the story of "Rip" Porter and a lovely piece I decided to name

The Salt of the Earth

Part One
“It's a Beautiful Day”

This had been an incredibly stupid idea. He'd even said as much. Once again overruled by his partner, here he was.

“Can I tell you what a balls up thing this is, Monkey?”

“Yeah, yeah,” came the terse reply. “You already did, Rip. A few dozen times.” Monkey turned around to face him. “I was supposed to know this would happen . . . how?”

From outside, he heard the sound of a bullhorn broadcasting the ultimate joke. “Alright, you . . . in the house . . . throw out the guns and come out with your hands in the air. You got no choice.”

He shook his head and pointed the gun at Monkey. “You know, if I'd listened to my Mama, I'd be watching TV Land or Discovery or something about now.”

Monk shrugged. “If you'd listened to your mommy, you'd be entertaining the bitches at those social teas and wishing you were like me. Geez, what a crybaby.”

He chuckled. “Monk, you're an ugly gorilla! You even got the breath to match.”

“Wrong again, oh fair haired one. Gorillas are part of the ape family! Along with orangutans, et cetera and all that jazz.” Monk grinned broadly. “I, on the other hand, *date* the gorilla my dreams. Get it right.”

“Ha-ha,” he answered. “Funny like a heart attack.”

“Look, bro, we're in it, okay? We need an exit and fast. That's supposed to be *your* specialty. Ripping the seams and fabrics of the entrances and exits? Rip it, man, rip it.”

“Rrrrrrip,” he answered. “Right!”

He crawled away from the window, careful to stay out of the spotlight the cops were shining in. He chided himself for ever thinking this was going to be the easiest job he'd ever pulled. As soon as he'd cleared the door leading into the hallway, he stood up and began to retrace his steps to the second floor.

The two had managed to bypass the security system on the first floor by climbing the elm tree to the second. From there, Rip had managed to pry a window open and the two men had gotten inside. The only problem was, that tree was in the *front* yard, where the police were now waiting. He had to find another exit that wouldn't get them nabbed by the pigs, would be in a dark part of the house *and* the yard, and still be easy to get out through. Just exactly his specialty—ripping an easy defeat and turning it into an easy escape.

Christ, this place is like Fort Knox with the security and . . . hello! What have we here?

The old man was standing with his back against the wall, leaning against the heavy oak credenza. He was dressed in a loose sweater, one of those kinds that buttoned in the front. The baggy pants came down to cover the tops of the worn penny loafers. Rip's eyes followed down, then back up to the horn rimmed glasses and "gimme" cap on the old man's head. With a faint amusement, he saw there was a fish of some kind on the front.

Rip watched the old man grin, applauding softly. “Hello, there,” was all the old fart had to say.

“Old man, whatever you think you're doing, don't get any grand ideas.” Rip smiled. “I think we just got ourselves a hostage.”

“Well,” the old man smiled, “I won't be one for telling you your business, sonny. But, uh, well . . . hostage situations always turn out bad. Of course, I'm just your guardian angel.”

Rip snorted. “Right. Guardian angel? What's that supposed to be? A ‘get out of jail free’

card?”

The old man shook his head. “That’ll depend, son.”

“On what?”

“On you.”

“On me?” Rip cocked his head to one side, still staring at the hold man. What the hell was he talking about?

The old man waved his hand, the long fingers making a sweeping gesture at the room. “This is your choice, son. And you can choose to get out of it, too.” The hand stopped, one finger raised. “You’ll pay the price for it, but you’ll be able to walk away.”

“I ain’t going to jail, you old coot.”

“Coot? Such an ugly word for such a simple thing as aging. Old man, I like being an old man. Such knowing, such wisdom comes with age.”

“Yeah, right . . . whatever,” Rip muttered. He began looking around the room for something to tie the guy up with. “Look, this ain’t personal, okay? We just need you so’s we can get out of here. Got it? Then, you go free, and me and the Monk split.”

“Of course,” the old man cheerfully answered. “You know, while we’re here, a little pudding would be nice.”

“What?” Rip turned back. The geezer was just flat out nuts. “Pudding?”

“I love pudding, nothing like a good bowl of butterscotch to make the day complete.”

“Pudding, yeah . . . uh huh. Pudding.” Rip chuckled to himself, finding what he was looking for. “Well, you dream of pudding, codger, and I’m gonna just tie your hands back, ok?”

“Hmm, no, I don’t think so,” the old man said. “Watch where you walk, son.”

In the blink of an eye—and later, Rip would think it was as if a finger had flicked the carpet below him—his foot got caught in a fold of the runner. He grabbed for a lamp on the way down, which pulled the table, unsettling the fishbowl of marbles that spilled on the floor. In a moment that closely resembled the old fashioned cartoons he’d watched as a child, Rip began to slip across the marbles with his arms wildly waving in the air. His feet skated over the tops of the rolling glass until he finally came down hard on his back, starbursts blooming before his eyes. It was a moment or two before he realized he was now lying at the old man’s feet, the latter standing with tears of laughter streaming down his cheeks.

Rip grumbled, gingerly making sure all his body parts were in working order. The back of his head was splitting from the hard whack. “Shut up, you old bastard.”

The old man clapped his hands together again. “I’m sorry, son, but that was classic! You a Stooges fan? Keystone cops, perhaps?”

Sitting up, he grabbed a handful of the marbles and tossed them at the old coot. “Got no idea who you’re talking about and I don’t care. Damn, that hurts.”

The man suddenly got serious again, kneeling beside Rip. Reaching out, he patted Rip’s cheek with a look of sorrow in his eyes.

“Yes, it hurts, son. And it will hurt worse. Only you can stop this.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Cause and effect, son. Cause and effect.”

“Look, old man,” Rip growled, “I’ve had enough of this. Just shut up, you hear me? Just shut up.”

“This is your only chance,” the old man advised, standing up again. He adjusted the cap on his head, then clasped his hands together. “I don’t give many chances as it is, but this is your last.”

“For what?” Rip gingerly got to his feet. “Why don’t you just shut off and come along like the good little hostage I want you to be. No one gets hurt, me and my partner make a break for it.”

“It doesn’t work that way, son, and you know it.”

“*Stop calling me son!*” His hands flew out to grab the old fart and stopped halfway there. With a heavy sigh, he dropped them again. “Look, I ain’t your son and you don’t know squat about me. Now, just play along and no one gets hurt.”

“Nothing to play, young man,” he said, smiling again at Rip. “I guess I can’t turn you from this, so all I can do is be ready to welcome you to the neighborhood. I can’t wait for the folks to meet you.”

Rip stopped casing the room and turned back around to the other man. “What? What are you talking about?”

“You’ll be coming to stay with us,” the old man answered. There was something elfin about him—besides the fact that he was really short. “In the neighborhood. If I can’t turn you from this, I can welcome you to your new home.”

“I ain’t going to your crib, you old bastard, if that’s what you’re talkin’ about. Me and my mate are gonna get out of this, you’ll see.”

Then, squinting in the darkness, Rip found what he was looking for; a small window in the farthest corner of the room. So far, so good. For a moment, he forgot about the duffer standing in his stupid fishing outfit and focused on the window. Sure enough, the window led out into a corner of the back yard by the garbage cans. It was out in the open, but, as far he could see in any direction, there were no cops, no dogs; there was nothing that could get in the way. A quick ladder from the sheets and they could be on their way with the pickings. Rip tossed a quick glance over his shoulder at the old man. Hell, they could leave the hostage tied up in a chair downstairs and be long gone before anyone was the wiser. Let the screwball talk to the fuzz about pudding and karma, whatever the freak that was.

“Look, Gramps, I ain’t got time to screw around.” Rip snagged the silk cord that held the drapes neatly tied and yanked it free with a single pull. The fabric fell unfettered as he twisted the rope in his hands.

The old man simply smiled at him. “This is your last chance, son. Take it or leave it.”

“Man, you just don’t get it, do you,” Rip answered, an exasperated sigh escaping at the same time.

“I . . . *get it*,” the man said, smiling so benignly. “I don’t think you do. But you will. See you soon. And . . . uh . . . watch out for the banana peel.”

“What?”

Whatever would have been the answer, he never got it. At that moment, an explosion tore through the downstairs and Rip was thrown to the floor again. This time the stars were brighter than before and he shook his head to clear his vision. He rolled over to push himself up when a sharp, grinding pain rose up from his wrist to his shoulder.

“Shit!” He curled up on his knees, cradling his broken wrist against his belly, screaming every cuss word he knew. Another explosion, followed by a scream, convinced him that lying there wasn’t going to get him out of there. He pushed up with his good arm, and staggered out of the room.

He clumped down the stairs, headed to the front room where he’d left Monkey. But there was a lot of rubble where his friend used to be. Only Monk would be stupid enough to set off the firecrackers early. Stupid jackass never did know a thing about blasting caps; he’d managed to

trip the whole dozen. Rip found his former partner hanging from the chandelier, a large piece of wood shoved into the man's chest.

Gotta get out of here, I gotta split this scene and fast. Rip the seams . . . yeah, that's what I do, rip the seams.

Suddenly the loot meant nothing. Rip wheeled around as the first gas canister crashed through the plate glass window. It rolled across the floor to the sofa, hissing its white smoke all the way. He quickly unbuttoned his shirt at the waist and stuck his wrist in the hole. It would have to do for now.

He knew where he had to go—the back of the house, to that corner under the room he'd been in. He remembered; there was no one back there. He followed his nose—until he broke it by running blindly into the door frame. Blood streaming down his upper lip, he ducked into the kitchen. He was in the back of the building; the escape route was right there. This was the room. He made for the back door.

“FREEZE, ASSHOLE!”

Rip, being a semi-intelligent man, knew when he was outnumbered and outclassed. That is, until he looked in the reflection of the window to his right and saw the lone policeman standing, gun drawn.

“I said, freeze, turkey. You're going down.”

It was a risk, but one he could take. Rip just wanted to get the hell out of there in one piece. Killing this guy wasn't an option; he wasn't a cop killer. Maybe if he pulled the gun and fired randomly, the porker would drop to the ground, hide behind that counter. He could fire a couple more shots to keep the guy there, then bust out through the back door. He could be swallowed up in the darkness—

“Put the gun down and turn around slowly.”

It's a pipe dream, Rip, old buddy pal o' mine, he heard Monk say in his head. You ain't going nowhere. Give it up! Do the time and get out with your ass intact.

“I said, put the gun down, asshole. And turn around. Slow!”

With a sigh, Rip started to do just that. What the hell, he was nailed either way he went. There was no way he could get to the door. There was no way he was gonna blow this guy away. There was just no way. He started the turn, his gun hand drawn to show that he was not going to use it; he only intended to lay it on the counter and step away, nice and easy.

But his foot turned traitor, stepping on something slick and unstable. Rip turned alright, but the graceful move turned into a stupid gesture of futility, the gun going straight out before him. His broken wrist ground until the growl escaped his throat, his finger involuntarily squeezed on the trigger. The shot rang out, followed by four more. Four ripping, burning stabs pierced his chest and threw him backward against the wall. Rip dropped to his knees, then hit the floor. The last thing he saw was the banana peel that he'd slipped on.

* * *

Everything disappeared into a haze of white fog. The funny thing was, it wasn't burning his eyes and nose, wasn't making him want to puke his guts out. He felt like he was floating in it, weightless and part of the mist. He heard words that meant nothing; voices raised in song, then sobs. Then, he was moving. It was like he was still just floating, but this time he could see. Now, there was darkness instead of fog and he was moving. Then, the light ahead and he was still moving. And the light wanted him, the light called to him.

“What is he doing here?”

“His time was up.”

“Yes, I know. But what is he doing here?”

“And where should he go?”

“He has to pay his debt, attend the karma. Then, he may come.”

“And he should go where to do this?”

Was there an answer?

* * *

Rip opened his eyes and sat up. He reached up and wiped the sleep from his eyes.

“Damn, talk about a lousy dream. Geez.”

But when he removed his hands from his face, he noticed two things right away.

The first was that he wasn't in his apartment. This place wasn't even decorated in his garbage can chic that the girlfriend laughed at. It was one room, he could see that much. But it was all in white. The walls were painted a pristine white. The chair by the corner, the curtains that just hung on a wall without windows—white. The floor, white tiles. The table that sat by the bed he was on, white. He jumped up, staring at where he'd just been. It was an old fashioned four poster with a canopy over it. Coverlet, sheets, pillow cases, canopy—all were white. The materials were all of wood or lace or silk or cotton, but they were all white.

The second thing was that he wasn't asleep or dreaming. There as no hazy quality to the room, to his vision. And he had no way of knowing how he had gotten here. That alone convinced him.

If this ain't a dream

The memories flooded back and he began to touch the places on his body. He flexed his hand, the fingers closing into a tight ball. His fist rotated on his wrist with no pain, no stiffness. He raised that same hand to his face, felt the smooth surface of his nasal bone as it began to protrude from between his eyes, stopping above his lips. His fingertips sought his chest; below the left nipple, the left shoulder. Did it really happen? Had he been shot? Maybe it was a dream, maybe . . . maybe

He found the stairway, leading up and out of the windowless room. It was a seamless thing; one moment, his feet were walking up the steps and then he was standing outside again. But this was weird. He wasn't home; he wasn't at the place they were going to burgle. He wasn't at a hospital or the police station. He was standing in the middle of a graveyard, all the marble and granite slabs around him.

“What the frig?”

“Ah, good, you're up.”

The sound of the scratchy voice was way too familiar. The old man was standing by the side of the walkway. He calmly pulled a cigar out of his breast pocket, neatly clipped the end, and stuck it in his mouth.

Rip was still staring around, his head rotating wildly. “Where am I?”

The old man puffed until he had the cigar going well enough, producing small billows of smoke. “Oh, I expect you know well enough.”

“Yeah,” Rip agreed. “I guess I do.” He turned his gaze back to the old man, hoping against hope. After all, appearances were usually deceiving. “And how the hell did I get here?”

“Oh, the usual way, same as everyone,” the old man answered with a cloud of smoke and a grin. “Probably a little less gory than most, but for a mensch, not too bad.”

“Ha, ha,” Rip answered, the sarcasm dripping, and then stopped himself. He reached up to scratch his chest. “Hey, what’s a mensch?”

“You’re a man with questions, I see,” the old man said. “Good, I like that. Shows you can still think.”

“What you d . . . look, you old coot,” Rip growled. “I don’t know what your bag is, but I ain’t sticking around to find out. I don’t know what you did to get the pigs off me, but I figure I owe you for that.”

“Didn’t do anything, son.”

“Sure you did. I don’t see the fuzz here, so you got ‘em off me somehow.” Rip clapped the man on the shoulder. “Thanks, Pops, you’re aces in my book. Now, I’m beating a hasty retreat and headin’ back to my crib.”

“Crib?” He watched the old man put the stogie in the corner of his mouth and pull out a small notebook. “Crib,” he muttered, thumbing the pages until he’d made a quick perusal of them all.

“Yeah, my crib,” Rip tried to explain. “My pad? My home? My apartment?”

“Ah,” the old man said with a certain amount of satisfaction. He stuck the notepad back in his pocket, adding, “You scared me there, son. I couldn’t figure an early arrive like you would take the A train that fast.”

“Uh huh,” Rip answered, pretending to understand what the hell this coot was talking about. “Well, it’s been a real trip, old boy, but I’m outa here.”

“Hmm. Well, no, I don’t think so.”

It was enough to stop Rip in his tracks. “What do you mean?”

“Well, that’s what I do,” the codger answered, more smoke puffed as he spoke. “See, being your guardian angel, it’s my job to explain the rules before you get welcomed, meet the folks.”

“Explain . . . rules?”

“Rules, son. We have to have a few rules, an image to maintain. You’re in one of the best haunted cemeteries in New England.”

For a brief moment, Rip felt as if his eyes were going to bug out of his head. It was really funny, in a way—he’d always heard the expression, but couldn’t quite picture it. He didn’t have to anymore. He could feel it.

“Haunted . . . ceme . . . ceme”

“Cemetery.” The old fart had the nerve to grin at him, the cigar still billowing the smoke clouds.

There it was. No denying it any longer. The reason he had no wounds, the white room. If he’d still been breathing, he’d have heaved a huge sigh of annoyance. As it was, he only uttered the epithet.

“Shit!”

“No, just a certain amount of compost for the flowers,” the old fart answered with another blinking grin. “You know, I don’t like to brag, but we have the best gardens of any bone yard in the whole state.”

Rip shook his head. “You gotta be kiddin’ me. Please say you’re kiddin’ me”

“About the gardens? I never kid about gardens . . . or flowers. I love flowers. Beautiful things, lovely smells.”

Rip rolled his eyes. “Look, I ain’t dead. Okay? It ain’t happenin’.”

“Oh, you’re dead all right,” the old man answered cheerfully. “Hell of an end, too. Blam-blam-blam-blam-in the chest. Four slugs, a bit messy. Lovely funeral. Nice family you got.”

“Shit,” Rip answered.

“And this lovely girl sang that Ave Maria. Shubert, not the Gounod. Not a big fan of the Gounod. Now Shubert, *he* knew how to make an Ave Maria.”

“Oh, God.”

“Loved that movie. That nice young John Denver person. God, what a character!”

Rip could only nod. For a dead man, he was working up a hell of a nauseous state—

“It’s not nauseous, son. You’re dead. You don’t get nauseous.”

Rip tossed a dirty look to the coot. “Stop diggin’ in my head, old fart!”

The old man waggled his cigar and took a few more puffs, a mischievous look on his face.

“Rules”

Rip looked into the brown, mirthful eyes. “Wait . . . *wait!* Who the hell are you?”

“Rule number one, that’s your home. When you’re not out in the neighborhood, you’re in your home. Simple. That’s where you stay dead. We try to give a little of the comforts of home, but you’ll be able to decorate however you want.”

“Wait . . . how do I—?”

“Rule number two, remember that we are a haunted cemetery. You’ll be expected to spook the odd make out artist and gravestone rubber. The tourists expect that and we don’t like to disappoint the little darlings. Remember, they are our bread and butter . . . so to speak.”

“Tourists?”

“Rule number three, you’re expected to do a little community service while you’re here. You’ll want to move on eventually, but for now, this is where you lay your bones and you need to give a little back to the community.” The self-styled guardian angel tipped a wink, adding, “We’ll discuss how you can do that after you’ve settled in, met your neighbors.”

Rip stared openly, managing a weak nod.

“Rule number four, your counselor will be by to set up your therapy.” The aged face turned grave. “Seriously, son—and I cannot stress this enough—for you to move on to your final reward, you need to go to counseling.” He gave a friendly wink. “You’ll thank me later.”

Rip nodded again. “What . . . when . . . how . . . who . . . ?”

Suddenly, there came the sounds of voices from every direction. Rip watched as diaphanous bodies rose up from the stones and crypts, each one talking or laughing. He heard voices calling out names of friends, who answered with cheery hellos. There came an “Oh, Trudy,” from one corner, and a “quick, Marvin, guess what I heard,” from another.

“Holy Mother of God,” Rip muttered, staring wildly around him.

His eyes came back to rest on the old man, who seemed to be waiting patiently. When he had Rip’s full attention, he took the cigar out of his mouth. With a grin, he doffed the fishing hat from his head and gave a deep bow. When he stood again, he walked over and put an arm around Rip’s shoulders. With hat in hand, he gestured to the crowd beginning to walk their way.

“Son, my name is Nattie Birnbaum. I am your guardian angel and *this* is our neighborhood. Welcome home, Robert Isaac Porter. It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?”

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**Part Two**  
**" . . . In the Neighborhood . . . "**

Nattie firmly seated the cigar back in the corner of his mouth. Rip was fascinated at the finger of flame that grew from the old man's nail as he re-lit the cigar. With a few puffs, the tip was glowing to Nattie's satisfaction. He grinned and winked both eyes at Rip, seeming to wait for something.

"How . . . how did you do that?"

Nattie shrugged and snapped it gone. "Little sleight of hand. Stick around, kid, and I'll show you a lot more than that."

"You . . . I mean . . . *I* can do that?"

Nattie simply smiled, shrugging his shoulders and puffing another cloud or two.

Rip knew he wasn't going to get a straight answer; Nattie was too busy being cute. He turned his focus, instead, to the little roadway that meandered around the graves. Nattie had been right about one thing, they'd come to see him. But they weren't stopping. Rip watched the folks as they passed, always looking at him out of the corner of their eyes as they floated past him.

"What?" He looked back at Nattie. "What, I grow a tail when I kicked off?"

"Feel like it," the old man answered with a grin. "No, they're just curious about you."

"So? Why don't they come talk to me?"

"New arrival. No one wants to be the first."

"Why?"

"Bad manners," Nattie answered, taking another puff. "Like showing up early at a party."

Rip shook his head. "That's just dumb. You mean you cats still care about that?"

"Ah, the social graces of life and the living," Nattie said, sighing with an almost wistful longing. "Some things don't change when you die, son. They just become more important."

Rip opened his mouth to say something before a shrill call interrupted him.

"Yooo hoooo! Oh, booooooys!"

A rather large cloud of smoke wafted past his nose and Rip commented, "Well, *she* doesn't care about social graces."

Nattie chuckled, sending another cloud out into the air. "That's your welcome committee of one, social graces not needed."

"Oh, boys," the cheerful voice intoned.

"Hello, Gracie," Nattie answered, happily puffing on his stogie—most of it wafting into her face.

The new arrival, for *her* part, paid it no mind. She absentmindedly waved it from her face with one hand and stuck it out to Rip.

"Nattie, deary, you must introduce us." The old man didn't even take the cigar out of his mouth as she kept right on going. "Oh my, such a good looking young man. You must be our new neighbor. Hello, I'm Gracie. Everyone calls me Gracie. My dear husband always called me that." She screwed up her face before shaking her head. "I never did know why."

Rip felt as confused as she looked. "Uh . . . well . . . uh . . . isn't that your name?"

Just as quickly, the smile returned to her face, accompanied by a look of sudden insight. "Why, of course, that's it. Of course, that's my name, dearie. So, you call me that too."

He bit down on a comment and just shook her hand. "Uh . . . Rip; my pals always call me Rip."

"What an interesting name," Gracie bubbled. "What does it mean?"

"Huh?"

“Your name, deary, what does it mean?”

“Uh . . . well.” He jerked his head back to look at Nattie, his mouth working and nothing coming out.

“Gracie, dear,” Nattie interrupted. “What’s that you brought?”

“Oh!”

Rip saw the dish in her hand, watched her hold it out to him. He took it from her, nodding his thanks. It was a standard casserole dish, complete with a lid. Then he lifted the top off and saw absolutely nothing for contents. His eyes opened wide for a moment, then turned up to see Gracie’s beaming smile.

“I hope you like it,” she exclaimed joyfully. “It’s my favorite, you know.”

“But . . . but . . . uh . . . .”

She giggled, more like a little girl than the matronly woman of middle age that she appeared to be. “Now, has Nattie explained everything to you?”

“Gracie, he just got here,” Nattie answered.

“Oh, Nattie, you haven’t even told him about . . . ?” She clucked her tongue and shook her head. “Falling down on the job here, aren’t you?”

Nattie pulled himself up, squaring off his shoulders. “Grace, I’ll have you know that I’m respecting his space. Just what the youngsters say when they come here; gotta respect their space.”

“Space, shmace,” she said, tossing her hand.

Rip felt like he was standing between the Williams sisters at Wimbledon. “But . . . uh . . . ma’am?”

“Listen, honey,” she said, resting her hand on his arm. “Nattie forgets sometimes, but you gotta know the lay out, y’ hear?”

“Grace, you’ll tell him all wrong.”

“Nattie tell you about our little home yet?”

“Grace!”

Rip shook his head. He started to hold out the casserole dish to her, but she plowed on as if she was blissfully unaware of anything.

“Now, see, we’re all just one big happy family, but the solids don’t know that. We don’t tell ‘em nuthin’ different, mind, but . . . well . . . .”

“Uh . . . solids?” Rip peeked at Nattie who was furiously puffing his stogy.

“Oh yeah,” she answered, “that’s what we call the living. Some’ll call ‘em ‘breathers,’ but I like callin’ ‘em solids.”

“Uh . . . okay.”

“Gracie, let me tell this—”

“So, anyway, we have our own little community here in the ‘in between,’ and we all do some community service, you know? Keep up the appearances.”

“Appearances?”

“Oh sure, that’s what we do. See? We have the Vanishing Committee and they do lovely things in the mausoleum.”

“Vanishing Committee . . . yeah, right.”

“And there’s the Eek Club. Oh they shriek so beautifully, it’s such a joy to hear them. And then, of course, there’s the Ghouls Scouts. They teach the little ones how to do their part and they have the best time. They get together and have scream-a-longs and tell solid stories.”



Rip felt his eyes start bugging out, the dish in his hands was momentarily forgotten. “Uh . . . scream-a-longs? Solid stories?”

Gracie sighed, apparently not used to such obvious stupidity, but she soldiered on. “Oh yes, and you’ll have to find your talent. Blend in with our little organizations. Can’t disappoint the tourists, you know.”

“Tourists?”

“Grace!”

“Oh, Nattie,” she grumbled.

“Gracie, dear, the poor boy is confused enough without help.”

“Fine,” she answered. “I suppose you’ll tell him all about the boring things and none of the *good* things. That’s you, Nattie; you take all the fun out of being dead.”

Nattie seemed to be genuinely insulted. “Grace, allow me to spell a few things out for you, here—”

“Nattie Birnbaum,” she huffed, her hands on her hips. “You must think me an absolute dunce. I can spell just fine, a-f-e-w-t-h-i-n-g-s! So there!”

Rip didn’t know whether to laugh or run as fast as he could. Instead, he held out the dish again. “Uh . . . ma’am?”

“You call me Grace, dear,” she said, her fit of pique dissolved in an instant and a smile replacing the frown.

“Okay. Uh . . . Grace?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Well . . . I mean . . . thank you for this, but . . . what do I do with it?”

“Well, you enjoy it, silly.”

Now it was Nattie’s turn to chuckle and Rip glared at her. Nattie only shrugged and nodded in Gracie’s direction.

“But . . . I mean,” he sputtered. “Grace, there’s nothing in it.”

“Hmm?”

“The dish.” He held it out to her, empty and pristine. “You gave me an empty casserole.”

She made a noise that sounded like it was supposed to be a sigh, rolled her eyes, and crossed her arms. “You men,” she answered. “Of course it’s empty.”

“Huh?”

“No one eats here, silly boy. We’re dead.”

“But . . .” Rip’s mouth worked for a moment before the question came pouring out. “But, what do I do with it?”

She gave a smile of such sweetness. “You’ll plant some nice flowers in it.” The smile evaporated in a slight frown as she added, “Problem is, we only get lillies.”

With that, she flounced off, leaving Rip holding the ceramic dish, still totally baffled. He watched her as she turned a corner behind the mausoleum. He could only shake his head and wonder at what kind of joint his parents had interred him in. When he turned back to Nattie, the other man was standing with a big grin and the cigar clutched firmly in his fingers.

“Go ahead,” Nattie said to him.

“Huh?”

“With the questions. I expect you got a lot of questions popping up in your head.”

Rip weakly nodded and looked back at the object in his hands.

“Here, put that down,” Nattie said, “and let’s take a walk. I’ll explain as we go.”

“But what do I do with this?”

Nattie gave an owlish blink, both eyes closing and opening. “Makes a nice ashtray. Just drop it, son. Let’s go.”

Rip did as he was told and got in step with the older man. “Nattie, what did she mean about the . . . what did she call it? The ‘in-between?’”

“This is the ‘in-between,’ son,” Nattie answered, waving his hand to gesture at the surrounding area. “We’re not with the living, not part of their side. But we’ve not left it completely.”

“What does that mean?”

Nattie smiled. “It means that we’re the vapors. In our world, we’re solid and they’re see through. In their world, it’s the other way.”

“Nattie?”

“Yes?”

“Is this . . . I mean . . . are we in . . . uh . . .”

Nattie rolled the stogie between his fingers, watching the brown leaf hold firm. When he finally looked up into Rip’s eyes, he simply answered. “This is the in-between, son. We’re in between them and the final destination.”

“You mean . . . Heaven?”

Nattie’s smile was warm and friendly. “Some call it Heaven. Some call it Nirvana. Some call it the Summerland. Some even call it Albuquerque, to the right of Pizmo Beach. But it’s where you go after here.”

Rip had sudden images of Sunday school and a very stern minister with some rather fiery notions of the afterlife. “So, this isn’t it? Heaven, I mean?”

“Oh no, son. This is only a way station before you head out.”

“How come you’re not there?”

Nattie began to puff on his cigar again. “Well, let’s just say I have a calling here.”

“A calling?”

“Of course,” the old man answered. “You might call what I do here a mentoring. I welcome you young pups to the neighborhood, introduce you around, and help you do what you need to do.”

“Oh. Is that what you’re doing with me?”

Nattie patted Rip on the back. “You are what I call a special interest case.”

“What does that mean?”

“I have a special interest in you,” he answered with a smile. “That home you were robbing belongs to my grandson and his wife.”

Rip gulped, stopping dead in his tracks. Nattie continued on a pace or two before stopping.

“You think I should be upset with you?”

Rip nodded, watching the elderly ghost.

“Well, I’ll tell you the truth,” Nattie continued. “It has more to do with you than my grandson. I watch the house, keep track of my great-grandson, but I felt you. Felt your goodness. You have a good streak inside you, Rip; one that’s not meant for thievery and the like. You took a wrong turn and had a bad end. But you’re not a bad boy. I can help you.”

Rip looked down at the ground, sticking his hands in his pockets. “It’s a lost cause, old man. Just ask my old lady, she’ll tell you.”

Rip felt a hand stroke his cheek and looked into the kind eyes. Nattie patted his cheek, smiling and giving the owlish blink again. He couldn’t help it; Rip smiled back at him.

“Your mother, God bless her, never felt that way, son. She doesn’t now. You’ll see. She’ll be here every day.”

“Think so?”

“I know so,” Nattie answered. “You’re a good boy inside, son. That’s what counts.”

“Thanks, Nattie.”

Nattie nodded, then took another puff of the cigar. “Besides, my grandson is a putz and a cheapskate. What you were stealing was plate at best. The only thing expensive in that house is the rock on his wife’s hand and even *that’s* a cubic zirconia. Now, let’s go. I want you should see the neighborhood.”

Rip let go of the first laugh he’d had since before the infamous job that got him here. He laughed loud and long, letting it come up from his toes. It felt good to laugh again.

“Nattie, you meshuge yutz; how about a game of checkers?”

The voice was gravelly, full of the sound of bourbon and branch, of well loved stogies, and an age gone by. Rip turned back to see another old man sitting in front of the mausoleum, the chair leaning back against the marble. He wore an old hat that looked like something his Gramps used to wear. He had on a pair of Bermuda shorts and an old tshirt. The other old man gave a wave of his hand, then gestured to the other side of the bench.

The returning answer was just as full of mischief. “Chester, last time I played, you cheated.”

“Humph,” the other man grunted. “Cheat! Ha! You should know better.”

“You run a crooked board, you old coot,” Nattie answered good-naturedly. “I want you to meet my protégé, Rip Porter. Rip, this is my good friend, Chester Finkelstein, scourge of the checker board.”

Rip nodded. “Hi. Good to meetcha.”

“Fresh blood, Nattie?”

“New kid on the block.”

He nodded, then said, “Welcome to the neighborhood, young man. You just call me Chet, okay?”

“Sure,” Rip answered, smiling. “I’d like that.”

“Good. So, Nattie, come let me beat your pants off.”

“Does the expression ‘cold day in hell’ mean anything, you old fool?”

“Told ya; meshuge!”

“Rip,” Nattie said, gesturing with the stogie in his hand, “hard as it is to believe, that old fart there is the one to talk to if you need to know anything about anyone. The old mensch has nothing better to do than play yenta around here.”

“Humph,” Chet grunted again. “You’re just sore because I whooped your pants on that last game. I’ll do it again. Sit your tucas down and get ready for a slaughter!”

Nattie turned around to Rip. “Hey, kid. You mind?”

Rip shrugged. “No, go ahead.”

Nattie sat down and the two men bent over the board. Rip stood watching as they started chatting.

“I suppose you heard the ruckus last night?”

Nattie pushed a piece into an open diagonal square. “Ruckus? What now?”

“Oy, the little goyim been upsetting old lady Dubose again, messin’ with her home. The little brats should be hung up by their thumbs and spit on.” To emphasize it, Chet spat on the ground at his feet before moving his piece. “The little monsters.”

Nattie nodded his agreement.

“Who is ‘old lady Dubose?’”

Nattie moved, then addressed Rip. “The first resident of the place, the local brats like to come kick her stone and urinate on her resting place. Very disrespectful.”

“Ah, Nattie, she brings it on herself.” To Rip, he said, “She’s a little yenta, not a kind word about nobody. When the little brats come, they make her rise up and she starts cussin’ and yellin’. They do it for sport because she makes a stink, in more ways than one.”

“It’s still not nice,” Nattie interjected. “She’s a lonely old lady and they don’t make it easier.”

Rip listened, then asked, “No one likes her?”

“She’s hard to like,” Nattie answered. “Besides, she’s entertainment for the little putzes.”

“They should still rot, the little schmucks. To do that to a little old lady, first resident!”

Chester spat again, cursing in what Rip presumed was Hebrew.

Rip stood, watching and listening to their prattle but not really a part of it. Gossip wasn’t his thing, never had been. The last thing he wanted to do was listen to it here. He put a hand on Nattie’s shoulder to get his attention.

“Hey, you cats mind if I wander a bit? Is that ok?”

Nattie gave a rather absentminded nod as he studied the board, absorbed in his next move. It was Chet who answered.

“Sure, kid, cop a walk. Have fun. Don’t wander too far.”

Rip did as he was told and took off.

He couldn’t quite remember a day like this, so peaceful and quiet. It was as still as the grave here, but not in a bad way. It was . . . homey, gentle. There was no rush here, no need to get his ass in gear. He had no clock to punch, no one to impress, no Monk to try and keep two steps ahead of. There was no danger, no anger, and no need of any kind. He watched the other “residents” as they went about their business, waved or nodded when someone did the same to him.

He wasn’t watching where he was

going; he was too busy watching the blue sky and the clouds passing over head. He was also wondering if the sun, moon, and stars were the same ones that had shone over his head when he was living. It wasn’t until he heard the wild giggles and shrieking that he realized he had, indeed, walked a far pace.

*“Thou vicious heathens! Thou miscreant monsters! A pox upon thee! Leave me be! Leave me be!”*

Rip looked in the direction of the shouting and saw an elderly woman, raising her fists and waving them wildly at two Goth types. The punks—two guys—were dressed in black, complete with eyeliner and red lips. The woman was wearing something that looked like a costume from some Shakespeare leaflet he’d seen. What caught his attention wasn’t the clothes they were all wearing, so much as the action that was occurring.

When Chester had said the old lady could raise a stink, he wasn’t joking. The two Goth-burgers were kicking at the tombstone, cackling wildly, but they were also holding their noses. And every kick at the stone would elicit another screech from the woman, and another waft of the stench that she was evidently sending out.

He stood and watched; for how long, he wasn’t sure. But when he saw the tears in the old woman’s eyes, that was all she wrote.

“HEY! YOU! DIRTBAGS!”

Without stopping his stride, Rip calmly walked over and stuck his fingers in the redheaded Goth's eyes. That stopped him dead in his tracks. This one reached up and grabbed his face as if he's been stung.

"Mick!" The blonde stopped, staring at his friend. "What's up, dude?"

"Man, I don't know. All of a sudden . . . I think my contacts are screwed, man."

"Like hell they are," Rip grumbled, and poked the one called Mick right in the adam's apple. Mick made a sudden choking noise, standing with his eyes wide open.

Rip wasn't done.

"You jackasses have a lot o' free time on your hands," he muttered. "Let's see if you can use the time to pick this out of your ass."

Rip turned around to the blonde, smiling as he did so. The expression on the guy's face told Rip that the punk could see him. So, he did what any self-respecting ghost would do in a graveyard. He stepped right up to old blondie *and walked right through him*. But as he did so, he remembered to grab a piece of material and gave Blondie a hell of an akashic wedgie.

Rip walked over to the woman and stood at her side. Mick wasn't moving; he was too busy choking with his eyes bugging out. His buddy was doing some sort of a dance; grabbing at his crotch and his butt with no success. The material wasn't budging somehow and that suited Rip right down to the ground.

He made a snorting sound, something that seemed to get the attention of the two punks. They jerked around in his direction, both of them openly staring and turning as pale as a sheet of paper. Rip raised his arms and, in his best scary movie voice, yelled, "Leave this place and never return. Leave or I will curse you, haunt you forever." He rounded it off with a long, drawn out groan.

Mick and Blondie practically fell all over the ground trying to get out of there; they couldn't run fast enough. Blondie was still working on his shorts when he hit the stone bench, tripping on the blacktop of the road. Mick pulled him up by the back of his jeans, making the wedgie even worse, and tossing him in the convertible parked there by the side. They burned rubber and squealed out of the cemetery.

"Prithee, who art thou to disturb my rest?"

Rip turned around to the woman. She looked angry enough to chew nails and spit carpet tacks, as his Granny used to say.

"Huh?"

"Thy friends have disturbed my place of rest and thou hast . . . thou hast aided . . . Thou art . . ."

"Look, lady, I just saved your sorry . . ." he started, rather confused and angry. After all, he'd just done his good deed for the day—until he looked down and saw the name on the stone; Patience Dubose, 1783.

The date on her stone said everything. He wasn't sure how he knew what to do, but he suddenly had a good idea. Rip held his hands up to her, a gesture of peace. He suddenly remembered the afternoons after school—before he dropped out—sitting with Mom. He knew what the right action was to take, something no one had ever done before—of that he was sure.

Rip crossed back to the woman and took a courtly bow, making a leg and bending low over it.

"My lady, I humbly offer my apologies for the disturbing of thy slumber. For thou art a true lady and a gentleman doth not insult with such unseemly behavior. Prithee, wilt thou forgive?"

The woman seemed quite taken aback. But she wasn't saying no, either.

Rip held out his hand to her and she responded by placing hers in it. In his best Errol Flynn, Rip kissed the back of her hand and released it. He stepped back and bowed deeply again. When he looked up again, she was smiling at him. And the age had dropped off of her face, making her look young and pretty.

“Thou hast no need of forgiveness,” she said, her sweet smile never wavering. “Thou hast offered comfort and safety. It is I shall ask *thy* forgiveness.”

Rip put his hand to his heart. “Nay, gentle lady, but I shall be thy champion against the brigand.”

She nodded to him only once before the doorway opened up at her feet. She paused long enough to smile, then continued down.

“I expect she’ll be leaving us soon,” came the gravely voice behind him.

Rip turned back to see Nattie standing there.

“You did good, kid. Me and Chet, we had a bet you’d be the one to tame her. Looks like I owe that old fart a stogie.”

“I don’t understand, Nattie.”

“You will, son, you will. Just one question, though. Where’d you learn that talking?”

“My mom,” Rip answered, chuckling to himself. “She’s a real freak for those old shows about England and Henry the VIII and all that crap. We used to sit and watch the old pirate movies with Basil Rathbone and that guy that tossed his cape on the ground in front of Queen Elizabeth. We’d eat popcorn.” He shrugged. “I was still her Robbie. You know?”

Nattie nodded. “I know.”

Rip needed to cover, the clutch was back at his throat and tears were threatening. “Anyway, that’s where.”

“Well, you done good, kid. You talked nice to her, words she could understand. I think she’ll be moving on now.”

“What does that mean?”

Nattie gestured with his hand and Rip went to stand with him. “Not now. You’ll find out when it’s time. For now, know you did the right thing and you helped. Which brings me to your community service.”

“Yeah?”

“I saw what you did to those hooligans. I’m impressed.” Rip waited while Nattie lit a fresh cigar. “No one here’s been able to make a connection with the solid side. Best we can do is simple noises—groans, moans, and screaming, a few vapors, that sort of thing.”

“You mean . . . *no one*?”

“Nope. So, *that’s* your job. That’s what you’ll do to help out. You’ll get your little section of the neighborhood to haunt and you’ll do a little knocking off of hats, moving flowers. The tourists will flock here. We’re very famous for our haunted cemetery.”

“So . . . you want me to . . . uh . . . .”

“They call it poltergeist activity. You’ll have a partner to help you, teach you a few things. You up for it?”

“Do I get to stick it to punks like that?”

Nattie gave his owl blink and smiled.

Rip grinned. “Far out! When do I start?”

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Part Three
“Right Neighborly of Ya”

Nattie had left Rip back at his grave with the promise that a new friend was going to be coming soon. The only problem with being dead was that time meant nothing. Soon could just as easily be twenty minutes, tomorrow, or two hundred years. Rip was finding that he couldn't tell the difference—there was no *feel* to it like there had been when he was alive. Sure he could watch the sun pass overhead, but there was always that gauzy quality to it all—a perpetual, forever kind of partial solar eclipse.

After a pass or two, he watched the doorway open at his feet. What the hell, he had to go down there sometime.

“Hey, you!”

That wasn't Nattie's voice. His curiosity piqued, he turned around to see who'd called him. He saw a young man, about his own age, standing by the road side. He was wearing an old fashioned cap, something along the lines of what the old coots that golfed with his dad had worn. This guy was wearing overalls and a tshirt, and what appeared to be penny loafers on his feet. He had the handsome features of a young man, but he stood slightly hunched over with his hands in his pockets. The dude's smile was curled at one corner of his mouth and there were tiny creases in the corners of his eyes.

“Now, you gotta be Rip. Am I right?”

Rip nodded.

“They call me Fargo.” He put out his hand, giving a big grin as he did so.

Rip took the offered hand, answering back with his own smile. “Pleased to meetcha.”

“Hey, me too.” Fargo stuck his thumbs in his pockets. “So, how's the flop? You jake with the joint?”

“Huh?”

“You know, the grass roots.”

Rip shook his head. *What the hell is this guy talking about?*

Fargo chuckled. “Your final resting place. Everything make the grade?”

The light finally dawned. “Oh . . . *oh!* Oh yeah, sure,” Rip answered, nodding his head vehemently. “It's great. Totally rocks.”

Fargo reached up and scratched his head. “Rocks? Well, don't know that one, but I reckon it's good, right?”

“Yeah,” Rip answered. “Yeah, it's good. That what ‘jake’ means?”

The other man's face lit up like a Christmas tree. “Now you're on the money!” He gazed over Rip's shoulder and whistled through his teeth. With admiration in his voice, Fargo commented, “Your solids got a lot o' simoleans, I bet.”

“Sim . . . oh, you mean *the green*? Cash?” Rip shrugged. “I guess. I never thought about it. Why?”

“You got a great spot, pal. See?”

Rip shook his head, confused.

Fargo turned him around, pointing at the section Rip had been buried in. “Now, where *you’re* layin’ up, see; that’s for you shmoes that come from a real cushy life. What ya calls the ‘burbs.”

“‘Burbs?”

“Suburbs, my friend.” Fargo rocked on his heels, pleased with himself. “Heard that one from a solid come to visit. The *suburbs*, he called it. Said it like it was a real swanky joint.”

“Oh, yeah, the ‘burbs, right.”

Fargo leaned in. “I ain’t got no action like you got. Me, I was a—.”

“Yooooo hooooo! Oh boys!”

Both men turned back to the path in time to see a lady walking toward them, waving her hand wildly in the air. A gulp to his side pulled Rip’s attention back to Fargo, who was turning bright crimson. He seemed riveted to the woman, not taking his sights off her for a moment. With a rough grab, Fargo pulled his cap, releasing a tumble of tawny blond curls. He stood twisting the material in his hands, obviously nervous. When he saw Rip’s amused stare, he gave a nervous chuckle.

“Uh . . . that’s . . . uh . . .”

“Well, hello, you must be the new gentleman,” she said, making the final approach to where they stood.

She was beautiful; Rip could see that right away. Porcelain skin that had been touched by the sun’s kiss in life, to give a blushing glow to her cheeks. Death hadn’t taken that away from her. She was dressed in pale green silk and lace, her pretty blonde hair had been pulled back from her face. Her eyes were the greenest he’d ever seen. But she was . . . *wow!* Suddenly, he understood Fargo’s reaction.

“Hello,” he answered.

“Hi, Fargo,” she tossed out, barely looking at him, but batting long brownish blonde eyelashes just the same.

Fargo did little more than grunt and stare at his hands.

“I’m Lorriann,” she said, a musical lilt in her voice, and she put her hand out to Rip.

He took it in his, gingerly giving it three pumps. He was afraid to do any thing else; he caught a narrowing of Fargo’s eyes. Rip let go and stuck his hands back in his pockets.

“I’m Rip,” he answered.

“I’m glad to meet you. Welcome to the neighborhood. I hope everything’s okay.”

“It’s great,” he answered. “I’m settling in, I guess.”

“Well, I’m just letting everyone know that we’re gonna be having a to-do at the Mause, later.”

Fargo’s eyes strayed for the first time. Rip wanted to know what he was looking at, but he was more curious about something else. “Mause? To-do?”

“Oh yes,” Lorriann answered. “The Ghou Scout are having their traditional merit badge ceremony and Scream-a-long. At the mausoleum. It would be just wonderful if you came.”

“Ghou scouts?”

“Oh yes, and you’ll probably be in their ranks very soon, you know. For you newcomers, the Ghou Scout teach you the ins and outs of haunting.” She gave a girlish giggle. “Can’t do your community service without some helpful hints. You earn your badges and just have a great time.”

“Oh. Okay.” Rip was feeling a bit dubious, but what the hell.

“We always have a scream-a-long after. Let the old pros get their hand in with the newbies.”

Fargo was moving away a little, but not before taking Rip's elbow and pulling him back too. Laying a finger over his lips to insure Rip's silence, he then pointed behind Lorriann, who was chattering along merrily and oblivious to anything.

Rip suddenly understood the concept of "solids." After the previous episode with the vandals, he'd noticed a difference between himself and the guys. But it wasn't something he dwelled on. This time was different as a rather well dressed couple walked down the pathway. The woman was carrying something that looked like a map, while the man grumbled as they walked.

"This is stupid. Where the hell did they bury her? Hmm?"

"Oh shut up, Herbert. It's not my fault your mother got hidden with the rest of the riff raff. I told you, *you* should have been the damn executor. I told you, didn't I?"

"Stupid old goat didn't name me, all right? What else do you want from my life?"

It was funny watching these two walk, her slapping him in the arm and telling him to grow some testicles and be a man. It was like watching moving smoke images; they had form and substance, but a good puff of wind would make them dissipate into thin air.

Solids, yeah. Solid on their side, smoke on ours. In-between. I'm standing in-between. I got it. I really got it now.

Fargo seemed to be waiting for something. It didn't feel like too long a wait. No sooner than the couple were almost even with the chattering woman, than he turned to her and spoke, finally.

"Hey, Lorraine, tell Rip about the badges."

It was a fast change; she stopped talking and turned a cool look to the two of them. Her complexion had changed a little too, or maybe he was seeing things. For a moment, Rip thought she'd gotten a bit grayer in color. "My name is Lorriann, dear."

Another of the residents strolled by. "LauraAnna, darling, how are you?"

This time, there was no mistaking the changes. The dress became dingy and torn in places. Her face went to the color of concrete blocks and the green eyes turned cold and narrow. The long, beautiful fingers began to curl into claws.

"Lorriaaaaaaaaaaaaann!!"

By now, the solids were beginning to feel something. Rip watched them come to a complete standstill, the wife looking wildly in all directions. The husband had a grip on her arm, but Rip was suddenly sure it was to keep *himself* from bolting off.

Another resident had joined the small circle that was beginning to form around them. "Hey, Lauren, sweetie; what are we doing for scream-a-long this time?"

The woman lost all semblance of her beauty, going stone. In the blink of an eye, her hair frizzed and became Medusa-like. The green was gone from her eyes, as they went blood red. The dress shredded more, becoming dirtier and dingier—becoming a death shroud. The hands came out, claws extended. She rose up to the full extent of her height, smoke beginning to billow out of her ears.

With a mighty shriek, she screamed out three syllables. "*Looooorrrrrriiiiiieeeeeaaaaann!!*"

The resulting screech set every headstone, rock, and grave marker to shuddering as if an earthquake had chosen that moment to erupt beneath their feet. Trees shivered, leaves twisting and blowing in rustling twisters. The couple suddenly got wide eyed, staring at the place where the "ghost" had suddenly appeared. Both of the solids turned whiter than the spectre before them. They were clutching each other—barely standing now—the woman's breath hitching in her throat. Lorriann, for her part, was still screeching and getting uglier by the shriek. Her eyes were really bulging out now; her skin was peeling in places. This was getting good.

The wife finally gave it up, tossing the map and disengaging her arm from her husband's grasp. She took off in a run that would have made an Olympic sprinter envious. Her husband let loose a scream that sounded like his manhood had departed for places unknown and he was soon following her. The small crowd dissolved into giggles and guffaws, with a few waving goodbye to the disappearing solids.

Fargo was bent over double, tears streaming down his cheeks. He was laughing so hard, he couldn't talk. Rip watched him, shaking his head. Well, it *was* pretty funny, but it wasn't *that* funny. Was it?

"Oh! That just tweaks my muffins! You'd think after all the time I've been here; they'd know my name by now!" Lorriann was back to her lovely self, the green eyes twinkling with mirth and no sign of the demon left. She batted the eyelashes and smiled her prettiest smile. "So, will you come? To the to-do? Will you?"

How could he refuse?

"Sure, I'll be there. I might as well get better acquainted with the neighbors, right?"

"Absolutely," she giggled.

Fargo had managed to recover himself and was standing with the mooning, puppy dog look again. The only hint of his fit of laughter was the streaming trail from his eyes. She deftly pulled a small handkerchief from a pocket of her skirt, walked over, and patted gently at his cheeks. There was no other communication; she turned away from them and continued on her way again.

"Wow," Fargo sighed. "Isn't she the dyin' end?"

"Huh? Uh . . . yeah, she's real pretty."

Fargo looked at Rip and snorted. "*Pretty?* She's . . . wow! She's the bee's knees. She's . . . she's"

"All that and a bag o' chips?"

"Ain't gettin' ya."

"Means she's the best there is."

Fargo nodded and watched Lorriann walk out of his line of sight, passing around a rather tall, angelic grave-marker.

Rip swallowed the chuckle in his throat and clapped Fargo on the shoulder. "I take it you got a thing for the lady?"

"Who, me?" Fargo turned back to Rip, wide eyed and flustered. "Oh yeah! She's the swellest dame in the place. She's got class, she's got style . . . she makes me laugh when she does that banshee thing." His face began to glow as he talked, a sweet smile replacing the baffled expression.

"You got the hots for her, huh?" Rip was smiling back.

"Oh no, pally, I'm mad about her. I'm . . . I mean, she's . . . what did you say?"

"All that and a bag o' chips."

"Yeah," Fargo breathed.

"So tell her, man," Rip said, gently nudging his new friend in the shoulder.

"Oh hell no, Rip," he said, his shoulders slumping a bit. Fargo kicked at a stone, his foot passing through it instead. "Geez Louise, she doesn't even know I'm dead."

"Hey," Rip answered, clapping the man on the back, "from what I saw, she was noticing plenty."

Fargo's face had a hopeful smile forming on the lips. "You think so?"

"Tell you what, I'll find out. I'll scope out the territory and give you the four-one-one. Deal?"

“Four-one . . . what?” Fargo had lost his happy thoughts.

“Trust me, man, okay? You just show up for the scream-a-long.”

“Where you going?”

Rip smiled. “I got an errand to run, someone I need to talk to. I’ll meet you there.”

“But—”

“Just trust me, Fargo. And meet me there.”

Rip took off at a gallop to find him, the one man who knew everything about everyone. He was right where Rip expected him to be—right in front of the mausoleum; staring at the checkerboard and chewing on the end of a lit stogie.

“Uh . . . Chester?”

“Ah, good, kid. Come sit, play me a game.”

“But . . . I don’t know how to play.”

The old man smiled. “Even better! Come sit, take a load off.”

Rip did as he was told.

“The object of this game is to capture all my men. These little guys can only move one way, but you get kinged and they can go everywhere. But only on the diagonal. I’ll show you as we play.”

“Uh, okay.”

“You’re red. You go first.”

Rip gulped and took his first move.

“So, kid. What’s on your mind? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Chester? Why does everyone call Lorrieann the wrong name? And why is it so funny?”

The old man chuckled and made his move. While he waited for Rip, he talked.

“And that seems rotten to you, does it?”

“Well, yeah, it does.”

“She’s a lovely girl, as you and a few of the other males noticed. Has a wonderful talent as the banshee of the neighborhood. I take it you caught her act?”

“Yeah,” Rip answered, moving another piece.

Chester was quick to jump over it, deftly drawing it from the board. “Well, see, she needs a little help with that one. So, when the marks come in, the kids take turns settin’ her off, see? Gets her going, she does her service, all’s good.”

“So no one hates her?”

“Good heavens, kid, why would you think that? She’s a lovely girl, very nice. Such a shame about her life.”

Rip looked up from the board. “What was wrong with her life?”

“Ignored, kid. Lovely girl, lots of talent, mostly ignored. Parents rich, but never around. She married a brown noser in her father’s employment.” Chester jumped two more men. “He didn’t notice her enough to spell her name right on the tombstone. Very sad for such a lovely, sweet girl.”

“Oh,” Rip answered. “That sucks. She *is* a nice chick.”

“So, the banshee was her way of getting attention and her community service. Along with taking care of the Ghoul Scouts, she’s a very busy lady.”

Rip nodded, silent while Chester cleared the board of another three of his pieces. He worked his mouth, then made his next statement.

“You know, Fargo has the hots for her. He thinks she’s . . . well, he has a crush on her.”

Chester sat back, smiling as he caught Rip's wary gaze. "Yes, he does. He's another one with a history, but that's for another game. I've cleaned you out of this one."

Rip looked down at the board, chuckling as he did so. "Yeah, you did."

"You got a plan, junior?"

"Hmm?" He was hearing voices around him and knew it was time for the "to do" that Lorriann had mentioned. Rip gave the question a thought. "Yeah, I do. You said she was ignored, right?"

Chester nodded, puffing on the stogie.

"Then, I think she should have some attention." He stood up. "Thanks, Chester."

"Anytime, kid."

Rip turned away, heading for the crowd that had gathered to one side. Fargo was standing near the back, cap twisting in his hands. Rip started towards his new friend.

But something caught his eye and he diverted from his path. There was a small pot of lavender roses on a nearby grave. *No one's gonna miss one*, he thought. He reached out his hand . . . and closed his fingers on nothing. Cursing to himself, he tried again, focusing.

Come on, Rip, you did this, remember? You grabbed that little shmuck's undies and wedged 'em in his crack. You can pick up a damn rose.

It took all of his concentration, but he managed it. His fingers closed around the rose, the thorn making a light impression. But it was so heavy. He focused on that too, trying to lift the smoky flower . . . pulling on it . . . tugging it until the smoky quality had gone and the rose was solid in his hand. With a smile, he joined Fargo just as Lorriann started.

"Thank you, everyone," she greeted everyone, beaming from ear to ear. "We have some badges to pass out and one of our Ghoul Scouts has graduated into her Masters of Poltergeist. I'm so proud!"

Lorriann waved her hand and was joined by four of the standees—three males and one female, all of varying ages. Gracie's comment about "little ones" seemed to have been more figurative than real. Only one of the souls was what Rip would refer to as young, and he looked to be about 15 or so.

"Jamie, step up here. Jamie's earned his badge in Automatic Writing. He landed on some silly solids having a séance in the neighborhood." She gave a girlish giggle, finishing with, "He gave them a spirit message they won't soon forget. Here, Jamie."

One of the older men walked up and returned the smile she gave him. Reaching up, she touched Jamie's chest. When he turned to face the crowd, sure enough, there was a button on his shirt, right where she'd touched him. They all gave a round of applause and Jamie stepped back to his place, blushing as he went.

"Dave has earned his badge in Ectoplasmic Activity. Right in front of a priest, he made some lovely slime on a headstone. The poor man was so badly gotten away with that he left his Bible. Well done, Dave."

Again, she touched the man's chest and again, the button appeared. This one didn't blush as he was cheered back to his place in the line.

The last to get his badge was the youngest, his name was Will. Will was awarded with his badge in Free From Vapors, having successfully scared the cookies out of a group of Girl Scouts out for a merit badge of their own; although what that had to do with a haunted cemetery was over Rip's head. Will gave a big grin and clasped both his hands over his head, giving the old victory shake, and he stepped back to another thunderous ovation.

Rip decided to make his move.

“Hey, buddy, I got something for you.” He handed the rose to an astonished Fargo, who almost dropped it.

“Wha-wha-where did you . . . ? *How* did you . . . ?”

Rip just grinned and said nothing.

“But . . . you” Fargo looked at the rose as if he were looking at a diamond of sorts.

“Hey, that’s my talent, remember?”

Fargo shook his head. “Yeah . . . but . . . you.” He shrugged in acquiescence. “Okay, so . . . what do I do with this?”

“I happen to know a pretty little lady that would love that rose, and you got a thing for her. So take it to her!”

Fargo’s eyes widened and he shook his head rapidly. “Are you off your chump? I told you, she don’t even know I’m dead! She won’t . . . I mean”

“Listen to me, buddy. She knows, okay? I seen her. Man, she’s been makin’ eyes at you. You just won’t give her the time o’ day.”

Fargo shook his head, but Rip wasn’t taking no for an answer.

“Fargo, I got the four-one-one on her. She’s lonely. No one ever paid attention to her, her whole life. All she wants is someone to notice her, notice how she looks, what she likes.”

“She’s got a manacle, pally.”

Rip shook his head. “A what?”

Fargo pointed to the ring finger of his left hand. “A manacle . . . a weddin’ ring. She’s married.”

Rip laughed. “The key operative in the sentence is ‘*was*,’ buddy boy. ‘Til death us do part, dig?”

Fargo shook his head to show, he didn’t.

“It’s like I said, everyone always ignored her. Buddy, you like her. You won’t do that to her. Go on, give her the rose. You’ll see.”

Fargo looked towards the object of his affections, and Rip waited for him to walk off. But just as quickly, the dejected slump of the shoulders told him that Fargo wasn’t budging.

“I can’t,” the other man said, a heavy sadness in this voice. “I just can’t.”

“Sure you can,” Rip encouraged him. “You just give it to her. Call her by her name.”

Fargo tried to push the rose back at Rip. “No, nix on it. It won’t work.”

Rip pushed it back just as hard. “It will. Go on.”

“Jeez Louise, Rip, just get the hell out of my death, okay? It won’t work, she . . . she just won’t.”

Rip took his friend by the shoulders. “Yes. It will. I believe in you, man. *You* gotta believe in you. Go on. Trust me.”

Rip could see it working in him. Fargo wanted to.

“Give her the rose and call her by her name. Ask if you can go with her on this scream-a-long thing. Whatever the hell it is.”

Fargo shrugged again. “Why not? I got nothing to lose but my self-respect.” He grinned back at Rip. “And if it *don*’t work, I’m gonna haunt you.”

Rip snorted. “I’m counting on it. Go.”

Clutching the rose, Fargo shrugged once more and made his way to the front of the throng. Lorriann had begun giving the instructions for the scream-a-long; dividing them up in groups and telling each group which section of the cemetery was theirs.

But the smell of cigar smoke stopped Rip from joining them. This wasn't the cheap stuff that Chester smoked; it was the smell of rich, dark tobacco.

"Playing matchmaker now," Nattie observed. "No end to your talents there."

"Hey, I like him. He's a good guy."

"Well, if it backfires"

But from the look on Lorriann's face as Fargo handed her the rose, it didn't look like it was going to. Rip noted with a certain amount of satisfaction that they were headed off in the same direction of the cemetery.

"That could have blown up in your face."

"Yeah," Rip agreed. "But it didn't."

"It could have."

"But it *didn't*," he insisted.

The answer was just the owlish grin and a waft of smoke.

Rip didn't say anything, watching the neighbors take their places. It looked like another throng of tourists had come to visit and the residents were about to start. That, apparently, was a scream-a-long; the groups began the caterwauling from their respective corners, then moved inward. Some darted around the solids, flying through the grave markers. Some spun like tops, some running along. But they all seemed to be screaming in a chorus of chaos; in four part harmony, no less. One section would start, then the others would join in. Then, when that had run its course, another section would start and they'd all go again. The solids were eating it up, cameras clicking along and flashbulbs going off. A few had tape recorders.

"Yeah, they love it. I told you, we're the most famous haunted cemetery in New England."

"I guess so."

"Look, son," Nattie said, patting Rip on the back. "You don't know all of Fargo's story, but that's okay. You made two lonely souls happy. We'll see what happens from here."

"What do you mean?"

"Issues, son," Nattie replied. "The reason we're here. The reason for what I do. You've done more than get those two kids hooked up. You've done something I've not been able to do. You've started them on reconciling. Once that's done, they'll take the next step. Just like you will."

"Next step?"

"Later, son. For now, let's go have a scream or two."

Nattie walked off, leaving Rip behind to wonder what he meant. Reconciling? Next step? He was going to have to find out what that was . . . especially if *he* was going to be doing it too.

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#### ***Part Four*** ***"Oh Show Me the Way . . . ."***

Rip just let his feet take him. It's not like he had any place to be and there was no such thing as time here, so he didn't have to be nowhere anytime soon. Or later . . . or . . . . He shook his head, stuck his hands in his pockets and took off.

*Reconciling . . . what the hell is that? Reconciling?* He was damned if he could figure it out. It had to be something really serious, the way Nattie was talking. He'd said it was what he did, and that Rip would do it too. Do what? Do what Nattie did? Do something else? It made no sense. He tried as hard as he could to puzzle it out, but all that was doing was making his head spin as fast as that Beetlejuice guy.

A cold rush of something went through him, stopping him birthed in his tracks. He spun around, just in time to watch a solid go tearing off in the opposite direction and shrieking as if the very devil was after the poor guy. Rip got a quick look at the widening wetness from the man's crotch and rear, and deduced what had happened. But it was the hard bump that made him stumble a few steps. Rip righted himself in time to see a headless body go following along, but in a decidedly less linear fashion. With no head to guide it, the body seemed to be going on instinct. It bounced a few times off one headstone after another before finally turning a corner and disappearing from view.

With that little bit of entertainment gone, Rip turned back to where the hell he *wasn't* going anyway and resumed his former activity.

*Reconciling . . . reconciling. What's the big deal that he won't tell me? What the hell can that be?*

The answer rather shook him.

"Ah, you gettin' ready t' reconcile, are ya?" The voice seemed to come from nowhere, and it was an accent that he couldn't quite place. "Excuse me, if ya don't mind. I'll thank ya not to step on me. *Hey, watch ya feet, ye clumsy oaf!*"

Rip came to an abrupt halt with one foot poised and looked down. There, lying calm and perturbed in front of him was a head. It was bald enough but still had the well kept fringes around the base. The eyes were a piercing blue underneath silvered bushy eyebrows.

Just as quickly, Rip stepped back. "Uh . . . I . . . uh . . ."

"Well, an intelligent answh!" That accent was plaguing him. It definitely wasn't New Hampshire, but it *was* New England. He knew that right off the bat.

"Uh, sorry," Rip sputtered. "Uh, what are you doing here?"

"Well, that'll be a long story, but for now, I'm waiting on m'self t' come back t' get me."

"Oh."

"Grover." But he said it more like 'Grover-uh.'

"Excuse me?"

"M' name is Grover. Don't suppose ya saw my body anywhere?"

Rip pointed back over his shoulder. "That way."

"Would ya mind givin' me a lift then? Since ya didn't step on me, ye might be keepin' me a spot of company and givin' me a hand."

It wasn't so much a question as much as an expectation. Rip bent down and picked up the head, brushing off the dust.

"Thank you; what's ya name, young fella?"

"Rip. Everybody calls me Rip."

"Well, good ta meetcha, Rip. Now, which way was I goin'?"

"Uh, you were . . . I mean your body . . . Come on, I'll take you."

"Ayuh, you're a good lad then. One favor, if ye'll hold me so's I can see where we're goin', I can lead ya much bettuh."

Rip dutifully tucked the head in the crook of his left arm and followed off on the last path he'd seen the body take.

“Grover, what were . . . I mean, what happened?”

“Well, ya see, it was my turn for that section of the road,” he answered in an obscenely merry tone. Only when he said it, he pronounced the word like *rudd*.

“No, no,” Rip interrupted. “I mean, how did you get here?”

“Oh, well, that’s a rather int’restin’ story, too.”

“No, no,” Rip corrected. “I know you died and got buried here. But I mean, you’re not from New Hampshire. Where’re ya . . .” He stopped himself short, rolling his eyes. For a second, he’d been mimicking the man’s speech. He started again. “I mean, where are you *from*?”

With a chuckle, the old man continued. “As I was sayin’, that’s a rather int’restin’ story. My wife and I come from Banger, Maine original, moved down here in summuh of ‘55. Wasn’t long aftuh, that we had that little accident that put us in here.”

“Accident?”

“Ayuh. Turn right here, I know where I went now.”

Rip did as he was told.

“Ayuh, little accident. We were takin’ a turn down the road when this young whippuh-snappuh in a cherry red Chevy cut me off.”

“Oh shi- . . . uh, crap. What did you do?”

“Well, was so angered, I put m’ foot down on the accelerator pedal ‘til we were doing close to a hundred. That’s when I hit the deer and we went over an embankment.”

“Damn,” Rip said. “So what happened to you and your old lady?”

“Oh, well, see, she went out o’ the car . . . through the windshield. Busted her neck, turned straight round ‘til she was lookin’ ov-uh her own shoulders. Me? Well, Doris was always on me f’r my temper, ya see. ‘Grover, don’t you go head over bambox! Grover, you don’t be losing your head now.’”

Rip couldn’t help it; he started chuckling. Then the chuckles turned to giggles, the giggles to rolling guffaws until the tears squeezed down his cheeks. Grover seemed far from insulted. When Rip finally had some semblance of control, he looked down to the smiling head.

“Ayuh, exactly right. Went over the embankment doin’ hundred, ran full into an abutment, took m’ head off at the shoulders.”

It was all Rip could do to hold on the man’s pate, he was laughing hard again. This time, Grover joined him and both were seized by the giggles.

Rip, once again, got control. “I’m sorry, but that’s just too funny.”

“Told you his whole death’s story, did he?”

Rip turned to the new voice, to see that he’d stopped in front of the mausoleum. Chester had been the one to speak, as he and Nattie sat with the checker board between them.

“It’s a good story,” Nattie answered back.

“Humph,” came Chester’s rejoinder. “You want a good story? Parting of the Red Sea! *That* was a good story.”

“Miracle, you meshuge old fool,” Nattie answered, moving a piece.

“Pah, you want miracle? The Sox! *That* was a miracle!”

“Miracle? The Sox? Oy!”

“Excuse me, boys” Grover chimed in. “Not wantin’ to interrupt ya little discussin’ but if you’d tell me where m’ body went, I’d be grateful.”

Locked in the discussion of Red Sox and miracles, the two men pointed off in a direction. Rip looked down at Grover, who could do no more than wrinkle his brow and look in that same direction. Rip shrugged and off they went. “Hey, Grover?”



“Ayuh?”

The giggles past and the hunt in progress, something returned to the fore of Rip’s thoughts. “You mind if I ask you a question?”

The head chuckled again. “You’ll be wantin’ to know the gory details of my passing, I’m sure.”

“Gross, yuck, no!”

“What’ll it be then?”

“How did you know I was . . . uh, thinking about reconciling?”

“Ya were mutterin’ about it.”

“Oh.”

“Ya wantin’ to know what it is, I ‘spect.”

“Well, yeah, I do.”

“Ayuh. Who’s ya gah-dian?”

“My wha-? Oh, my *guardian*, oh. Uh, I guess it’s Nattie. Why?”

“Well, reckon he should be tellin’ ya this, but I’ll be glad to give ya a little.”

“What is it?”

“Reconcilin’ is like a laxative for the soul, ya see.”

Rip did a double take and lifted the head up a bit. “*Excuse me?*”

“Ya take a bit and shi- . . . well, it’s a good BM of all your baggage that you carried here.

You see?”

Rip thought for a moment. “Not really.”

Grover tried again. “It’s what them new-agers would call ya *kah-mah*.”

“My what?”

“Your *kah-mah*. That payback you get from former to former.”

“Former?”

“Your *lives*,” Grover answered with a certain amount of not so good graces in his voice.

“What you done on that side, livin’. You know, former lives and such. You rack up the kah-mah, they call it. Then you come here and you reconcile it.”

Just as confused, Rip tried for a bit of clarity. “You mean like, sin?”

“Hmm,” he answered. “Not sure they call it that. Maybe so, maybe no. All I know is you got it and you come here to reconcile it.”

“Then, what happens?”

“Yoooo hooooo!!”

Rip looked up to see Gracie coming at a full trot towards them. He smiled as she approached. He really liked her. There was something rather sweet about that ditzzy woman.

“Grace!”

“Grover, darling! I see you’ve met Rip. Isn’t he just the sweetest thing?”

“Oh ayuh, doin’ me a favor, doncha know.”

Rip smiled, suddenly shy at her comment. “Hi, Gracie.”

She reached up and pinched his cheek, something no one had done since he was a child.

“Oh, Rip, you sweetie pie. You’re such a doll.”

“Grace, dear, I don’t want to be rude ’r nothin’, but we’re a bit pressed here. Have you seen —?”

“Your body,” she cut in. “You know, funniest thing, I was looking at my roses, thinking . . . my goodness, the kids don’t come no more. They never leave roses like they used to but then, kids don’t. You got kids, Rip?”

He didn't get a chance to answer.

"Grace?"

"Oh yes, well. I was thinking of my roses when all of a sudden, I saw . . . Rip, dear, did you like your dish?"

Rip managed to get the nod out.

"Grace!"

"You're headed for home, Grover. That's what I was flying around trying to find you for. You better hurry, you know what happens when she . . . well, you know what happens. You best hurry now."

What followed was a spate of profanity that set poor Gracie to blushing, then to running with a nervous giggle. Rip, who wasn't totally unknowing of such language, waited until Grover was finished.

"Well?"

The eyes rolled in the disembodied skull, finally settling back on Rip.

"Well, ya best be trottin' down that road there and be snappy about it. If Doris sees . . . well, ya have to trust me. Won't be propuh, won't be pretty."

Rip didn't "trot," but he did take off at a faster clip than before. He also picked up the thread of conversation.

"So, Nattie said I'll be reconciling. He . . . well, he said . . ."

"Said what?"

"See, all I did was fix up Fargo and Lorriann. I mean, they look real cute together and I could tell they got eyes for each other."

"What did Nattie say t' ya?"

"Said I took a hell of a chance. What did he mean?"

"Ooooh, that's an easy one. What you young folks call a no brainuh!" Grover licked his lips and went on. "That one's like crawlin' on your knees in a dark room with an electric cord in your hand and tryin' to find the only light socket in the room."

"Huh?"

"Son, you can hot wire a great many things, but you can't hot wire two souls that maybe don't belong to each other."

"You saying . . . I mean, come on, they dig each other."

"I'm saying, we all got problems, sins, whatever you want to call it. And this reconcilin' brings it all up, ya see. Ya dropped a cat in the water without knowin if the damn thing can swim."

"You're saying . . . uh . . . what *are* you saying?"

"Maybe you put two lovebirds together. Maybe you set two firecrackers blazin to blow up in someone's face, son." Grover clucked his tongue with an 'I told you so' air. "Might be a grand bit of hurtin' there."

"Oh."

"Oh."

Before Rip could ask the next question, a scream suddenly filled the air around him. He felt a twitch to his side and heard the, "Oh damn." He looked down to see Grover's eyes rolling and an exasperated look on his face. But it was the resulting *pop* that really drew Rip's attention.

He looked up to see the missing body standing next to a pile of body parts.

"What the fu . . . holy . . . damn!"

“Ayuh,” Grover answered with an almost apologetic tone. “She always did fall to pieces if something scared her.”

“She . . . uh . . .”

“Be a good sport, will ya? Take me over there? Before she pulls herself together and does it again?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

Rip headed towards the rather gruesome site. Without any further ado, the headless body put its hands out and plucked the head from Rip’s arm. It reached up and firmly seated the cranium on the shoulders. There was a sound like suction as it adhered to the neck, followed by a smile on the old man’s face. Rip was almost surprised to see that Grover was really shorter than he was. He couldn’t help it, he smiled right back.

They both turned their attention down to the pile of limbs, torso, and goggling eyes peeking up at them from around the red, polka dotted dress.

“Damn it, Grovuh, I told ya nevuh do that to me! You scare me half to life when you do that to me! I hate it!”

A sudden spate of strobe flashes caught Rip’s attention. A young man was snapping off picture after picture in their general direction.

“Don’t worry, young fella, he thinks he’s seein’ globes of light and such. It’s fine. It’s what we do.”

Rip nodded. “You need any help with her?” He watched Grover bend down and lovingly begin to straighten his wife’s pieces out.

“Naw, we’ll be just fine, thank ya. Just fine.” He paused long enough to toss another warm smile at Rip. “And thanks helpin’ me out back there. Helpin’ get my head on straight.”

“Sure,” Rip answered, turning to go. “Oh, Grover?”

“Ayuh?”

“Thanks for talking to me.”

Grover nodded his welcome before he bent down and returned to his task. As Rip left, he heard the old man cooing to his lady. There was something kind of nice about that, something comforting.

He’d meant what he had said; he was grateful to Grover for the answers, even if he didn’t understand them. Whatever the hell “kah-mah” was, it was beyond Rip’s comprehension. But, did the old man really mean what he said? Had Rip made a mistake in helping Fargo and Lorriann? She was a really nice lady, he could tell that about her. She had the sweet quality; feisty and able to take of herself without any help, thank you, but sweet. And Fargo. Fargo. He could talk to Fargo. Fargo was . . . well, Rip could almost consider Fargo a friend. Something about the man’s nature. Even if he didn’t know all of Fargo’s story, the guy was pretty cool.

Well, maybe he’d figure it out. One thing was for certain, this *neighborhood* was just nuts. The luck of being in this particular cemetery, “one of the most celebrated cemeteries of New England,” was just wild. There were so many weird people in here that he was starting to feel okay about it all. *Let’s face it, if you gotta spend eternity somewhere . . . this ain’t so bad. I won’t be bored, that’s for sure.*

The huddled figure in front of his stone rather threw him for a moment. Whoever it was was the smoke and mist of the solids of the living world. He could see it was female, but not who it was. She wore a dark dress, a hat with one of those old fashioned lace veils that came over the eyes. It wasn’t until he had walked up beside her that he saw the face.

“Mom?”

“Hello, honey,” she answered, almost as if she could hear him.

Rip knew it wasn't possible, but he tried again. Maybe she *had* heard him. “Mom?”

“I know, I know,” she said, tugging at a particularly stubborn weed. “It's been so long since . . . well, since . . . *the accident*. I just got sick, honey. I couldn't come right away.”

He knelt down beside her, looking into her drawn, pinched face. “Mom?”

“Your Pop's doing okay. He misses you too.” She pulled a package out and started to unwrap the brown paper. “See, I brought you some flowers, honey.”

Rip sat down beside her, suddenly speechless. Not that it mattered.

“Oh, honey, you missed it,” she said, a strange chuckle coming out first. “Your Pop and me took first place in the bowling tournament. You'd have been so proud; we beat 'em all fair and square.”

“Yeah,” he finally answered. “I am proud, Mom.”

“And your sister had her baby. You got a nephew, honey. They named him for you. Little Robert Isaac.” She gave that little giggle again. “He's just like you too, so curious, just watches everything. Kinda looks like you too, honey.” She arranged the roses and daisies in the vase.

“He'll be a good boy, just like you . . . .”

“Mom, don't do this,” he whispered. “Please don't do this.”

She pulled a small bottle from her coat. “Told the old man I was gonna come down here and have a snort with my boy.” She took a gulp out of the bottle before pouring a bit on the ground before the stone. “Always the best for us, huh? Me and my boy, drinkin' the best.”

“I'm sorry, Mom. I screwed up, huh?”

It was almost as if she really could hear him. “Now, don't you go being down on yourself, Robbie. It was just bad luck is all. You was always a good kid. Headstrong, but you was a good kid. I was always proud of you. Always.”

She took another slug. Somehow, he knew it was the scotch they always used to drink, that single malt.

“Sometimes we do stupid things, honey. But that don't change nothing. You remember that time you shaved your head and said being bald was the way to go? And your buddies razzed you on it?” She laughed, pouring another glurg on the ground. “Well, it was kinda dumb, but it wasn't fatal.”

She brought herself up short.

“Well . . . I mean . . . you know what I mean. It grew back. No, don't you go being hard on yourself, honey. You weren't meant for this world. You were too good for it. Next one'll be better, you'll see. You and me and the good stuff.”

She took another gulp of the scotch. “Not bad, huh? I mean, we tried, you know? I know we screwed up a lot, but not bad for two old hippies out of the Haight, huh? Sometimes I think me and your old man shoulda just stayed there. Maybe things would have been different, better.”

She sat quiet then. It was almost like she was listening.

Rip reached his hand out; of all the times his talent was needed, all the times he needed to feel her cheek. This wasn't one of those times. His fingers went through the smoke and all he could do was watch her with a feeling of despair heavy in his chest.

She upended the small bottle, pouring the rest of the amber liquid on the ground.

“Well, gotta go, honey. Your Pop and me are headed off to a protest. Stupid jackass governor we got, what a crook. I mean it, a serious crook. Makes Nixon look like a piker.” She stood up rather slowly, gaining her bearings. Rip could see it now, she'd lost weight and she was paler than he'd remembered. “Personally, I hope this jerk gets voted out, but we'll see.”

She patted the stone. “You be good, Robbie. I know that where you are, it’s a lot better than here, honey. I know you’re a lot happier than this scummy old world I’m in. I’m glad for you too. Someday, right?”

He nodded, feeling the hot sting in the corners of his eyes.

“Well, I’ll be back. I’ll tell ya how it went at the Capital.” She chuckled. “We’re gonna fry the son of a bitch!”

He couldn’t watch her leave. If he did, he’d start crying like a baby. He wasn’t gonna do that. He wasn’t gonna be a baby. So, he stared at the flowers on his stone, waiting for the moment to pass. Waiting for his composure to return.

“So,” Nattie said quietly. “You understand now?”

Rip nodded.

“Makes sense now?”

“Kinda.” He turned to his guardian angel. “I did that to her, didn’t I?”

“Nah, kiddo; life does that to us all.”

“But I didn’t help things.”

“You make mistakes. You heard her.”

“Yeah.” Rip wiped his eyes. “That’s what Grover meant. Not “kah-mah,” but *karma*. I’ve heard of that one. He just said it wrong.”

A puff of smoke from Nattie’s ever present cigar wafted under his nose. Nattie’s answer was a kindly, “Yup.”

“Karma,” Rip said, more to himself than anyone else. “Cause and effect.”

“Yup.”

“And now I gotta see if the cat can swim, huh?”

“Yup,” Nattie said a third time.

“Can I ask you something, Nattie?”

“Sure, son.”

“When it’s my turn to reconcile, do I have a chance to . . . I don’t know, make up for things?”

Nattie gave that owlsh blink, taking the cigar from the corner of his mouth. “We’ll see, son. That’s *my* job, help you through it and, if I play my cards right, help you get the answers.”

“When, Nattie? When?”

“Rip, in a place without time, that’s rather like asking directions in a one room school house. But, if we were on that side, I’d say soon.”

“What do you say here?”

Nattie gave a very grandfatherly pat on the back to Rip, rubbing the place between his shoulder blades. It almost started the tears again; his mother had done that since Rip was a child, to calm him when he was upset. And it was working. He was calming down, getting control.

“Here? Here, I tell you to listen to your heart. You’ll know when it’s time. You’ll *feel* it. Like gas, little gas bubble that reaches up and pops. Embarrasses you in front of your girl.”

Rip gave a small giggle. “Better that end than the other.”

“Absolutely, son.”

“Soon?”

“Soon.”

Rip nodded. And wondered when would be soon.

*Part Five*  
*“People are Strange . . . .”*

“Hello, down there. Can ya come up?”

He didn’t have anything better to do, so Rip went up the steps.

“Hi,” he said to the gentleman standing before his stone. “Who are you?”

The man was wearing a rather expensive suit, smiling a very expensive smile. He stuck his hand out to Rip, the glint of sun flashing off of a diamond ring on his hand. Rip took the offered hand, pumping it no more than the standard three times that was supposed to be customary. At least, that’s what his Pop always said. Shake it more than three times meant you were goin’ steady with the guy.

“So,” Rip repeated. “Who are you?”

“My card,” the man answered enigmatically. He handed Rip a small business card, and beamed broadly.

Rip looked down, then up with a rather dubious frown. “Uh, says your name is . . . Weener?”

“Why.”

“Huh?”

“It’s *why!* *W-e-i-n-e-r*. Pronounced *Why-ner*.”

“Weener, whiner, whatever.” Rip suddenly wasn’t in the mood. “What do you want from me?”

“It’s more like what you want from *me*, good buddy,” the man answered, flipping open a briefcase and setting it on top of Rip’s headstone. He pulled a brochure out and handed that to Rip as well.

Rip looked down, catching the front page. “What’s this? Insurance?” He cocked an eyebrow at the man. “You’re a little late, dude.”

“You’re never late, good buddy,” Weiner answered. “Unless you’re the *late* good buddy!” He paused waiting for some response from Rip. “Get it? Late . . . *late?*”

Rip politely chuckled. “So what kind of insurance? Life insurance?”

Weiner laughed back. “Gosh no, good buddy, we’re definitely *late* for that. This is *after* life insurance. I am your Death Insurance Salesman and I’m here to give you a great deal on your after life.”

Rip held the brochure and card out to the man. “Uh, thanks but no thanks.”

“No, no; you need me, good buddy!” He flashed the grin again. This time Rip could count at least two teeth capped in what looked like gold. “See, I’m here to make your death a more secure and enjoyable experience.”

“Enjoyable? Like this is a ride at Disneyland?”

Weiner rolled his eyes. “As if!” The grin returned as he went on, “You got interests that need to be protected, good buddy. You got a great place here, and you’re on your way to being . . . well, you’re on your way. You need what I got.”

“Go on,” Rip said, withdrawing his hand and the pamphlet.

“Well, see, our insurance protects you by offering great benefits.” He leaned forward, deftly plucking the brochure from Rip’s fingers. He spread it open, pointing to items as he talked. “See

here, you got your Crypt Protection; you know, in case you poof up the wrong thing and it causes scars on your psyche.”

“Poof?”

“Yeah, poof. You know, make things appear from ‘thin air’.” One of the perks of the in-between and the afterlife. You can poof things at will, see. Well, in case you poof the wrong thing, or your poofer gets busted. You never know.”

“Uh huh. Okay.”

“Now, here, you got your Akashic Disability plan. You know, in case of Karmic Debts, you’re covered, see? This little beauty is your ‘get out of the crypt free’ card. You know? ‘Do not pass the Mause, do not collect any brownie points?’”

“Right. Sure.”

“Now, this little beauty was all mine. Talk about your ‘get out of the crypt free’ cards.” Weiner tapped his finger on a particular paragraph of the brochure. “This is your guarantee to the presence of a Counselor in case you get tapped by the Karma Cops.”

“The who?”

Weiner gave him an incredulous look. “The *Karma Cops*.” When he still got no recognition from Rip, he snorted and threw back his head. “Don’t tell me you ain’t been told about the Karma Cops, yet.”

Rip shook his head.

“Geez, old Nattie must be slipping.” Weiner slipped his thumbs into the lapels of his suit and rocked on his heels. “Okay, yer Karma Cops keep the rules and the safety in the neighborhood, see? They make sure the Law of Karma is followed to the letter; make sure no one messes with someone else’s karma. Okay? Get me?”

Rip shook his head again. “No, but I’ll take your word for it.”

“No, good buddy,” the salesman started, his tone becoming a bit on the exasperated side. “It’s not my word, it’s the law. See? Law of Karma says what you send out, you get back threefold. The Karma Cops enforce the law. Now, you get it?”

“Uh . . . yeah, yeah, I do, thanks.” Actually, Rip still wasn’t all that sure, but he’d have said *anything* just to shut this guy up. “So, that’s all you’re here for?”

“Well, no, see,” the man answered. “If you *do* get busted, your Counselor gets to officiate, see? And, here, you got your addenda that you get to pick your judge, too. See? Makes it a little more on your side.”

“On my side?”

Weiner shook his head and leaned in to Rip. “Trust me; you’ll want it when you see the deck is stacked against you. The *Tarot* deck, if you get my drift.”

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

“See, that brochure explains everything about our policy. We pay full premium, no deductible. You get a carefree afterlife, everything’s covered.”

“What . . . uh, what if I . . . accidentally screw up somewhere?”

“Easy, good buddy,” Weiner answered with the confidence of a sale won. “We help you pay all your karmic damages. If your . . . uh, *screw up* causes an accidental birth, then we help you take care of the consequences. No messy starting at the beginning of the chain for you.” He stopped suddenly, scratching the back of his head. With a rueful look on his face, Weiner added, “Of course, if you do it intentionally, it’s a trip to the void, you understand.”

“Void?”

“Yeah. Catholics call it Purgatory, but it ain’t really. It’s just a place you go to rest, recover, think about what you did, see? Nowadays, solids call it a ‘time out.’ Yeah, it’s sorta like that, a time out.”

“Time out. Okay.”

“So, see? This policy keeps you safe and secure. Oh! And in case of your own early birthing, we take care of making sure you get a good life to pay off your debts. See? None of that fishing around. You go straight to the next former, secure in knowing that your debt is gonna be paid off.”

Rip nodded. He had absolutely no idea what this idiot was talking about and at that moment, he wanted to run. Something was pulling at his gut and telling him, he needed to be anywhere but there.

“So, you sign here,” Weiner said, pulling out a document from his pocket and brandishing it in front of Rip, along with a pen. “Right there,” he repeated, pointing to a line at the bottom of the first page. “You sign and it’s a done deal.”

Rip looked down at the page, then back up at Weiner. “Uh, look, you mind if I have this looked at? You know?”

“Sure, sure,” he said, not in the least insulted. “You let Nattie look at that for you. He’ll tell you the score. He’ll let you know.”

“Yeah, please.” If he was still breathing, Rip would have let go of a deep exhale of relief. This guy was going to go away with no hassle.

“I’ll be back to get it from you. When you’re ready’s fine.” Weiner turned to go but stopped as his foot hit the path in front of the plot. He turned back to Rip and waggled a finger in his direction. “You don’t wanna wait too long, good buddy. I gotta feeling you’re gonna need me sooner than you think!”

With that, he turned and sauntered off, whistling and waving to everyone. Rip watched him leave and turned in the opposite direction. He needed to talk to someone but not Nattie. Nattie was too enigmatic, too full of riddles. The man he needed to talk to was Chester.

“Rip! Pally! Oh, pal, you gotta help me.”

He turned around to see Fargo in a rush. He waited until his friend had caught up.

“What’s wrong, man?”

“Oh, geeze Louise, Rip,” Fargo answered. “You really put me in a jam, pally.”

“What?” Rip was confused and the way Fargo was talking, he went on the defensive.

“Listen, I didn’t do anything, okay?”

“Sure you did. You hooked me up with that skirt.”

“What’s wrong with Lorrieann? She’s a nice lady, I like her.”

“Aw, yeah. But she’s all the time chinning on about her old man, trying to make me green. I mean, I was dizzy with the dame, okay? But, jeepers, the doll is making me goofy.”

“Come on, man, chicks are like that,” Rip tried to reassure his friend. “It don’t mean nothing more than they just want a little attention. To know you care.”

“A *little*?” Fargo rolled his eyes. “Pally, she wants *all* of my attention. Everywhere I go, she’s anklin’ behind. It’s always ‘Fargo, please . . .’ and ‘Fargo, you gotta . . .’ and she’s driving me around the bend. I can’t talk to nobody but she’s hanging on me like . . . pally, I ain’t ready for no akashic manacle, okay? I just ain’t. And she’s all over me like a cheap suit.”

“Come on, Fargo,” Rip pleaded. “She’s a nice lady and she thinks you’re the next best thing to sliced bread. Give her a break, okay?”



Fargo made a noise that almost sounded like a sigh. “Break? She’s breaking my back, Rip. You gotta help me. I can’t even do my community service, she’s playing overcoat.”

“Fargo—”

“Look, I don’t wanna give her the gate. She’s a really swell skirt and I really got a thing for her. But, jeepers, Rip! Please!”

“Fargo, she just needs to be loved. You can do that, right?”

“Please, pally, please. I’m counting on ya.”

Rip shrugged. “Yeah, sure, whatever you need. I’ll talk to her.”

Fargo beamed. “You’re the jake, pal. The dying jake.”

Fargo took off, leaving Rip behind to wonder what the hell he’d just gotten himself into. The smell of cigar smoke turned him around to see Chester and his ever present checkers board.

“Gonna come sit? Have a game?”

Rip sat across from the old man. “I’m black, huh?”

“Yeah, I need all the help I can get,” Chester answered with a puff of smoke. “You got good on me.”

The first piece was moved and it was silent, except for the sound of the birds in the other side. It was kind of nice, hearing that. Somehow, he didn’t feel so alone when he heard the birds. He could really be part of it all, even if he wasn’t. They moved a few pieces before Chester broke the stillness.

“So. Kid. What’s on your mind?”

“I just feel like things are . . . I don’t know, falling apart, I guess.”

“How so?”

“Mom coming by really threw me. Then . . . I mean, I thought Fargo and Lorriann would be perfect together, but he says she’s driving him nuts. I don’t get it.”

“Broads are like that and there’s more to Fargo than you think.”

“What? What is it?”

“Not for me to tell, son. He’ll tell you when he’s ready.”

Rip jumped a man. “King me.”

“Brother! What a mensch. King me, he says. Oy!” But he dropped a piece on Rip’s man.

“Chester?”

“Yes?”

“I asked Nattie once about this place. He said this isn’t Heaven, but the in-between. He never did tell me what that was.”

“Been gnawing on ya, has it?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you know you’re not part of the living, yes? The solids?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, we’re not part of that other side, either. This is sorta the halfway point between the solid and the pure soul. You’re in between. You got a foot in both planes, see.”

“Both? How many are there?”

“How many grains of sand in a bucket?”

Rip shrugged.

“Exactly right.” He shoved a piece into a corner. “There’s no time because there’s no one place, kid. There’s only many.”

“But, what about the birthing? I heard that one too.”

“Well, see, that’s what *they* call it. On the solid side, it’s dying, see? If you leave here to go there, it’s birthing. Either way, the Companion crosses you over.”

“Companion?”

“Yeah, sure. Solids call him the Angel of Death, except no angel I ever knew was for death. It’s more of a birth on any side of the Veil.”

“So, you’re saying there’s more than one place to be born?”

“Oh sure, kid. Like the Buddhists say. Only they got it short by a few gazillion planes. But it’s close.”

“*Is* there a heaven?”

Chester jumped two of Rip’s men. “Well, not like *you* think of it.”

“What is it then?”

Chester took another hit off his stogie. “To tell you the truth, I don’t know. Never been there.”

“What?” Rip stopped in the act of taking his jump. “What do you mean, you’ve never been?”

“Oh, sent a few there. Quite a few. The ones that are white, pure, tired of birthing and dying. That Jesus, he was glad to go, see. All these meshugener putzes that keep tugging on him, doing all this pain and suffering and saying it’s in his name. Oy! What a mess! He was glad to leave the whole headache behind.”

Chester leaned forward and in a secretive tone, added, “Tell you the truth, he’s gainfully employed there, anyway.” He winked at Rip, then sat back to puff on the cigar again.

“So . . . I mean . . . how do you know it’s *there*?”

“It’s there, kid.” Chester smiled. “Trust me, it’s there.”

“But how do you *know*?”

“I have my ways. Didn’t fall off the bagel truck *yesterday*, you know.”

“But . . .,” Rip sputtered, and then stopped. Chester wasn’t going to tell him; he just might as well give up.

“Truth is, kid, no one’s ever come back to talk about it. But it is beautiful. And it’s a lot different than what you think.”

“So, is it . . . I mean, is *that* heaven?”

“We call it the *far meadow*,” Chester answered with an air of satisfaction. “That’s not even the right thing to call it, but it works fine.”

“So, heaven is really a far meadow, and . . . um . . .” Rip paused to try and process it all. “This is . . . in between?”

“Think of it as the way station, the layover stop between flights. Does that help?”

Surprisingly, it did.

But any other questions were going to have to wait. The sound of hysterical crying whipped Rip around; Lorriann running as fast as she could and tears streaking down her cheeks. And having been raised as a gentleman—of sorts—Rip stood up. Chester, however, had one more thing to say.

“Kid, you better sign that insurance policy now,” the old man muttered, sticking something that looked like a ball point pen in Rip’s hand. “Trust me, it’s on the level and you need it now.”

Rip didn’t argue; he simply did as he was told. He barely had time to put his name on the dotted line when the paper was whisked out of his hand by Chester and Lorriann was plastered to his chest, weeping as if she was planning on drowning the cemetery.

Wrapping his arms around her, he rubbed her back and made little shushing noises to try and calm her down. That part was hard enough. It was the crowd that was beginning to mill around them. And they suddenly didn't look as friendly as they had when he first came.

"Shh, honey, shh," he crooned to her, stroking her hair now. He waited until the sobs had subsided before lifting her chin to look into her green eyes.

"Why? Why, Rip, why?"

Well, it didn't take a quantum physicist to know what the problem was. "Darlin', Fargo's a great guy, but, well, he's not used to a lovely lady like you really needing him."

"But, Rip—"

"See, he's a loner, I guess. Kinda like me."

"He's a creep," she answered emphatically.

"No, honey, he's really not, I swear it. He just—"

"He always ignores me. And he talks like I'm not even there."

"Lorrieann, I promise you, that's not it, I swear."

"Rip, why? Why did you do this to me? Why?"

He stopped, hardly believing the question. "Why . . . why did *I* do what to you?"

"You shoved him at me! You're the one that talked him into it. We were fine until you stepped in."

Then another voice chimed in. "That's right, pally, you did. You stole those flowers from the solids and said, 'give 'em to her, Fargo, go on.' So I done like you told me and—pow, bam—and now look at me."

"Fargo, wait, I . . . I . . . but you said—"

"I said she didn't know I was dead. I didn't say I wanted . . . geez Louise, Rip, why didn't ya just leave me be. She's clinging like a vine and I can't do nothin'."

"But . . . buddy . . ."

Then, another voice. "That's him, that's the one. M' Grovuh goes fuh a walk and next thin' I see is his body comin' and that young fella stole his head."

"Now, wait a minute, lady," Rip sputtered. "That's not true, no I didn't."

"Ya did," the woman answered in a rather haughty tone. "Ya stole his head, walkin' 'im all ovuh the cem'tery and scarin' me t' pieces."

"Wait, your name is Doris, right? You're Grover's wife. Wait, I didn't mean to. I mean . . . wait—"

But another voice chimed through. "He's the fella been causin' all this brouhaha."

"Ayuh, gettin' so ya can't have a peaceful death no more."

"And ye heard what happen t' Old Lady Dubose, didn't ya?"

"No, what happened?"

"Well, young feller interfered, and she reconciled early."

There were repeats of the word, like an echo that swept across the now disgruntled crowd that had seem to materialize around him.

"Reconciled?"

"Yep," said another, unfamiliar voice. "Reconciled. Gone, just like that. Got her chance to go t' Far Meadow and she took it."

A young girl stepped out of the throng. "But . . . but who's gonna make the smell now?"

Another young voice shouted, "And, who's gonna teach us how to haunt?"

An even younger child walked over, kicked Rip in the shins and, with hands on hips, shouted at him, “She was s’posed to be keeping us from haunting at the wrong times. She was the schedule lady. And you messed it up!”

“Aye, he did, he messed it up.”

The crowd was slowly moving around him, closing off any hope of escape. They were all beginning to yell at him, accusations of butting in and stealing souls and heads and other body parts. Rip was turning in circles, trying to understand, trying to calm them. He searched desperately for Chester, but he wasn’t in the circle anymore. He wasn’t even close to Rip.

Then, he saw them; Chester and Nattie were standing in the doorway of the Mausoleum. They were puffing away at their stogies, Nattie giving his owlish blink. If he could only get to them. If he could only get out of this claustrophobic mess.

A hole opened, just the route he needed. Rip felt a hand grab his shoulder and managed to shrug it off. He started at a brisk walk, trying to ignore the shouts. He hustled, so he could get through it before the hole closed. Hustle turned into a sprint, and he closed the distance—

Just in time to see the man step forward into the breach. Rip stopped short. That old familiar feeling of dread and unease with the cops settled in. This one had longish, curly brown hair that hung to his shoulders. The uniform was blue, but not the usual navy blue of the police *he* knew of. It didn’t matter; Rip could smell a badge from a mile away. Still, there was something *really* familiar about this one.

A hand reached up to remove silver aviator sunglasses from the face. With a grin and a slow, southern drawl, the officer said, “You’re under arrest, sir.”

Rip felt his mouth dry up. “Arrest? For what?”

“Violation of the Karmic Law, sections 2, 3, and 5; manipulation of another soul, interfering with karmic destiny, and failure to comply with your community service decree. You’re also in violation of the Dead Act. In other words, you’ve been a busy boy in things you didn’t need to be busy in, trying to be among the living. And don’t think we don’t know about that little theft of solid property you pulled.”

“But . . . but . . . wait, officer, I can—”

“I’m afraid I’m gonna have to haul you in.”

“But . . .” Then, it dawned on him why the face was familiar. “Hey . . . wait a minute. You’re Jim Morrison.”

The smile was immediate, the face melted until the features were a perfect match. It really *was* Jim Morrison . . . no, it couldn’t be.

“Wait,” Rip sputtered. “You died in France, in Paris. You ain’t buried here. What the hell are you doing here?”

“Got a former here,” he answered. “Let’s face it; puking blood in a bathtub was a bit too much like suicide. In fact, it pretty much was. They gave me a choice. A long sleep in the dark or come here and keep track of the Karmic Law.” Morrison shrugged. “Beats the dark.”

The old Rip jumped right in. Hey, this was a fellow protester, a fellow snubber of the status quo. *He* should understand. Of all the people in the cosmos that hated the establishment, Jim Morrison should be a soul mate. Hell, Rip was a *huge* Doors fan. That should count, right?

Nope, didn’t cut one bit of slack.

“You have the right to remain silent. If you give up this right, anything you say can and will be used against your ass in front of the Adjudicator. You have the right to the presence of your Counselor to keep you from being stupid.”

“But . . . wait . . .”

“Come on, man, I gotta take you back to your plot. You’ll stay there until you’re summoned for the hearing.”

“Hearing?”

“You signed your insurance form,” Morrison said, somberly. “Good for you. Means you can have visits from your Counselor.

“Wait, hearing? You mean, I’m gonna be judged?”

“Oh, hell no,” Morrison answered, a little too cheerfully. “You’re nabbed fair and square, man. You’re already guilty. The hearing is just to present evidence on why your ass shouldn’t be fried like a potato chip, dig?”

Morrison took Rip by the elbow and started to lead him in the direction of his burial plot. The crowd parted, still making the occasional cat call or rude noise.

“Listen, man; I’m sorry it’s gotta be this way, you dig?”

Rip nodded numbly.

“You can’t go screwing around with Karma, man.”

He stopped in front of Rip’s stone, as the entrance opened up. Rip looked down and then back at Morrison.

“Am I totally screwed?”

The former Doors’ front man smiled an honest and genuine smile of sympathy. It was an endearing smile, one that said, ‘I can help you, I understand.’

“Yes,” was all he said, giving Rip a gentle push down the steps.

Rip made it down to the bottom of the stairway. He stopped long enough to watch the entrance close up. He didn’t have to try it to know that right now, it wouldn’t open again until his hearing was called. He crossed over to his bed and lay down to wait.

### *Part Six* *“This is the End . . . .”*

He had paced every inch of the room, stared at the same cracks. This was totally absurd; confined to his “room” like a child. Time meant nothing and who knew when Nattie would show up. Rip jumped up and flopped down on the bed, causing the mattress to bounce. With his hands crossed behind his head, he lay there and stared at the walls. It might have been helpful if he had those damn ceiling tiles; the ones with the holes that he could count.

“Screw it . . . I can imagine ‘em.”

He laid there, eyes focused on the ceiling—plain, white, boring. He was as still as he could be. Rip blinked a few times, then doggedly stared. His vision wavered, cleared . . . wavered a little more. If he stared long enough, thought hard enough—he could see them. He could see them so well, he could count them. He started counting the imaginary holes in the imaginary tiles.

“Am I interrupting?”

Rip didn’t even raise his head off the pillow. “No. Knew you were comin’.”

The aroma of cigar smoke was very strong. “Nasty business back there.”

“I guess so.”

“You’re, uh . . . you’re angry.”

He had to sit up at that one. “Angry? Try pissed off. *Really* pissed off.”

Nattie nodded. “I know what you mean—”

“No, you don’t,” Rip hotly argued. “You have no frickin’ idea. I’ve been sent to my room without supper. I’m a grown man, damn it.”

“You’re a young soul, son.” Nattie’s voice sounded almost sympathetic, apologetic.

It wasn’t winning Rip over.

“*Bullshit!*” Rip jumped back up and stormed to where the old man stood. He had to jam both of his hands in the pockets of his jeans to keep from either throttling or pushing Nattie.

“Bullshit,” he repeated. “So what! And I ain’t all that young, okay? I’m not a kid.”

“No,” Nattie answered, taking another puff. “But you’re not as old as others.”

“I ain’t stupid.”

“Doesn’t make you stupid, son. Just makes you inexperienced.”

“Why?”

Nattie looked genuinely curious. “Why what?”

“Why is this happening?” Rip was hot and getting hotter with each utterance. “Why? Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you warn me? I’d have stopped. I didn’t know anything. I didn’t know the rules.”

“Ignorance—”

“—of the frickin’ law is no frickin’ excuse and that’s so much bullshit!”

Nattie nodded, slumping his shoulders. He looked defeated, somehow, whipped into submission.

It was enough to catch Rip off guard. He struggled to hold on to his anger; how dare Nattie look this way or play the wounded party. If anyone was wounded, it was Rip. *He* had been wronged. After all, it wasn’t his fault he didn’t know the rules, didn’t know diddley squat about law, Karmic or otherwise. And here he was paying for something he didn’t even know existed until he set foot in this hell hole.

But he couldn’t hold it. The anger drained out of him as fast as the whiskey from a shot glass.

“Nattie?”

Nattie’s eyes met Rip’s. “Yes, son?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would have been easier, wouldn’t it? You really think so?”

Now it was Rip’s turn to be confused. “I don’t know.”

“I’ll tell you this,” Nattie went on. “A lot of things you don’t know about me, son. A great many that I can’t tell you. But one thing I can; I never believed in stepping in when it was better to let someone learn on his or her own. It’s too easy, having an answer spoon fed to you like some little kid. Like bein’ sent to your room when you did wrong.” He reached up and patted Rip’s cheek. “It’s not how I work. You’re a good man, Rip. Good man. I’ll support you, love you, cherish you. But I will not bail you out. I did that once.”

“Bailed me out?”

Nattie took a puff from the cigar. “Not you specifically, but I did the big bail out. Once. Made the ultimate sacrifice. Figured if I was gonna ask someone else to do it, I should be able to, right?”

Rip nodded, still confused.

“Well, I did. I made that sacrifice. Sent someone I loved more than anything, sent someone that meant everything to me. I forgot one thing, son.”

“What’s that, Nattie?”

“Free will. Karma. Even I can’t change the way it is, the ebb and the flow of the cosmos at large. I do what I can to influence my little corner, but it is what it is.”

“What is it? If it is what it is . . . what *is* it?”

“Life, son. Living, being . . . existence . . . life. Even being dead doesn’t change that. The body is only a shell. The soul is a free flowing thing and will never die. It can’t.”

“Nattie?”

“Yes, son?”

“What will happen to me?”

The old man did something that Rip would never have expected in a gazillion years. He reached around to take Rip into a fervent embrace. Rip hugged him back, just as hard. It wasn’t until he stepped back that he saw the tears in Nattie’s eyes; as he blinked back the tears in his own.

“I’ll take care of you, son. I swore I would and I never break my promises.”

Rip nodded.

“Now,” Nattie said, smiling to break the tension of the moment. “You’ll have a hearing. You go in, present your side, explain things. And we see what happens.”

“You’re my counselor, right?”

Nattie gave the owlish grin again, a tender goodwill written on his face. “Absolutely. The best. I never lost a case yet. You should not worry.”

That helped a lot. “Far out.”

“You even get to pick the judge; the Adjudicator, that’s what we call the poor shmuck that sits to listen.”

“Uh . . . well,” Rip stammered. “I don’t . . . I mean . . . I don’t know that many here. I guess . . . I just don’t.”

“Well, of all the folks you know, who would you like?”

Nattie puffed on his cigar. That was all Rip needed.

With a smile, he answered, “Chester. I like Chester. He’ll be fair. He knows me.”

Nattie nodded. “Good choice. Excellent choice. Chester it is. And I’ll be there.”

“Who’s . . . I mean . . . uh . . . who’s . . . .”

“Prosecuting?”

“Yeah.”

Nattie’s smile was even warmer. “You shouldn’t worry about that. But, it’ll be someone who cares.”

“Yeah, well, okay. I’ll try.”

“Good boy.” Nattie patted Rip’s cheek again. “You got a good soul, Rip. I wish you could see what I see. But you will.” He stepped back. “Well, time to get this show on the road. I’ll call you when it’s time, son. You stay here, relax; just relax. Nothing more you can do. That young cop person will bring you to the courtroom when we’re ready.”

Rip gave a nervous giggle. “Yeah, sure, if you say so.”

“I say so. Now, you take a nap, read a good book.”

“Take a nap, sure, why not. Nothing else to do.”

“Well, you can count those little holes up there. Works for me, when I can’t count sheep.”

“Huh?”

Nattie pointed overhead.

Rip looked up to see the tiles on the ceiling; *the tiles with the holes*.

“You did good for your first time. You did real good.”

Rip gulped. “*I did that? I did that?*”

He heard Nattie chuckle. “You did that. Just be careful what you poof, now. Don’t get in any deeper.”

He was still staring at the ceiling when Nattie left, shocked at what he saw.

Rip looked at the ceiling, not totally convinced that it was really there. So, this was poofing.

He looked back down at his hands.

“How the frick did I do that? Okay, okay, okay.” He looked back up. “I was looking at it, wanting to see it.”

He looked back down at his hands.

“I want my comic books. The Crow. I want my Crow comic books. I can do this.” He stared as hard as he could. “I want my Crow comic books. I can make them here. I know I can. I can do this . . . .”

At first, it was pure shock. The foggy mist appeared in his hands, taking the outline of the forms. The more he stared and the harder he willed it, the more solid they became. Soundlessly and seamlessly, the desired objects went from mist to shade to form. All four of the books had managed to materialize in his hands. His hands were shaking a little as he thumbed through the first. The pictures were vivid, the colors as dark as the story. The shock turned to amusement, to joy.

He sat down on the bed, crossed his legs, and began to read. When Jim came to collect him, he had polished off all four comics, and managed to poof the entire Superman series and Batman series. He was working his way through a Spiderman when the lanky man walked down his stairway.

“Hey, man.”

That old gnawing in his belly started as Rip sat up abruptly, a guilty start working through him—a carry over from when he was a child and his mother caught him reading his comics instead of cleaning his room.

“Uh . . . hey.”

“You ready?” Morrison gave him a jaunty smile. “Let’s split. Time for the big show.”

Rip nodded. He took one more look around the room, burning the sights into his memory. This place had actually become a home for him, some place he was comfortable. He didn’t want to think this was the last time he’d see it. But the thought crossed his mind anyway.

“Chill, man. Okay? Come on.”

He followed Morrison to the mausoleum, strangely deserted. As if he could read Rip’s mind—or maybe he could—the other man answered.

“It’s cool. They’re inside, man. Waiting.”

“Inside? No one goes inside the mause. Everyone gathers out here.”

“Not for serious shit,” Jim answered. “Come on, I gotta deliver you inside.”

Without missing a beat, the lanky frame walked up to the marble façade, then through it. Rip watched for a second before following. It was just the weirdest thing, walking through that stone. It was smooth, at first; then itchy and cold. Stepping through was like walking through a marshmallow pebbled with something that wanted to dig in to him, pummel him. Then it was over and he was through the barrier.

They all watched him, some sitting; a buzzing of muffled conversation filling the room. It was a mélange of faces, each on with a different expression. Some were eyeing him with suspicion, some with pity. It was just like any other courtroom; Rip was very familiar with those.



Morrison led him forward to where Chester sat. The old man smiled at him.

“Come on in, kid. Have a sit, cop a squat.”

Rip sat down in the offered chair.

“You know, you’re in luck. You got Nattie Birnbaum for your counselor. He’ll do you right, kid.”

Rip nodded, but it felt anything *but* okay. He felt the hand on his shoulder and turned to look up into Nattie’s kind, smiling face.

“It’ll be okay, son. I never lost a case yet.” He chuckled. “It’s usually *me* sittin’ up there on the bench though.”

“Huh? You mean . . . .”

“That’s right, kid,” Chester answered. “Nattie here’s the official judge of all things. I was kinda surprised you picked me. I figured a smart kid like you woulda chose him.”

“But . . . Nattie?”

“Haven’t figured it out yet, have you?” Chester shook his head. “Smart boy like you—”

“Hush, you old coot. Leave the boy alone.” Nattie said down in the other chair. “Son, we’re gonna start now. I want you should just relax. You just be honest. It’s important that you’re always honest.”

Rip nodded again. “I will, Nattie. I swear.”

“Oh goodness me, goodness me.”

Gracie blew in like a breeze, managing to knock off a few ladies hats, blow a few skirts around, and flip a man’s tie straight up across his nose and forehead. She pranced up to the table and, with a big flourish, whipped a briefcase up in the air. She whirled it a few times before laying it down. With a grandiose pop, she flipped open the latches. She made a big show of pulling out page after page after page, laying them neatly in a stack to the side.

Chester cleared his throat.

Gracie gave him a sweet smile and started plucking sharpened pencils from the brief case, one by one. She laid each one on the table top, making a major Broadway production out of making sure the ends were all straight and lined up.

“Gracie, dear?”

“One moment, Chet, honey. I’m not quite ready.”

She pulled a pitcher of what appeared to be lemonade out of the briefcase, followed by a glass of ice. That done, she closed the lid and neatly tucked the case under the table. She walked the *long* way around the table to come to her seat. With a demure nod to the “judge” and Nattie, she poured a glass of lemonade and sat down.

“Finished, my dear?”

“I’m ready, your honor-ator.”

Several women giggled and a few men chuckled. Any other time, Rip would have been one of them. Right now, he just couldn’t.

“Uh, your . . . look, Chester,” Nattie said. “If Gracie’s not ready . . . .”

“Ready,” Grace interjected. “I’m always ready, Nattie, you know that. Why I was born with an egg timer in my hand!”

“Egg timer?”

“Of course, how do you know when an egg is done without a timer? Silly Nattie.”

Nattie shook his head. Rip hid the smile that was *finally* able to come forth.

“Gracie,” Chester said, his own smile curling his lips. “*Are* you ready?”

“Oh, of course, honey.” She wiggled her fingers at him and gave a wink. “I’ll call my first victim . . . .”

“Victim,” Rip whispered tersely at Nattie. “She said *victim*?”

His counselor just waved it off and lit another stogie.

“Doris, honey, come on up now. Don’t be shy.”

Doris sat primly down into a chair by the Adjudicator’s table. Chester was sucking on his own stogie, watching her as she sat down.

“So, dearie, I want you to tell the Adjudicator exactly what you told me,” Gracie advised, her voice oozing with sugar. “And don’t you worry about a thing, honey. He just *looks* like a silly old chimney.”

That earned her a raised eyebrow from Chester, but it never fazed Gracie at all.

“Oh ayuh,” Doris started up. “Young man come walkin’ up carryin’ Grovuh’s head, mind. ‘Twas after I seen Grovuh’s body come strollin’ up to me; lost, ya see.”

“Hmm,” Gracie said, stroking her chin and trying to look thoughtful. “You said, strolling. How was the body strolling?”

“Eh?”

“You know; was it a long ambling shuffle? Or was it a mincing quick step?”

“Oh,” Doris answered. “I s’pose it was a shuffle.”

“Gracie.”

“Just a moment, Chet, this is important.” She smiled at Doris. “Was it carrying flowers?”

“Eh?”

*Doris ain’t exactly what you’d call quick on the uptake*, Rip thought and continued watching.

“You know, dearie. Flowers for his lovely bride.” Gracie nodded for Doris to answer. “Was he bringing you flowers?”

“Uh . . . well . . . .”

“Grace,” came Chester’s stern voice. “What does this have to do with anything?”

“Well, I think every husband should bring his dear lady flowers, even if he lost his head for some other bimbo.”

“I ain’t no bimbo,” Rip burst out, jumping up. “Look, I didn’t steal nuthin’, okay?”

“Easy, kid, you’ll get your chance,” Chester said, waving Rip back down in the seat.

Nattie took Rip’s arm, guiding him back down. With a warning glance, he silenced anything that Rip was about to say.

“Nope, see what ya meanin’. Nope, didn’t bring no flowers to me.”

“Tsk tsk,” Grace answered, clucking her tongue and shaking her head. “He stole Grover’s head before he could pick your flowers. Bad, bad.”

“Uh, your honor, may I please?”

“Nattie, go right ahead.”

“But I’m not finished.”

“Any more questions, Gracie?”

With a giggle, she answered, “No, Chet, no more questions.”

“Are you finished?” Nattie asked politely.

“I’m finished,” she answered sweetly, sitting down.

Nattie cleared his throat. “Doris, dear, how do you know Rip stole Grover’s head?”

“Well, seen ‘im comin’ down the road carryin’ it, didn’t I? Scared me t’ pieces seein’ the body come walkin’ like that.”

“But you didn’t actually see Rip take the head.”

Doris began to squirm a bit. “Well . . . uh, no, I didn’t.” She shot a look at Rip and blurted out, “But that didn’t mean he didn’t, Nattie, and ya know it.”

Nattie turned to Rip. “Stand up, son.”

Rip did as he was told.

“Now, tell me. Did you steal the head? And be truthful, son. I’ll know if you’re not.”

“I didn’t steal it,” Rip answered. “I was walking along, looking for Fargo, and I heard someone call out. I looked down and there was this head. He said his name was Grover and he was from Maine originally. I asked him what happened and he said he was doing his job, scaring solids.”

Nattie stared into Rip’s eyes, long and hard. It wasn’t an angry stare, wasn’t malicious or disbelieving. Nattie seemed to be looking for something. It felt like he was looking through the filing cabinet in Rip’s head, searching all the files; checking the naughty and nice list. And then, just as quickly, he broke off and left Rip feeling slightly woozy.

“His soul is clean, Chester. He didn’t steal the head.”

Chester nodded.

“Now, wait a cotton pickin’ minute,” came a voice from behind.

“He sent Old Lady Dubose out early.”

“We saw it.”

“Aye, we did. I heard it, too. Seen it.”

Chester waived his hands. “That doesn’t mean he stole Grover’s head.”

“But, we saw . . . .”

“Grover,” Nattie called to the man sitting in the back. “Well?”

Grover looked very uncomfortable. But he answered. “Nope. He didn’t steal m’ head. It’s just like he said. Doris is . . . well, it’s just her carin’ for me.”

Chester slapped the table. “Doris?”

“But . . . y’ honor . . . .”

“I’m tossing this one out the door with the bath water. If Nattie says he ain’t fibbing, he ain’t fibbing and Nattie would know.”

The room erupted into pandemonium.

“But, I seen him—”

“But, Old Lady Dubose—”

“And what about—”

Chester pounded on the table again. “Come on, folks, come to order. Order! I want order in here.”

Gracie stood up. “Let’s see now, I’ll have—”

“Grace,” Nattie warned. “Don’t even think it. That joke is older than vaudeville.”

She turned a shocked expression on Nattie. “Humph! You have no idea what I was gonna say, Nattie.”

“You were about to order a ham and swiss on rye, hold the mayo.”

“Fat lot you know, Nattie, you being *him* and all,” she answered, tossing her head in defiance. “I was about to ask for a cream soda and a bagel.”

Chester made a rather disgusted noise. “Grace.”

“Yes, sir,” she said with a sigh. “Lorriann, honey, come on up.”

Doris quietly left the front of the room, giving Rip a dirty look as she left, and demure Lorriann came forward.

Her eyes were puffy from where she'd been crying. She seemed smaller somehow, like a little girl lost. Gracie plucked a hankie out of her pocket and, with a flourish, handed it to Lorriann.

"Go on, honey," Gracie purred.

"I really liked Fargo, Grace. He was just the really sweetest guy. I just . . . I mean . . ."

Lorriann stopped for a moment. "I just wanted him to notice me."

Fargo was there in a trice. "I did, doll face. I noticed."

"No you didn't. You're just like *all* of them. No one ever sees me, they never do."

"That ain't true. I seen ya. But you were always wanting more and more. Geez, I was smothering."

She looked down at the hankie in her lap. "Just like all of them."

Gracie took her hand. "They never did see you, did they?"

Lorriann shook her head. "My parents just had me so they could inherit, you see. My Mom's family had lots of money and if they had kids, then they'd get it all."

Chester waved Gracie back. "What happened, honey?"

She looked at the Adjudicator. "They were good parents, I guess. I mean, they never beat me or anything. They just . . . I mean, they just didn't know how to love me."

Rip was watching her, riveted. He barely felt the movement beside him as Nattie walked away. But he heard the soft, gravely voice.

"Yes, my dear, talk to me now. I'm listening."

Her gaze locked on Nattie and she went on. "I used to do things, you know? Try to get them to talk to me, notice me. But Mama was always calling for my nanny or Papa would just hand me money and send me off."

"So, what did you do?"

"I did things, other things. I dated men who were . . . dangerous. They'd have to notice me then, right?"

"Did they?"

"No."

"That's when you married your husband, didn't you?"

She nodded. "Stuart . . . he paid attention to me. At first he talked to me, listened to me. I just wanted someone to notice *me*. But all he wanted was my money, the money he thought I'd inherit."

"Did he ignore you too?"

"Yes. Unless he wanted money. But he was always out with his friends until he wanted money. Until . . . until that night."

Nattie was closer now. He took her hand in his, never breaking the spell between them. "What happened, honey?"

"Papa didn't like Stuart. He knew what Stuart was, you see. Told me I had to leave him, divorce him or I was out of the will. Isn't that funny? I was disowned and Stuart never knew . . . until I told him."

"Did he get angry?"

She nodded one more time. "He called me names, told me I was stupid. Said . . . said I was a terrible person and that my father had paid him to marry me anyway. Said he had a real girlfriend, a real woman." She stopped, tears beginning to form in her eyes.

"What happened then?"

"I ran away, out of the bedroom."

“To the front door.”

“Out of the house . . . .” She stopped again and gave the only solid reaction Rip had seen since he got here. She sighed. “I didn’t see the bus. I don’t think the driver saw me either. I woke up here.”

Nattie stepped back, turning to look at Fargo. Rip looked at his friend, who seemed very lost himself.

“Lorriann,” Fargo whispered, then stopped. His mouth worked, but it seemed like he didn’t know what to say.

She filled the gap. “I just wanted you to notice me, Fargo. You were the first person to be nice to me when I got here.”

“But . . . geez oh Pete.” Fargo pulled his hands out of his pockets and kneeled before the lady. “Aw shucks, Lorriann, I noticed ya. I couldn’t help it. You was always looking like you needed someone to take care of you.”

She smiled through her tears, but said nothing.

“Your solids, they’re . . . well, it’s their loss, babe. You’re the jakiest skirt in the whole joint. And if you’d been my girl, I’d-a paid plenty of attention to you. I shoulda known *now*, I shoulda done it *now*.” Fargo kissed her hand. “I’m sorry, doll.”

“No, it was me, Fargo. It was me.” She touched his cheek. “I should have just relaxed. I should have known, you weren’t like them. You’re different. Special.”

“Wasn’t meant to be, doll face.”

“You think I’m . . . I’m . . . .”

Fargo’s smile widened. “I know you are, doll. You’re funny and sweet and pretty. You make me laugh. You always made me feel like I was something, not some grifter that got left here.”

“You *are* something to me.”

Nattie spoke to both of them. “You both are.” Then, to Lorriann, he said, “See? I told you. And your grave always had flowers, so you weren’t forgotten.”

“I wasn’t?”

Nattie smiled at her. “Would I lie to you?”

Gracie chimed in. “You always made this place brighten up, sweetie. You’re the best Ghoul Scout leader we ever had.”

Fargo kissed her hand again. “I care about you in my way, doll.”

Nattie nodded. “So do I, honey. You’re one of mine; that makes you special.”

It only took a moment; from Rip’s point of view—with time being totally irrelevant—the moment Nattie said that, Lorriann took on a glow. Her face lit up like the marquee of a movie theater. The lights flashed in her green eyes. A smile sparkled across her face.

“I didn’t need them to pay attention, did I?”

“No,” Nattie said. “You just needed to know inside, you’re a special girl. You always will be.”

With that, Lorriann floated up out of the chair until she was levitating above their heads. The glow on the outside became a glow on the inside, her skin became translucent. Her hair shone like spun gold. An aura of silver radiated from her, almost blinding Rip. She spoke one word.

“Home.”

With that one word, the light grew and grew. It became so bright that it did blind him now. Rip covered his eyes with his hand, squinting them shut. Still the light penetrated. It was hot and

cold in turns, filling the room. When he was sure he couldn't take it anymore, with a pop, the light was gone.

Rip took his hands down and slowly opened his eyes. The dark spots slowly disappeared until he could see in the room again. Chester was seated at the table, Nattie and Gracie standing before him. Fargo was sitting in the chair by Chester.

*Lorrieann was gone.*

"Hey," Rip sputtered, standing up. "What . . . where . . . where'd she go? Hey, wait a minute. I have my cross examination. You ain't gonna blame this on me, I didn't do nothing."

Nattie smiled. "Yes, son, you did. This is gonna count for you. You helped her reconcile."

"Huh?"

"She accepted what is and found out it didn't make her what she is. She's gone home, to the Far Meadow."

Rip sat down hard. He could hear the whispering behind him. "Old Lady Dubose" was repeated over and over, now adding Lorrieann's name.

"But . . ."

"I flopped," Fargo said. "I flopped big time, didn't I?"

Gracie reached over and patted his arm. "Honey, it's a hard thing to be a counselor. Trust me, I know. Oh my, I've lost a couple in my time to the void."

"All I ever did, Gracie," Fargo answered. "Screw it up, never get in deep. I took a walk one day 'cause I didn't wanna wear no manacle and hopped the first train. Been thumbin' ever since. Never tie me down."

Chester put a hand on the man's arm. "You ready to say it now, lad?"

Fargo nodded. "I wasn't good enough, Chester. I wasn't good enough for a swell skirt like her, or the dame I fell for when I was alive. They always deserved better."

"Why do you say that," Nattie asked.

"Ain't nothing but a no name hobo."

"Didn't you want more?"

Fargo nodded.

"Why didn't you?"

"Shucks, *you* know that one."

"Why don't you just tell me," Nattie said, smiling again.

"Fell for some society broad, Ramona was her name," Fargo answered, twisting his cap in his hands. "She was . . . oh geez, Nattie, she was just swell. But . . . I was just her back door man, see? On account-a, I wasn't good enough." He looked up again at Nattie. "She took a powder one day, never told nobody nothing. Just left."

"And you went looking for her."

"Well, sure, wouldn't you? I mean . . . sure."

"But?"

"Found out, she had a husband. Some society bagger, see? I was just some tramp to get a little dirty action with. So I took off running, ridin' the rails to try and forget about her."

"What happened?"

"Geez, Nattie, you know what happened. I . . . uh . . . I was running for a train and slipped on the track, right in front of the 4:15. Next thing you know, Fargo is a greasy smear on the tracks and they're putting what's left of my remains in the box in the ground."

Gracie slipped her hand in his. "Honey, it's time. Okay?"

Fargo nodded.

“Fargo isn’t your name, is it?”

He shook his head. “I had an old newspaper in my back pocket. It was the notice about Ramona’s first kid being born. Was the Fargo Gazette. I guess they figured that was where I was from, so they stuck that on my stone. Fargo, North Dakota.”

“Time to claim it, honey,” Gracie cooed.

Rip stood up. “You mean . . . it’s not your name?”

“No,” Fargo answered, a guilty look on his face.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

The man shrugged.

“Geez, Far . . . uh . . . shit, man. You’re my friend. I don’t care what your name is. You’re my buddy. You’d be my buddy if your name was Shirley, okay?”

Fargo’s face brightened a little. “Even if I’m a nobody?”

Rip clucked his tongue. “You ain’t a nobody to me, buddy. I told you. You’re my friend. You’re my *best* friend.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

The face brightened a lot more. “It’s Sam. Sam Freeman. From Akron, Ohio.”

Rip crossed over to the chair, his hand held out. “Hey, Sam. I’m real glad to meet you. Name’s Robby.”

Rip never made it to the man. The light show began again, this time brighter than before. This time, Rip had to completely turn around. It was like a nuclear meltdown, the way it was flowing through him. But at least this time, there were no dark patches in front of his eyes. He didn’t move until he felt Nattie’s hand on his shoulder.

“Chester,” Nattie said, “let this go on the record that Rip helped three souls reconcile and move on to where their karmic debts took them. With my blessing.”

Gracie interrupted the pat on the back with, “Nattie, he’s not a counselor. You know he stumbled on those two. Maybe it wasn’t their time.”

“Aye,” said another voice in the back. “Look what he did to Old Lady Dubose.”

“And that Fargo lad. We’ll have to fill his spot in the haunting,” said another.

“And who’s gonna lead the Ghoul Scouts now,” queried the little ankle kicker from before.

“Nattie,” Chester chimed in. “They got a point.”

“And we’ve got business for Rip now,” Nattie agreed.

“Then, I’m ready to call my next witness,” Gracie shouted into the melee.

Chester pulled off his shoe to bang on the table a few times, getting everyone’s attention. It got deadly quiet in the room again. “Say it again, Gracie,” Chester said.

“I said,” she huffed, “I’m ready to call my next witness.”

“Call the person then.”

“I call Rip Porter to the stand,” she said triumphantly. “To answer the charges and explain himself to the lot.”

Rip turned back to Nattie, who just smiled.

“You’re on, son,” Nattie said. “Don’t worry, I’ll be right here.”

Rip nodded and sat down.

It had begun.

*Part Seven*  
*“The Salt of the Earth . . . .”*

“Well, kid?”

“Well, what?” Rip turned to face Chester. “What do you wanna know?”

“Did you pull the flowers from the solid side?”

“Um . . . well,” Rip sputtered. “I mean . . . .”

“Son,” Nattie prodded, the stern paternal tone in his voice.

“Well,” Rip sputtered again, “I mean . . . yeah, okay, yeah, I did.” In a quick rush of words, he went on. “But it was Fargo and Lorrieann, I mean he was jonesing for the chick, okay? And I wanted to give him a boost. He wasn’t never gonna say anything to her if I . . . what are you looking at?”

Nattie’s expression was hard to read. He was just watching.

“What are you looking at,” Rip repeated. “Look, if I screwed up, ain’t nothing new, okay? I’m a screw up. That’s what my old man always said. ‘You want something screwed up, give it to Robby.’ See? He knew.”

Nattie just shook his head.

Rip sunk down in the seat. “Okay, okay. I shouldn’t have taken the flowers, okay? That what you wanna hear?”

Gracie clucked her tongue, her hand to her chest. “Oh my, those poor little blossoms, yanked before their time. Poor little things.”

“Grace?”

“Yes, Chester?”

“They were already dead, sweetie. The florist killed ‘em, cuttin’ ‘em for the display.”

Gracie stamped her foot in indignation. “You see what I mean? Poor little flowers. No one *ever* thinks of the poor little flowers. You think they have a life’s ambition of being funeral arrangements and bridal bouquets?”

“Gracie . . . .”

“You know, becoming a nosegay is *not* a career choice!”

“Gracie?”

“Yes, Chester?”

“The job at hand? Focus?”

Gracie smiled sweetly at the Adjudicator and turned a stern expression on Rip. “So, you broke on through and took those flowers. Didn’t you think they’d be missed? Didn’t you think some poor solid bought those to make their dearly departed know that he was missed?”

Rip shook his head. No, he hadn’t thought that far.

“And what about Old Lady Dubose? Hmmm?”

Rip looked up at the prosecutor. “What did I screw up there?”

“Son,” Nattie answered. “It’s not a screw up. Don’t you see?”

“Sure it is,” Rip hotly tossed back. “I’m a screw up, okay?”

“Nattie,” Gracie burst in. “He was counseling without a license. You’re the one that made the rules.”

Chester nodded. “Gotta agree with the little doll there, Nate. You did.”

Rip watched the exchange. Nattie? That old fart made rules around here?

“Wait a minute,” Rip cut in. “I thought you were in charge, Chester.”



The stogie came out and Chester only chuckled. “Got *you* fooled, then.” He pointed with the cigar at the other man. “Nattie, there. He’s the one. I guess you ain’t figured it out?”

Gracie’s girlish giggle turned Rip back to the other two. Nattie was just smiling, saying nothing.

“Figured out what?”

“Oh my,” Gracie answered with another giggle. “Rip, honey, he’s—”

“Gracie.”

“Oh, Nattie, he needs to know. Besides, we still love you anyway. You ain’t no different to us.”

Rip was confused. “Different? Love . . . what does she mean?”

Chester crossed his arms and sat back. “Remember I told you only one soul has crossed on all the planes? Only one ever goes to the Far Meadow?”

“Rip, honey,” Gracie went on, “We can’t touch the other side, the solid side. Only one is allowed to do that.”

“Why?” Rip caught himself, trying to keep the question from being as rude as it felt. “I mean, what about all those ghosts and shit people see?”

“Placers,” came a voice from the crowd. “Placers stay where they were last alive.”

The little girl that had kicked him earlier stood up. “Placers gots problems and they don’t think they can leave. So they’re stuck in them places. They’re real sad ‘cause they don’t think they’re loved.”

Another of the Ghoul Scouts stood up. “Placers don’t know Nattie, so they don’t think they’re worth all the fuss. They don’t love themselves. See?”

“But . . . they don’t know you?”

Nattie gave the owlish blink. “You think it was any coincidence that I was there?”

Rip was getting more and more confused and bewildered with each question or answer or statement. “It wasn’t?”

“Son . . .”

“Wait,” Rip blurted, standing up. “Wait, you said that . . . it . . . you said that house belonged to . . . wait . . . you said he was your grandson . . . but then you said he was your *great* grandson . . . but . . . but . . .”

“My son.”

“Your son?” Rip sat down hard and fast. “But . . . aren’t you a little . . . I mean. Look forgive me for asking but aren’t you a little . . .”

“Old?”

Rip answered with a weak nod.

Nattie seemed far from insulted. “Ancient, my lad. Positively ancient.”

The light was beginning to come on in Rip’s head. “But . . . I . . . I thought . . . Jesus . . .”

“Was my son,” Nattie finished. “*You* are my son. Chester is my son. So was the cop that plugged four slugs in your chest and the mensch funeral director that overcharged for the flowers on your coffin. You’re *all* my children.”

“But . . . why?”

“Why?”

“Why did you tell me that? Why me? Why *any* of this?”

Nattie took a puff off of his stogie. “You know how they say that God is dead?”

Rip nodded.

“God isn’t dead. Because God never lived. God was never born. God just is. It’s one of those paradoxes, hard to understand. So you just accept it.”

Rip nodded again.

“Why did I tell you that? Because I wanted you to know I had a vested personal interest in you, in that soul. I have an interest in all of you.”

“But . . . I don’t understand.”

“I know,” Nattie answered, smiling. “See, in the end, there is no time, no being, no questions, no answers. We are. *You* are. Past, present, future; it’s all the same to me. Here, there, everywhere; all one place. You see me now, someone sees me then. I am.”

Rip shook his head this time, trying to indicate that it wasn’t coming any clearer.

Chester was the one who answered next. “You know, those Pagans had a good idea. Saying that their Gods were inside them, part of them. Making them all children of Gods.”

“So,” Rip said, “you’re saying that you got my mom pregnant? Like Mary?”

Nattie gave a hearty laugh. “Well, nothing so mundane, but I suppose you could say that.” He turned serious again. “No, son. Like that nice young Carl Sagan said, you’re made of star stuff. Only the stuff came from me. You’re made of *my* stuff.”

“Oh,” Rip answered, falling silent again.

“My son,” Nattie said, laying a hand against Rip’s cheek. “Don’t you see?”

“Guess not.”

“You always had my love. I was always with you. I tried to guide you. And it doesn’t matter what you call me—God, Zeus, Cernunnos, Great Maker—I was always there. Always inside. Always listening. I helped when I could, gave what you needed.”

“But?”

“But, it is *your* being,” Nattie answered, as kindly as he could. “Until you accept that, you can’t go any farther.”

Rip took a hard swallow. “You’re saying . . .”

“Go on, honey,” Gracie said. “It only hurts for a flash.”

Rip nodded for the last time.

“I always blamed my parents. You know?”

“Why, son?”

“My old man said I was just a screw up. Everything I ever touched, I screwed up. So it was just easy to believe him. So, I never tried. Figured I’d just screw it up. Only one thing I was ever really good at.”

“What’s that, kid?”

Rip turned to answer Chester’s question. “Boosting cars, stealing stuff. Breaking and entering.” He chuckled, more to himself than the crowded mausoleum. “I could break on through, get in and out so fast, no one could catch me. I was real good at that.”

“But?”

“But I never tried. Never tried to do anything else. Oh sure, I knew it was wrong but it was cool. Got me the green. You know? Lined my pockets and I could get the good shit when I wanted it.”

“Your dad?”

Rip shrugged. “I was a screw up, he expected it.”

“You sure?”

“What do you mean?”

Nattie was the one who answered. “You ever think why he might say that?”

“No.”

Nattie grinned and blinked again. “Like father, like son. He figured he screwed up with you. He wasn’t talking about you so much as he was talking about himself.”

“I doubt that,” Rip answered.

Chester’s voice was close to cracking as he spoke. “Trust me, son. While you were out, before you woke up here, he came. Every one of their days. Crying, apologizing for letting you down. He hasn’t been back since because he figures he’s the big screw up.”

“No,” Rip yelled. “No, it was *me*. I was the screw up. I let him down. All he and Mom ever wanted was for me to have the . . . .”

“Go on, honey,” Gracie gently prodded.

“They just wanted me to be happy,” Rip said. “I took the cheap way, I took the easy way. They didn’t do nothing wrong. My Mom is the best, okay? She’s the best. And my old man . . . my Dad . . . he loved me as good as he could, okay? It ain’t their fault.”

“And?”

“Yeah, I stole those flowers. I didn’t think it would hurt nothing. I didn’t think . . . .” Suddenly the light dawned on the marble head. “I didn’t think.”

“Go on, son,” Nattie said with a nod.”

“I didn’t think that what I did would matter to anyone. I figured them folks wouldn’t miss that shit. They were rich, they could get more. I didn’t think about what I was doing might hurt my Mom and Dad, my sister. I didn’t . . . I didn’t think anyone would care.”

“But they did, son. You saw your Mom.”

The tears were beginning to stream from his eyes as Rip answered, “I saw her. She still loves me. And I don’t know why.”

Gracie stepped up, putting her arms around Rip and he gratefully hugged her back. She stood, holding him close and caressing his hair.

“I know,” she said. “I know because I watched my son take the wrong road. She loves you because she knows, inside you, there’s still her little boy, still her sweet son. And it doesn’t matter what you do, she’ll always love you and always see that boy.”

Rip nodded against her chest, the smell of a sachet rising up to his nostrils. “I didn’t mean to hurt Far . . . uh . . . Sam or Lorriann. I just wanted to help them. I should have thought first, you know? I should have thought maybe they wasn’t meant to be together or they woulda been already.”

“And?”

“Mrs. Dubose. I shoulda thought about that, too. Maybe that was her haunting bit, huh? Maybe she was supposed to do that, right?”

“And?”

“I shoulda thought about what I was doing on the other side. I shoulda just dropped that damn gun. I shoulda just given myself up, paid my debt. I coulda been something, done something. Maybe I coulda learned that there were people that loved me, people I hurt. I coulda made things right with ‘em.”

“And?”

Rip sat back and looked up into Gracie’s concerned face. But it was to Nattie that he spoke. “I can change now, can’t I? I can’t fix what I did there but I can help others not do it here. Right? I can change.”

Nattie nodded. “One more bit of unfinished business, son. And then, it’s . . . well, we’ll discuss that when we get back.”

“Back?”

Nattie reached out and took Rip’s hand. “Hang on,” he said.

Everything turned to a blur around him—the people, the mausoleum, everything. It was almost as if everything had happened instantaneously; but then, in a way, it had. He and Nattie were standing by his headstone.

“Mom?”

“Go on, son,” Nattie said, pushing Rip forward.

“But . . .”

“Go on. You’ll see.”

His mother was pouring the bottle on the ground. “Have a snort, honey. Just like old times.”

“Mom?”

She gave a sudden start, the bottle falling from her nerveless fingers.

“Nattie, she hears me.”

“Yes, son. Go on.”

“Mom?”

She sat, with a muffled thud, on the grass. Her wild eyes turning to look in his direction. Rip watched her reach up and take the crucifix around her neck. “Robby?”

“Yeah, Mom, it’s me. I’m here.”

“Oh God, no. No, I’m going nuts. That’s it, I’m going crazy.”

“No, Mom,” Rip answered, kneeling down.

She looked like a shimmery angel, like every angel on every TV show he’d ever watched. He hadn’t noticed the last time, how truly lovely she was like this—the golden light shining like an aura around her. The glow of her skin and the deep blue of her eyes.

“No, Mom,” he repeated. “You’re not going crazy. It’s really me.”

Her hands come to her mouth, the tears pouring down her face. One hand reached out, trying to touch him. This time, he thought first. Would it hurt anything? A quick look over his shoulder for Nattie’s approving nod, and Rip reached through to touch her fingers gently.

The smile was slow, but it lit up her face like the proverbial Christmas tree.

“It *is* you!”

“It’s me, Mom. I swear.”

“Oh honey,” she gushed, then stopped. Rip watched her force herself to calm before speaking again. “My baby. Oh my baby, I’m so sorry. I failed. I failed you.”

“No, Mom, no.” He forced his own tears down. “No. Mom, *I* screwed up, okay? I didn’t believe in myself. I didn’t trust myself. You and Dad, you gave me everything and I didn’t appreciate it. *I* should be the one apologizing. *I* should be the one telling you how sorry I am.”

“But, baby—”

“No, Mom,” he insisted. “Please. I can’t grow; I can’t learn what I’m supposed to be learning if I don’t say it.” He smiled at her. “It’s okay, Mom. It’s a great place where I am. And . . . new friends, *good* friends. A place where I can do some good. Where I can be the good boy you always see in me.”

“Oh, honey,” she answered in a breathy, weepy voice. “Are you happy?”

“I am, Mom,” he said. “I’m okay, Mom. You don’t ever have to worry about me again. I’m okay. I swear.”

“I miss you.”

“I miss you too, Mom. But the cool thing is, I can be here waiting for you. For you and Dad. And we can go to the Fa . . . uh, to Heaven. We can go to Heaven and be happy and . . . Mom, it’s a swell place.”

She reached up, wiping the tears from her eyes, never looking away from that spot where she had to be seeing him. “I’m glad, honey. You deserve a swell place.”

“Mom, I’m sorry for all the shit I put you and Dad and Sis through. Please, please forgive me? Tell Dad too, okay? Please? So he can forgive me? And Sis?”

“We forgive you, Robby. We do.”

There it was, that warming in his soul. It felt like a fire had been lit from within, never knowing the cold had really been there until that one spark was ignited.

“Mom?”

“Yes, honey?”

“Don’t rush your time, okay? Please?”

“I won’t, honey. But I want to be there.”

“I know, Mom. Just . . . you’ll come when it’s your time. And Daddy too.”

“Okay.”

“Mom?”

“Yes, honey?”

“I love you.”

Her tears began to flow again. “Oh, Robby, my darlin’ Robby. There was never a day that I didn’t love you. That I was never proud to be your Mom.”

The warmth inside turned to a glow. Rip looked down at his hands, they really *were* glowing. That golden light was beginning to seep around the edges of his hands.

“Nattie?”

“It’s okay, son. That’s the reconciling. You’re doing fine. Keep going.”

“It’s gonna be okay, Mom.”

She smiled, nodding. “Yes it is. You’re okay. You’re my boy. You’ll be there and I can wait. As long as I know you’re okay, I can wait.”

“You’ll come visit?”

“Every week, I’ll come. Me and your Dad.”

“Tell him I said I love him?”

“I’ll tell him.”

“I gotta go, Mom. But I’ll be here. I’ll know you’re here too. Even when I can’t . . . do this. I’ll know. You’ll know; you’ll know I’m here.”

“I’ll know.”

Everything blurred again and he was back inside the mausoleum. The warm glow was still building inside him.

“Go on, son,” Nattie said. “Go on. In front of *them*.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry for messing things up. I’m sorry for not thinking first, not realizing . . . my Karma. That’s it. Karma; cause and effect, oh man, I got it!”

Nattie took Rip’s hands in his. “I forgive you.”

Chester echoed it, “I forgive you.”

Gracie was next. “I forgive you.”

From behind came a rousing chorus. “I forgive you.”

“Go on, son,” Nattie said. “You have to do it too.”

Rip nodded. “I forgive me too. I can do better. I *will* do better. I understand.”

His vision went golden. The light was blinding, more so than before with Lorrieann and Sam. It was like his world, his cosmos, everything was dipped in twenty four carat gold and the sun. The warmth took him over; filling him with something stronger than any orgasm he'd ever had in his life. Suddenly, he understood. Everything. Every memory of every lifetime came rushing into his head. Every moment of every existence suddenly wrapped around him. Names zipped by at dizzying speed—names of those he had been, of those he had known. Every face of every lover, every wife, every child came before him like the pages of a scrapbook laid open by the wind.

He felt as if he would explode, then as if he would implode. It seemed to go on forever, as if it *was* forever. And then, it was done. He waited for his sight to clear, for the glow to fade back. He was eager to see this Far Meadow, see what it was.

And he was severely disappointed to find that he was still in the mausoleum.

“What . . . the . . . frick?”

There were more than a few giggles around the room. His ears turned hot at his embarrassment, the blush deepening across his face.

“Uh, sorry to be here?”

“No,” he blurted out. “No, Nattie . . . I . . . well . . . yeah.” Rip surveyed the mauses, all the amused faces watching. “I mean . . . uh . . . .”

“Lorrieann and Fargo?”

“Well, yeah, *they* went. Why didn't I?”

Chester answered this one. “They decided long ago that they were quits on that side. On all the sides. They earned their rest for a while.”

Nattie nodded. “They'll be in the Far Meadow by choice. They have other planes to be in, other debts to settle. But for now, they declared their intention.”

“Are they together,” Rip asked in a tentative voice. He'd screwed this up once; he didn't want to do it again.

“If that's what they want,” Nattie answered. “It's not for either one of us to say.”

Rip acknowledged the mild rebuke. It wasn't anything he really needed to worry about then.

“So,” Nattie said. “Why are you here?”

Rip thought about it; gave it serious consideration. He smiled at Nattie.

“Because I'm not done here, right? Because I still have lessons to learn and work through here, on this side. Right?”

Nattie gave his blink of approval.

“Because I'm going back?”

Gracie giggled. “Oh no, I don't think so.”

“I don't understand.”

Chester clapped Rip on the shoulder. “Well, could be that your work is here, kid. We're gonna put you to work doing that community service, see.”

“You mean, my haunting wasn't it?”

Nattie re-lit the stogie. “Nope.”

“Then what is?”

“Oh honey,” Gracie answered. “You're gonna help *me* now.”

“I am?”

“That's right, son,” Nattie said. “Gracie, here, is gonna show you the ropes as a counselor. You done good with Lorrieann, Fargo, and by the way, her name isn't Old Lady Dubose. It's Annie. You did good with her, too.”

“You sure did, honey,” Gracie said. “You just got lucky, that’s all. Because you didn’t know what you were doing.”

“And you’ll teach me?”

“Sure will, honey.”

“You learn from Gracie,” Nattie said. “She’s the best. And if you need answers, ask Chet there. He knows everything there is to know about anyone coming through.”

“Holy Ghost,” Chester answered. “It’s my job.”

For a moment, Rip was sure his eyes were going to bulge out of his head.

“What? You didn’t think I had it in me?” Chester had a look of amusement on his face, followed by a sudden nod. “Oh yes, you expected the white dove treatment.” He tipped a wink at Rip. “That’s only for the tourists.”

Rip laughed in spite of himself.

“Oh,” Nattie interjected. “One other little item.”

Rip turned to Nattie, waiting.

“You got a new nephew, you know.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“He’s a good kid. He’s got promise. Only problem is, he’s a chip off your block.”

Rip shook his head.

“His mom says he’s just like you.”

Rip’s eyes widened. “Oh shit, no . . . I . . . he can’t! He can’t do what I did, Nattie. He can’t be like me. That was the wrong way.”

“Then, he’ll need a Guardian Angel.”

Rip stopped. “He . . . .”

“Nattie,” Chester asked. “You think the kid’s ready?”

Nattie nodded. “Funny thing, learning. You always learn best when you teach someone else.” To Rip, he said, “Little tyke’ll need someone who knows the score. Teach him how to believe in himself. How to succeed. Someone who’s been there.”

Rip grinned. “Someone like family. Someone like me.”

Nattie blinked. “Little children, so open, so aware. Motes in the sunbeam are angels dancing. Fairy houses from mayapple plants. Dreams are adventures with pirates and Indians. And who’s to say they’re wrong?”

“He’ll hear me in his dreams?”

“He’ll hear. He’ll know.”

“I can do this,” Rip agreed. “And I’ll learn from Gracie and I’ll help those who need me. And I can take care of my nephew.”

“Visit your folks. They dream too.”

Rip brightened. “I can? It’s not against the rules?”

Nattie laughed. “That’s called makin’ the rounds. And thanks for asking about the rules. Shows you can learn. Shows you’re a bright boy, the salt o’ the earth. That’s a good start.”

The praise meant everything to Rip.

Nattie patted Rip on the back, gesturing with his free hand to the gathered crowd. “Folks, welcome Robby to the neighborhood. Robby, welcome home. I think you’re gonna do just fine now. Don’t you?”

He smiled back at Nattie, at Gracie and Chester, at them all.

“Yeah, I do. I’m home now. I’m home.”

**The End  
... for now**

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Introduction To

And last, but certainly not the least, I'd like to entice you with another bit that might just interest you.

Yes, I do write novels as well. My first two were self-published by a novice with no idea how to make them sell. However, I found myself a good publisher who was willing to take me on. I'm happy to announce that my first *traditionally* published book will be out in 2007.

What started out as a simple, short ghost story (familiar pattern here, I think) turned into a rather frightening series of dreams for me. I put them into story form and decided to be evil enough to share them with you. I'm offering a small excerpt here, with the hopes that you'll buy the full novel when it comes out after the first of the year.

And, by the way, you might want to leave the light on for this one

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### ***A Wager of Blood***

by J. W. Coffey

On a night in 1760, Matthew Harper played a seemingly innocent game of chance in the parlor of the inn he owned. But, before the night was over, the inn belonged to Newell Thornton. Matthew, his wife, and two other people lay murdered and the Inn burned to the ground. 240 years later, Zachary Harper is determined to reclaim the Thornton Inn for the Harper family. What he doesn't know is the old Inn holds the key to that ancient murder, the gateway into Zachary's private hell, and the souls of the four murdered people. He is soon swept up into a diabolical game of chance where his own soul is the prize, and dice are loaded against him in a demonic *Wager of Blood*.

#### ***Chapter Excerpt The "Don't Pass" Bet***

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*It was her!* But that was impossible. He saw the woman run through Sean and it was Frankie.



“Oh, my God . . . you . . . hey, come back here!”

Zach barely had time to see her clutching something tightly against her chest; something wrapped in brown paper. Then, she was running past him, down the stairs. After a final glance at Sean, he turned and followed her down. She took a quick and dainty dash down each riser, then a full gallop to the front room, to the front hallway and his office. He watched her make the turn inside and did the same.

His office door had been standing open, as it always was, but the room was different. Instead of the crowded office décor, he was looking at sofas and a seating area. There were tapestries over the window. He saw a table with a chess set laid out, decorated with an inlaid board. Instead of his filing cabinets, was a smaller sideboard, decanters of gaily hued liquid—presumably wines and spirits of sorts—and pewter goblets and mugs. A lace runner decorated the top of the darkened wood. There was a small fire going in the fireplace and a rich carpet on the floor.

*No, no, this isn't real. No!*

“Dearest Hannah, you must help me,” she said.

Zach gasped to see who Frankie was talking to. It was his wife, wearing that dress he loved so much on her.

“Please, I beg of you, you must help me.”

“Calm yourself, Frances, my dearest friend. It will be well, I promise you.”

*Oh God! Oh, no! No, it can't be. No, no, I'm not seeing this. I'm not going back. I'm not crazy!*

“Oh, sweet Hannah, you must help us. He is mad, he is quite mad! He'll kill us all, I know it.”

Frances started to cry, clutching the brown package tightly to her. Hannah came over and held her for a few moments, cooing and shushing the tears to calm.

Hannah pulled away and took the other woman's face in her hands. “I fear, my friend, I fear. Something has gone greatly wrong here. Please, if you know something, you must tell me.”

Frances seemed to calm slightly and she nodded. “I have the proof . . . the papers here. Newell has done something so dreadful and evil, and I have the proof here. But Ian is fearing that he'll come to harm us. He bade me bring them here. He said you would know what to do.”

“Evil? Proof?” Hannah's face was a study in confusion. “You must tell me.”

The other woman pulled back, staring at the carpet. “I dare not. You must not think ill of . . . of . . .”

“Of you?”

Frances shook her head and said nothing.

“Of Ian?”

Another shake of the head.

“Of *Matthew*? Why, what has he done?”

“It was not Matthew's doing,” Frances exclaimed. She put a hand to her friend's shoulder.

“It was Newell, I swear it. Matthew was cheated, robbed! Newell robbed Matthew and stole the Inn from you.”

Hannah's hands flew to her mouth. She shook her head and turned away. “No, he could not have.”

“My darling Hannah, please,” Frances said as she followed, putting her hand on the woman's shoulder once more. “Matthew was lulled, then robbed. Newell is a vile man and he has done this for his own purposes. He is cunning, my dearest friend, simply cunning and wicked. Matthew had no chance against the thief.”

The woman named Hannah turned back around.

“My poor, sweet Matthew. It is no wonder that he has been so upset. He must be sure that I would hate him so.” Hannah’s shoulders suddenly drooped. “My dearest husband, such a burden he carries now.”

“Then, we shall relieve him of that burden.” Frances held out the bundle she’d been carrying—a bundle of papers, some of them bound as a manuscript would be. “I have the proof here; the proof that will send that vile man to the gaol.”

Zach felt a sudden gust of wind and heard the report of the door slamming. His head turned back, but the front door of the Inn was still closed. He turned back to the office to see the two women staring at him with panicked looks. He spun around to see no one behind him, and the panic struck him hard that they’d been looking at him. He twisted back to the women to see Hannah’s panicked face tighten up again.

“Frances, did you see?”

“He has followed me,” Frances answered. “We must hide these now. Ian said you would know what to do.”

Hannah nodded, and she turned back to the fireplace. She knelt down before the hearth and started to work on one of the stones, jiggling it.

“Matthew and I were talking about repairing this stone, and he said it would be a most wonderful place to hide things. So, we had taken to putting our valuables in here. Matthew has put a small bag of money here for emergencies, along with our other papers. I should think this is a perfect place to hide those that you carry.”

Frances knelt down beside her. “Will it fit, do you think?”

Hannah giggled. “Oh yes, it shall fit, there is plenty of room here. See?” She slid the stone off the hearth, reaching in until her hand had gone up to the elbow. “See? We shall roll your papers up and they shall fit quite nicely. Room to spare.”

She took the papers from Frances and did just that, carefully fitting the newly made tube into the niche. “There.”

Suddenly, Zach heard angry voices behind him. He saw Thorny storming in the door, followed by another man.

“Harper, you are a vile insect, leave me to my task and stop me not!”

“Thornton, I demand you face me this instant!”

*That voice is so familiar. I’ve heard that voice so many times. Uncle Matthew?*

Zach watched Thorny wave a hand and turn to face the other man. “I am engaged in other affairs, Harper, and you are wise to leave me be for now. I shall attend your insipid and inane prattle another day.”

Zach saw the face of the other man, twisted in anger. It *was* his Uncle Matthew; the face of the man who had been coming to him since childhood. It was the face he’d always thought of as his guardian angel. It was the voice he’d always heard when he was in trouble or upset. He’d lost that voice.

“You robbed me, Thornton, and I want what is mine.”

Thornton snorted a sarcastic laugh and shook his head. “I did no such thing. It was a friendly wager and you lost.”

Matthew’s voice raised and he stepped closer to the other man. “I lost nothing that wasn’t cheated from me. I know what you did to me.”

“Harper, you have fallen under the spell of your own table wine. I know not of what you speak. Now, you will give me leave to attend to my other errand. I have no time for you.”

Thorny turned and headed for the stairs. Zach watched his uncle shoot a look into the room and hold up a hand; gestures of a warning to “stay there, do not come.” Then he, too, started up the stairs, still shouting as he went. Both men shouting at each other, disappeared up the railing and disappeared out of Zach’s line of sight.

A small scuffle pulled Zach back to his office.

“No, Hannah, no.” Frances was holding Hannah, trying to keep her from running out. “No, you must stay. Please. Your child, remember?”

“What?”

Frances smoothed her friend’s hair back and turned Hannah to face her. “You are with child, my dearest friend. You must protect the life within you. We must wait.”

“I fear . . . .”

Zach heard the shouting suddenly stop, and turned to the stairs. “Oh my God,” he whispered and saw a thin ribbon of blood squirt against the wallpaper. He heard the muffled thuds, the sound of something being beaten repeatedly. He wanted to go up there, and couldn’t move. His feet were firmly planted, his mind racing with the same thought.

*It’s not real. It’s not real. It’s not real!*

“MATTHEW!”

“No, Hannah, no!”

Everything happened in a blur of motion and sound. First, the woman called Frances ran out again, right through him. Zach felt a curious sense of cold rushing through his body, freezing everything inside him instantly. He had a moment of vertigo, the world swimming before his eyes and he clutched the doorframe to keep from toppling over. He took slow, steady breaths to fend off the nausea he was feeling.

Then, the sound of screaming and more of the same thudding against the floor boards, to be followed by the woman, Hannah, rushing through him and up the stairs. But this time, she came back down them, and he saw her rolling down. She banged against the wall and the stiles of the railing before landing at the bottom. Zach heard the sickening crunch of her neck as her head twisted around until it faced the opposite direction. The body came to rest against the wall and never moved.

“Oh, sweet Jesus. Mother Mary, please! Oh my God, no, no, no!”

Zach was transfixed and horrified. He stood, watching the body, and trying to get back to his safe place in his mind. The one he was forced to find, to block out all the visions; to block out the horrors of his hallucinations. “No, my God, please . . . please, no.”

He gripped the threshold of the door hard enough to make the tips of his fingers bite into the wood. Splinters jabbed the skin and caused tiny spots of blood to form. He pressed a little harder and now the pain reached his brain. “I am not seeing this. It does not exist.”

Zach lifted his left foot and put it behind him, putting his weight on the foot and pushing away from the doorway with the hand that gripped it. He took another step—with his right foot, this time—and followed it with his left again. He let go of the doorway and continued, his sight never leaving the far wall, the doorway leading into the dining room. That was his reality, that was his Inn. He kept backing up until his buttocks collided with his desk. A quick survey around him and he found that he was in his office again.

Zach closed his eyes and sat down on the desktop. His hands came up to his hair, and he pulled the thong, untying the ponytail, and let his hair fall forward. He brushed his fingers through his hair and felt the hot tears on his cheeks. He rocked slightly, weeping harder and harder, moaning as he did. Louder and louder, his moans filled his ears and started to bounce off

the walls of his office. He was losing it, and badly. Zach couldn't pull it back, the whole thing was taking him again. The smell of the hospital disinfectant rose up in his nostrils and he felt the vomit rising. He just couldn't stop the crying. He couldn't stop.

*SLAM!*

He spun away from the door, the tears still fresh on his cheeks. It was enough to stop the tears, to help him gain control of himself.

"Sean? That you, man?" He hastily wiped his face with the back of his hands. "Sean?"

His query was met with only silence. Zach reached over and got a tissue and blew his nose. He took another one and wiped the remainder of the tears from his face.

He felt a presence behind him. Good, Sean was back, worried about him. He blew out a cleansing breath and gave a nervous laugh.

"Sorry, man, been a long day. I guess I'm a little more on edge than I thought. So, did you find her? Find anything that can help us find her?" He turned back around and saw no one.

"Sean?"

He heard the sound, low and rasping. He heard the laughter as it started from behind the granite and marble. He watched the fleur de lis start to glow and saw exactly what Meg had tried to tell him. Two eyes opened against the stone and started staring at him. The laughter echoed out of the mouth of the fireplace and the smell of brimstone belched out on the foul breath of whatever demon was inside. *He was alone with it.*

*A Wager of Blood is scheduled for release in the fall of 2011.*

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The Author

Jesse V. Coffey wrote her first book as author, J. W. Coffey—the name was chosen as homage to her mother, as well as another unnamed, private influence. Born in Kentucky, she was raised in Florida and then spent another twenty five years in Ohio. A writer since childhood, she didn't focus on the publishing aspect until 2001, when she completed her first novel and made the decision to "put it out there for the world to love or hate on their own." That first book was titled *The Savior* and as she calls it, "the most personal of all of the books I've written."

Ms. Coffey is a member of ASCAP, along with other writing groups and organizations. She currently has a day job working for an online textbook seller. She lives in Lexington, KY with Whiskers, her feline queen, for whom she acts as chief cook and poo-pan cleaner.

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***Coming Releases***

(as J. W. Coffey)

*The Brothers Cameron: An Opportunity for Resentment*

*A Wager of Blood*

*The Savior*

(as Jesse V Coffey)

*The Morrigan*

*Wilde Mountain Time*

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