

**At the Gates of Heaven
and Other Short Stories**

By Brian T. McKee

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
The Salesman.....	1
Who's blind?.....	9
Guides.....	15
Fundamentalists.....	17
Dogmatists.....	18
The Old Naked House Cleaner.....	19
Hi Mom!.....	23
At The Gates of Heaven.....	25
There May be No Tomorrow.....	35
The Storm.....	39
The Trek.....	45
Jay.....	49
The Last Word.....	53
Halloween.....	57
At the Cliff's Edge.....	59
Untitled.....	61
Hi Maa!.....	63
Mark and Dex.....	67
Forever.....	71
At the Gates of Hell.....	73
Northward.....	81
Surface Tension.....	85
Thomson's Farm.....	89
The Race.....	97
Two Priests.....	101
The Argument.....	113

Introduction

Have you ever reached a moment in your life where the thrust forward runs out? Like the booster that's been attached to your butt since you were born finally burned out? Maybe someone took a fire hose to the rocket, or maybe it just ran out of fuel, but for the first time the world stopped whizzing by and you took a real long deep hard look at yourself, right here and right now.

In January of 2000 my life changed. I found out I had been suffering and didn't know it. I found out it wasn't my choice to suffer, but it was up to me to end the suffering. These stories, except for the one in the preface, are a reflection of the feelings, thoughts, and ideas that occurred within me during the years that followed.

This book contains bits and pieces of me, of the soul I discovered when I took the time to look within wanting to understand.

Each work begins with a story number, and a brief description. Its title and text follow.

I learned much about myself while evolving these mini-plots. I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I enjoyed writing them.

Preface

I wrote the following story on June 24th, 1995. It turned out to be a precursor to the stories I would write four years later. The salesman in this story became the prototype for the Satan character who appears in later stories.

The Salesman

Paralyzed with fear, Ima looked deep within her heart. There she found a wall, covered with moss and vines. Walking around the wall, Ima tried to gain entrance; there seemed to be none, only cracks with a little light.

The salesman walked up to her out of nowhere, handsome and clean, wearing the finest suit and shoes, and carrying a new black briefcase. “May I help you Miss or should I say Ms.?”

With much trepidation, while looking at the ground, the old woman said in a wispy frail voice, “I’d like to get in, please...”

“I’m sorry ma’am that you feel bad, but you signed the property to me, don’t you remember the good times you had?”

“Yes ... Yes ...” said the little old bitty, her tattered old bones barely able to move. She seemed as if on death’s door and not a match for the young businessman who stood before her. “But I think those times...” she paused to draw in a fresh breath of air “...were not so good after all. Look how they’ve left me completely spent.”

“Not true,” said the wise young man, “you’ve grown old and that is natural to do. You’ve had your fun; your life is now done; there is nothing here for you.”

“But nonetheless,” brooded the little old hag, “I wish to go into that which was once my home. When did you put up the wall anyway, I don’t remember you building that.”

“The wall protects from those who would rob me. You may not enter, for I hold the key.”

“Nonetheless, I’m looking for an entrance,” said the little old lady. With that she walked by the traveling salesman and inched her way along the wall, meticulously searching every crack and crevasse.

“Now Miss Gough you best not fight. You may not like what I’ve done to your home. Its mine – you have no right.”

“How different could it be?” thought the lady to herself. She decided to not listen to the man following her around.

She felt a loose stone and carefully began to pry. “An entrance,” she thought, “waiting just for me.” Her hands ached with the experience of her age. The creaks of the arthritis reflected the pain she felt as she struggled to get a grip on the stone that would let her look in.

“See now Ima E., you know you can’t look in there. Tis my property. Remember, you sold it to me fair and square. Nothing but pain from old memories in there.”

“Nonetheless,” said the stubborn old fool, “I’m going to look in and then return home.”

Her sensitive fingers pried at the stone: she wiggled it loose and pulled it free. It fell to the ground with a thud.

A bright light pierced through the break in the wall burning the old lady's clothing, face, and eyes. The old lady screamed as the flesh on her face flashed to powder. She closed her eyes, covered her face, and looked away. The light was too bright for her.

The light vanished; the old woman let her hands down, and looked at the wall. The place from which the light had shown was now filled with a freshly mortared brick which blocked the old woman's view of the home she'd left years ago.

"Ms. Gough, you are too old, too fragile to return home. You do not even deserve to visit. There is nothing but pain of memories from your past. Let me show you something I'm selling, it will bring you happiness that's sure to last."

Ima looked at the salesman with tears in her eyes. The salesman opened his briefcase and brought out a lovely trinket. He placed it around her neck.

"It's truly your size and says so much about you," said the salesman, "why don't you run off to the party and show it to Betty Lou?"

The gnarly old lady stood up as well as she could and looked at the salesman, who held up a mirror. She saw herself in her younger days: strong and bold, and felt that the trinket might be the thing she had been looking for all along. She still cried but couldn't remember why, and then she thought of the cost: what would he want this time?

“Ah yes, Ms. Gough, the cost is but a crumb. In fact, you’ve been such a good sport you may keep that; just tell everyone who you got it from.”

The old woman straightened up and walked toward the voices that parted in the dark.

The salesman began to walk off, feeling a sense of accomplishment; he’d done his good deed.

After a short time the old lady remembered where she was and what she wanted to do, she became resentful and turned back toward the wall. The salesman saw her and thought, “Here we go again...” As the old lady approached, she threw the trinket at the salesman and in a rage said, “I don’t want your silly little thing!”

“Ms. Gough: you must refrain from using such harsh words; I am just a humble salesman trying to do my job. You sold me your home and you can’t have it back. I have been nice and traded you wonderful things for your home. I’ll give you no more slack. You are feeble, old and dying, you have no energy to fight. You have sewn your oats, now it is time to fertilize them, quite right!”

“You miserable lying piece of crap!” screamed the old woman, “You have tricked me for the last time!”

The salesman disappeared along with the wall and her home. The woman was left confused and angry, but she didn’t know why.

She wandered for days, maybe weeks, through the darkness of eternal night. She slept for a while at a place called work and even dreamt of wonderful romance with her husband named Wish.

She awoke some time later and regained the desire to find her home, she was confused and barely able to move. Her old body was very near death: the pain in her chest, hands and feet reminded her where she wanted to be.

She saw the wall; it had always been there; as she crawled toward it, the salesman appeared in front of her.

She saw him, carefully stood up, and walked painfully, step by step, looking for the entrance to her home within. She used the pain of her movement to drown out the salesman who desperately wanted to be heard. He offered her beauty, he offered her gold, he offered her fame, and he offered her power. He had beautiful flora, animals and flesh. She paid no attention.

She found a loose stone, of pink and magenta. Two of her fingers, now just skin and bone, broke away before she'd pried it free. It dropped to the ground and the old lady looked in: nothing but darkness, not like her home. She put her hand in the wall and she felt another stone much larger and sound. She felt so defeated, like all had been lost. Suddenly something that felt like a steel blade fell down on her arm cutting off her hand.

She screamed because of the searing burn and yanked her arm out of the wall. Yet, with the pain, came a calm that was pleasant. She may have felt the pain before, just remembering now.

Looking down at the stub of her arm, she saw that she bled. She couldn't care less: she just wanted to go home.

The salesman persisted and on he did babble, but the truth was all told – the woman understood.

Weak and bleeding to death, the old lady fell to the base of the wall. She contemplated her existence and thought of the stones. She realized that she had placed every one of them, and forgotten why.

Her home was within the wall she had built. The salesman had sold her each and every piece and she'd mortared it herself with her illusions and desires.

She'd not sold her home to the man ranting before her. He'd lied about that as in everything he'd ever said.

Her life began flashing before her mind's eye. The salesman began to panic. "What are you doing? Do you want to die?"

"How miserable your life! You've not begun to live! Just follow me! I'll make everything creative! I can give you a new hand, better than the first. I can make you young and sensual again, you're assuming the worst!"

The old woman dosed as she saw every mistake. They passed before her and she saw where she went wrong. And for every admittance, her penance became a tear. She cried for many hours, withering away.

Soon she felt lightness at her side. She lifted her heavy head and saw that the wall was falling down.

The salesman in one last attempt screamed, "Get up and move you fool I don't lie! It will crush you and then you will die!"

The woman smiled and looked at the beast, "I'm ready for death, and I've nothing more to see."

The salesman began to run to find the darkness. The wall fell on the sweet lady.

The light found and vaporized the salesman, the one who really feared the light. The old woman's home was never a place she'd lived, but it was a place from which the salesman hid.

Story #1

I wrote this attempting to compose a short that could convey my feelings without actually telling my personal story. I wanted to see if it was possible to convey raw feeling in story form without being hindered by the words themselves. Warning, this is the saddest thing I've ever written. It is also the only truly sad story in this collection.

Every character in the following story is an aspect of me, and the feelings they experience were felt by me in the forty-five days before this was written.

Who's blind?

Claire let go of the stick and waited anxiously. It dropped through the air and after a moment landed on the ground in front of her making a distinct tink, tink sound. Claire, a three-year-old, giggled in amazement of gravity and even though her mind didn't form the words she felt a question, "why does everything want to go down?"

Picking up the stick, Claire was about to let go of it again when the wind changed direction and a new smell entered her nose. Turning around she recognized the scent of her favorite animal and she called out, "Doggy!"

Dropping the stick, but not waiting for the sound as before, Claire began to run up the street toward the dog.

The familiar smells of the street where Claire played every day captivated her for a second and she stopped her wobbly run toward the dog. The pine trees wore new soft green tips and to Claire the smell of green was more vivid than any other. She loved the

textures of the pine needles, the maple and oak leaves on the street's many tall trees.

The hot sun had made the recently paved street warm and gooey and the foul smell was difficult to ignore. Easily distracted, like all three-year-olds, Claire spun toward the neighbor's yard and caught the smell of fresh cut Kentucky Blue Grass. Walking toward and carefully feeling for the fence, she skirted under and knelt down feeling the grass and pulled a few pieces up to her lips for taste.

Then the smell reminded her of her original task.

"Doggy!" she shouted. Climbing under the fence and standing back up she continued her trek up the street.

The dog had been trotting down the street toward her. A feral and rather scruffy cross of many refined animals, the dog's tongue bounced lightly out the left side of his mouth as he jogged down the street.

The dog had avoided being caught by the dogcatcher for six weeks and had even known not to eat the pork-fried cork left out for him by Mr. Davidson.

"Doggy!" said Claire as she half ran, half walked and half wobbled toward him.

The dogcatcher, Barney, rounded another corner in his truck searching for the feral dog that he knew had to be near by, he had just seen it running up this hill. He had tried every trick he knew to catch that dog and the dog had outsmarted him at every turn. He would catch that dog today – he had to. The dog had bitten a child just a few days ago and Barney felt pressure from the town council

who had threatened to get help from the animal control department of a larger neighboring city.

Peering toward the yards, trying to figure out where the dog had gone, Barney noticed the back of one of the older homes on the street and came to a stop. The yard, completely overgrown and completely unkempt was a sore spot in an otherwise beautiful neighborhood. Old Mr. Davidson lived there. Mr. Davidson had lost his twenty nine year old wife to cancer and had never really recovered. He grew old, bitter and resentful of his life.

Barney heard something outside. Turning down his radio and rolling down his window he listened and heard a panicked woman yell, “CLAIRE!”

Barney pulled forward and turned left on the next street: he knew the dog was close.

Claire ran up the street, her bare feet feeling every crack she crossed, and her keen young nose smelling every tree, the fresh cut grass and the newly paved street. She heard her footsteps, and the nail scraping of the dog’s paws moving toward her. She felt the pattern of light and dark on her cheeks as the sun drifted between the branches and new leaves of spring.

Claire’s mother, Jenna looked up from the porch, and saw that Claire was gone.

“Oh my God!” she thought.

Jumping to her feet, Jenna ran down the porch steps and yelled, “CLAIRE!!!”

“Doggy!” yelled Claire on Jenna’s left.

Looking a half block up Jenna saw her daughter running full speed toward the dog that had been terrorizing the neighborhood children for over a month. Panic set in and fighting the weakness in her knees she began to run toward her child.

“Doggy!”

But there was something different, some instinct in Jenna’s heart that said, “Don’t worry.” As she ran she realized that the dog’s tail wagged and his head was up, he didn’t seem intent on hurting the child. In fact it seemed as if he were happy to see her.

Mr. Davidson heard another muffled shout from down the street, “CLAIRE!” He knew what was happening. He grabbed his shotgun and walked toward the front door. Today he would kill that dog, and finally rid the neighborhood of it.

Looking at a picture of his wife, and touching his finger tips to her lips, he smiled and said, “I’ll protect you my love.”

Opening the front door Mr. Davidson saw Claire just a few feet from the dog, acting quickly he took aim at the flea ridden piece of shit that had been terrorizing the neighborhood for months and pulled the trigger.

As Mr. Davidson pulled the trigger he heard Jenna yell, “No!” Jenna watched as Mr. Davidson walked onto his porch with his shotgun and feeling relief and at the same time fear she felt herself yell, “No!” The gun fired, and the dog fell.

Claire and Jenna reached the dog at about the same time. The blood had already begun to coat the dog’s right rear hip and leg.

Claire heard the gunshot and was startled, stopped walking for a second and heard the dog fall to the ground with a loud, hollow and fleshy thud. Marking the distance she walked to him.

Claire felt around for a second, found the dog's face and pet him on the muzzle. The dog licked Claire's fingers, returning her affection.

"Doggy!"

Jenna yelled, "No!" A second time, as Mr. Davidson tried to take aim at the dog's head.

"The dog wasn't going to hurt her!" She shouted.

Mr. Davidson walked off his porch into his horribly overgrown front yard and said, "You can't know that, he's already bit another child."

Claire continued to pet the dog and Jenna pulled off her blouse and attempted to control the dog's bleeding.

The dog continued to lick Claire's hand as she continued to rub his ears, nose, and occasionally eyes.

The dog catcher drove up to the scene, hopped out of the truck and yelled to Mr. Davidson, "you finally got him, eh?"

"Yep. Bout time too."

Jenna began to sob slightly.

Many neighbors began to walk out of their houses to observe the spectacle. Little eight-year-old Jack Warner walked past the dogcatcher's truck with Popsicle in hand and said, "You shot the dog?"

Jenna looked up and said, “Jacky, go home.” Mr. Davidson said, “Yea, I shot him. He bit you, don’t you remember?” “Well yea, but, he didn’t deserve to die for biting me.” “What do you mean? You had to get the rabies shots.” “But he only bit me because I was teasing him.” “What!? You didn’t tell us you were teasing him!” Claire interrupted, “Doggy!”

The dog, now weakened from blood loss couldn’t lick Claire’s hands unless she happened to move her hands in front of his nose. But Claire liked his cold, wet nose, so that happened often.

Barney realized that the stories had gotten out of control, that this dog was a good dog, and that he should save it.

Grabbing some blankets from his truck he began to wrap the dog.

Jenna pulled Claire away from the dog, and Claire stubbornly said, “doggy!” trying to stay near him.

Barney bundled up the dog and headed for the nearest veterinarian.

Story #2

I noticed that my life path had crossed many others recently and I realized that what ever we do has an affect on everyone, not just ourselves. Having encountered a few guides on my journey I wanted to write a story to represent how I felt about my luck.

Guides

In the middle of nowhere, at the intersection of three roads, a wise old man stands reading a book of scriptures. A wary traveler, hiking toward him from one of the roads approaches the old man and asks for directions.

Without looking up from his book, the wise old man points down one of the roads and the traveler, knowing his path to be correct trudges on.

This happens many times a day for months on end. The wise old man always shows people which way to travel to get where they desire but he always does so with little care about who they are or where they are going.

One day a spunky and enthusiastic youth runs up to the old man and asks, “Which way to nirvana?”

The old man, looking up from his book for the first time ever, smiles and says, “Why nirvana is down all these roads, just pick one and you will find your path.”

The youth became confused and the old man, feeling the youth’s confusion, could not continue to read his scripture.

“But wise old man,” the youth exclaims, “how can nirvana be down all the roads?”

“Because,” says the old man, “Nirvana is not a place, it’s a journey, and every step you make toward your destiny is nirvana.”

“Oh,” the youth replies, not really understanding.

While the youth contemplates, the old man continues to read.

“Well kind sir,” asks the youth trying to change his tack a bit, “which way is best for me?”

The old man shakes his head and says, “I do not know.”

Feeling frustrated the youth asks, “Which way should I go?”

Still reading, the old man replies, “I do not know.”

The youth thinks for a minute, his impatience dissolves, he smiles and asks, “which way would you go?”

The old man points randomly down one of the roads and the youth runs off.

After the youth crests the next hill a hundred meters from the old man, he stops, turns and shouts, “There’s another fork in the path here! Where should I ...” The youth stops himself, hesitates and then asks, “which way would you go now?”

The old man smiles to himself and shouts his reply: “I don’t know. I’m not at your crossroads.”

The youth thinks for a minute, makes a choice and walks down his path.

Stories #3 and #4

I wanted a story representation of the problems of fundamentalism. This is what I came up with. A friend pointed out that the opposite of fundamentalism is dogmatism, so I wrote that story after this one.

Fundamentalists

Two men are walking along a stream, when one of them spots a small child far across the stream floating down the river on his back.

Amused he points out the child and says to his friend, “Check that out, looks like fun, doesn’t it?”

His friend looks baffled and says, “What are you talking about? All I see is a log.”

The first man looks and replies, “No. It’s a child on his back floating and relaxed while he sails down the river.”

The second man stares and looks as hard as he can, but all he sees is a log.

The men get into a heated argument and after a few minutes of following the object from the bank, they decide the only way to settle the argument is to swim across and see what the object is.

The object in question is an alligator and both men are killed and eaten.

Dogmatists

Two men are walking down a path headed for home from the markets of the neighboring village. They have been down this path many times before. It is like an old friend – every surface feature reminds them which way to turn and at what time. They know the road so well they never bother to look farther than two feet in front of them.

They know that at the third boulder they have to follow the second groove to the right. They know that at the second muddy spot they have to turn left and walk under the big oak tree.

On this particular day while walking in slumbered silence, like they always do, the pair of men come upon a stream in the path they had never seen before. Rather than stepping over the small stream and continuing on their journey, the men get into a debate as to the symbolism of the stream.

One man argues that it is a bad omen, that they must change their course and travel home by a different route. The other man argues that it is a good omen and merely represents that they're path is evolving.

While they stand arguing, the source of the small stream, a natural earthen dam towering to their right, bursts drowning both men.

Story #5

This is one of my favorites. I think I met this man once in a dream.

The Old Naked House Cleaner

The old man walked down the street of this small city, not knowing where to go or how to get there. He plodded on his path, putting one foot before the other. He knew not where he would go but he knew there was a reason to keep moving, a desire to find his next footfall.

The man had no shoes or clothing. He didn't know about shoes or clothing, because he'd never seen them. He focused on people's faces and more specifically on their eyes. Limbs and bodies never seemed very important. He just saw faces and heard the voice of the soul behind their eyes.

Often he heard people who cared for him speak of shoes, but he had not understood them, because all he listened to was their soul and its cry for love and understanding. The gibberish coming out of their mouths made no sense. "What's this about clothes and shoes?" he would mutter as he walked.

Often someone would invite him into their home and put blankets over his shoulders and food in his mouth. He would notice the comfort, but he knew it was temporary so he wouldn't pay much attention. He was there for a purpose. He had a job to do.

He looked into their eyes and touched their souls. They often didn't know he was doing it. After they fed him he would cleanse their soul, feeding the part of them that needed love. That is what he called "house cleaning." He would do his house cleaning and then

talk about it all evening, even after they left him to sleep he would tell them, muttering all night about how important his job is and how much God loved him for all of his house cleaning.

On this particular evening he walked down the street of a little village. A poor village compared to the posh one he had just left a few days before. Nobody in the posh village had invited him in to do house cleaning, he was disturbed because they were all obviously very miserable, but they wouldn't invite him in. In fact they seemed put off by his presence. He left that town, totally disappointed.

He didn't feel well, but he knew God would provide. God had provided for so many years and this day he knew God would provide.

A child saw him. To the child's horror the man was stumbling and his feet bled. The old man was emaciated, dehydrated and obviously near death. The child ran to his mother who was caring for her other children. Upon hearing her eldest's description, she ran out into the street and saw the old man lying face down in the dirt, naked and mostly skin and bone.

The old man walked or so he thought. There had to be a place where he could be of service. Its true that fewer and fewer people were interested in his house cleaning, but still there had to be someone who wanted to have him look in their eyes.

Suddenly he felt a presence. It had gotten darker earlier tonight but he felt someone pulling on him. Then he felt the cool liquid running down his throat. This sensation never failed to amaze him.

Why did he exist in this thing called a body and why is it that so many people become lost while wearing theirs?

For a while there was darkness but after some time the sun in the window woke him and he felt the cover of temporary blanket, a warmth he knew would go away.

A woman smiled and said something. He felt her smile even before he saw it. Looking up into her eyes he realized that she wanted house cleaning. She wanted her soul purified and he would complete yet another duty today. God would be pleased with him.

He looked deeply into her eyes and smiled. Taken aback by his penetrating stare she moved a step away and then yielding to the power of his soul she felt her self blinded by the beauty of the life around her. The world took on a new dimension and she felt as if she had never lived before, as if her life would never be the same, and as if she would never again regret anything she did or had done. The beauty, the color, the life, the love of her children, everything took on a new and personal meaning.

When she finally awoke, laying on her back with her children staring down at her, she looked to the old man who had died while she reveled in her own light and love. She felt that he had done what he was meant for and she, like the few other's he had touched in his life, finally understood what he meant when he mumbled about house cleaning.

Ultimately, after her children were grown, this woman like so many others the old man had touched would take to the streets seeking those who needed house cleaning, and in the fullness of time she too would not understand anything but house cleaning.

She too would walk naked and talk endlessly of her work. She too would touch a few souls who wanted to know the true beauty of life.

Story #6

This one wrote itself. It's just my cynical side showing.

Hi Mom!

Two men are busy arguing about something.

A seven year old child, who needed a bicycle pump, walked up to one and said, "Dad?"

That man replied, "Not now son. I'm trying to convince Mr. Richards here that the glafloogleflump is actually glifendedrum."

That's not really what his father said, but that's what the boy heard.

"But Dad!"

"Not now son, Mr. Richards is trying to convince me the glafloogleflump is trerenderen."

"But Dad, my bicycle tire is flat!"

"Son, your bicycle tire is not as important as this discussion. You'll just have to wait until we're done."

Angry, confused and dejected the little boy slumped down on the porch step behind where the men stood. He crossed his arms and listened to the banter between the men.

"George, I'm telling you the glafloogleflump has to be trerenderen because if it weren't the pigmatubula wouldn't be rixamatophoric."

"So," said the boy's father, George, "you're saying that the glafloogleflump is trerenderen?"

"Exactly," said his neighbor.

“But John,” sighed George, “If that were true, then the champlitrator would be constigrafted!”

“Hmmm,” said John, “I hadn’t thought of that. Maybe the champlitrator is constigrafted, but only when the grifymative spoonelemator is constructed of canverative bermitrobulum.”

“Damn you’re good John,” admitted George, “I hadn’t thought of that, but wouldn’t that also imply that the grifymative spoonelemator is green and not white?”

“Yea, but nobody knows what color a grifymative spoonelemator is or even if one exists!!!”

The two men laughed heartily for a few seconds as the boy’s mother came out onto the porch drying a plate she had just washed. She saw her son hunched over and closed off.

“That’s true John. That sure is true,” said George.

The woman looked softly down at her child and said, “What’s wrong dear?”

“I need the tire pump, Mom.”

“Well where is it?”

“It’s on top of the metal cabinet in the garage.”

“No problem, I’ll get it down for you.”

The boy’s face lightened, his body sprang up and he and his Mom walked through the open garage door. She handed him the pump as he said, “Thanks Mom!”

And people wonder why kids yell, “Hi Mom!” at a TV camera.

Story #7

This is my absolute favorite. This story wrote itself and even fooled me at the end. It is a story expression of my annoyance with small minded people. Maybe it's just my way of letting go of my past, letting go of the part of me that's small minded.

At The Gates of Heaven

Two very old men are standing at the gates of heaven, waiting for St. Peter to let them in. On the gate, just a few yards behind them is a bright white sign that reads, "Back shortly, St. Peter."

As they wait the men naturally begin to talk about their lives and share their personal stories.

One guy starts talking, "well, I was just a barber in a small burg called Keelystown, Virginia. I was raised by agnostics and failed to find a reason to believe in god or the afterlife. I decided to be atheist when I was pretty young, because I saw all the horrible things people blamed on god and figured if I didn't believe in god, I'd never be able to blame him for anything. Boy was I was really surprised to find that I still existed after I died."

The other man laughed and said, "Well, we try to tell you fellas." Looking introspective the atheist said, "Yep, the religious types would come around all the time. My religious friends would try to get me to go to church. Heck a Priest came round during my last few days of life to try and get me to admit there was a god, but you know I just never bought into it."

Laughing again the good Christian said, “Well, I’ve always believed in God. Seemed to make good sense to me, but my parents were very religious so it was easier for me to believe.”

The atheist smiled, nodded, and said, “I wonder what would have happened if my parents had been religious.”

The atheist looked thoughtful for a second and then continued, “Gosh I wish I had a cigarette and a beer, something to take the edge of this whole experience.”

No sooner had he said the words when a pack of his favorite filter-less Camel cigarettes and a bottle of cold Rolling Rock, his favorite beer, appeared in front of him.

He looked astonishingly at his comrade and grabbed the cigs and beer. He twisted off the top of the beer bottle and tasted it.

“Ahhhh. Perfect. Just like I remember.” With that he set the beer down on the ground and tapped the cigarette pack to compress the tobacco a bit. Opening the pack he pulled out a cigarette, popped it in his mouth and said, “Um, god, can you give me a light?” The cigarette lit and he took a long drag. As he exhaled he relaxed a bit and seemed to age backwards a little. He and the Christian didn’t notice the change.

“Damn that’s good, just like I remember. I stopped smoking 30 years ago because it was killing me and I knew it. It sure does bring back some good memories, smoking a drinking with my boys. Those were good times, you know?”

The atheist aged backwards again, this time he noticed and stared for a second at his hands.

The Christian, shocked, seemed to age a little, becoming more decrepit. How could the atheist get all of these things from God? Everyone knows that drinking and smoking are sins, and yet, here in heaven this man gets them.

Then it dawned on him. The atheist must be going to hell, and this is his moment of solace before descending to the pit.

The Christian forced a smile and said, "Well, good for you. I'm glad you are enjoying it."

Taking another swig of his beer, the atheist said, "Don't you want anything? I mean if god provides for an old atheist like me, I'm sure you can get anything you want."

"No," replied the Christian, "I don't need anything. I'm quite content to wait here for St. Peter."

Lighting another cigarette off his first, the atheist took a long drag, blowing the smoke out of the corner of his mouth to keep it away from the Christian. Then wondering what to do with the spent cigarette, he thought to himself, "god, um sir, what do I do with the butts?"

The cigarette butt disappeared from his hand.

Amazed the atheist said out loud, "God sure is a cool cat, isn't he?" The Christian, having witnessed the cigarette butt's disappearance smiled rather uncomfortably and said, "Um yea. Sure is ... a cool cat.

"My! I wonder what is keeping St. Peter," blurted the good Christian.

“I dunno,” said the atheist, “but I think I’m going to ask god for a recliner and a TV while I wait.”

The Christian could not believe his ears, he became angry and his scowl deepened the creases in his face. A man who never believed in God at all during his life was now making these ridiculous requests while waiting at the gates of heaven. How could he do that, doesn’t he have any respect at all? Suddenly the Christian observed the atheist sitting in a recliner, lighting another cigarette and pressing buttons on a remote control. A 56-inch TV appeared out of thin air.

“How can you just sit there watching TV?” Asked the Christian.

“Why not? I ain’t got nothing better to do.”

“How could you waste God’s precious energy on TV?”

“I figure god wouldn’t give me something if he didn’t have the energy. I mean the guy is big and powerful right?”

The Christian took a deep breath and tried his best to calm himself. He knew there had to be an explanation for what was going on and he knew that sooner or later the truth would come out. While he worried he seemed to age more as the worry put more lines and creases on his face. He hunched over a bit and became lost in thought.

The atheist said out loud, “Hey god, can I see my funeral? I’d like to see how it goes.”

The TV changed and the man watched his own funeral. His children and grand children were all there and all crying. It was obvious the old man was very respected and loved.

The Christian turned toward the gate and peered over it.

“I wonder where St. Peter has gone.” He said out loud.

The atheist yelled, “hey buddy you might want to watch this. I made this video for my family a year or so ago, just in case I died.”

The Christian couldn’t stop himself from turning around to watch.

The funeral reception was obviously at the atheist’s house. Everyone was very sad as they played the videocassette that no one but the old atheist had seen.

The old man on the tape, connected to an oxygen machine forced himself to sit up in bed and stare into the camera.

The atheist, sitting in heaven, laughed, knowing what his recording was going to reveal and he aged backwards yet again. Putting out his cigarette, he stuffed it and the pack into a garbage can that appeared next to his recliner chair.

The old man on the video tape smiled and said, “Howdy all you family!”

Everyone at the reception watching the video laughed and then sobbed just a little harder.

The old atheist continued on the tape while the ever-younger Atheist watched and threw out his almost empty beer.

“You people are probably crying right now, aren’t you? Well, stop it!”

Once again the people at the reception laughed at the image of their dead father, and grandfather.

“I didn’t live my life just so you all could remember me as some dead guy. I didn’t go to barber college, cut hair for sixty years, just so you dumb asses could dress in black and cry over my death. Hell no! I did all that so you all could go out and have some fun for god’s sake!”

Knowing what a devout atheist the old man was, the entire family laughed at him talking about god. The old man had known it would get their attention.

“What are all you people doing? Just look at yourselves! I’m not dead if you carry me around in your hearts. And I know god damn well that you all have me in your hearts, cause I’m such a sweet heart you have to keep me there. I’ve managed to wriggle into everyone’s heart, even you Brian!”

Brian, a man of about 19 years of age laughed and said, “I tried to hate you Uncle Matt, but I couldn’t ... you bastard!”

There was a pause from the old man on the videocassette, then continuing the old man said, “I know you tried to hate me. But I wouldn’t let cha. You have always been my boy. Ever since my sister, your mom died, leaving you homeless. You were the hardest work of my life, boy, and that’s why I left everything to you. All the rest of these assholes got all that they need to be happy, but you, I want you to have me with you forever, just so I can annoy you from the grave.”

There was a sigh from the family, suddenly the will made sense and they all felt relief having heard the truth from the old man and not from the will or the lawyers.

Brian burst into tears and argued with the videocassette, “I don’t want anything from you old man! I want you! You left me just like mom and dad! I don’t want any of your shit.”

The old man on the videocassette sat watching his wristwatch. After a minute he looked back at the camera and said, “You done venting yet?”

“Well, you’d better be because I ain’t got all day to make this tape. So listen up.

“When I agreed to take your sorry ass into my house, I knew you were going to be a problem. You’d given your Mom endless troubles. Everyone encouraged me to let you fall into the system, but you are my blood, and damned if I was going to let the state raise blood, when I could do it myself. We never agreed on anything, but we did find a balance, we did find a way to respect each other’s wishes and you did become a man. You may hate me for leaving you, you may hate me for being so rough on you, but you will see in the future that it was necessary to crack the whip on you, to keep you in line, to teach you some discipline.”

The old man on the tape took a drink of water and said, “oh, by the way Brian, you never said it, but I know you love me, so don’t ever regret not saying it to me, instead make sure you learn to say it to everyone in your life, got it?”

Tears streamed down Brian’s face and he said, “Yeah, I got it.”

The old man said, “Good. Now go pack up my house and sell it off. You need the money for college.” Brian wandered up the stairs to his room, following the old man’s orders one last time.

The old man on the tape recording took another drink of water and said, "As for the rest of you, if all you're going to do is stand around mourning my death, get your asses out of my house. Get out there and celebrate my life or I'll haunt you for all eternity!

"Oh and by the way: I love you guys, thanks for being my family." The tape ended and everyone stood silent for quite a while.

The old man's eldest daughter pulled the tape out of the VCR, held it up and said, "This tape belongs to Brian don't you think?"

Everyone laughed and nodded.

The TV disappeared from in front of the atheist and as he stood, all the furniture disappeared.

As he turned to face the Christian, he looked no older than 26. The Christian, on the other hand, looked 600 years old and very bitter as well.

"I feel better than I ever have," said the atheist, "I think I really did good this lifetime.

"Ha!" rebuffed the Christian, "how many of your children know and love God?"

"None," as far as I know, "Brian joined a church a few years back but even he grew tired of the hypocrisy."

"Well if you didn't instill respect and love for God, then you failed your mission didn't you?"

"I didn't know I had a mission."

"Well of course you did! We all do! We have to have faith, keep faith and spread faith!"

“Really?” said the atheist, “you know I didn’t know that. I wonder how many demerits that will be.”

“Demerits! You get no demerits. You go straight to hell for not believing in God!”

“Well I believe in him now, after all he gave me all those goodies.”

“That doesn’t count!”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s all about what we believe, it’s all about our faith in God!”

“I don’t think so. I don’t think that belief is important at all...”

“You are a fool,” interrupted the Christian.

By now the Christian looked like a walking, talking corpse and as his anger and frustration continued to build his body began to disintegrate, soon there was just a pile of ashes where the Christian had stood.

Bewildered the very young and very handsome atheist took a step back just as Saint Peter appeared at the gate.

“Tsk. Tsk. Tsk,” said Saint Peter as he shook his head, “we lose more good Christians that way.”

Amazed, the Atheist walked up to St. Peter and said, “Is he dead?”

“Well yes, but he hasn’t ceased to be, he just went to Christian heaven. We built it a few years back to keep the good Christians happy until they could handle the real heaven.”

“I’m confused.”

“Oh. Don’t be,” said Saint Peter, “we always pair the really good Christians up with the really good non-Christians to see if the Christians can grow beyond their beliefs.

“Lets see, you burned him in seventeen minutes, that’s a new record, congratulations. Lets see ... who won the poll. Awe damn, it was Jesus, man that guy is good at predicting how long it will take the good Christians to teleport to Christian heaven.”

“So you mean he’s not dead?”

“No. No. He’s dead, just like you and me, but he can’t get into real heaven because it’s too far beyond his scope. He can’t accept that people are people and that life is life and that who you are and what you do are more important than what you believe. So god put him in a place where his ideals won’t be offended and hopefully in time he’ll grow to accept others as they are. Until then, he’ll be isolated away from those that may upset him as you did.”

“Oh. I see.”

“Good,” said Saint Peter.

“So are you going to let me into heaven?” Asked the atheist.

“Huh? Oh. You can go in any time.”

“But the gate is closed.”

“Haven’t you learned anything yet, Matt?”

“Oh yea! Hey god, open the gate please.”

The gate slid open and Matt walked into heaven, where his wife and his parents greeted him. They threw a huge party for him and he lived, um died, happily ever after.

Story #8

This story is my expression of the sadness I feel over the fact that people don't realize what's really important in life, until it's too late.

There May be No Tomorrow

Bob, John and Ken are sitting in their favorite bar like they do on many evenings. Actually Bob and John are sitting upright but Ken has his head on the bar, holding his empty mug of beer to his ear, trying to cool off.

"Jeez Bob!" said John, "I swear. If my wife got any nastier I'd hall off and hit her."

Bob replied, "I strongly doubt you have the balls for that."

"No way man, I'm telling you, if she don't lay off me tonight when I go home ... oh God do I have to go home?" John paused to take a long drink of his beer, and then he continued, "I swear I'm just sick and tired of her."

"Well my friend," said Bob, "you think you've got it bad, you should see my wife..."

"Man," says John cutting his friend off, "I have seen your wife, she's so hot, I mean she's totally fuckin' beautiful."

"Yea. Yea she is, and she treats me like a god too."

"Then what the hell you got to complain about?"

"She won't let me near her."

"Oh damn, why the hell not?"

“I have no idea. I mean she was so hot and so eager to please and so much fun to hang out with in the beginning. Now, ten years later, a couple of kids, a few extra pounds on each our asses, and she doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

Ken moaned, held up his finger and the bar tender quickly poured him another mug of beer. Ken pulled it to his left temple and felt the cold.

John kicked Ken’s chair and said, “Ken man, you have got to stop drinking, you are such a feather weight.”

John swung his head back toward Bob and got a little dizzy. Continuing is conversation with Bob he said, “Have you talked to her about it?”

“I’ve tried. But she won’t talk anymore. She said she tried for years, and is sick of trying anymore.”

“What’s going to happen, you gonna divorce?”

“I hope not John. I love her. Have since the day I met her, I just don’t know how to show it anymore.”

The men sat quietly while John and Bob were served another round.

“God I wish my wife would just shut up once in a while,” said John, “I can hear her for sure ... telling me exactly what I need to do to make her happy, but you know what, she never is. She just bitches and moans and finds reason after reason to resent me. God it’s all so pointless!”

“You going to get a divorce?” Asked Bob.

“I wish I could, but I don’t think she’d go for it.”

Ken moaned again and sighed.

“What the hell is your problem Ken?” Asked Bob.

Without moving a muscle, and talking into the bar, Ken said, “Every fucking day you assholes get drunk and say the same god damn things and you never do a damn thing about it.”

“Well,” replied John, “if Mr. Bachelor dude has any ideas, we’re open to suggestions. Ain’t that right Bob?”

“Hell ya. What the fuck can I do to make my wife happy?”

Ken sat up and stared Bob in the face. “Just be nice once in a while ya prick. You gotta make her feel special.”

“How the hell do I do that?”

“Buy her some flowers, take her dancing, watch the kids for a Saturday, hire a god damn baby sitter and take her to a resort for the weekend. Pretend she’s not going to be here tomorrow and realize what you should do right now to show her you love her.”

“But she won’t let me do any of that for her!”

Ken retorted, “Says you” and finished his beer.

The men sat silent for a few minutes and then John looked at Ken and said, “What about me mister know it all!”

“You gotta grow a spine and stand up to her. She doesn’t respect you and neither do you. She bosses you around and you let her. You gotta start taking care of yourself, so that she’ll let you take care of her. If you don’t love yourself there is no fucking way she’ll

love you, she's too busy loving herself and your kids. Pretend she's not going to be here tomorrow and figure out how much you'd have to do around the house for you and the kids to be physically okay. Then do half of that."

Once again silence fell over the bar. Ken put his head back on the bar, chin down, face forward and held up his finger. The bar tender poured another draft and Ken held it to his forehead.

Bob looked at Ken and said, "Losing Emily and the kids killed you huh?"

"No," said Ken, "it made me wish I were dead."

The three sat for another minute and then Bob said, "I think I'm going to go home early tonight, maybe get some flowers at the store ... maybe I could pick some, that would be better, huh Ken?"

Ken nodded carefully to keep the beer against his forehead.

John said, "I think I should get home and help my wife with something, any suggestions?"

Ken sat up and said, "Clean up the kid's rooms, she'll be so angry she won't know what to do with herself. That's when you kiss her softly and say, 'I'm sorry.'"

Bob and John hesitated at the door and John said, "sorry to bail on you bud..."

Ken smiled and said, "Get the hell outta here you assholes. Go make things right, no matter what it takes – there may be no tomorrow."

Story #9

This is an allegory. I hope you understand it. I refuse to explain it.

The Storm

The wind pounded my face dauntlessly. The salt air, the mists of the seas and the chilling full moon hung over the ocean, reminding me of the tasks I'd not yet completed.

The surf pounded on the bow of the boat on which I rode and the tossing and rolling of the deck underneath my feet made me feel uncertain about my future.

The parentless blonde headed child sitting across from me, whom I hadn't noticed until the storm started, looked at me seeking the safety of my smile. I looked lovingly over to her and said, "It's okay. We'll be fine."

Another big round of waves hit, pounding the boat and sending water across the deck. The child, now fully scared asked me with her eyes if she could sit by my side. A little frightened at the thought, and of her apparent aloneness, I finally smiled and patted the bench next to me.

Sitting next to me with about a foot between, it was obvious the little blonde girl had some reservations about me too.

The waves were getting worse, and even the captain seemed unsure as to our ship's fate.

Another big wave hit splashing us in the face. The cold water seemed dreadful and as it washed across our bodies, it felt as if death herself had brushed us.

The child slid over next to me, took my arm, pulled my hand into her lap, and hugged my forearm for safety.

I've never been fond of children, but this seemed like a practical thing, because the child was obviously more afraid than I.

The waves seemed unnatural. There were no clouds, and no rain. Just clear sky and millions upon millions of stars.

The captain looked down at us, smiled and said, "It looks like its going to get worse before it gets better, you best hold on!"

The small boat tossed in the 20 foot waves, and as the captain kept the boat facing into them, the little blonde girl and I held each other tightly looking to each other for comfort.

As usual the captain looked calm and forceful. His eyes shone clearly his determination to ride out these freak waves.

The little blonde girl stared up at me, and I realized that I had been silly; there was nothing to fear in this little girl.

Very shyly, the little girl said, "do I know you?"

I looked down and said, "I don't think so, we are apparently just journeying to the same destination."

"Well, you seem awfully familiar."

"You do too dear. Maybe we just remind ourselves of each other."

Suddenly the waves became worse, the boat began to list badly from side to side, and I became tremendously nauseous.

The Captain frowned and said, “We’re just going to have to bear it, I gotta keep aiming into the big ones, the little ones are going to toss us a bit!”

The captain began turning the wheel of the ship back and forth, trying to keep the ship on course into the waves. Guessing that he needed more speed he pushed the engine throttle to full and prayed the storm wouldn’t get worse.

He hadn’t looked at the compass for hours and he had no idea where we were, he only knew that he had to fight the waves and hope for calmer seas when he could once again map his position by the stars and plot a course home.

During the next three waves, the little girl climbed into my lap, and I noticed a little brunette boy seated across from me. I hadn’t noticed him before.

Sitting in my lap the little girl waved to the little boy and stuck her tongue out at him. He began to sob uncontrollably and as his sadness heightened, the boat began to climb a very large wave.

I scolded the little girl and said, “Shame on you. Is he your little brother?”

“No. I don’t know who he is or even where he came from,” replied the little girl.

I called him over to me and he sat on the seat next to the little blonde girl and me, within seconds he was holding my right arm to his chest and allowing his tears to fall onto my hand.

The captain, now frantically fighting the seas, trying to keep us upright on a giant forty foot wave, stopped his business for a

second to notice the boy. The captain smiled as he continued to guide the boat to the best of his ability.

The boat crested the wave and fell violently down the other side. The captain aimed the boat straight down and in a few seconds we were climbing the next wave, when another little girl, a brown haired and blue eyed little girl, appeared sitting across from me.

“Where do all these children come from?” I wondered to myself.

Then I noticed the little blonde girl in my lap had somehow disappeared. “Where is she?” I thought.

The little brunette boy climbed into my lap and yelled, “Neener neener neeeeeener!” to the little brown haired girl.

I scolded him as I had the little blonde girl, whom had disappeared. I thought to myself, “did she go over the side? I mean should we be looking for her?”

I held my left arm out to the little brown haired girl as we crested another wave.

She fell and rolled toward me and I just managed to keep her and the little boy under control as the boat reached the bottom of the wave.

Then a little red haired girl appeared sitting next to me with a very devilish grin on her face.

The brown haired girl and she began to fight and as we began to crest the next wave I knew that if I didn’t stop them one of them would die.

I shouted at them, “Don’t you realize? You are hurting each other for no reason! Come over here and hold me while I hold you, together we can get through this!”

I hugged the little brunette boy and he disappeared.

The pandemonium of the two children fighting stopped and they each climbed onto my lap, one on my right leg the other on my left. I grabbed them each around the waist as we crested the next wave holding each other tightly; I closed my eyes and buried my head between them. As the boat came to rest at the bottom of the wave I opened my eyes and the little girls were gone.

I looked to the captain who had just brought out his compass and sextant.

The seas were calm and there was a light on the horizon.

“There’s a sunrise coming, best figure out where we are now because I won’t be able to tell when the sun comes up.”

“Captain,” I asked, “what happened to the storm?”

“Oh, you know squalls: they can come and go at anytime. The trick is you gotta ride them out.”

“Where did the children go?”

The captain smiled and said, “What children? You are my only passenger for this journey.”

Story #10

Another allegory, this one represents life and the bravery which our souls exemplify when they come here.

The Trek

“So it is time for you to walk the mountain?”

“Yes Master.”

“Are you ready?”

“Yes Master.”

“What preparations have you made?”

“None Master.”

“Excellent. And have you decided who you will take with you?”

“Yes Master.”

“Who then?”

“My little brother master.”

The old man wrinkled his brow, the sky opened above him as the sun rose and light shone down on the back of the old man’s head. The glare of the morning sun caused the youth to blink and as the sun raised behind the old man, the youth lost sight of the master’s face.

The old man broke the long silence, “you are aware that your little brother may be more of a burden than you can bear. This is your first Trek.”

The youth squinted trying to make out his teacher's eyes. "He needs to start early Master; he needs to make the Trek on his own as soon as possible."

"Why?"

"Because he is the last."

"Why should he not wait for his turn like all the rest?"

"Because he is my brother."

"It is Jacob's turn. Your brother must wait."

"No, Master, it is my choice and I choose my brother."

"You are defying me?"

"Yes Master."

The old man laughed and said, "Then you are truly ready to go on your Trek."

The sun was high enough now that the youth could see his master's face, and the smile it contained.

The old man walked to the young man, placed his hand on his shoulder and spun him around. The Master escorted the student to the dorms.

"John," yelled the master, "John step forward."

Jacob jumped and said, "But it's my turn!"

"It's Jeremy's choice, and he chose John."

"That's not fair!"

The master laughed and said, "That's life, get used to it."

John hugged his brother as they smiled at each other.

John said, “Goodbye Jeff, goodbye Jorge, goodbye Jan, goodbye Jed.”

The boys said goodbye and John and Jeremy followed the master to his room.

They were each fitted with a belt, and a simple seamless gown.

John became concerned and said, “Um. This is all we get?”

“I’m sorry, John,” said Jeremy, “that’s it and you may not even know about them while your on the Trek, hopefully our paths will cross more than once and I’ll be able to remind you of the belt and gown.”

“You mean we can’t go together? Aren’t you supposed to help me?”

“Well yea, but we are put at different spots on the mountain, we may meet and travel together at least part of the way, but the mountain is tricky and often we must walk different paths.”

“But, I’ve never been on a trek!”

“I know, but you have to start sometime and I wanted to give you the chance.”

“But...”

“You don’t have to go.”

“But...”

The old master looked at his students and said, “He will go, it has been decided.”

Story #11

A former girlfriend's painting inspired this story. Jay is the main character, and he's got this thing about fear.

Jay

The moon sat low in the sky, hanging precariously by its upper point, from a cloud that I could just barely make out.

The man next to me was a stranger, but my father, and as we walked hand in hand across the park to his car I realized that I would be getting to know him.

I had two toys, one in each hand: my teddy bear, Ollie, and a single matchbox car. I wondered who would get my other toys.

An owl hooted from a nearby tree causing me to stop my four year old feet and look up.

My father, stopped to see what I had noticed. Seeing the owl he said, "It's an owl Jay."

"I know," I said, trying to be as contrary as possible.

With a little tug, my father got me to continue our walk to his car.

Then a question entered my mind, "why?"

"Why what Jay?" Replied my father.

"Why did Mommy go away?"

"She didn't Jay, you're going away."

"But she changed."

"Maybe Jay, but she loves you. You know that right?"

“Yeah. I know, but she changed. Why did she change?”

“I think it was the car accident Jay. The doctors think so too.”

The cold air beat against my face and the snow crunched under my feet. This is winter in Chicago and the winter of my childhood.

It must have been about 10:00 PM when my father picked me up. Mom hadn't fed me in about two days, but I didn't complain because I knew that she just didn't feel well.

She called my father after my step father had left and asked him to come get me. It had taken him two days to get me. I remember her words to this day, “I can't take care of him anymore, he's not mine, come and get him.”

We jumped in my father's beat up old Ford and my father drove us to his home in New Mexico. I've not experienced snow or winter cold since that day and I never want to again.

“That's why I won't go with you to New York Jessica, I can't stand the cold.”

The house was a neat as a button, and the silence outside was calming me while I dealt with Jessica.

Jessica yelled, “I love you and I don't want to leave you but I have to take this job, it's my dream, don't you understand?”

The oven timer went off and I got up to unload my roast.

“I understand,” I said as I opened the door, “but the pain is too much, I can't do it. I can't stand the cold.”

“I'll be with you! You can't let what your mother did twenty-six years ago affect now! I'll keep you warm, I promise!”

I placed the roast on a plate and then on the table. “No. If you love me, you’ll stay here with me.”

Jessica served the vegetables while I cut the meat, it was perfect. Too bad the conversation didn’t fit.

“But Jay, don’t make me choose and don’t ask me to give up my dreams for you, that’s not fair!”

“Nobody said life was fair, look what my Mom did to me.”

“But Jay ... Forget it, you’re hopeless ... You won’t ruin my life!”

We ate in silence and after dinner, Jessica packed. She took very little and I never saw her again.

“That’s why I won’t date women with dreams,” I said as I dealt another hand, “How about seven card stud, aces and jokers wild.”

“That’s totally irrational,” said Chris while looking at the cards in his hand, “and you don’t date anyone at all. I’m your only friend.”

“Hey, it’s about protecting myself,” I said as I matched Chris’ bet and raised him a nickel, “I won’t allow anyone to hurt me again, first my Mom and then Jessica.”

“Jay. You’re forty two, alone and lonely. Can’t you see how you’re punishing yourself for your mother’s actions?”

I started to raise the stakes again, but stopped knowing I was in over my head and folded instead.

I was somewhat annoyed with Chris’ hand as well as his attitude.

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

“Yes I do. You are so afraid of life, so afraid of being hurt that you refuse to take any risks to live, to love. Its just so sad man!”

“Look Chris, I know myself and I know how to take care of myself. All I’m doing is protecting myself.”

“There must be a way to convince you.”

“Convince me of what?”

“That you’re a fucking lunatic, all closed up in yourself. You let no one in at all dude! You are so afraid. Like a big baby!”

“That’s why I don’t have people as friends anymore,” I said as I pet Muffin’s fur from head to tail. As she reached to bite my hand for touching her tail I moved it back to her head and started the process all over again.

“Purr Purr Purr.”

Before flipping channels, I got up, stepped over the garbage in the living room and walked to the mail box.

Looking around the neighborhood, I couldn’t believe how fast it had grown, I had bought a place three miles from anyone, and now nearly twenty years later was getting my sixth neighbor.

“Oh good, my social security check, I don’t have to baby my bottle any longer.”

As I walked back in the door, Muffin leaped out the door and disappeared.

“That’s why I don’t keep living animals anymore” I said to the deer’s head mounted on the wall.

Story #12

I like Perry Mason.

The Last Word

“Far be it for me to admit my guilt, after all it is your responsibility to prove it.”

The heavy set, broad shouldered old man laughed at the prosecuting attorney and maybe at everyone in the court room.

“Mr. Smith,” replied Kevin Carney, the chief prosecutor for Fairfield County, Georgia, “you agreed to testify on your behalf, and because of that you have to answer my questions as well.”

“No. I don’t,” said John Smith while dropping his fist on the stand in front of him. “You can’t make me testify against myself. Its part of the Fifth Amendment and even if it weren’t, you couldn’t get me to answer that question.”

“Mr. Smith, this question is not about you.”

“No. But if I answer it, there is an implication of guilt. You sir have asked a lawyer’s question.”

Kevin looked at the judge whose stern look skewered the defendant.

“Your honor,” sighed Kevin, “please ask the defendant to answer the question.”

The judge coughed. John looked slightly toward him and cocked his head as the judge spoke, “Mr. Smith, you must answer the question, or you will be held in contempt of court.”

“Sir,” replied John, “I have very little time left in my life, so I really don’t give a damn about your rules and regulations. Lock me up and throw away the key, I only have a few months left anyway. This trial is pointless, the crime’s not mine, and I’m not fingering the one who did it or admitting I committed it.”

“You leave me no choice. Bailiff, take this man, throw him in jail, and let him out only if he changes his mind.”

John was hauled to jail where he stayed for a month. Then his doctor informed the prosecutor that John had very little time left. The rugged old man had withered quite a bit and now a much thinner, much paler man walked in his shoes.

Because of this, court was re-convened.

John sat behind the stand, very tired and very grey.

Kevin looked at the old man and said, “John.”

“Yes sir,” said John weakly.

“You have pancreatic cancer.”

“Yes sir.”

“It has metastasized?”

“And spread to most of my internal organs.”

“Your doctor had reported that your pain should preclude you from functioning without pain killers.”

“Yes. There is a lot of pain.”

“Yet you sit there, because the law requires it.”

“I sit here because I have no choice.”

“We need you to tell us what you witnessed six months ago.”

“No sir I will not.”

“You will go back into jail. Wouldn’t you rather die at home?”

“Where I die is no concern of mine.”

“Mr. Smith, we need to know who entered the store at 9:05 and spray painted the camera lens.”

“You claim it was me. Either you are asking me to incriminate myself, or you are admitting that you have wrongfully jailed me during the last month of my life.”

“Mr. Smith, we know you were in the store at the time of the robbery homicide, we know that you saw the murderer, and we know that you won’t identify him. That makes you at least an accessory to murder.”

“Says you.”

The judge, tired of hearing the rhetoric, banged his gavel, and said, “Mr. Smith: answer the question.”

John Smith, his real name not known, smiled and looked at the judge, said “no sir, I have a better idea.”

Then he died.

A hush fell over the gallery and the defense attorney, Mr. Smith’s only friend, stood up, walked to the stand and felt Mr. Smith’s pulse.

“Well gentlemen,” she said, “it looks like Mr. Smith gets the last word.”

Story #13

I wanted to write a scary story.

Halloween

As the man slowly backed away from the corpse, he got a shiver up his spine.

As the hair on the back of his neck stood on end, he got an idea.

As the idea bounced around inside his head, it began to rain.

As the rain ran down the window of his car, his headlights began to fade.

As the lights diminished, the man felt a cold and bony hand at his throat.

As the man shrieked he stepped back and the lights on his car switched back on.

There was nothing at his neck.

There was nothing in front of him.

There was no corpse.

There was no casket.

And no hole he'd just spent hours digging.

And no tombstone.

And no headlights.

And no grave yard.

There was only dead silence.

Story #14

There comes a time when you realize that if you go where you need to, there's no going back. Like standing at the summit of a mountain and realizing that to get to the next peak you must jump off this one and start climbing all over again.

At the Cliff's Edge

Standing at the edge of conscious understanding,
Staring at the ledge of conscience over demanding.

Fighting the will that pushes me a sky-ward,
Righting the still that hushes me a shy word.

I peer out into the blackness, half heart broken, half forlorn,
I fear out into the slackness, half soft spoken, half war torn.

I know where my path rests, beyond the hatred and the lies,
I grow where my wrath nests, beyond the placid and the wise.

Shall I divorce myself from the past and break that last chain,
Shall I re-force myself from the last and take that past pain.

I want to realize who I am, face fact: to my goal I must walk,
I want to idealize who I scam, trace pact: to my soul I must talk.

I can't know what lies out there in the total dark,
I can't show what cries out bare in the modal stark.

I can see a glimmering star on this knife's gage,
I can be a shimmering par on this life's page.

I close my eyes, take a breath, balking toward the mend,
I chose my dyes, break the death, walking toward the end.

Right foot first, falling forward never back,
Tight put verse, calling forward clever stack.
I dive head first hoping for the best in station,
Arrive dead burst groping for the destination.

Story #15

This is another self explanatory poem.

Untitled

Now I seek the path's next stop light, praying its color be green.
I've made many mistakes it seems, trying to be loved and seen.

I can't take back the past, its furrowed into time.
The future may be set, fate's reactions, sublime.

Fortune smiles on me in many ways,
the money, it seems, really really pays.

But when it comes to love I'm at a loss,
cause fate has pushed it aside, she's the boss.

I hunger now in ways never explored,
cannot reach the lovely lady adored,
forcing myself through the thick of the night,
Looking for that light, so clear and so bright.

Story #16

This isn't what you think it is.

Hi Maa!

"It's been too long," she said.

"How long this time?" I said.

"21 years. That's much too long."

"Why don't we seem to get together very often?" I asked.

"I don't know. My door is always open."

"Well it's not like I don't think of you often Mom."

"That's true. I also have you in my thoughts often."

"But still. I think we should get together more often."

"I agree," said Mom, "but remember I promised to not interfere with your life, now that you're on your own, so you have to come to me, or at least give me a jingle and tell me where to meet you."

"I know the rules Ma, I just forget sometimes. I'll try to do better."

"I know you will dear. What's new with you kiddo?"

"Oh. I got a new girlfriend, she's different."

"Does that bother you?"

"Well I didn't think it would but she's kinda demanding."

"Well there are plenty of fish in the sea, yanno?"

"Yeah, but I'm getting tired of fishing, wanna settle down, yanno?"

"I understand. What else is going on?"

“I got a new job, actually had several since we last talked.”

“Like any of them?”

“Actually, the new one is really good and I seem to be doing well, but ... well Cassandra’s Dad got me the job.”

“And Cassandra is your girlfriend?”

“Yeah.”

“I see. Well maybe they’ll keep you because you’re doing good work.”

“Maybe, but Cassandra’s kinda holding it over my head.”

“Hmmm. Well I’m not one for giving advice, but it seems to me your best option has become obvious.”

“Yeah, that’s kinda why I called today.”

“So you wanted some advice from your old Maa, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Kiddo, I think you know what you have to do. Just be willing to accept the consequences of your actions and make sure to learn from them, okay?”

“Yeah. I hear ya ... Um, so what’s new with you, Ma?”

“Really? You’re asking about me?”

“Oh don’t be so surprised, I love you, yanno?”

“I know you do kiddo, I just have to razz ya once in a while.”

I sighed and repeated, “So what’s new?”

She laughed and said, “Well I just created another universe, this one’s done in paisley, your grandmother laughed her butt off, told me it would clash with everything, but I’ve managed to fit it in.”

“Really? That seems kinda weird, to do a whole universe in paisley.”

“Well the fish love it, but the humanoids are kind of annoyed. Ha ha I made a funny.”

“Do you think this will last longer than the plaid universe?”

“I don’t know. The plaid one ran out of steam after only 2 billion years. Your universe on the other hand ...”

“Ma, don’t tell me, I don’t want to know.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right, ignorance equals bliss. Humans are so funny, trying to fool themselves into believing they don’t know.”

“Hey Ma, sorry to cut you short, but I gotta go break someone’s heart and listen to some screaming for a while.”

“Hey kiddo, you don’t gotta listen to the screaming, just walk away, no one deserves that.”

“Thanks for caring Ma.”

“You’re quite welcome my son. Have a nice life, just in case I don’t hear from ya.”

“Don’t worry Ma, I won’t make the same mistake again. I’ll call next Tuesday.”

“Hugs and kisses little one.”

“Same for you Maa!”

Story #17

I wish I had a brother. Not that I don't love my sister, I just wonder what its like to have a brother.

Mark and Dex

Forth in line was Dexter, nerd boy as his friends called him, dork face as the bullies called him, and Dex, as his big brother, Mark, called him.

Buzz buzz buzz went the crowd.

What is nerd boy doing in line for Junkster Rummage concert tickets, and how did he get to be forth in line? He must have been here all night.

Did Dexter actually listen to music? And if so, why isn't it classical or something like that? Why would nerd boy listen to heavy metal?

Dexter stood in line waiting for the ticket window to open – only five more minutes.

The buzz changed from, “why would he want those,” to “how could he be related to Mark? Mark is the coolest kid in the school, a graduating senior. Dexter is a pathetic, nerdy, wispy little freshmen. How could they possibly be related?”

Well in fact they aren't. Dexter is adopted, but no one knows that besides Mark and his parents. Dexter knows, he had figured it out a long time ago, but he's told no one, as he doesn't want to spoil his parent's illusions.

A really nice blue 68 Chevelle pulled up in front of the theater and from behind the wheel the driver yelled, "Hey Dex!" The car roared to the nearest parking space and the young driver came running up to the ticket window.

It was Mark.

"Dude! I can't believe you did it! You actually saved a spot in line for me."

"Bout time you got here Mark, I wasn't liking the fact that I was going to have to forge Dad's signature and use his credit card. Is the deal still on?"

"Of course Dex, but I had no idea you'd really do it. I thought you hated heavy metal!"

"I don't hate it, and besides with front row center seating, or thereabouts, I should be able to get anyone to go with me. I think its time I start listening to your advice Mark. I've been thinking about it."

The ticket window opened and the people in the front of the line bought their maximum 36 tickets.

Dexter approached the window and smiled at his classmate Debbie, "Four tickets right at the stage, center if possible, please."

Debbie smiled back and said, "Here you go Dex." Then with a strong lilt in her voice, she said, "Hi Mark, how ya doin?"

"I'm fine Deb."

"That will be \$224 dollars please," said Deb.

Mark handed Debbie the cash and checked the seats. Front row just off to the left.

“Damn good tickets Dex! Thanks much.”

“You’re welcome bro.”

As they walked down the line toward Mark’s car, Mark said overtly, “so who you going to ask to go?”

“I don’t know Mark,” replied Dexter, also overtly loud, “who you going to ask to go?”

“I don’t know Dex. We’ll have to figure that out tomorrow in school, huh?”

“Yeah. Tomorrow.”

On the drive home Mark smiled at Dex and asked, “exactly what advice of mine are you following little bro?”

“Something you’ve been trying to get through to me for years, Mark. Be yourself. If someone doesn’t like you for who you are: fuck ‘em.”

“I doubt I said it quite like that, Dex.”

“Well. No, but it was close enough that I got that gist.”

Marked laughed and said, “well just don’t tell mom that, k?”

“okay.”

Story #18

Don't jump to conclusions. This isn't what you think.

Forever

As far as she knew, she'd been there forever.

There was no sky, no ground beneath her feet. No sweat in her pores, no food around to eat.

No sun, no stars, no fun, no bars, just total blackness ...

A sense of never never.

"How long have I been here," she wondered to herself.

She felt warmth and the perpetual thrum and hum of that melodic rhythm that seems to echo endlessly around her.

"Where was I last?" she asked in her head.

"Under a car? Oh my I was dead!"

"How'd I get here? Where is here? I'm so very afraid!"

"I must get out! I must run away! I must not fade!"

"Into the warmth, the rhythm, and the charade."

"Oh its so comfortable living here all snug and warm."

"I'd stay forever, if I weren't so bored."

Confusion on set, thought became simpler, and in time she forgot how to be bored.

Time marched on into the unknown future, motion once in a while. Sometimes the sounds of distant music, sometime a prod, sometimes a gentle rub.

Her universe was very small, dark, and damp, but very warm, and safe, so far from the car horn.

Much time she spent there, a life time it seemed, until one day she saw light at the end of a tunnel, meeting the cold cruel world with a scream.

“Oh my god,” she thought in an instant,

“I get to do it all over again, I hope I do better this footprint.”

The world seemed blurry, loud and insane,
she knew it quite well, and was home again.

Story #19

This is nasty, just so I could prove to myself that I'm capable of writing anything.

At the Gates of Hell

WARNING, THIS IS VIOLENT AND CONTAINS EXPLICIT SEXUAL REFERENCES

Two mass murderers are standing at the gates of hell, waiting for Satan to show up and usher them in. The gate is closed and there is a sign that says, "Back in five minutes, signed Satan."

Both men are young, strong, virile, and handsome. Both had been awaiting hell for years, planned on being here, had made their lives a living hell to make sure they went to hell upon their deaths.

They felt like the Angel of Death himself while they walked the planet, with no concern for anything but themselves. They didn't care about a damn thing, except satisfying their needs for destruction. They had thoroughly enjoyed their lives and patiently awaited their time in the pit, the pit they had been promised by their mothers and the judges who ordered their executions.

They began to discuss the obvious, how they'd gotten to hell...

"Well," said Dick, "I got here by being a serial murderer, it took them six and a half years to catch me and I was only sixteen when I started. Hell they never really knew how many I killed. I admitted to thirty seven but there must have been twice that."

"Oh that's nothing," replied Aster, "I started when I was 12, by killing my entire family. My Mother, the stupid bitch, told me I

was going to hell, so I figured if I was going to go there I might as well go there in a big way, huh?”

“Ha! Yeah. I know exactly what you mean. The priest asked me before my execution if I wanted to confess and be forgiven and I said, ‘oh yeah, like it’s that easy, who you trying to kid, pops!’”

The two laughed out loud and Dick continued, “So is that all you killed was your Mom and family?”

“Hell no. I would only be in purgatory for doing that, putting them out of their misery was more like a mercy killing. I got lucky in getting a fresh out of school genius as my defense attorney, we concocted a story about how my parents and siblings beat me, showed them some pictures of be all beaten and bruised, hell I had just fallen off my motorcycle, heh heh, damn I was banged up. Anyway the jury bought it and I was sent to an institution. You cannot believe how easy it is to convince those morons I’d done a full recovery. I just read about the illness they had assigned to me, read about the typical process of recovery and faked it the whole way.”

“So you continued after getting out of the hospital?” asked Dick.

“Yeah, and they suspected me but I was amazingly good at fucking with the cops and the feds though. I read everything about serial murderers growing up, saw all the movies, and I left absolutely nothing to chance, except of course, the victims.”

Standing still for a moment and getting lost in thought, Aster paused.

Dick looked at him, puzzled, and said, “How’d you get caught?”

Aster smiled and said, “The bitch.”

Dick frowned and said, “What bitch?”

“I decided the next non-predicable thing to do was to journey to Alaska and hunt and kill a hiker... I learned all I could about hiking, practiced in the Sierra Nevada, and the Appellation ranges. I got really good over the course of six months.”

“I flew to Alaska, to one of the world’s greatest mountain ranges, rugged and beautiful land. I have never felt so peaceful. I had actually forgotten why I went there, until she showed up.”

“Who?” Asked Dick.

“Kelly, that’s who.”

Aster smiled again and said, “She was hiking ahead of me and I’m so damn good I caught up to her. She was so beautiful, I mean shockingly beautiful. Dude I really hadn’t noticed women until I met her. But I got this really great idea. We were out in the middle of nowhere, the odds of meeting each other was astronomical, but the odds of meeting someone else, zero. I realized I could torture her, chase her along the trail and just experience things I’ve never felt before. Hell most of my victims never saw me coming, this one I could drag out for weeks, maybe months if I let her starve a bit.”

“Dude, that sounds so cool.”

“We hiked together for a while, she was really sweet, but at some point I wanted to play my trump card, so I told her I was a mass murderer and that I was going to kill her.”

Aster stopped for a moment, took a deep breath and Dick said, “Well, what did she say? Did she run, did you stalk her, I mean what happened, don’t just leave me hanging!”

Aster sighed and said, “She was turned on.”

“What?”

“She got really turned on.”

“That’s not normal dude.”

“I know, but she was so sexy and she asked me to tell her of all my deeds.”

Aster sighed again and said, “I figured what the hell she’s dead anyway, so I told her all my excitement for the last six years. I couldn’t remember them all, but I remembered the fun ones anyway.”

Dick replied, “So how did she react, did she get afraid?”

“Nope,” said Aster, “she got wet.”

“No fucking way!”

“Dude, honest to God, her pants were wet to the knees.”

“So what happened next?”

“It don’t take a genius to know what happened next. We did it all day and all night and when she finally exhausted herself – she was on top as I’d run out of steam much earlier – she waited until I looked away and hit me on the head with a rock. I woke up in the hospital the next fucking day with three cops around my bed!”

Dick laughed his ass off. He laughed and shook so hard the rubber band holding his hair back broke and his long black hair fell around his shoulders.

“Dude that is so fucking pathetic!”

“I know dude, it was fun for 24 hours, but I shoulda been more prepared. If I’d had my blade I coulda done her while she was at it... Damn 20/20 hind sight. I woulda been okay...”

After a second, Aster said, “funny, your hair looks a lot like Kelley’s.”

Dick pulled his hair back, held it with one hand, held out his other hand and another rubber band appeared out of thin air. Then he put the rubber band around his pony tail, twisted it, and wrapped it again.

A little shocked, Aster said, “How’d you do that?”

Dick said, “Oh that’s easy,” and then transformed into a woman right in front of Aster, “much easier than changing gender.” Dick had become Kelly.

“You bitch!”

Aster lunged at Kelly, wrapped his hands around her neck and squeezed until there was no life left in her. He sat down and thought, “I didn’t know I could still kill in Hell.”

Kelly sat up and said, “Sure you can, but I’ll just come back, we’re already dead.”

Aster heard her voice again and reacted. He grabbed the nearest thing he could find, a piece of hardened lava and beat her to death.

After a minute of rest, Kelly sat up, fully restored and said, “You know we can do this as many times as you need, we’ve got all eternity.”

Aster grabbed the gate and ripped a length of heavy gauge steel from it. He apparently had super human strength. Running at Kelly, he pierced her straight through the heart and she died again.

Sitting down by the fence, Aster began to reflect.

Kelly sat up, pulled out the steel, healed instantly and said, “God you turn me on Aster, wanna fuck?”

Aster attacked her, trying to rape her, but she enjoyed it so he stopped. Tired and confused Aster crawled back to the gate.

Kelly laughed and said, “You are such a pussy!”

Transforming again Kelly changed into her natural form, the form of Satan.

Aster saw the transformation and said, “So it was you who got me caught?”

“Ha! HA! HA! HAAAAH!” screamed Satan, “you had done enough killing, don’t you think? And besides you were wimping out, if I hadn’t come along you probably would have retired and never gotten caught and I couldn’t have that now could I?”

Aster stood up and walked to Satan.

Satan looked him in the eyes and said, “What do you want?”

“Aren’t you going to usher me into hell?”

“Oh you want in so badly? Don’t you like my company? I could go back to Kelly and we could have some fun if you like.”

“No. I just want to get in. I’m so tired of the lies and BS.”

“Awe, poor baby. Okay let me get my keys.” Satan reached in to the wall and pulled out a set of ruby crystal keys. Unlocking the gate, he followed Aster through and closed the gate behind him.

There was barely enough room for the two of them.

“Where is the rest of hell?” Asked Aster.

In Kelly’s voice Satan replied, “Oh, you’ll see my boy, you’ll see.” A computer terminal popped up beside Satan and a chair appeared under his butt. Satan sat down and he began typing data into the computer.

Aster peered over his shoulder and said, “Figuring out where I’m going to go?”

“Exactly,” replied Satan.

Satan typed for a few minutes, while Aster noticed the back in five minutes sign. “Did you want me to pull the sign down for you?”

“Oh no,” said Satan, “I’ll need that for the next visitor. Heh heh.”

After a few more minutes, Satan said, “well it seems you have a few choices, shall I randomize or do you want to select?”

“Oh I don’t mind selecting, it is eternity, right?”

“Well, something like that,” answered Satan. “Do you want to be blonde or brunette?”

“Huh?” Replied Aster.

“Do you want to be blonde or brunette, I thought you were a smart boy, seems I was wrong.”

“Um, brunette I guess.”

“C or D cup?”

“Wait a minute, you’re changing my gender? You can do that?”

“Yes I can, but I’m letting you select your hair color and breast size, that seems more than fair don’t you think?”

“I’d really rather be a man.”

“Sorry kid if you wanted to select everything you would have to had lead a better life. In heaven you get to select everything about your next life, here, I select most of everything.”

“Wait. Did you say next life?”

“That’s right, why do you ask?” Asked Satan playing like he didn’t understand the question.

“I get to live again?”

“Well of course and its going to be hell, HA ha ha HAAAA!”

“Wait a minute! You mean I’m not going to spend all of eternity in hell?”

“Yeah you are duuude, but it ain’t a place man! It’s a state of mind! Bwuaaaahhhahahahahahaah!”

With that Satan slapped Aster on the butt and aster fell into the wall and flew head first out of a woman...

“WAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!!!!” Cried Aster, or should I say, Amanda.

Story #20

I wrote this for my friend Tamara. I love this story.

Northward

In the shade of the sunglasses she wore, lain a shadow of her future fate. Behind the darkened glass, behind the lightened frames lay eyes of power, beauty and grace.

She had come from a darkened past, but in her future shined brilliant light, so here and now she tightened her sun glasses and loosened her blouse.

The sun beat down as she walked the sands, ocean on her left, rugged mountain on her right. She walked in low tide, often needed to swim in high tide, but she kept close to the rugged rocks of the mountain to her east, for fear of the unknown depths to the west.

The journey was north. Never up nor down. She'd lived in hell, spent a few months in heaven and decided that neither was for her. Now she walked the warm beach, northward.

There was a slight wind off the ocean. Enough breeze to tickle her nose. Today was calm and quite beautiful. In the past there had been few days like this. Now, they seemed to come and go but she remembered them when they were gone, and that kept her walking through the storms.

When she was younger she often gave up, seeking refuge in the homes along the beach. But she had learned that these shacks, created by others who walked a similar path, were places to lose one's self, and she'd realized that the warmth was temporary, and came at a high cost.

Now she walked, patiently, steadfastly, onward toward the North Star. She didn't know where she'd end up, but she knew in her heart of hearts, that was the way for her to go.

A large rock jettted out of the mountain on the path in front of her, and forced her to walk out a few dozen feet into the ocean. The mountain was too high, and too steep for her to climb in her bare feet. She'd crossed hills like this before, but it always ended up with her recovering in one of those pitfall houses. Both were dangerous and she'd decided to avoid them at all costs.

The water was calm today, beautiful and for the first time in a long time she looked out to sea. Out about 200 yards was a small island. It was so attractive she felt uncontrollably compelled to swim to it.

But she'd tried before and the seas always sucked her under, she barely survived these incidents and barely made it back to shore. Walking was safe: swimming was dangerous.

While walking through the shallows deeper and deeper, trying to round the ledge, she hit the edge of the giant stone mountain and slipped off the edge of the beach, falling into deep water. The water was surprisingly warm, but she panicked and swam as fast as she could northward. After a few seconds a riptide grabbed her and dragged her 50 yards from the shore. It seemed the harder she swam, the farther out she went.

She knew about riptides, she knew what she had to do; she had to swim parallel to the beach, so she turned north, and swam as hard as she could. She'd been in the waters many times, been attacked by sharks, giant squids, been ripped up on reefs, and during good

times even swam in the presence of bottle nose dolphins. She was prepared to meet this challenge head on and swam confidently.

But she got nowhere.

Instinctively she turned south. This worked and she even found it easy to head east for the shore, but how to get around that giant rock mountain? Could she jump over the underwater ledge onto the beach on the other side? Was there beach on the other side? From her vantage point, she couldn't even tell.

Stopping herself, she found composure and looked out to the other island. At this moment a tiger shark swam by. She'd been in the water with them before, but this one felt particularly hungry and she worried a bit. As the shark swam north he too was caught in the riptide and could proceed no further. Turning, he swam by her again and then turned out to sea.

She watched in amazement as he swam within a few yards of the other island's little beach.

"Can I make it?" she thought to herself.

"I've got nothing to lose. I know my path is north, so I must try."

She began swimming following the course taken by the Tiger Shark. The water grew colder, the waves grew higher, and at one point she lost sight of the island, but she swam in the direction she knew it must be.

The salt water burned her eyes and all that swimming she'd done against the riptide had taken its toll, she began to realize that she might have been better off resting on the shore and trying again tomorrow.

Then again, maybe not.

It took her longer than the shark, but she made it to that other island. As she climbed onto its little shore, coughing and heaving for breath she looked back to her old island, to that rock, and saw that there was no more land to the north, the rip tide was the currents coming across the northern side of the island.

Breathing a sigh of relief she walked north on the eastern coast of this new little island.

Looking over to her old island she wondered why she'd been so attached to it, why she'd felt it so important to stay there and why she'd never made it to any of the other islands she'd seen before.

As she reached the north eastern corner of this little island, she saw that the beach continued westward, and there was a lush and green forest to the south. This was just the tip of a much larger and unexplored island.

“How funny,” she thought, “this island doesn't have the cliff side on it so I can search the forest for the first time. I wonder why that other island is so rocky.”

She walked into the forest and tasted a few fruits. Some were bitter, made her down right sick, but in a short time she identified the good ones, the edible ones and she didn't get too sick.

By nightfall she'd found more wood for fire than the total she'd found in all the years before. Sitting in front of her fire on the beach, she looked north. Taking a bite of fruit she said out loud, “Time for me to travel west I think.”

Story #21

This story is just for fun.

Surface Tension

“I dunno.”

“Me neither.”

“What should we do?”

“I told you I don’t know.”

“Well neither do I.”

Josh stared down at his feet perched atop the swimming pool cover.

Jason smiled and said, “Well you’re the one who got out there.”

“But I was sleep walking.”

Jason laughed and said, “yeah, so walk back.”

“But Jason! I might fall through the cover!”

“There’s strong evidence that you won’t, as you haven’t fallen through in the ten minutes you’ve been talking to me.”

“But...”

“Look Josh, you’re just going to have to take a step and if you fall, I’ll pull you out.”

The edge of the pool cover was half way across the pool surface and from the direction Josh faced it was patently obvious he had walked across the surface of the pool and had come to rest, in pajamas, standing on the edge of the pool cover.

How the pool cover had gotten only part way rolled up and how it was that Josh stood on top of the flimsy plastic cover, on top of the deep end of the pool, with no apparent support other than surface tension was a complete mystery.

Things like this had happened before. Once, a year or so ago, Josh had awakened lying on the ceiling, face down. He called for his elder brother and begged him to not tell their parents. Things of this nature, typically gravity defying things, had been happening all his life, but being stuck on the ceiling was the first one he'd not been able to resolve by himself.

“Jason. Walk out here and get me.”

“Josh you know I'd have to swim and then we'd both have to get wet and we'd have to explain our 3:00 AM sojourn in the half covered swimming pool. Just walk. You know you can.”

“I really hate this, you know? Is this some kind of joke God is playing on me?”

At that moment, Jason and Josh's Dad walked onto the patio from within the house, rubbed his eyes and said, “What are you guys doing up so late?”

“Um,” said Jason, “we're a bit restless tonight.”

“Why did you guys roll up the pool cover, you know the leaves are going to get into it and then you'll have to sweep it before your party tomorrow.”

“Yeah Dad, we know.”

Jason and Josh's father walked out on the surface of the pool to his son.

Both Josh and Jason were shocked and mystified.

Picking up his son, Josh's father carried him to the patio and said, "You shoulda told me about this years ago, I coulda made things a lot easier for you. I don't understand why kids don't trust their parents these days. Then again, Grandpa Smerthy could see it in me, but I couldn't see it in you or I'd have told you about it already. Sorry kiddo."

Josh's father placed him on the patio and said, "You could have walked off at any time as long as you believed you could. It will take some practice. Now for heaven's sake, go to bed and lock your door with the dead bolt, hide the key under your brother's pillow and get some rest. The night walks will end as soon as you accept your talents."

Josh and Jason followed their Dad as he walked up to his bedroom. As they walked into their room, Josh and Jason heard their Dad talking to their Mom. There was a laugh from her then a sigh and soon after Josh's father was snoring.

Josh closed and locked the door, gave the key to his brother and soon they both fell fast asleep.

Story #22

I have a great deal of respect for people who have honestly faced themselves, faced their fears and come out brilliant examples for all of us.

Thomson's Farm

Two men sat in a pub. One man, drinking a pint of Guinness looked at his teetotaler friend and said, "I'm amazed at how you quit drinking."

"I had to, John, it was killing me."

"Jeez George, It doesn't bother you to sit here near all this fine brew?"

"Naw, I decided last year to give it all up, that alcohol was my enemy and since I could defeat it by never facing it again, that I'd be better off avoiding the battle all together."

"Amazing, I've never had a problem with the stuff."

"Well, it runs in my family, I guess I picked up the habit from my father."

"So how have things been lately?"

"Pretty great really."

At this moment an acquaintance walked over from the other side of the bar and sat down. "Hi John, hi George, how you fellas doing?"

"Hey Jerry," said John, "We're doing great, eh George?"

George smiled and said, "Yep, I was just saying how great things are. How you doing Jerry?"

John knew the answer and knew there was no need for George to ask. Jerry's life had been rough and recently felt like an emotional torture chamber. But today, Jerry had a surprise for them.

Drunk as a skunk, Jerry stammered, "I feel really good actually."

"Really?" asked John.

"Yeah, and it ain't the booze either. I got a new perspective."

Doubting Jerry's sincerity, or at least his basis in reality, John said, "How do you know it's not the booze?"

"Well. I was happy earlier today without it."

John stroked his graying beard, drank a sip of his Guinness and said, "Exactly why were you happy earlier today?"

"Well," said Jerry, "Cause I wanted to be."

John had seen Jerry's acts, when he wanted to be liked, when he needed to fit in and be presentable to others, and he thought that's what Jerry was talking about.

"Oh, you mean you were pretending to be happy?" Said John.

"Seriously John," said Jerry, "you need to get a grip, how can anyone pretend to be happy, what's the difference?"

"Um. Jerry, honestly I've seen you miserable and I've seen you happy and there wasn't much difference, I kinda assumed that the happiness was an act."

"You know? So did I." Jerry's speech slurred a little, but his mind was as sharp as a tack, "but then I realized that it could be the other way around."

“I don’t get you?” said John.

George sipped his Coke-a-Cola slowly and listened to the conversation with great intensity.

“Well,” began Jerry, “I was walking through Thomson’s field, feeling bad, like I always do, when I happened across this fella sitting under one of Thomson’s old Apple trees. He was a simple looking fella.”

Jerry paused for a second with a far off look on his face.

“Well,” said John, “what happened?”

“Huh?” Asked Jerry, “oh yeah, he was wearing a jogging suit, and this base ball cap, the sun was so bright and the shadow so long across his face that I really couldn’t see who he was.

“Well anyway, I sat down on the other side of the tree and we got to talking. I asked him how he’d come to sit under the Apple tree and he said that he was jogging across Thomson’s field and had stopped to take a break.

“I asked him how he was feeling, and he said, ‘I’m great, how are you doing?’”

“Well I started telling him how rough my life has been, all the things that have happened to me, how terrible I feel all the time, and he interrupted me like you guys do.”

John, feeling a little smug replied, “Well can you blame the guy?”

“Honestly?” asked Jerry, “no I can’t blame him, who wants to hear someone’s sob story, its kind of a rough thing to hear.

“But the thing is, I could tell that he really cared, because of the question he asked.”

Some of the people sitting at the surrounding tables began listening to the conversation.

“What did he ask?” asked John.

“Well, he just asked me a simple question at first, ‘what does any of that have to do with your happiness, with how you feel?’

“‘Well what do you mean?’ I demanded to know. ‘It’s all the horrible things that have happened to me. My life is upside down, I lost my wife last year, my dog died two weeks ago, I have every right to be upset and down about that.’

“‘That’s completely true,’ agreed the man, ‘but do all those feelings prevent you from being happy?’

“‘Well of course!’ I said, ‘you can’t be upset and happy at the same time!’

“‘Why not?’ Came the strangers reply.

“‘Because!’ I shouted, ‘they are mutually exclusive,’ and being a mathematician I knew I was right.

“‘Oh,’ said the stranger, ‘that is unfortunate.’”

Jerry pushed his beer aside and said, “I better quit drinkin’ I’m forgetting the story and I really need to remember it.”

“So what happened next?” Asked John.

“Yeah,” chimed in George, “what happened next.”

By this time a small crowd had gathered around Jerry as he was telling his story. The bar tender had pulled the plug on the jukebox, and had turned off all the TV sets. Jerry was the center of attention.

“Well,” said Jerry, “I sat there thinking about what the man had said, and after a few minutes I asked him a question.”

“What was the question?” Asked Conrad from two tables over.

“I asked him, ‘What does it take to be happy?’”

Jerry took a deep breath and said, “I’d never thought about it before, there had been a time in my life when I was happy. When Marcia was still around, when we were dating, when every thing seemed like a fairy tale. I had been happy then, but never really knew why.

“The man thought a while,” said Jerry, “and finally replied, ‘I don’t know what it takes to make you happy, I only know what it takes me to be happy.’”

“Well that made sense,” said John.

“Yeah. A lot of sense,” replied Jerry. “After a minute the stranger said, ‘what does it take to make you happy, Jerry?’

“I thought and thought and said, ‘I don’t know. I only know that I’m unhappy.’”

“So what happened next,” inquired Judy, one of the waitresses.

“We sat there on opposite sides of that tree for quite a while in complete silence. I hardly had a thought in my head. I just felt the pain of my losses, how I missed Marcia, and how badly I needed to get back to work because the debts were mounting.

“At some point I looked over to the stranger, allowing myself to be blinded by the sunlight streaming down on us and said, ‘is happiness an action?’

“To which he replied, ‘I don’t know about you but for me its inaction, or at least partly inaction.’”

The crowd stood in hushed reverence of Jerry, because Jerry had never seen these things before. People had been trying to tell him for months that he needed to let go, but he never heard them because he was not ready to listen. Jerry went from being the town joke, to being the most interesting person in the bar.

Jerry sighed and said, “I realized that when I was with Marcia, lots of bad things happened, but we always muddled through. Hell, we lost our parents within the span of three months. We were heart broken and lost for months, but we pulled through, we made it together. How would I do it without her? Is it possible to do it without her?

“You know it’s really quite beautiful on that hill on Thomson’s farm. I could see the town, this bar, all your houses and the cars on the street. For a second I felt away from all of you, and away from all that pain. For just a second I felt nothing.

“Looking toward my new found friend again blinded by the sunlight I asked, ‘is feeling nothing better than feeling pain?’”

“The stranger replied quickly, ‘I think pain is preferable to nothing, because you at least know you’re alive and doing something.’”

“I heard his words and kinda felt peaceful sitting there without any problems on my mind. I had a pain within me, I could feel the loss,

the grief, but my mind was blank and I was simply enjoying his company under that lonely old apple tree on the big hill on Thomson's farm."

John looked confused and said, "But how did that lead you to being happy, and to thinking that there's no difference between being happy and being sad?"

"I realized in that moment that I was hurting and happy," replied Jerry.

Then looking thoughtful for a moment Jerry added, "I asked him one last question as he got up and started stretching his legs for his jog down the hill.

"I had been thinking about how happy my life had been with Marcia, and how the children had all grown and moved away, and I began to get sad again, they were all gone, dead or moved away, I was all alone here. I began to feel the depression again.

"I thought out loud, 'why does it always go back to how much things have changed, and how much I've lost?'"

"The stranger, whose face somehow still eluded me in the bright sun, turned away from me, preparing to run down the hill and said, 'because you're not controlling your mind and keeping it where it belongs.'

"As he ran down the hill I realized that only I had the ability to direct my thoughts, and that my thoughts and feelings are separate. It was only when I confused the two, when I focused my mind on the loss and hurt that I got wrapped up in all the pain and fell into my pit of despair.

“I spent about two hours under that tree watching my mind go from peaceful to miserable, each time I grabbed control, and put my thoughts elsewhere. Sometimes thinking about how I was going to ask for my teaching job back, sometimes thinking about how I was going to clean the house – it’s such a mess – and sometimes thinking about how beautiful my grand children are. After a while I realized, I will be happy again, and knowing that I will be happy again, made me happy. Pretty amazing really.

“And ...” he paused, “yes, the hurt is still there. And yes I still feel it. But it doesn’t make me feel bad, it makes me feel alive and, well, like I’m healing.”

After a few minutes of silence in the room while everyone drank in Jerry’s epiphany, George looked at Jerry and said, “So why get drunk?”

“I was tired of trying to think about good things, and I knew beer would take away my desire to think, and it did too, but I’ve had enough. I’m going home to sleep it off.”

Jerry stood up, wandered through the crowd and out the door.

George stood up almost immediately after, stretching his arms at the ceiling. Then he dropped a five dollar bill on the table.

Judy wondered out loud, “I wonder what the stranger’s ‘inaction’ was.”

There was a hushed, “yeah,” from the crowd.

George pulled on his baseball cap and as he walked out the door he said, “Alcohol.”

Story #23

Why do you run your races? Is it to win or perhaps there's some other meaning for it?

The Race

As the runners rounded the last turn, I felt my heart pumping, my hands clenching, my muscles tensing.

“Mother, give him the strength,” I chanted silently to myself.

Daryl ran just ahead of the other runners in the first group toward the home stretch. This race seemed odd because there were six in the first pack and usually there are two or three runners far ahead of the rest. Daryl had said today was weird, but I hadn't understood what he meant until this moment.

Daryl started the race nearly last, because he'd entered too late to pre-qualify for a better position, but as he'd never run an official marathon before, he wasn't likely to have gotten better anyway.

Daryl ran twenty six miles at least once a month, running was more than just a hobby for him, it was a meditation.

I've been involved in eastern mysticism since I was a child, my Mom got into the new age stuff and introduced it to my brothers and me to when I was in my teens. Over time my mother and brothers lost interest, but I found myself drawn to it, and ultimately began to understand some of the more delicate aspects of energy.

I met Daryl two years ago. I was twenty three, and he was twenty seven. I knew I'd never marry him, he's obsessed with running, but damn he's a great guy and I feel lucky to know him.

I noticed Daryl starting to make his move, his last burst of energy to pull ahead.

Daryl had been running marathons by himself for six years when I met him. When I suggested he race in the Boston Marathon and he said, “what for? To win? Booooooring!”

But I sparked something. He began to study the runners, started attending marathons around the country, studying the form of the race and he realized that he’d be able to kick any of their asses. When he told me that I said, “So race,” and he said, “what for? To kick their asses? Booooooring!”

But the seed was again planted. He became obsessed with knowing all the famous runners, researching their lives, understanding why they do what they do, and he found out something, they all run to win. He knew he could beat them because he didn’t care to win.

About two hundred yards from the finish line, Daryl stepped up his pace again. The announcers screamed their delight as the crowd of runners stepped up their pace to keep up with him. No sooner had he pulled away than they had surrounded him again.

Daryl went into this race with funny intentions. He told me so. I had no idea what he meant at the time, but I was soon to find out.

One hundred yards before the finish line he stepped up his pace again, he was running nearly as fast as he would in the 100 yard dash. Three of the runners in the race fell flat on their faces, apparently exhausted.

Daryl had set a horrible pace, a pace about fifteen minutes slower than his best, but roughly five minutes faster than the world record.

The world record was going to be shattered today and I guess that was one of his funny intentions.

Daryl pulled ahead of the remaining two runners, who struggled to keep up. I could tell even Daryl was beginning to tire.

It was obvious he was going to win, but at the finish line he stopped as the two nearest competitors sailed by him winning the race and taking second.

While the celebration ensued, Daryl walked away from the finish line, through the crowd toward me, never crossing, never finishing.

No one knew who he was and no one seemed to care.

He checked with the three fallen runners, and although they were scraped and being bandaged, they all thanked Daryl for setting a pace they didn't know they could manage, and one of them apologized to the others for having knocked them out of the race.

Daryl shook each of their hands as I walked up to him.

“What the hell was that? You coulda won!”

“Win the race? Booooooring!”

Daryl smiled at me, and I smiled back.

“So what did you do? What was this for?”

“I wanted to see if I could pass on my knowledge, show others how to push themselves harder than they've ever pushed before. Did you notice that the only ones who thanked me are the ones who failed? That's really interesting.”

I don't think I'll ever fully understand Daryl. I am sure he's teaching me, I'm just not sure what he's teaching me.

Lately he's been fascinated with the Triathlon.

Story #24

Two Priests

A Priest named John died of old age. After a moment to whisper good bye to his flock, he ascended to heaven.

As he walked the golden cobble stones toward the entrance of heaven, he saw a fellow priest standing at the open gates.

Father John walked up to the other priest and said, "Hello. Saint Peter?"

The other priest, a bit startled, turned and said, "Um. No. My name is Father Bob."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I just expected to see St. Peter at the gates of heaven."

"Well, he was here, but seeing as how I'll be standing here for a while, he asked if he could take a break. Come to think of it, it's been quite some time."

"Is there anything I have to do to go in?"

"Officially, no, but if you wouldn't mind, St. Peter asked me to keep a log of those who pass, it's a bit of a game he plays with Jesus."

"I'm in no hurry," said Father John.

"Okay then," said Father Bob, "let me get the note pad." Father Bob turned toward the gate, away from Father John, closed his eyes, and concentrated for a second. He reached forward tearing a

rip into space time and pulled out a small crystal clip board containing several sheets of paper.

As Father Bob turned back toward Father John, Father John exclaimed, “That’s amazing! How did you do that?”

“Huh? Oh it’s nothing. Saint Peter taught me how to get his clip board. I could teach you in very short order.”

While Father Bob flipped through the pages on the clip board, Father John looked into heaven and asked, “how come I can’t see anything but fog beyond the gate?”

Father Bob looked up and said, “Everyone you loved is just beyond the fog. They come to you a few at a time. The fog is there to keep you from being overwhelmed after you walk in.”

“Oh. Can I go in yet?”

“You can go in any time, but if you wouldn’t mind answering a few questions, then I can do this for St. Peter and Jesus.”

“Okay,” said Father John, “I’m in no hurry.”

“First question,” said Father Bob, “What religion are you?” Father Bob paused a bit, smiled at Father John, laughed and said, “Catholic, heh heh.”

Father John looked confused and asked, “So other denominations do go to heaven?”

“Of course. The Catholics admitted that in the late twentieth century, when did you die?”

“Lets see. I think it was July third 2026.”

“Well then, you should have known that.”

“I didn’t exactly agree with everything the Catholic Church taught, you know?”

“Neither did I, but I felt that was kinda obvious. It sure is obvious now that I’m here.”

Father Bob continued with his questions, “What was your occupation? Another obvious one: Catholic Priest.”

Father John smiled and said, “Yep. That’s what I did after I piddled about in different jobs for a while.”

“Oh really, what else did you do while you were alive?”

“I ran a restaurant for a while, that was fun, but I didn’t feel I was making much of a contribution, that’s why I became a priest.

“Before that, let’s see. I was a carpenter, a musician, a comedian – but that was very short lived, and as a kid I flipped burgers at McDonalds. I think that covers it.”

“Very interesting,” replied Father Bob, “Did you have any children?”

“Not that I’m aware. My teenage years were kind of extroverted, so it’s possible, but I don’t know.”

“You will once you walk through the gates.”

“Really?”

“Yep.”

“What else will I know?”

“Well. You’ll get to feel all the feelings of the people you touched, whether it was positive or negative.”

“Wow. That’s sounds kind of scary.”

“It won’t be. It feels very natural. It’s a very good way to learn from mistakes, and prepare you for your next life.” Father John gasped, “Next life?”

“Sure. The Catholics were wrong about that one too.”

“When do I get reborn?”

“When ever you want.”

“And if I don’t want to be?”

“Well, as soon as you walk through that gate, things are going to change, you are going to be more aware than now and your fears will dissipate. Then you’ll be able to see all your lives and how they impacted your spiritual growth. It’s really a good thing, or so I’m told.”

Father John shook his head, feeling a little overwhelmed with all this new information. He wanted a little time before he entered so he asked Father Bob a question, “You know a lot about me, how about telling me about yourself?”

Father Bob took a deep breath and said, “My story is not simple.”

“Well try me anyway, I need to get used to the truths you just laid on me.”

“Well then you know how I feel,” said Father Bob, “So many truths, so many things to be afraid of.”

“What do you mean?”

“You see. I grew up in a very bad situation. My father beat me regularly. He beat all of us regularly. When my Mother decided to stand up to him, he beat her to death and got away with it completely.”

“My god, that’s terrible.”

“Yeah. I know. I knew it then too. My brothers and sisters and I devised ways to survive. We made plans to escape and figured out what we’d do to stay away from him.”

“How old were you at that time?”

“Well, lets see, I was nine, my sisters were thirteen and eleven, and my brothers eight and seven.”

“So young. Did you witness your father killing your mother?”

“Yeah. He dragged her dead body around the house, showing us what would happen if we disobeyed him.”

“Lord! That’s simply awful!”

“Yeah. It was tough. That’s why we had to escape.”

“How did he get away with it?”

“He was a cop.”

“Oh. Damn. That’s horrible. I’m sorry I keep interrupting, please continue with your story.”

“Well. We all planned our escape. We had trial runs when Dad was on his drinking binges. We planned it down to the second.

“Ultimately the day came when we had to say goodbye to each other.”

“Why goodbye?”

“Because we figured if we split up, we’d be better off. I never saw them again.”

Something hit Father John, and he blurted out, “why aren’t you going into heaven?”

“I was getting there John. Give me a chance.

“My sisters were very acrobatic; they actually forged my father’s signature and put themselves in a circus. I saw them perform once, but we dared not meet, for fear one of us was found out.”

“My brothers used the money my sister’s and I had saved and their phenomenal intelligence to enroll at a very good school. They worked their way through, all the while pretending to have a normal home.

“I gave my money to my brothers, so I went to a far away mission and claimed to be an orphan who wanted to be a priest. The priests there bought it and I’ve been one ever since.”

“It sounds to me like you were all successful.”

“We were. I got one letter from my brothers telling me that they had graduated from college with law degrees and wanted to bring all of us together again, I replied that their sisters were in the circus, but that I couldn’t risk being found by Dad and asked them to not contact me again.

“I lived a lie. I never wanted to be a priest, I just wanted away from my father. I figured I’d do the priest thing until I could figure a way to get enough money to move far far away.

All my parishioners loved me. I seemed to have a knack for writing wonderful sermons. But I didn’t mean any of it. I didn’t believe in god, not after what my father did to me, not after all the hurt he had proclaimed to be god’s judgment on me!”

Bob began to sob slightly as he talked, John hugged him gently and said, “you were always afraid, huh, afraid of being caught?”

Bob sighed and said, “Yeah, so deadly afraid. I had to be the priest to stay hidden. I couldn’t make any mistakes, let people know that I was living a lie, otherwise they might send me back!”

John laughed and said, “Your father died, I’m sure.”

“That makes sense, but to me the fear was so great I couldn’t take that chance.” Father Bob relaxed a bit and said, “You know. You’re the first person, save St. Peter, who asked me about myself. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem,” replied Father John, “I’m a bit worried about what’s beyond those gates.”

“Oh.” Said Father Bob, “I didn’t tell you why I won’t go in.” “No. You didn’t.”

“Well. I’m worried. I lived a complete lie. I didn’t do anything on earth for anyone, it was all for myself, all to hide from my father. I’m afraid to go in because I’ll experience all the lies to all those people.”

“You know,” said Father John, “I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

“What do you mean?”

“You did all the right things, helped people when you could, tried to follow your conscience, and live the way of the Priest, right?”

“Yeah. I did.”

“Well, then you only did good. Maybe it was for the wrong reasons, but I don’t see how god could hold that against you, after all you were doing your best with what god had given you.”

“But, you don’t know how many times I said to myself, ‘do this because a priest should do it and whether or not you like it, you are a priest.’ I never really believed any of it.”

“I don’t think god counts belief as much as he counts actions. How did you feel about the people of your parish?”

“I loved them. I loved being a part of their lives, I got to glimpse happiness, watch children grow into wonderful people. Once in a while they asked me for advice and I would tell them a story from my childhood to help them with some perspective. I never told them the truth about my father, but much of what I learned from him really applied to their dilemmas.”

“If you loved them, you taught them, helped them, then don’t you think you were doing everything you should have been doing?”

“I guess. But it was for all the wrong reasons.”

“Not always. Sometimes you did it because you wanted to, not because you were afraid, right?”

“I guess so.”

“I don’t think either of us has anything to fear from walking through those gates. How about we go together?”

“I’m still afraid.”

“You’re father is not here Bob. It’s time to let that fear go.”

“I’m afraid of the lies.”

“You are afraid you lived your life for the wrong reasons. It is not possible to live life for the wrong reasons, because life has no rhyme or reason that we can perceive. I understand so much about what you are going through, it seems to relate so well to my childhood.”

“Really? When were you born?”

“August 20, 1960”

“That’s amazing! I died on August 20, 1950!”

“You’ve been waiting a long time then, huh?”

“Well. St. Peter told me to take my time.”

“So you died before I was born, that’s pretty amazing.”

“Heck. Ten years before to the day, that’s some coincidence.”

John smiled at Bob and said, “That really is amazing. What do you think; shall we brave the truth together?”

“Okay. Let me put St. Peter’s clip board back.”

Turning toward the gate, Bob focused and put the clip board back into nowhere, so St. Peter could find it.

Then, walking arm in arm, the two men walked through the open gates into heaven. The fog around them became alight with all the experiences of the men's lives. They could each feel all the pain, all the pleasure, all the hope, glory, suffering, surrender, trials and tribulations they had each gone through. First they experienced one single memory, John's memory, and then one by one they experienced another and another until the experiences began to overlap and they began to relive everything that had happened in both their lives.

When they finished experiencing every moment of each of their lives, they each took a deep breath and father Bob exclaimed, "that was amazing! I saw it all, felt it all, relived it all in just a few moments."

John sighed and said, "Yeah, that was amazing! Explain one thing for me. Why is it I saw your entire life flash before my eyes as well as my own?"

"You know, I don't know. That is really weird."

They each realized in the same moment while slowly walking through the fog, "we have the same soul!"

"That's why the birth and death days were so similar!" Exclaimed father Bob. "You and I are from the same light!"

"Simply amazing," said Father John.

Walking forward through the fog the priests felt how one of Father Bob's sister felt when Bob had saved her from her father by stepping in front of his fist. He was barely three at the time. The feeling of love and thankfulness overwhelmed them. There is no

description that can explain the love Bob's sister felt in that moment.

Then they felt how a co-worker had felt when Father John had allowed the co-worker to take the blame for Father John's mistake. The sadness, the unfairness, the loss of self esteem and faith felt horrible for the two priests.

Then, one after one, the experiences of everyone they had ever met, everyone they ever passed on the street, anyone they met on any travels they ever made began to flood forth. The speed and power with which these experiences flowed through their being made the experience of reliving their lives pale by comparison. The thoughts, sights, visions, and raw emotions felt overwhelming at first but they each surrendered to them and allowed them to permeate their being. As they accepted the good with the bad they became more wise, felt their mistakes, learned from them and often applauded their victories.

Father Bob's life was never a sham. He had made some mistakes, but he had taken the cards god had dealt him and played them very well. God was proud of him, proud that he'd learned.

Then the two men saw a tunnel form before them with an overwhelming light at its end. Drawn forward they felt themselves merging with the light and with each other. They were headed home, on their way to the place where souls existed between lives.

Their soul had been victorious after having itself twice split off into mind and ego, and had regained the full wisdom of these men and their lives. It would now plan for its next life, no doubt

returning with a new deal of the cards to see how it would play the next hand.

St. Peter appeared at the gates of heaven and sighed, “Only one extra life to bring Bob in. Damn it, Jesus wins again.”

Story #25

The Argument

Two children, identical twins, died of leukemia at the tender age of six. As they walked toward the closed gates of heaven, they noticed two men arguing near the entrance.

Cautiously approaching, they recognize the identities of the arguing men: Jesus and St. Peter.

The children felt frightened to see Jesus – god himself – arguing with Saint Peter, the man their Mom and Grandma said would welcome them into heaven.

As the men argued, the children carefully skirted around them, walked up to the gates and peered in.

On the other side of the gate lie a road paved with Kit Kat Bars, marked by chocolate sign posts, and a small building composed entirely of gummy bears.

It was the single most beautiful sight the children had ever seen.

A great desire to enter heaven swept over them, but not great enough to cause them to interrupt Jesus and St. Peter while they debated.

The children stood on the bottom rail of the large metal gate, stuck their heads between the narrow vertical bars, and their mouths watered at the thought of the gummy bear building just out of their reach.

To their surprise the twins saw their puppy, the six month old puppy that had died of heart failure when they were four years old.

Standing at the chocolate sign that said, “This way to heaven,” the puppy yelped joyfully at the twins.

The twins badly wanted to go in, but didn’t feel brave enough to interfere with the arguing deities.

The twins, named Tom and Tim walked up to Jesus and St. Peter and listened to the ensuing argument.

“Look Jesus,” said St. Peter, “I’m telling you the key to the gate is in my other pants pocket, and it went to the laundry, we’re just going to have to wait until my wife can bring it to us.”

“Peter, dear man, you are not supposed to take the key with you, it is to remain with whom-ever is on duty, and as I was that person, you were supposed to leave it here, and yet, when I looked for it this morning because you closed the gate in jest, not only did I not find it, but you informed me you had lost it!”

Tom and Tim’s dog, Sparkle, barked from inside the gate. Tom and Tim looked longingly at him and called for him to come to the gate.

Sparkle whined and looked at the chocolate signpost. He wasn’t allowed to go beyond it and the children understood.

Jesus continued berating Peter, “We are both now stuck outside the gates and there are people arriving to go in! How are we supposed to explain to Tom and Tim here why they can’t go in?”

“Look,” said Peter, “I made a mistake, I accidentally carried the keys home with me last night and then this morning I carelessly closed the gate before I checked to see that I had the key.”

“How are we supposed to get in? This is so embarrassing, I mean here I am the son of god and I can’t even get into heaven on my day off.”

Tom, normally the quietest of the twins, spoke up, “Can’t you just fly there and get the key?”

Jesus and Peter turned toward the children and Jesus said, “No, Tom, we can’t get into heaven because the gate is locked.”

Tim spoke up and said, “Tom and I are very light, you could lift us over the gate and we could go get the key for you.”

“Well. That’s a great Idea,” said Peter, “but there is a force field, the gate is just ... well ... its more like imagination than real, the key really just opens a hole in a force field, if you reach through the gate you can feel it.”

Tim reached through the gate and felt a warm pulsating energy, and where he touched glowed with a golden yellow halo.

Tom said, “Neato, that’s pretty.”

Jesus paced along the gates and thought out loud, “We’ve tried contacting others. Everyone must be on vacation or something.”

At that point a man walked up the road toward Peter, Jesus, Tim and Tom.

Jesus said, “uh oh. I was worried about this.”

Tom asked, “Why. Who is it?”

Peter looked up at the man as he approached and whispered, “Its Satan.”

Satan looked quite different than the children had imagined him. He was quite a contrast to Jesus and Peter because he wore a suit, tie, hat, and carried a briefcase. Jesus and Peter had simple one piece garments with a gold sash tied around their waists.

Tim blurted out, “Why don’t you have horns?”

“Oh. Recognize me do you?”

Peter said, “Hey Satan, how’s it hanging?”

“Good,” said Satan, “Good.”

“Hello Jesus,” said Satan, “how are you?”

“I’m good, just hanging around. Nice to see you.”

“Really, well imagine that. Nice to see Satan. You must be bored from being locked on the outside of heaven.”

“Hey,” said Peter, “how’d you know?”

“Oh, everyone down below knows, we’re laughing our asses off.”

“Why are you here Satan?” Asked Jesus.

“I’m here to offer Tim and Tom a lollipop and a drink for their wait while you knuckle heads figure out how you’re going to get a message through the bubble.”

With that, Satan opened up his brief case and pulled out two medium sized lollipops. Tim and Tom looked at Jesus who nodded so Tim and Tom took the lollies and began to lick them.

“I know you got more in mind than that Satan,” said Peter, “What’s the real reason you’re here?”

“Well. Actually, I was kinda hoping to show Tim and Tom around my neck of the woods, see if they’d be interested in spending some time with me.”

Tim and Tom, who’d been licking their lollipops, looking at Sparkle and not paying very much attention, felt a little queasy when they heard Satan’s words. The boys looked toward Jesus with fear in their eyes.

Jesus said, “Don’t worry kids; you don’t have to go anywhere you don’t want to go.”

“Hey kids,” said Satan, “Just a quick tour of Hell, its not that bad a place you know, and I promise I’ll bring you back before these morons figure out how to get the key.”

“No way,” said Tim.

“No way,” said Tom at all most the same time.

“Let me get this straight,” said Peter, “you’re offering a tour of hell and a trip back up here?”

“That’s right.”

“No strings?”

Satan smiled and said, “No strings what so ever.”

“That’s a pretty good deal kids,” said Jesus.

Tom and Tim looked confused.

“What do you mean?” They asked in unison.

Jesus smiled and said, “It’s a rare opportunity to see hell through the devil’s eyes, you could learn a lot.”

“But we’re just kids!” Shouted Tim.

“And we’re supposed to go to heaven!” Shouted Tom.

“But you can’t get in right now,” replied Satan, “and I wouldn’t mind baby sitting for a while.”

“I’ll tell you what Tim and Tom,” said Jesus, “I’m locked out anyway. I’ll come with you, unless of course Satan, I’m not invited.”

Satan, somewhat annoyed, frowned and said under his breath, “It’s a free universe.”

“Then it’s settled,” said Jesus, “unless you boys don’t want to go.”

“Well,” said Tim, “I guess if you’re going to be there Jesus.”

Jesus nodded.

“And you promise to bring us back to heaven, right Satan?”

Satan nodded.

“I guess its okay,” said Tim.

“Okay,” said Tom.

The boys and Jesus looked at Satan who smiled like a used car salesman and said, “Okay then, I guess I provide transportation?”

“Yes you do,” replied Jesus.

A candy apple red convertible Cadillac appeared and all four boarded. The back seat was raised by several feet so the boys could see clearly.

Satan started the engine and then knelt on the seat and turned around to face the boys.

Where we're going is going to surprise and shock you, but I think you'll find it highly enlightening.

Satan sat back down and pulled the car on to the road that leads to the gates of heaven.

Down down down the hill the car raced. It seemed to the boys that the hill would never end, and then suddenly the road became very curvy.

Satan, an excellent driver, kept the car moving along quickly even with all the hair pin turns.

After a little while longer, no one could say how long, the road became very bumpy and the boys were tossed around quite a bit.

"C-could ... y-y-you ... t-take-ke ... ann-nnother ... r-r-route-te, please?" Asked Tom while leaning forward in the seat.

"Nope," said Satan, "The road most often traveled leads you straight to hell and that's why it's in such bad condition – too much traffic."

Its odd and no one seemed to notice, but Tim and Tom were older than six years now, they seemed more like twelve years old.

Suddenly the darkness surrounding the car became darker.

"We just entered the tunnel," said Satan, "get ready to cover your eyes!"

Everyone could see a bright light ahead; it wasn't exactly white, more of a green and blue hue. Tom and Tim thought almost exactly

the same thing at the same time, “why is there so much light in hell?”

BOOM! There was a thunderous crack as they left tunnel.

What they saw, they couldn’t believe.

In all directions, all around them, as far as they could see, was green grass, blue sky and beautiful wild flowers, trees and bushes.

A road stretched out before them, over small hills, bounding toward the horizon.

Satan brought the car to a stop, so everyone could get oriented.

“THIS IS HELL?” Asked Tim.

Satan smiled and said, “yeah, not bad huh?”

“I expected something completely different,” said Tim.

“Mee toooo!” Shouted Tom.

“Where are all the people?” Asked Tim.

“They’re around,” said Satan, “you’ll get to meet some I’m sure.”

“Jesus,” said Tom.

Jesus turned and said, “Yes Tom?”

“Why didn’t they tell us that hell is beautiful?”

“Tom, we’re not really in hell yet, this is just part of the road to hell.”

Satan shook his head, “How about we make a deal Cuz, you keep quiet and let me give the tour, and I won’t send you home.”

Jesus laughed and said, “okay, but if you mislead them, I’m going to tell them.”

“Fair’s fair, I guess, I’ll be me and you be you.”

Satan started driving the car up the road. For a few minutes everyone was quiet.

Tom leaned forward and said, “Mr. Satan, sir?”

“Yes Tom,” replied Satan.

“If this isn’t hell, where are we?”

“We’re in sort of a purgatory; this place is basically what you make of it. You guys seemed to think this place is beautiful so for you guys its heaven. It’s not quite lollipops and gummy bears, but still quite appealing. I really do love it here myself and I’m glad I do most of my business here.”

“How long until we get to hell?” Asked Tim.

“Not very long, not very long at all.”

Over the next rise, the boys saw a small town.

“Is that hell?” Shouted Tim.

“Not exactly, that’s Fairfield,” said Satan.

“Fairfield? Wait a minute. Are we on earth?”

Jesus smiled and Satan looked in the rear view mirror, smiled and said, “Yeah. Got a problem with that?”

“But you said it was purgatory,” said Tom.

“Well, it’s kinda what you make of it Tom, just relax, I’ll take you back to heaven when your tour is done, I promise.”

“Hey,” said Tim, “can we see Mom?”

“Um,” said Satan, “That would probably upset her greatly. I’m going to let you think about that before we go to Jackson.”

“But we are going to Jackson?” Said Tim.

“Yes we have a couple of stops in Jackson,” replied Satan.

As the Cadillac slid into town, the boys became aware that this was just an ordinary mid-west town, just like their own home city.

And despite no one noticing, the boys looked to be about fifteen years old.

Satan pulled the Cadillac into a tavern.

“Our first stop,” said Satan, “the work place of Sarah McCormick.” The two adults and two young men walked into the bar and grabbed a booth.

A waitress walked up to them and said, “Howdy! What can I do for you boys?”

Eying Tom and Tim she said, “What ever you’re having, it’s got no alcohol, right?”

Before the boys could answer, Satan spoke up, “Oh come on, its their eighteenth birthdays, they’re going into the army, and their Uncle Jess and I just wanted to take them out for a drink, can’t you see your way to giving them a few beers, I’m driving...”

Before the waitress answered, Satan put a fifty dollar bill on the table, "I'll have a gin and tonic." The waitress grabbed the twenty and walked off.

She didn't seem to notice Jesus at all, even forgot to ask him what he wanted to drink.

"Isn't she lovely?" Asked Satan.

"She isn't very honest," said Tim.

"Maybe not, but she sure is fun to tempt."

"Is that Sarah?" Said Tom.

"That's Sarah, one of my favorites. She's actually gotten away with murder, gotta love her ingenuity."

Sarah returned with three drinks and before she had a chance to walk off, Jesus said, "I'll have a Scotch on the rocks."

Sarah, somewhat shocked said, "Oh my god, I didn't even see you sitting there, I'm sorry, I'll get it right away."

As Sarah walked off, Satan chuckled. "Jesus, don't you love the rich symbolism of this situation, damn I love how life fucks with people."

Jesus frowned and said, "She can't see me even when I'm here, very very sad."

Tim and Tom understood, and seemed about eighteen years old.

Tim and Tom took a sip of beer and the four of them got up to leave before Jesus was served.

“Don’t worry about your drink Jesus,” said Satan, “she plum forgot about it.”

“She’s not really a bad person, is she?” Asked Tim.

“Sure she is,” said Satan, “she does so much wrong, you wouldn’t believe, hell most of it she inflicts on herself and the ones she loves most!”

Jesus turned and faced the boys, “everyone is good, deep down inside, but some people have been taught to believe that they are evil, and they believe it. Others are just so selfish by their very nature and up bringing that they don’t even know about their inner goodness.”

“Well hell, Jesus,” sighed Satan, “you’re giving away all my trade secrets, cut it out!” Pausing Satan continued, “lets walk down town, it’s a great day for a nice walk, don’t you think?”

Jesus, Tim and Tom nodded and followed Satan down the sidewalk of the city.

Satan led the way with Jesus standing between Tim and Tom.

“Wait a minute,” said Tim. I was six when I died, how come I’m an adult now?”

Jesus smiled and said, “Souls are ageless, you now reflect more of your soul than you do of your life on earth as Tim Hathaway.”

Tom looked at his twin brother and said, “Wow! Do I look that old too?”

“Yeah Bro! And we’re thinking older too, we’re thinking like adults too. This is so cool!”

As the young men chatted amongst themselves, Satan turned down a dark alleyway.

“Just a quick stop,” said Satan, “won’t be long.” Jesus held the boys back and said, “We’re going to be invisible for this stop, I want you to see what happens.” Jesus led them down the alleyway as Tim and Tom realized that they could see through each other. Tim slapped Tom hard, Tom said, “Ouch! What the hell?,” and Tim said, “Sorry man. I thought we were non-physical!” Jesus chuckled and continued to lead them down the alleyway.

Satan stood over an old woman lying in the alley. She was mostly unconscious, but she could hear him. Satan too was invisible.

A company executive, lost in down town, stumbled through the alley, walking directly through Tim and Tom.

“Man that was weird,” said Tim.

“Shhh,” said Jesus, “watch Satan work.”

The boys could hear what Satan was saying, “Trip this man, he’ll break his neck, and you could take his cash and eat a feast.”

The old woman shook her head, woke up just as the man was walking by. The boys felt her broken heart, her empty stomach, her dependence on pain medication, and her desire to be set free from life. But as horrible as her pain, she resisted the urge to trip the man.

The business man, startled by her movement, jumped to avoid her, and then hurried out of the alley way.

If there had been an opportunity, it had past by the old lady.

As the business man neared the end of the alleyway he tripped and fell flat on his face.

“Quick,” whispered Satan to the old lady, “go get his wallet while he’s unconscious, he’s rich, he’ll never miss it.”

The old lady stood up and walked toward the man.

“That’s right, it’s just a few bucks, and you could score some codeine with just a few bucks.”

The old lady reached the business man, rolled him over and carefully checked to see if he was alive. She found his cell phone in his breast pocket and called 911.

Then out loud she said, “SATAN! GET THEE BEHIND ME!” With that, Satan disappeared.

Tim and Tom, shocked, asked Jesus, “Where’d he go?”

“Satan? Don’t worry about him, he’ll be back.”

“How did she do that?” asked Tom.

“Its easy Tom, no single being in the universe is more powerful than any other, unless they surrender their power to another or pray together.

“Satan is just one soul, no different than you, Tim, or I. And we have all the power of the universe at our command. It’s just that under normal circumstances we don’t know it. If you’ll pardon me, I have some work to do now.”

A police car rolled up outside the alleyway and two officers stepped out.

“Hi Mary,” said one, “are you still hanging out down here, you know we’re going to have to arrest you now?”

“I know, just please help this man he tripped and knocked himself unconscious.”

The Police officer took the man’s cell phone from Mary and checked out the business man.

The business man regained consciousness, sat up and said, “Ouch! My leg!” Then he groaned and said, “My nose hurts too!”

The Police officer’s partner shouted, “There’s an ambulance on the way.”

The Police officer motioned to Mary to sit in the Police car, so she began to hobble over to it.

Jesus walked to the business man and whispered something to him.

He spoke up and said, “Wait. Did she call the Police for me?”

“Yes she did,” said the Police officer.

“Then why are you taking her away?”

“She’s a derelict sir, and it’s against the law.”

The man reached into his pocket, pulled out a crisp one thousand dollar bill and held it up to Mary.

“You’re not a derelict if you have a thousand dollars.”

The Police were shocked, and allowed Mary to grab the bill and head down the street.

Suddenly Satan was back and whispering into Mary’s ear, “Drugs. Drugs. Drugs. Drugs. Drugs...”

Mary and Satan disappeared around the corner and suddenly Satan stood by Tim's side.

"God, I love my job!" Satan sighed.

The Police officer frowned at the business man and said, "You know she just going to spend that on drugs, don't cha?"

"Maybe, but that's her choice," said the business man.

An ambulance pulled up as Jesus, Satan, Tim and Tom walked out of the alleyway.

"Is Mary evil?" Asked Tim.

"Of course she is," blurted out Satan, "she's a druggie homeless person."

Jesus stopped walking and the boys turned toward him.

"What do you think Tim?" Asked Jesus.

"Well," replied Tim, "she does have a lot of problems, but when it came down to the wire, she did the right thing and helped that man."

Tom asked a more pertinent question, "How do you measure good and evil?"

Jesus smiled and said, "More importantly Tom, how do YOU measure good and evil?"

"Well, I don't know. We were always taught right from wrong, but there are so many shades of gray. When we were kids it was obvious, but now it seems impossible to judge."

Jesus placed his hand on Tom's shoulder and said, "Do you know what's right for you?"

"Well, yeah, I guess."

"Then you know what's good and evil for you?"

"Yeah."

"So why not apply that to Mary. Wouldn't it be obvious that she's evil because of her drug addiction, how dirty she is, and how she chooses to live?"

"Well. I thought so at first, I mean, when I first saw her, but then I realized that she's a good person, just like you said, good deep down, but kinda messed up on the outside."

"How do you know if she's a good person?" Asked Jesus.

"I guess I don't know. I mean I can't tell by looking." replied Tom.

Tim spoke up, "but we need to know if people are good or bad so we know how to treat them, I mean they could hurt us!"

Satan was bouncing around the conversation, every once in a while he'd sigh, "booooring, lets do something fun!"

Jesus looked at Tom and said, "You're right! What can you do?"

Tim looked at his brother and said, "You can't tell by looks, you can't even tell by their actions, what can you tell by?"

Tom said, "Maybe by how they treat you?"

"That," said Jesus, "is a good way to stop yourself from pre-judging people."

“The trick is,” he continued, “to realize the subtle abusers as quickly as possible, but that is a conversation for later.”

“Will Mary buy drugs?” Asked Tom.

“Oh goody!” Cried Satan, “Let’s go see!” The four spirits appeared in a hotel room where Mary had rented a room for the night. The hotel employees were hesitant to rent it to her and checked the thousand several times to make sure it wasn’t counterfeit, but ultimately gave her a room.

She relaxed in bath water, up to her neck.

Tom and Tim realized she wasn’t as old as they had thought, she was actually only thirty seven and her hair wasn’t grey it was platinum blonde.

Satan hung over Mary whispering, “Drugs. Drugs. Drugs.” Then another Satan appeared standing next to Jesus, Tim and Tom.

“Hey,” said Tom, “if you’re over there, then how can you be here?” “Remember kids,” replied Satan, “we all have infinite power in the universe; I just know a few more tricks than you two.

“Oh crap!” cried both copies of Satan, the Satan taunting Mary looked at the one near Tom, Tim and Jesus and said, “you moron, she heard you!”

With that Mary whispered, “Get thee behind me Satan!” And both Satan’s disappeared.

“Mary hasn’t eaten in six days, and she’s pregnant,” Jesus told the boys, “she’s also about to have an hallucination.”

Jesus became more opaque and Mary saw him.

She held out her hand and he touched it for a second. She shouted, "Oh my god! I'm pregnant," and the boys found themselves solid and back at Satan's Red Cadillac.

Jesus appeared a second later and said out loud, "Where are you Cousin?"

"Why do you call Satan 'Cousin,'" asked Tim.

"We're all brothers and sisters of course," said Jesus, "Satan and I just razz each other by calling ourselves cousins to put a little space between us."

"Oh."

"What do you mean, we're all brother's and sisters?" Asked Tim.

"We are all created in god's image, right?"

Satan sighed from nowhere and said, "More bible stuff, man you guys are booooring!"

Tom, ignored Satan, said, "That's what we were taught."

"I think the best interpretation of those words," replied Jesus, "is that we are all created to be mini versions of god."

"Even Satan?" Asked Tim.

"Yes, even Satan," replied Jesus.

"That's hard to imagine," said Tim, "why would god let people like Satan exist?"

"Oh Oh!" said Satan, "Let me handle this one Cuz!" Jesus nodded and Satan continued, "The first promise god made all of us is that

he would not interfere with our will. He gave us freedom of will, and by doing so promised not to control us in anyway.”

Tim frowned, “I don’t get it.”

“Come on,” said Satan, “it’s the best gift in the universe! We can do what ever we want, we can be or act or destroy or create anything at any time for any reason, just because we want to! What a tremendous gift he gave us!”

“But you abuse your freedom!” said Tom.

“Watch it there buster,” replied Satan, “you can’t know if I’m abusing my freedom because you aren’t me and you aren’t god. We are the only two who know for sure.”

Jesus added, “And there is a universal law of love that guarantees that all energy sent into the universe by a soul will be returned to that soul.”

“You mean,” said Tim, “that Satan will have to get all this stuff that he does to people back?”

“Well,” replied Jesus, “It’s a bit more complicated than that. You see Satan works within the parameters of universal law to help people learn about themselves, he rarely does anything that causes himself great karma.”

“What about trying to capture heaven from god?”

Satan laughed maniacally and Jesus smiled at his cousin’s antics.

Once Satan had calmed a bit he said, “Stupid people blamed me for their suffering. I am not to blame for human suffering, I am actually trying to teach you all how to surpass your suffering.

“You see, I am a master at playing with Karma. I ascended away from the earth eons ago. I’m not the first soul to play the role of the serpent; I am in fact the fifth in this part of the universe. My job is to tempt people, and I’m damn good at it. If it weren’t for me and my ability to perceive people’s weaknesses, humans would never grow, life would be boring, and not one soul of God would evolve much.

“I am not you’re enemy kids, I am your staunchest friend. I help you find yourselves, find your flaws and grow into something better than the sum of your parts.”

“But we’ve been taught that you are evil,” sighed Tom, confused and tired.

“You were taught wrong, but I shouldn’t be telling you that, because you see that’s my latest ploy for the downfall of man. I invented myself as the evil villain so humanity would have something outside themselves to blame for all the things that go wrong in their lives, and more importantly something to blame for all the evil they do.

“By blaming me people can deny their own divinity, and differentiate even farther from god. It was an idea I had a few thousand years ago and why god appointed me to the post of Satan. I had graduated from this planet long before religions ruled the hearts and minds of the masses and I saw an opportunity to pervert all that religion stood for. God allowed me to try out my idea and enslave billions of souls on this planet. It may seem horrible, but the ones who are learning, the ones who are finally coming out of

the darkness, the ones I helped to face themselves are really and truly enlightened beyond our highest hopes. The system works.”

“But ...” stammered Tim, “how about all the lost souls?”

“Well,” replied Satan, “You’ve got to throw away the bad onions to make good onion soup, right?”

“I don’t understand,” said Tom.

“This is harder to explain,” replied Satan, “The lie has snuffed a lot of people’s progress, but you must understand that they will have numerous lifetimes to learn to face themselves, and thus confront me and defeat me within their own heart. On the whole everyone is moving forward, it’s just that some are moving faster than others.”

“So,” said Tim, “What the hell is hell?”

“Hell,” replied Satan, “is a state of mind, nothing more. Life is what you make of it, and if you believe all the lies, then you are in hell. If you face the truth, you will learn to grow beyond physical existence like my cousin and I did. I can only teach you things I have learned myself. I have been where you are and I escaped by facing the light. To be a shadow master, I must truly understand the light, do you see?”

“I think I’m starting to understand,” replied Tim.

“Me too,” said Tom.

“Feel free to ask questions,” said Satan, “You’ll forget all of this later, so it really doesn’t matter what we say now. Heh heh.”

“Okay,” said Tim, “if you aren’t evil, then what is?”

Tim and Tom looked at Satan who looked at Jesus and said, “You’re department Cuz.”

Jesus smiled and said, “In my opinion, evil is any act committed by man that is against his hearts true desire.”

“Where is true desire?” Asked Tom.

“There exists in each of us,” replied Jesus, “a soundless voice that tells us right from wrong. If we listen it will tell us what we should do in all situations. If we are reacting, we can’t hear it. If we are lusting, we can’t hear it. Well, actually there are lots of things that prevent us from hearing it.

“When ever we go against that soundless voice, whether we know it or not, we are committing evil.”

“But that implies ... “ started Tim, and Tom continued for him, “that right and wrong are purely personal.”

“That’s exactly right,” replied Satan, “everything is subjective.”

“So who has a right to judge?” Asked Tom.

“Only you and god have the right to judge you,” replied Jesus.

“And god won’t judge us, because he promised not to?” Asked Tim.

“That’s right,” replied Jesus.

“Boy, if people knew this,” speculated Tom, “the world would go into chaos.”

“You think so?” asked Satan. “I sure hope your right, but until it arises, I’ll keep trying to keep people in the dark, keep casting my shadows in the light.”

“Come on boys,” said Satan, “we’ve got two more stops.”

The four semi-corporeal souls climbed into the red convertible and Satan drove north through the town. As they hit the north end of town the scenery greatly changed and the boys realized they were driving into a completely different city.

They recognized this town, it was the home of their previous lives, the home of Tim and Tom.

Satan drove the Cadillac into a grocery store parking lot. “Come on boys, let’s get some bread and milk for the missus.”

Tim, Tom, Jesus and Satan, now mostly physical walked into the grocery store.

The air smelled of flowers, fruit, meat, vegetables, soaps, cleaning supplies. For the boys it was like smelling home.

Satan grabbed a loaf of “Heavenly” bread, smiled and winked at Jesus, and then walked to the dairy isle and grabbed a half gallon of milk.

Walking to the front of the store, a bit like Groucho Marks might, Satan got in the longest line and repeatedly refused to go into shorter lines.

“Have to be in this line, got some mischief to make,” he replied to Tim and Tom as they pointed out much shorter lines in both directions.

Jesus walked around, in anonymity, no one seemed to notice or care that he was there and that he looked exactly like everyone thought Jesus should look.

The young girl who was bagging groceries on this particular isle was having a hell of a time. It definitely did not seem to be her day.

As Satan walked up, he carefully cracked the opening of the half gallon of milk, and placed it on the conveyor belt.

“Why don’t you boys go help young Emily bag groceries?” Asked Satan. So Tim and Tom walked past the person ahead of Satan and offered to help Emily.

Emily looked as if she’d seen a ghost, became more nervous and began to fumble and stumble even more.

The boys didn’t know it, but Satan had cast a demon spell on them, so that people would perceive them to be demons at a subconscious level. Most of the women in the store were more attracted than frightened, but Emily was scared to death, because it reminded her so much of her father, a fundamentalist preacher.

The girl running the cash register rang up the bread and milk, and Satan paid for his food. Emily picked up the half gallon of milk to put it in a bag and it slipped crashing to the floor and leaving a huge mess everywhere.

Satan completely freaked out and began shouting at the girl, “look what you’ve done, you stupid ignorant little girl! You are simply all butter fingers aren’t you? I can’t believe the management here permits people like you to work for them!”

Satan continued berating the girl until she started to cry. She grabbed her name tag, threw it down and ran from the store.

Tim and Tom felt horrible, but were powerless to do anything. Tim picked up the milk carton, looked at it and said, “Didn’t Mom always say, ‘never cry over spilt milk?’”

Tom frowned and said, “Yeah. How come you’re so belligerent Satan?”

Oddly enough, when he said Satan, it came out Sam.

Tom tried again, “Satan?”

And again the word came out, “Sam.” Satan smiled and said, “People like that don’t deserve to have jobs.”

Satan was handed another half gallon of milk, he grabbed his loaf of bread, stepped gingerly over the spilt milk, and walked out the door with Tim, Tom, and Jesus trailing. As Satan walked past the trash can outside, he threw the milk and bread away.

Tim and Tom were shocked, “All that trouble and he throws out the food?”

Satan climbed into his Red Cadillac and said, “Come on boys! We gotta get to the last stop, times a waste-in’!”

Jesus ushered the boys to the car.

As the car pulled away, Tim and Tom sat perplexed.

“What the hell just happened?” Asked Tom.

Satan laughed and said, “This one’s complex, care to take a stab at it Cuz?”

Jesus smiled and said, “Emily has an abusive father. He’s been forcing her to repress herself her whole life. He’s taught her that she isn’t worth anything and that all she ever does is mess up. Satan just reinforced that belief so that she could issue her life’s fatal flaw.”

“Fatal flaw?” Asked Tim.

“Yes,” replied Jesus, “a fatal flaw is the mistake to end all mistakes. You see tonight she’s going to allow her secret boy friend to become her secret lover, it will end up being the only way she feels needed or wanted, and it will dominate the next twenty or thirty years of her life.”

“That sounds horrible,” said Tim.

“It is,” replied Jesus.

“Isn’t there a way she can avoid it?” Asked Tom.

“Her soul wants things to be this way,” replied Jesus, “It wants to learn how to drive this kind of affliction, and it hopes it can lead the girl back toward a path of light instead of shadow in the future.

“She’s actually lucky, many souls don’t ever bother letting their physical counterpart learn and grow because that would defeat the process of soul learning. Sometimes a soul wants to be in pure hell for an entire lifetime. Upon reflection, the ego of that person will have a great deal of learning after its body dies, but only if it humbles itself before god and before the soul that drives it.”

“That’s the second time you’ve used the word, ‘drive,’” said Tim, “what exactly do you mean by that?”

“In life,” replied Jesus, “everything is dualistic, everything has two aspects. Hot cold, wet dry, good bad, love fear, etc. The dual of the human ego is the human soul.

“The human soul learns about itself by creating a mini version of itself, in its own image, very much the way god created the soul in his own image.”

“So a human being is made in the image of the human soul?”
Asked Tom.

“Yes,” replied Jesus.

Satan was amusing himself by very carefully cutting off other drivers, driving various speeds and generally annoying lots of other folks all over town. He seemed to have no place to go and was enjoying his freedom very much.

“But,” said Jesus, “A human being would not be complete without its soul, so you must imagine the mind, body and ego of a human is a simplified version of the human soul.”

“Doesn’t that mean,” said Tim, “that the human soul has a mind, body and ego?”

“Yes, in a certain sense,” replied Jesus, “it does. It has a mind of its own, many bodies of varying types and it has consciousness, which is sort of higher form of ego. In fact consciousness touching reality creates ego automatically. It seems god knew what he was doing when he created physical reality. He must have had us in mind when he created the universe.”

Tim looked up suddenly and yelled, “STOP!” Satan jammed on the brakes causing several cars to collide with him.

Tim jumped out, with Tom realizing very quickly where he was.

They were home, except things were different.

Jesus shouted out to the boys, “you’re invisible again, go where you like, remember its about ten years since you died, things are different.”

Tom quickly followed his brother up the front steps as Satan began yelling at the person who's car had struck him from behind.

Tim and Tom stepped through the front door to see their mother smoking a cigarette on the couch. The house was a mess and they had the feeling their father was long gone.

“Mom looks terrible,” said Tom.

“Yeah,” said Tim.

Almost as if she heard them, Tim and Tom’s mother looked at a picture she had of them from when they were five, before the chemo, before they lost their hair. She kissed her finger, touched it to the picture, and said, “I’ll get you back boys, I swear it.”

“You don’t need to worry about us Mom, we’re fine,” said Tim.

Tom wished he could be physical, remembering that he was the most powerful being in the universe he tried to make himself visible.

His mother turned and looked him in the eyes and began to sob very sweetly. Out loud she cried, “Its like you are here, it’s like I can feel you! Why god? Why did you take my boys away?”

June, the boys mother, thrust her head into the couch pillow and held her head with her hands.

Jesus and Satan walked into the room. Satan whispered something to June and she sat up and opened another wine cooler.

“What happened to her?” Asked Tim.

Jesus looked at Tim lovingly and said, “She never got over you, and Satan’s got her into drugs and alcohol. While she diverts herself from all the pain she should be feeling, she’s hurting herself even more, making the amount of suffering she needs to endure to heal even greater. The more pain she has to face the more she wants to avoid it so the more she diverts herself. It’s a vicious cycle that’s about to get stomped on.”

Satan pushed a button or three on June’s remote and the channel changed.

Everyone’s attention turned to the TV.

“Today, there is great news for infertile women,” said the announcement.

“J&S fertility labs have just received approval to experiment with a new drug that actually causes development of ova in post menopausal women, giving them a last chance at fertility.”

June began to cry, picked up the phone and dialed the number from the bottom of the screen.

The boys found themselves back in the Cadillac out front of their Mom’s house.

“So,” said Satan, “where next?”

“What do you mean?” Asked Tom, “You’re the tour guide.”

Tim touched Jesus' shoulder and asked, "Is Mom going to be okay?"

Jesus answered, "of course. No amount of hurt down here can keep a soul from progressing for very long. It's just a matter of time."

Satan looked at Tom and said, "So? Where to?"

"I don't understand," replied Tom.

"Oh... They still don't get it," said Satan, "best explain it Cuz." Jesus turned on the front seat and faced the boys.

Satan rocketed the car straight out of earth's atmosphere. Normally the boys would be really interested in seeing that, but Jesus captivated them for now.

"You see boys," said Jesus, "this wasn't just a diversion. Those four women are all possible mothers for your next incarnations. Your souls want to be together, but wanted you to make the choices instead of them. They think it's more interesting when the egos of one life choose the path of the next life's ego."

"I'm confused," said Tim. "Me too," said Tom.

"You must now choose where to be born. All of those women are going to have identical twins."

"Oh my god!" said Tom, "you set us up!"

Satan laughed and said, "YES WE DID! God I love my job."

Jesus smiled and said, "You can look at it that way if you want, but honestly its just one way of introducing you to concepts that you couldn't possibly understand as six year old Christian boys."

“So, let’s recap, shall we?” Asked Satan, “You have four choices: First: Sarah McCormick, bar tender and nicely evil little wench. Second: Mary, the pain killer addict street person. Third: Emily the teenage daughter of a fundamentalist Christian. And last but not least, the sentimental choice, your former Mom, June.”

“Before you answer,” interrupted Jesus, “ask lots of questions.”

“Gosh,” said Tim, “are these our only choices?”

“Four is mighty good,” replied Satan, “most people don’t get any choice at all.”

“Will all the women have healthy babies?” Asked Tom.

“No. In fact all of them will have some difficulties. Tim and Tom are far more healthy than any of these babies,” replied Satan.

“Um. But we died of Leukimia,” exclaimed Tim.

“Exactly,” said Satan.

“That sucks!” shouted Tom.

“Awe, it ain’t so bad, quit being a cry baby, you weren’t nearly so whiny when I threw you in the pit a couple of life times ago.”

Tom became annoyed, “Well. You set me up you bitch!”

Tim didn’t understand the context, but he saw what was going on, Satan was trying to get them to choose blindly. Obviously Jesus wanted them to answer questions.

“What do you think would be best for us Jesus,” asked Tim.

“I can’t say, I can only answer questions about these lifetime’s possibilities.”

“And I can do that as well as Cuz can,” snarled Satan.

Tom was fuming and not of any help.

“We are going to be together again?” Asked Tim.

“Yes,” said Jesus, “you have chosen to incarnate close to each other for many lifetimes. Your goal Tim, has been to help Tom find himself and burn some karma from his past lives.”

Tim began to ask a series of questions, Satan answered them all, except the last.

“Which mothers will have conjoined twins?”

“Sarah and June.”

“Will both twins survive?”

“Of both conjoined twin sets, one child will live, one will die.”

“Which of us will die?”

“In both cases, you will die Tim, and your lives will separate.”

“Will the non-conjoined twins’ lives live the same length of time?”

“Close.”

“Where can I do the most good?”

Jesus smiled and said, “Good for whom?”

“Good for Tom, I guess, you said that’s my goal.”

“All of them will do well for Tom, if he allows it,” replied Satan.

“Then which will be the best for me?”

“All will suit your choices for growth,” replied Satan.

“You’re not asking the right questions,” shouted Tom.

“I’m doing my best, I don’t hear you speaking up!” shouted Tim.

Tom calmed a bit and said, “I think Sarah and June are out because I want you to be with me. I need you bro.”

Jesus and Satan were both shocked at Tom’s helpful interaction.

His six years with Tim had been a success.

“I agree,” said Tim.

“That leaves Emily and Mary.”

“But Mary’s evil, right Satan?” asked Tom.

“You’re all evil,” sneered Satan, “haven’t you learned anything?”

“He’s lying!” said Tim and then a light appeared in his eyes, “GET THEE BEHIND ME SATAN!”

Satan disappeared, and Jesus said, “Mary then, huh?”

“Yeah,” said Tim.

Tom nodded and added, “Yeah. Mary. She knows how to keep Satan away!”

Jesus jumped in the driver’s seat and drove the car back up to the gates of heaven.

The gate opened as he approached. Waving to St. Peter, he said, “You own me ten bucks.”

St. Peter grumbled as Jesus drove the young men down the Kit-Kat road toward the gummy bear building.