

# UNREMEMBERED MEALS



ERIC BECK

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*BY ERIC BECK*



**DORRANCE**

PUBLISHING CO

EST. 1920

PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA 15238

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Dorrance Publishing Co

585 Alpha Drive

Pittsburgh, PA 15238

Visit our website at [www.dorrancebookstore.com](http://www.dorrancebookstore.com)

ISBN: 979-8-88729-005-8

eISBN: 979-8-88729-505-3

UNREMEMBERED  
MEALS



*Isn't life more than food...?*

Matthew 6:25



*If only I could remember anything at all...*

Robert Smith



“UNREMEMBERED MEALS” is a phrase I came across in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*. At first, it was almost destined to become an unremembered phrase. But it dwelt in my mind. I thought, “How can we truly forget a meal?” After all, without alimentation, life wouldn’t be possible. But, like air, sometimes we take things for granted. My coworker in the kitchen once said, “Some people like to talk, talk, talk, but don’t give them any food—after a week, they can’t say anything.” And like the preacher said, “What is happening now has happened before, and what will happen in the future has happened before, because God makes the same things happen over and over again.” Just like Jerry Seinfeld said, “We’re never in danger of running out of appetites.” But once our bellies are full, we look to, among other things, literature. That’s where this book comes in. Read it, and maybe, when it’s over, you’ll be hungry again.





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## PRAYER AND FEASTING

“Let me have another one of those meatballs,” said Frank, stabbing at the plentiful, rounded food with his fork. He did some masticating. He sighed heavily. “Delicious!” he declared.

The siren started.

“It’s back to the prayer closets for us,” said Frank’s fellow monastery member, David.

“I don’t know if I have the vocabulary for another eight hours of talking to God,” Frank admitted.

“Neither do I,” said David, and gave Frank a knowing look as he surreptitiously stowed a loaf of bread away into a baggy part of his habit.

“David!” Frank whispered.

“If I don’t have the words, at least I won’t be hungry.”

The two monks arose from their table and went back to the wing where they would be on their knees until the siren wailed again, until the next feast began. Or, that was what was expected of them; David would stop prostration after one Lord’s Prayer and scarf down some French bread. Then he would return to the floor of his closet. Eight hours passed. The siren started. With a little too much eagerness for the supposedly pious monks, they poured back into the feasting chambers. This time, David was preparing for a cache that he had secretly created in his prayer closet. Pretty soon, he would be eating all the time. He put an apple into each of his pockets; he hid an entire roast in his satchel; he wasn’t wasting any space on his person that could be filled with

food taken from the dining table. When it was time for more religious reflection, David would have weighed in as 80 pounds heavier had there been a scale around for him to stand on. As it was, he entered his prayer closet with an oddly shaped gut. Once he closed the door, he took the watermelon from beneath his shirt and put it in the cache. He bowed before the Lord and said, "Thank you, O God of the spirits of all flesh, this perpetual alimentation is going to do wonders for our relationship, once it gets started. Amen." He arose and took a huge bite of a sweet potato.

Meanwhile, David's friend Frank had gotten his hands on a Bible, which, this being a monastery, one would think would be a ubiquitous tome. But this was the 25<sup>th</sup> century. Bibles were solely back in the hands of the Bishops. But Frank, a lowly, insignificant monk, was hungry. And not just for calories; he wanted the words of God. Somehow, maybe instinctively, he knew there were things about his religion the men overseeing the monastery weren't telling him. So while David was making plans to become obese, Frank snuck into the Bishop's office on one of his walks back from the dining hall to the prayer wing. There it was, an actual Bible, just laying there. And the Bishop wasn't in sight! Before Frank could start to wonder where he could be, with as much stealth as David used to slide a cherry pie into his hood, Frank swiped the sacred text from the desk and bolted back to his closet. He was breathing heavily, but once he had steadied himself, he opened the book. And *afflatus* happened. He looked right down on the verse that said, "This kind of faith can come only by prayer and feasting." But he looked a little bit closer. Something was fishy. Something about the print itself. Frank moved his finger over the page. The textures were anomalous. Then Frank discovered he could remove a piece of the paper. And this piece had the word "feasting" on it. Beneath it, Frank read the word "fasting." What was going on!

Once the siren had sounded and they were back at the dining tables, Frank wasn't eating. He was the only monk who wasn't eating. As he watched his friends gorging themselves, a tear fell from his eye. What he couldn't understand was, if the Bishops assumed the subordinate monks would never see a Bible, why were they altering the scriptures? Were they deceiving themselves? If so, why? Or was there someone who was deceiving the Bishops? Someone higher up?

Once it was time to sleep, Frank snuck over to David's closet. He had something to show him.

When he entered his friend's place, David was sucking on an ice cream bar. The chocolate was melting and dripping onto his stomach as he lay in bed. He didn't care.

"David," Frank whispered.

David looked up. He didn't say anything. His eyes did the communicating.

"I want to show you something, David," Frank said. And he showed him the mysterious verse.

"What is going on!" David whispered. Those were the first syllables David had made all day.

The next morning, David destroyed his cache. And at the day's first feast, David refrained from consumption along with his friend Frank. The siren wailed. As they walked side by side back to the prayer wing, the pair of rebels was ambushed: bags were put over their heads by large men and they were carried off to a forbidden section of the monastery. Once they had their hands tied to chairs, the large men removed the bags from their heads. David and Frank blinked at the bright light. Then a voice came from the bright light. And soon the owner of that voice could be seen. He was a short man in a fancy suit with a green necktie. He was saying, "How do you find God's word?"

"It's very good reading," Frank said.

"I think so, too."

"What is going on?" David repeated himself.

"You have been chosen."

"For what?" Frank said.

"To teach Sunday school on a planet named Earth."

"Sunday school? Earth?" Frank said.

"It will all be explained to you on your trip there, but for now I want to direct your attention to verse 29 of Deuteronomy 29. It says, 'The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever.' It is safe to say that something has been revealed to you. But there are still so many 'secret things.' We know so little of reality. But what little you know, well, don't be shy about it. That is all." The man with the green tie disappeared. Frank and David again had their heads covered with bags. They were taken to the space craft, where they were

released into the cockpit. They were handed flight manuals. The manuals were written in a foreign language. "What language is this?" asked Frank.

"The language of the sunflowers," said one of the large men.

"Who are they?" said David.

"They are hyper intelligent plants."

"And they fly this ship, I mean, normally?"

"That's right," said another of the large men, who then departed and left the two monks on the space craft, which took off towards Earth. And Sunday school. Whatever they are.

David snuck a cookie.

## A CONSUMMATION STORY

The sermon is over. The healing service is beginning. The pastor has a word of knowledge:

“Someone in our congregation has a wart on his penis,” he pronounces.

Jake leaped up in his pew. “That’s me!” he shouted.

“Come forward.”

Jake went up and stood by the pastor at the front of the church.

“How long have you had this affliction, sir?”

Jake said, “Five years.”

“Get your wife up here.”

“Come on, Julie,” Jake called out.

Julie walked up and joined her husband. The pastor tacitly nodded. Julie nodded back. She then put her hand on Jake’s crotch.

“I’m healed!” Jake shouted.

“Go examine yourself in the men’s room and come back and give us confirmation,” the pastor said.

“OK,” Jake said. He walked out of the sanctuary. On his way to the lavatory, he stopped by a table of delicious smelling muffins. Of course, he knew these were reserved for the worshipers, who, after the service, would come pouring into the lobby. But Jake had an extra-voracious sweet tooth. He took one and ate it. He picked up a napkin and as he was wiping the crumbs off his mouth, he felt movement in his bowels. And he got excited; Jake always was eager to be succinct in all his ways; he would pull down his pants to do two



things at once: relieve himself and make sure Jesus cured his sex organ. Presently, he was in the bathroom stall.

"Thank you, Lord," Jake praised God. His healing was confirmed. Then he reached for some toilet paper.

"Hey, dude, got a life verse?"

"Who said that?" Jake said, bewildered.

"I'm the guy in the next stall. Got a life verse?"

"Yeah, I've got a life verse."

"Well, I've got the life verse. How do I know it is the life verse? Because it is literal."

"What is it?"

"He who keeps my saying shall never see death."

"Wow. That is powerful."

"So, what's yours?"

"What's my what?"

"Your life verse."

"Oh," Jake faltered, "I..." He had a lot of verses he liked, but due to what the day was bringing his way, he decided on a verse he normally wouldn't. "The parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care."

"Yeah, that's a good one. I wouldn't expect it to be anyone's life verse, but hey, what do I know?"

"I also have a life verse," came another voice.

"Who's that?" said Jake.

"I'm in the other stall. The one to your left."

"Oh, what is it?" Jake said.

"But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost has never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation."

"Whatever happened to good old John 3:16, or Psalm 23. This is turning into a weird day," the man from the first stall said, and he flushed the toilet and walked to the sink to wash his hands.

Jake also flushed his toilet and walked to the sink.

"Name's Ted," the man extended his hand. Jake shook it.

The man in the third stall farted loudly. Ted nodded with his head toward the bathroom door. Jake nodded in agreement. The two left the other to his flatulence.

Ted said, "How long have you been coming to this church?"

"Oh, a long time." Jake looked around the corner. "It looks like the service is over," he said as he saw the congregation coming out of the sanctuary.

Julie spotted her husband and waved to him. "Excuse me, Ted," Jake said, and he went to meet his spouse.

"Julie! I'm healed!"

"Oh, that's wonderful, Ted! Pastor, did you hear? Ted is healed!"

The pastor smiled and squeezed Ted's forearm gregariously. "I'm so glad," he said, and he walked away to greet an elderly man in a wheelchair.

Jake and Julie were driving home in their car.

"We've been married a long time, Jake," Julie said.

"Yes," said Jake, making a left turn.

"Well, now that, well, because...now that you're healed..."

Jake smiled.



Two decades later, Joseph was sitting in the church bathroom stall. As he was getting some toilet paper, a voice said, "Got a life verse?"

Initially, Joseph was startled. Then he said, "In sin did my mother conceive me."



# IS THIS THERE?

## *One Small Creature*

The purpose of this book is to make money. We all know about the evils of loving money. But does anybody not love money if they go to work as a physician, construction worker, or cashier? You may say no. Surely the Hippocratic Oath is more motivating than a salary, a sky scraper well built more satisfying than an income, and a customer well served more copacetic than a paycheck. But what about me?

“A worker deserves his pay.” Wages is a word. And so is schizophrenia. Meaning what? Constant quandary and perpetual diffidence. That is if it were merely a word and not a disease. But what about me?

I could have applied for some benefits years ago, but I went to work. Principles is a word too. If it wasn't a concept also. So why the big to do about this fairly common mental illness? Well, I wouldn't be writing this book if I wasn't taking medication. I could go off the medication and live a life as an executive who makes lots of money, but I choose to take the medication, thereby agreeing with the doctors, and then I'm writing this book to make money, because money means something to give the apartment manager every month, instead of say, a hug to a visitor in the psych ward.

So I'm profiting off my diagnosis and I'm not ashamed. Not just because I take the medication, but because maybe I can help someone in a way that benefits not just myself, one small man.

### *Start Again*

Reading over the beginning chapter, I realize how very schizophrenic it sounds. Any well trained psychiatrist, or even maybe just any half way competent English professor, will judge it knowingly. I could start again, but, “What I have written, I have written.” Anyways I sincerely hope my motives are honorable.

### *Inchoate Self-help*

So we’ve all seen the news exploding with Covid-19. Why aren’t there news stories every night about another person diagnosed with schizophrenia, if it’s so severe, as many say, and even more experience? Because, like the social worker that came to my house years ago said, upon hearing of my condition: “Oh, a lot of folks have that.” And like a gentleman at a Bible study recently commented, “What changed with Covid-19? Nothing really.” I found him to mean, it’s just another way to die; I wouldn’t be surprised if the night before he put in a Cure album and listened to Robert Smith sing, “There is no terror in my heart/Death is with us all.” So what changed with the first schizophrenic? Nothing really. Just another competitor with gout for most annoying ailment. So, if schizophrenia depends on a society to make it worse, could Adam (as in Adam and Eve) have gotten this sickness? If he did, or had he had it, he could only live out his life, which he did (see Genesis), and what more is that saying than that we actually are, after all, waiting for Godot? And if modern America is a Red Sector A, “all that we can do to help ourselves in stay alive.”

## EQUINE TRANSLATION

Kim was a horse. She belonged to a man who lived in the city. Kim spent most of her time preparing this man's meals. This man was clinically depressed. Although he had a job, he wasn't very productive. He would clock in when he got to his office in one of the taller buildings downtown, and then it would take him about fifteen to twenty minutes to get to his desk. Like today, for instance. Kim made him five delicious pancakes. He ate two of them. He gave the remainder back to Kim, but she only neighed (probably because she was concerned about her master's poor appetite) and he went back to sleep. Minutes later, he awoke, got his hat on, and headed out. It was 9:02 when the time clock received Ted's—that was his name—employee ID. Already, he was a couple of minutes behind. He thought, "Oh, what a day." He shuffled his way down the hall.

"Hi, Ted," a coworker said.

Ted smiled weakly, and continued on.

Not only was Ted not very productive because he was rarely punctual and slow in getting to his desk, but once there, he couldn't concentrate. He was always thinking about Kim. He loved her. He had had her since she was a week old. But now she was very close to death. The veterinarian had told Ted that she had cancer. That was the main reason he was depressed. But his depression had come on before this deadly diagnosis. It had started, probably, when his latest relationship with a woman ended. The woman was Lisa. Lisa was very attractive. But in the course of her relationship with Ted, she became un-

couthly jealous of Kim. In all their conversations, it was Kim this and Kim that—never did he comment on Lisa’s beauty. Finally, Lisa had cut things off when at dinner one evening, she came out and said, “Ted, do you love me?” Ted was staring right at her—no, right through her, and as if he hadn’t even heard the question, after a short pause, he said, “You know, Kim really is a good jumper.” Lisa threw down her napkin and stormed out of the restaurant. Ted was stranded at the table—and like lightning, he was depressed. Two weeks later, the veterinarian said, “We can operate, but I’m not sure we can get it all.” That was five weeks ago. Two surgeries had been done in the meantime. Presently, the phone on his desk rang.

“Manny’s Percussion. Ted speaking.”

“Yeah, I’d like to order one of your bass drums.”

“Certainly, and could I get your name, please?”

“Samuel Jacobson.”

Silence.

“Hello?”

“Kim.”

“Who’s Kim?”

“My horse.”

“Your horse’s name is Kim?”

“That’s right.”

“Wow.”

“That’s an understatement. Hey...Samuel, was it?”

“Yeah.”

“I know you’re eager for more information on your bass drum, but would you listen to me talk about Kim for a while? I just know you’ll be entertained.”

“Sure. Sounds like a remarkable animal.”

“That’s another understatement, but yes, Kim is remarkable. And amazing and friendly and she makes a hell of a veggie omelet.”

“How’s that?” Samuel said.

“Do you have any extra money? I’m thinking of starting a fund for Kim’s life.”

“Her life is in danger?”

“Cancer.”

“Ah, shit, I’m sorry.”

“So do you?”

“Do I?”

“Have any extra money?”

“No.”

Silence.

Samuel resumed: “But I have a place up north. And I’m in a rock band. We could hold an event there. Tell all your friends. We’ll have food and music.”

“That sounds great.”

“So how much is that bass drum?”

---

Later that evening, Ted was by the fire in his living room. Kim was in the kitchen, taking something out of the oven. She brought the dinner to Ted.

“You know, Kim, you could take it easy on the cooking. I know your health could use a rest. Not that I don’t still appreciate it. What do we have here? That chicken?”

Ted accepted the plate of hot food out of Kim’s mouth, and went about gestation. When he was done, he sighed and put his head back on the sofa. His mind wandered. He was now remembering his conversation with Samuel.

“Hey, Kim.”

Kim looked around.

“I’ve got this idea,” Ted said.

Three weeks later and two hundred miles closer to the Arctic Circle, Ted was pouring himself some coffee.

“Can I have some of that?”

Ted looked around. “Oh. Sure, Samuel.” Ted gave Samuel a cup.

“Well, all the food is prepared. The band is warmed up. Now I guess we just wait for everyone to show up.”

“Where’s Kim?”

“She’s out on the deck.”

Ted and Samuel went out there. Ted put his arm lovingly on Kim’s back.

“This is all for you, my dear friend,” Ted said.

If a horse ever could smile, Kim could be seen to do so now.



Down below, in the backyard of this getaway house owned by Samuel, rows of chairs were lined up and long tables full of fruit, nuts, salads of all kinds, hot dishes, casseroles, meats, beverages of all types—in short, food galore—were lined up, as well. At the end of the longest table was an extremely large glass bowl. It was into this bowl that Ted and Samuel were hoping their guests would drop in large amounts of freewill offerings. Then, Ted hoped, he could afford to hire Dr. Blevans of Boise—the greatest veterinarian in the land. And so elongate Kim’s life.

Twenty minutes later, the first guests started to arrive at the house. The band took the stage that had been set up. Before Samuel sat down behind his drum kit, he took the microphone.

“Welcome, everyone. I don’t know most of you. But I know why all of you are here. Your shared love for our dear Kim is evidenced by your presence. And no matter what happens now, if nothing else, this night is a celebration of Kim and her owner, Ted. So let’s get rocking!”

A loud cheer went up.

The band played a couple of songs, during which more and more people filtered into the backyard and more and more large bills were placed in the glass bowl. Meanwhile, Kim herself still stood on the deck, looking down meekly on the festivities. Suddenly, right at the climax of a song, a bright light, like a spotlight being beamed down by God, shone upon Kim. The band stopped playing and everyone turned to look at the great horse. She disappeared. A great gasp went up from the crowd. Ted, who, during all this, had been standing quietly behind the scenes, eyeing the glass bowl, rushed onto the stage and took up the microphone.

“We all know what happened to Enoch,” he said. “A similar event has just taken place. Everyone, today, a horse, but not just any horse, but a horse with a culinary gift beyond description and my best friend, has arrived in heaven. None of the money you have donated could have purchased a finer destiny for our friend, not even miraculous surgery. Folks, today, there is no room for grief.”

Everyone trickled back to their vehicles and headed back south to their homes. The bass player and the guitarist from Samuel’s band quickly left the stage and surreptitiously stole all the money from the glass bowl. Then they went to the liquor store and bought all the booze they could. Next, they went camping. Sitting by the fire with a scotch in his hand, the bass player said to the guitarist, “You tell me, who was truly translated?”

## THE SIDE EFFECT

“Larry couldn’t make it.”

“How come?”

“He was going to see his uncle Steve in the hospital.”

“That’s the one who drove that cab for all those years.”

“Yeah,” said Jim, getting into the swing set, “I guess he finally got into an accident.”

The two boys enjoyed the playground for a good while, even if Larry was absent. Then they went home for their suppers.

“Did you have fun playing with Jim?” Dan’s mother asked him as she stirred the pot of something delicious.

“Yeah...Larry wasn’t there, though.”

“I heard—”

“Did his luck finally run out, Mom?”

“Whose?”

“You know whose. Steve. Larry’s uncle.”

“It was only a matter of time.”

“53 years?!”

Dan’s mother turned her head down to concentrate on their meal.

Back in 1957, Steve Beard was hired at Jones Cab Service. It was his first day of work. The first passenger he ever had was wearing a furry hat.

“What’s your name, dude?”

“Steve.”

“I know that.”

“Why’d you ask, then?”

“Listen, Steve, I’ve got something to tell you.” The man with the furry hat leaned forward in the back seat so that his head was almost even with Steve’s. The man said, “The coast is clear.”

“Huh?”

“You don’t have to worry about the traffic.”

“Oh, I’m not worried. I’m a pretty good driver.”

The man shook his head. “You’re not getting me. I mean, the coast is clear.”

“Huh?”

“No more looking over your shoulder when you back up. No more nothing like that.”

Steve was puzzled. “Okay,” he said.

The man continued, “I’ve got it from the highest authority in the universe that you can drive like you’re sipping beer in an exotic woman’s hammock.”

So that’s what Steve began to do. He didn’t, but he could have driven with a blindfold on for his entire career. It’s like Hemmingway wrote all his great works randomly stabbing his fingers at the typewriter. Steve would pick up a customer. He might look out the windshield because there was nothing else to look at, but he could have worked a crossword puzzle while he took that customer across town. He would pick up another passenger. He might have kept his hands on the steering wheel just for appearances, but he could have given himself a nice shave as he dropped that passenger off at the airport. How did this become possible? Did the Bible write itself? Both good questions.

But then one day, May 5, 2010, Steve was backing up from a parking spot, when he drove right into a truck. He was seriously injured.

Larry took out another napkin. He wiped away a couple more tears. He was sitting with his mother and father in the lobby of the hospital where Steve was being treated.

“Is he gonna make it, Mom?” he said.

His mom held him closer.

A doctor came out of a door.

“Steve would like to talk to the boy,” he said.

Larry looked up at his mother’s face. She smiled sadly and nodded. Larry got up and followed the doctor to his uncle’s room. When Larry entered, Steve was sitting upright. But he looked in bad shape.

“I’ll leave you alone.” The doctor shut the door behind him as he left.

“Larry,” Steve said.

“Yes, Uncle?”

“Was it a coincidence, or did my luck just die?”

“I...ah...” Larry was confused.

“I still don’t know who that guy with the furry hat was.”

“Uncle Steve, I think that you are very brave.”

“Why? Because I stopped taking my medication?”

“You...”

Steve barely smiled. “That’s right. But don’t tell your mother.”

“I won’t.”

“It wasn’t Providence. All along. It wasn’t a guiding hand. It was luck. But did Providence put a stop to it. If so, why? Why now?”

A nurse came into the room. “I have your medication, Steve.”

Steve winked at Larry.



## A SPORTS LOVER'S PROGRESS

We've all heard people say, "That's why we play the game." We don't just assume the outcome. And that is true with every part of life. Neil Peart has asked the question, "Can any part of life be larger than life?" Fans keep score at home. Someone may think that track 2 and 7 of a rock album have similar if not identical bass lines. But if one listens to this album in the traditional way, the space between track 2 and 7 may blur one's impression. If one listened to track 2 and immediately fast forwarded to track 7, they might be able to pick out the differences. If one was to binge on classical music, their best bet would be to appreciate the differences between each back to back movement. If one was to listen to classical music for many hours, and then was asked to—

Bob crumpled up his piece of paper and threw it in the garbage can with disgust. He let out a loud sigh.

"What's the matter, dear?" his wife asked from the kitchen.

"It's just that I'm somewhat of an amateur philosopher."

"Yeah, you should stick to storytelling."

"That's good advise."

"What do you want to do tonight?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Let's go to the library."

Later that night, Bob was searching the shelves of the local library for a book by his favorite philosopher.

"Excuse me, are you Robert Ryan?"

Bob turned to see a young man with glasses staring at him.

"I am."

"Your last novel was amazing."

"Thank you."

"In fact, we're making a throne for you."

"A...what?"

"Follow me."

Bob followed the young man. They came to the common part of the library. And there it was. An actual throne. Formed from books.

"Go ahead. Sit down."

"Don't you think the librarian would be upset?"

"I am the librarian."

Not knowing what to do, Bob ascended the throne and placed himself there.

"I'm telling you," said the librarian, "that really suits you."

"I feel a little silly," Bob said.

"Nonsense."

Bob looked down towards his left. He saw that his elbow was resting on a King James Bible. He felt all the more inadequate.

"Attention patrons," a loud voice came from the PA system. "Come to the common area and bow down to Mr. Robert Ryan. Anyone who refuses will be shot."

This is a library? Bob thought.

"Bob!" It was his wife. She was looking up at him in confusion.

"Diane. Thank God it's you. Listen, call my agent. Tell him—"

Suddenly the large crowd that had gathered was on their hands and knees. Even Diane, not knowing what to do, joined them. Only one person was standing. When the librarian noticed this maverick, he scowled, stood up, and pointed at him with an accusing finger.

"You there. Why aren't you worshipping?"

"This is absurd."

There was a shot fired. It missed the recalcitrant one by centimeters. He quickly ducked out of the way and fled. When he reached the sidewalk outside, he looked up at the building from which he was fleeing. "Church of Ryanism," was painted above the door.

"This is not how I thought this day was going to go," he said, and continued to run through the early evening.

Back inside, Bob murmured the same sentiment. "This is not how I thought this day was going to go," he said to himself.

"I want to assure you, sir, there will be no more such interruptions," said the librarian.

"But don't you see? That man was right. This is absurd." Bob got to his feet. A mouse scurried past him. He got startled, and in his effort to avoid the rodent, fell over. As he did so, the makeshift throne collapsed around him and he was now lying beneath a pile of books.

"Someone help him to his feet. Now!" A handful of people rushed to Bob's aid. They grabbed him by the shoulder and elbow. Once he was back—

Dave crumpled up his piece of paper and threw it in the garbage can, disgusted. He sighed loudly.

"What is it, honey?" his wife asked from the kitchen.

"It's just that I'm somewhat of an amateur short story writer."

"I agree. You should stick to preaching."

"That's good advice," said Dave. He then went to work on tomorrow's sermon.





## FORGOTTEN RUDERIES

Dave's friend was going to prison. He hadn't known him for long, but in the short time he had spent fishing with him, they had grown very close. Just before he was taken to the penitentiary, his friend, Thomas, gave him a piece of pottery. Thomas had made it himself. It was a kind of bizarrely shaped bowl, in which, "you can keep your extra change," he said. "Thank you," Dave said.

"It is something you can remember me by," Thomas said.

"I won't forget you."

"I know you won't. And just in a few years, we can be back on the lake."

"I look forward to it," Dave said. Thomas entered the prison.

That night, at home, Dave put his new change bowl on the kitchen counter.

"That's nice," his wife said.

"Thomas made it for me," he said.

"Dave?"

Dave was struck by the concern he heard in his wife's voice. He looked at her.

"What is it, Samantha?"

"I know you don't have to tell me, but...if...that is...why did...?"

"He raped someone."

"Thomas did?"

"Let's watch some television."

Dave walked out of the kitchen and entered the living room. Samantha stood dumbfounded, gazing into the refrigerator, which she held open, thinking.

The next day, Dave was out fishing. He found it lonely without Thomas, even though, before he had met him, he had fished alone for many years. The two had met at a billiards. That was about ten months ago.

“What else do you do, besides play Eight Ball?” Thomas said.

“I like to fish.”

“No way! Me, too.”

“I own a boat. We should go sometime.”

They had arranged to go fishing the next day, which was a Tuesday. After that, they went fishing every Tuesday for six months.

Then one Tuesday evening, when Dave pulled up to Thomas’s place with the truck and the boat trailer, he didn’t answer the door. Dave was a bit confused. He drove home. He wouldn’t go fishing again until the day mentioned above, the day after Thomas was sent away.

After Thomas had been in prison for two weeks, Dave found an extra job delivering pizzas. He had trouble with the customer service part of the gig. He didn’t want to sound like an asshole when he handed over the food, but for some reason, probably at least partly because his mind was on Thomas, he couldn’t force himself to be cordial, let alone effusive.

Every night, Dave would drop the coins in his pocket into the bizarrely shaped bowl. After a month, he had enough change to buy a Bible.

“Why do you want to buy a Bible?” Samantha had asked him.

“I don’t know. Just because I’ve never read it.”

He bought a King James Version. He read about how God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.

“That’s what you’re doing to me!” he yelled out at the sky.

The next day Dave knocked on a customer’s door.

“Here’s your pizza,” he said.

“Thank you, sir!”

“Whatever,” Dave said brusquely. He got in his car and drove back to the restaurant.

Every time Dave communed with himself, saying, “I’m going to smile. I’m going to thank them. I’m going to use a tender voice,” by the time he was actually talking to the customers, he couldn’t stop himself from being unreasonably unconcerned.

That night, as he prayed (he had never prayed before, but he read about the people in the Bible praying, so he thought, I’ll give it a try) he said, “God,

why do you always harden my heart when I'm trying to be nice?" He heard a still small voice. The next day, he was the saintliest of the saints.

As he prayed that night, he said, "God, why did you wait to soften my heart until after I had already offended so many customers?" He heard a still small voice. The next day, he quit his job. After he clocked out for the last time, he drove to the prison to visit Thomas. When he was sitting across from him, Dave began, "So I bought a Bible."

"A Bible?" Thomas said.

"Yeah."

"We have a Bible study here."

"Really?"

"And right now I'm rehearsing the part of Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*."

"Ah, prison, the Bible, and *Waiting for Godot*. A man can't expect much more."

"Except for perhaps a fishing trip."

"Of course."

"Or a meal with one's wife, or a game of catch with one's son, or—"

"Thomas, I didn't mean to sound—"

"No, Dave, I'm sorry. I didn't get put in here for no reason."

"Well, it's just for a few more years."

A few years later, Samantha was baking a cake to celebrate Thomas coming home. Dave was planning to go pick him up that evening. It would be a small party. Just a few friends and Thomas's sister. When the party started, Samantha brought out the cake. Thomas bit into a piece.

"This cake tastes like shit, Samantha," he said.

Everyone blushed.

Thomas concentrated on his coffee, which he seemed to be enjoying.

As Dave was driving him home that night, Thomas said, "I think it was God who hardened my heart."

"I used to have that problem with my customers," Dave said.

"You raped your customers?"

Dave faltered. "No. I'm sorry. I didn't know what you meant."

"But I'm a new man now."

"So what about God?"

“What about Him?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

The next week, Dave and Thomas went to play billiards. A stranger approached them.

“Do you guys like to fish?”

“No!” Dave and Thomas said in unison.

Then next time they were out on the boat, the two friends didn’t say a single thing to each other. Then it got dark and it was time to go home.

## THE NUDE SHOPLIFTER

Hank worked harder in the last three hours than he had in the last three years. It was his first day at his new job. He was working in the scullery of the big restaurant downtown.

“What’s this?” Hank asked his superior dishwasher.

“Oh, don’t touch that. Not until tomorrow.”

“Why not?”

“That pan has been soaking in soapy water since April 1968.”

Hank’s eyebrows went up. “Nearly 48 years.”

The superior dishwasher nodded. “48 years.”

“And tomorrow...”

“Tomorrow we scrub it.”

“Wow,” said Hank.

“You have no idea how many dishwashers have longed to be in your shoes.”

“Mine?”

“You get to consummate this epic effort to clean this pan.”

“I’m excited.”

“You should be. But that’s all for today. You can go. And get some sleep. You’ll need it.”

“Thanks,” Hank said. He went to the locker room and changed and then hopped on the bus. He sat down next to an older man.

“You going to watch the game tomorrow?” he asked Hank.

“Which game?” Hank said.

“You mean you haven’t heard that all sports are ending?”

“They are?”

“Yeah, and whoever wins this game is the champion forever.”

“Sounds like a big deal.”

“It is a big deal. When you get home, check your local listings.”

Hank enjoyed the rest of his bus ride home and thought about a lot of things as he watched the city go by out the window. Finally, he was at his apartment. He got into his pajamas and went to sleep.

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“For the love of calculators, where is Hank?” said the head dishwasher. If you are wondering about the phrase he used, know that he had a passion for mathematics.

“We can’t stand around waiting for him, get the cloth,” said the chef.

It was the next day, but Hank hadn’t shown up for his shift. So the head dishwasher went ahead and cleaned the pan that had been used nearly half a century ago to make a cake for the state’s governor. He dumped the putrid water into the sink and wiped the cloth around the inside of the pan. It all came off just like that. For all the anticipation, it was almost anticlimactic. But the ease of the clean was what had been expected and hoped for, so maybe it was not all that surprising. The chef shook the head dishwasher’s hand and then business went on as usual in the kitchen.

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That morning Hank awoke. Before getting out of bed, he lay there, thinking. “Do I really want to slave away some more in that stupid dish room? I’m still exhausted from yesterday.” He lay there for hours. The time came for his shift to begin, and he was still in bed. He heard his phone ringing, and ignored it, knowing it was the restaurant calling. Finally he got on his feet. He took off his underwear that he routinely slept in and walked naked to the bathroom, where he used his toilette. “Do I really want to get dressed? I have so little energy,” he thought to himself. It was now a little after noon, and he was hungry. He didn’t have an ounce of groceries in his entire apartment so he decided

he'd walk to the convenience store. He still hadn't dressed. When he walked down the sidewalk, no one saw him. In fact, not another pair of eyes saw him even peripherally during his whole journey to get lunch. You see, the sporting event to end all sporting events was airing on TV. No one, literally no one, wanted to miss a second of the action. While all the people in Hank's neighborhood had their eyes glued on their TVs, he entered the convenience store. It was open, the lights were on, but he could see no other customers or employees. Hank found a sandwich and some potato chips and went up to the counter. He set them down and as he held his credit card in his hand, waited to be rung up. He waited. And he waited. "Hello?" he called out. There was no one.

"Forget this," he said. He took his items and walked out of the convenience store with them. He walked down the street and turned a corner. It was then that the convenience store manager came out of the bathroom, not knowing that someone completely nude had just stolen some victuals.

When Hank got back to his apartment, he enjoyed his lunch, decided, "I might as well put something on," got dressed and turned on his computer. He started looking for a new job. He'd need it.





## IT'S NOT REALLY THE BIBLE, IS IT?

It had been a long day. Now the sun was going down. He looked out his window and remembered his creator. There was a tear. He got in his bed and slept.

The next day he spent sewing a pocket onto his hiking backpack.

The day after that, a book came via horseman. He read half of it and put the book in its new pocket.

He was a lonely man. Not that he wanted to be, he just didn't have any friends. And let's face it, there really weren't many potential friends around in these strange days. After World War Three, times became...prehistoric. That is, now there was only agriculture and very few humans.

When the sun came up in the morning, he noticed a piece of paper that the wind had blown onto the glass of his sliding door. It said, "I am looking for a companion to hike through the Woodsy Woods with me." He shoved it into his shirt pocket and dwelt on it most of the day. "Who could have written it? And why did they want to go through the Woodsy Woods?"

He was an avid hiker. Hence the backpack. Well, most of the survivors were avid hikers. With all the strides of technology wiped so quickly and brutally from the earth, it was one of the only hobbies available. He had hiked most of the wilderness around his modest dwelling, but nobody, I mean NOBODY, would even think of braving the Woodsy Woods. Not until this person, he concluded, looking at the note again as he sat at his breakfast table the next day. He chewed on his food. And slowly a daring attitude started to rise in his being. Let's consider this more clearly: I have no friends—this

could change that. I am bored with the same old trails—this would definitely change that.

After his meal, he strapped on his backpack, complete with the science fiction novel in the pocket, and went out, not knowing where to, only that he was looking for whoever wrote the note.

As he began walking, he saw a horseman coming towards him in the distance. There were no more cars or trucks, but the horses, the ones that had survived along with the paltry humans, provided the best transportation. He wondered if it was the same man who had delivered his book. And if so, could he be the mysterious note author? As he watched him approach, he realized the horse was going at a pretty good gallop, and that the rider's face looked pained. He tried to wave his hands to get his attention, but the horseman passed right by him. But not without also shouting: "Run for your life!" So he ran for his life. He became winded and stopped and looked around him. There were only the trees and the sound of the birds. He kicked at some dirt and started walking. He came to some water—a creek. He dunked his head in it. He felt relieved, and he sat down to think and rest. Should I be afraid? That horseman looked terrified. But of what?

"Hey, man." A woman's voice. He turned around suddenly.

"So, what do you think?"

He realized that this woman had written the note.

"Let's go for it," he said.

"What's your name?"

"John. Yours?"

"Patricia."

"Now, Patricia, you know what we're getting ourselves into by hiking the Woodsy Woods."

"What?"

John was speechless. He never really did find out why that section of the forest was so cursed, only that it was cursed...reportedly. And he had never seen these reports. Maybe there was no reason to be scared at all.

"Come on, John. You're not superstitious?"

"Of course not."

Just then a huge, grotesque, and very smelly creature—looking like something out of a Lynch film—came jogging up the lane—the lane the horseman

had taken. It was also quite large – the size of a dinosaur. Now I know why I was running for my life, thought John.

“Patricia! Run!”

John ran. Patricia did not. Instead, she greeted the creature like it was an old friend. It came to a lumbering stop and held out its paw. Patricia gave it a shake.

“John! Wait! This is Leroy.”

John stopped running and turned back.

“You guys gonna hike the Woodsy Woods?”

“Yep. Me and my new friend, John.”

“You’re braver than me,” said Leroy. Then he waded into the creek and disappeared beneath the paludal area beyond.

“Let’s go,” said Patricia. She and John started to walk toward the start of the Woodsy Woods, which was a good two miles from the creek.

“Who...what...was Leroy?” John started up a conversation while they journeyed.

“I made him.”

“You had intercourse with a T-rex?”

“Don’t be uncouth, John. I made him in my science lab.”

“Where do you live?”

“In Detroit.”

“How can you be sure it’s Detroit? I haven’t heard of there being any cities that are recognizable since after the war.”

“Well, that’s where I lived before. I never lived anywhere else. And, call me spiritual if you want, it kind of feels like Detroit.”

“So these Woodsy Woods are in...Green Bay?”

“Geographically, it could make sense.”

“How did you get way down here?” John wondered.

“On foot. Come on, John, you should know that us hikers get antsy. And Leroy was really getting restive in his garret room.”

“You’re a mysterious bird, Patricia.”

“Thank you.”

They came to a bit of a hilly and rocky area. They made their way silently—except for a few grunts—over it and were back on the grassy lane.

“Where did you find my note?” Patricia asked.

"The wind blew it onto my door."

"Wow. So it kind of found you."

"Yeah, I guess so." John laughed.

"I'm so glad." Patricia smiled.

"When you wrote it, how were you expecting anyone to...were you even expecting a response?"

"No way. In fact, I wrote it as part of my journal. I journal every night by my campfire. The wind ripped it out of my little notebook. I chased it for a while—it was no use...then I thought, Hey, someone may find it!"

"When you saw me at the creek, you knew it was me. How?"

"You're wrong. I didn't know. I assumed."

"I guess there aren't a lot of us around, huh?"

There were about 500 humans living in North America at the time of this story. Most of these people lived in metal or wood shacks, while some, like John, lived in relatively opulent homes that didn't get destroyed in the bombing. And still others, like Patricia, lived in mansions. For everyone, though, starting over had been like the first day on earth.

How the Woodsy Woods had become so notorious is thanks to a man named Philbert Pencilman. He had been dislocated just like everybody. When he found an area of forest, he thought, I'm gonna make this mine. Then he thought, How am I going to keep everyone else out? He was trained in the psychic powers that had started to gain a following shortly before the first A-bomb fell. In fact, he was the leader of that following. So he dug himself a bunker and went to work. And like wi-fi, he disseminated an aura of horror like the brainwasher he had always dreamed of becoming. The next part of this story is dedicated to how John and Patricia quite unwittingly took him down.

"Well, this is it," said John. They had arrived at the Woodsy Woods. One more step and they'd find out if the curse was real.

"You can go first," Patricia said.

They entered the woods. And there was no terror in these woods, as they soon found out, but like Hitchcock, they learned that the terror was only in the expectation of the woods.

"It's kind of nice in here," said Patricia.

"I was thinking the same thing," said John.

They hiked in enjoyment for about one whole hour. John was leading the way. Suddenly, he heard Patricia cry out. He turned around. "Patricia?!" She had disappeared. After seeking her ardently for a long time, he decided to keep going; he was hoping maybe there was some kind of settlement at the end of these woods where he could find help. And there was.

A very tall man with a very long beard, named Philemon, came out of a metal shack, one of about half a dozen in this diminutive village, and said to John, "What's up, dude?"

"My...girlfriend is missing," John said.

"Missing?"

"Yes. She disappeared."

"No, she didn't disappear; she fell into Philbert Pencilman's bunker."

"Huh?" John was nonplussed.

"Jason! Fred! Come with me," said Philemon. Jason and Fred came out of one of the other shacks. They had knives. They followed their friend back into the Woodsy Woods. John made up the rear.

After they had hiked a short distance, John stopped. "I think I was about here when I heard her cry out," he told the others. They milled around a bit. Then, someone farted.

"Was that you, Jason?" Fred said.

"It came from over there," said John. He rushed towards where he had heard the flatulence. And he fell right into Mr. Pencilman's bunker. Or, rather, right into Mr. Pencilman; he had his knife, given to him by Fred, in his hand, brandished; and it went right into the evil man's head and skull; he died almost instantly.

"I've never been more thankful for having gas in my life!" Patricia said.

"Are you hurt?" John said.

"I'm fine."

There was a ladder in the corner. John started to climb his way out of the bunker. Patricia lagged behind, having caught a glimpse of something in the corner. It was a box. She opened it. There was a book inside. She grabbed it and followed John.

"We should make him a grave," Fred said.

"Why?" said John.

"What do you mean?"

“Does he deserve it? He wasn’t the greatest guy, remember.”

“Ah, but remember also this: ‘Honor all men.’”

“Who said that?”

Fred nodded toward the book Patricia was holding. She turned it over in her hands.

“It’s a Bible,” she realized.

The group of five spent the next couple hours preparing Philbert’s grave. They put him in the ground. They sang a hymn.

“Let’s go,” said Jason in a resolute voice. He marched off in the direction of their small village.

The others followed.

When they got back to the village, it was like a revival like no other was taking place. Yes, a spiritual revival. A church was being built. Songs were being sung. Prayers were being said.

“What’s going on here?” John wondered.

Patricia gave her Bible a squeeze and looked around. “That’s just what we need,” said a man, walking towards her. “What?” she said. “May we use that book for our first meeting as Christians? Short of the Second Coming, that Bible is the most welcome site we could ask for.”

“Don’t you have your own?” she asked.

The man shook his head. “It’s a rare tome these days.”

Patricia handed over the Bible, that, remember, had been in Mr. Pencilman’s bunker. And now that Mr. Pencilman had died, like a kernel of wheat, many seeds have been produced; and since “grace makes beauty out of ugly things,” as Bono sings; and since “the Lord is in his holy temple,” as Habakkuk says; and since in the month before his seemingly unpredictable demise, Philbert had been devouring the scriptures; and since God uses everything for His glory, He used Mr. Pencilman’s psychic proclivities to fill the earth “with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord.”

During the next several weeks, the small number of denizens in the village created somewhat of a first century community. One day, a stranger came to the village. He looked around at the place and asked to speak to whoever was in charge.

“What’s causing this prosperity?” he asked Philemon in a voice of awe, approval, and, let’s be honest, a little incredulity.

## UNREMEMBERED MEALS

Philemon turned his head towards Patricia, who was sitting on a bench, reading. She smiled and held up her book.

“Line,” said the stranger.

The stage director sighed. “Let’s take a break,” he said.

The theatre group went out for burgers.





## NOT JUST ANY ENDING

George sat in his parked car. He looked out the windshield and drank his morning coffee. Suddenly a rabbit hopped out from behind a bush.

“Would you look at that,” he breathed.

Suddenly, an oriole flew down and perched on a shrub.

“Wow,” he said.

He took another sip of coffee.

A man walked in front of his car. He was carrying something. George tried to see what it was. He squinted.

“Looks like a camera,” he decided.

He finished his coffee.

“Looks like a camera pointed at me!”

He quickly opened his door and got out of the car. He rushed up to the stranger.

“Hey, what’s the big idea?”

“George?” said the cameraman.

“How do you know my name?”

“Huh?”

“Cut!”

George turned around. There was an entire film crew in the field where his car was parked.

“What’s wrong, George?” said the director.

“What’s going on?”

"I don't understand your question. Would you get back in the car so we can finish this scene?"

George started to run. And he wouldn't stop. Not until he finally collapsed.

George turned over onto his side. He was trying to get comfortable. The night's sleep had been restless, at best. Now he was very tired indeed.

"Try this pillow," said a woman.

"Thanks," he said. He sat bolt upright. "Where am I?" he demanded.

"Where are you? You don't know where you are?" said the nurse.

"What did they do with my car?"

"George, you're in the hospital."

George tried to get out of bed, but when he went to swing his legs out from beneath the sheets, he saw, to his horror, that he didn't have any legs. He began to scream.

More doctors and nurses and even a security guard ran into George's room. They held him down and tried to quiet him. Just then a man with some sunglasses on came into the room.

"I'm here to take custody of Mr. McGregor," he said with boldness.

"And who are you?" asked a doctor.

"I am who I am."

"We know that."

"Then why did you ask the question."

"Do you work here at the hospital?" asked a nurse.

"Sure do. Here's my name tag." The man pointed to his chest. His name tag read, "Christ."

"Get a psychiatrist," someone said.

Christ stepped confidently forward and grabbed George McGregor up in his arms and jumped out the window.

"Where are we going?" George asked his rescuer as they sailed away beyond the clouds.

"We have a good surgeon where I come from."

"Where do you come from?"

Christ simply smiled.

Two days later, George awoke in his own apartment. He saw a cardinal outside his window. He lay in bed for a few minutes. *My legs!* he suddenly thought with panic. He yanked off his covers. He had legs!

“How is this possible?” he said aloud.

“George, I wish you’d stick to the script.”

George looked up. There was a film crew in his bedroom.

“What script?”

The cinematographer looked at the director with concern. The director nodded.

“Okay, everybody, that’s it for today,” the cinematographer announced. “We’ll pick up shooting tomorrow.”

The film crew slowly shuffled out of the room, taking all the lights and other equipment with them.

“I wish you the best,” said the cinematographer to George. Then he, too, left the set.

The director looked at George for several moments. Then he walked over and sat on the bed next to him and rested his hand reassuringly on his knee.

“You’ve had quite a few days,” he said.

“I just wish someone could explain to me what’s going on,” George said, almost pleadingly.

The director smiled. “Come with me,” he said.

The two walked into the other room. There was a woman looking in the refrigerator. “Come on, Cynthia, buy your own lunch,” the director said to her. She left the apartment.

“Cynthia is our boom mic operator. You’ll have to forgive her; she’s new.”

The director turned on the television set and put in a disc. “I hope you like it,” he said.

A movie played. George was the main actor. It showed him in his car drinking coffee. It showed him running through the fields. A tractor ran over his legs. A helicopter showed up and flew him to the hospital. Christ appeared. Next, he was in heaven having new legs being surgically sewed onto his body. He was in his bedroom, he was admiring the cardinal, then—

“Wait, how did you get all this footage?” George asked with fright in his voice.

“What do you mean?”

“Someone must be filming us even now,” George said.

“No, George, the crew is having lunch. I suggest we do the same,” the director walked into the kitchen and got out a loaf of bread.

“I’m not crazy!” George yelled.

“I didn’t say you were. How about a peanut butter sandwich?”

George ran out of his apartment. That night, he was in the mental ward.

The next day at a group therapy meeting, George showed the movie he was in; he had snagged the disc and put it in his pocket just before fleeing his apartment the day before. When the movie was over, one the patients said, “Let’s finish the movie here. Today.”

“Let’s!” said all the others.

“Okay,” said George, “but first, what’s for supper?”

Later, when supper came, Cynthia said, “Speak a little louder,” lowering her mic a bit. She and all the crew were now in the hospital.

As George swallowed the last bite of his potato wedge, the director said, “That’s a wrap!”

## REHAB FOR BEGINNERS

Scratching his chin, Dave looked about his modest apartment. What should I do today? he asked himself. Today was the first day of his retirement. For the past eleven years, he had worked in a garage. He was retiring early, but without failing to realize that this retirement might be one of several. He wasn't afraid to ask himself the question: would his money last? But Dave wasn't thinking too hard about that. Right now, he wanted a project. I'll take up fitness walking, he suddenly decided. He put on his shoes and went outside. He saw a discarded toothbrush on the ground. He picked it up and shoved it into his pocket—what a mockery of the sacredness of the quotidian; he would do something with this hygiene tool. What? He walked on. There's the lake. He got himself on the stone path and started swinging his arms like a pro. He loved the sound of the birds and the sight of the green trees. He started to get a little winded and slowed his pace. He saw an old watch lying on the ground. He picked it up and put it in his pocket. He wouldn't be returning to his apartment empty-handed. What's this? A piece of a shattered vase, it looked like. He added it to the bevy of objects.

Now he was home. He emptied his pocket onto the kitchen table: a toothbrush, a watch, a piece of porcelain, and a goose feather. He had added this last item to his cache just as he finished his circuit around the lake. It was a blue and white feather. Very long. Very soft.

What should I do with this mess? he wondered.

He got out a pot from his cupboard and put the items in it. He put some scraps of newspaper clippings in it and dropped a lighted match into it. He

watched it burn. When its contents were sufficiently incinerated, he went into his bathroom. Why did I do that? He chided himself. I was going to be creative with those things. I was going to clean that toothbrush, I was going to repair that watch, I was going to paint that pottery shard, I was going to give that feather to my niece. I was too lazy. He didn't have the patience to let his collection just sit there. He felt like he either had to get to work on them immediately, or—well, we saw what he did. If they just sat on his kitchen table—even for just a few minutes while he watched TV, or heated up a pizza—they would be crying out to him, as if from their grave—but he had, in his fashion, resurrected them—their grave was the ground where he had found them while fitness walking—his new preoccupation. His kitchen table, where they lay for that tiny moment was a kind of heaven—if they were sentient, which he doubted, but still, didn't Dostoevsky write about how respecting even inanimate objects made the universe a better place? But no, he couldn't have them just lying there for any length of time. It would be like the telltale heart. But why did I come into my bathroom, he asked himself suddenly, coming back to the moment. This floor is filthy! I need a mop. I don't have one. I'll get me one. He went to the store and bought a mop and a small mop bucket. He went home and went to work on his bathroom tile. I can't let it get that way again, he decreed. I'll stand right here, holding onto this mop. If anyone comes in, I'll clean up after them immediately. He stood like a mindless mannequin for several hours. Then when his body finally told him he was sleepy, he realized, I live alone. He went back to his living area and lay down in bed. As he drifted off, he realized fitness walking wasn't a career. He would go apply for a job at the library in the morning. Some retirement! He chuckled himself quietly to sleep.

## THE NEW HONEY

The two dipsomaniacs walked into the liquor store. They walked up and down the refrigerated isle of beers of all varieties. "This kind," one of them said.

"That's the shittiest kind, Don, come on," said the other.

"He's right." It was the liquor store manager.

"We're not interested in what you think," said Don.

"Let's just get it, then. I'm thirsty."

The two friends walked out of the liquor store with the shittiest kind of beer they could find. They went back to Don's place and got drunk. The next day it was Sunday. When they woke up in the morning, Frank, Don's buddy, suggested they go to church.

"Why not? I've tried just about everything else."

"Including the shittiest beer in town."

The two men smiled.

It was the church on the hill above the park that they went to that morning. They sat in a pew near the back and prepared to hear the preaching.

"Today's text," began the pastor, "is found in John's Gospel, the second chapter. Verse nine says, 'When the master of ceremonies tasted the water that was now wine, not knowing where it had come from (though, of course, the servants knew), he called the bridegroom over.' And verse ten goes, 'A host always serves the best wine first,'" he said. "'Then, when everyone has had a lot to drink, he brings out the less expensive wine. But you have kept the best until now!'"



"I knew there was a reason that beer tasted so good last night!" Don whispered to Frank.

"What are you talking about?" Frank said.

Don put his finger to his lips, looked around him surreptitiously, grabbed Frank gently by the elbow, got up, and led him quietly out of the church.

"The liquor store manager!" Don said.

"What about him?"

"He's Christ!"

A week later, after Don had been in the mental hospital for a couple days, the psychiatrist was preparing his discharge papers.

"And you're no longer convinced that the liquor store manager is Jesus."

"No," said Don.

The psychiatrist nodded and made a mark with his pen.

"Can I ask you something, doc?"

"Sure," said the psychiatrist.

"What do you think happened?"

"I have something to tell you," the doctor said.

"What is it?"

"Psychiatry is my second career."

"Oh, really? What was your first?"

"I was a librarian for fifteen years."

"Why'd you switch?"

"Normally when people ask me that I say it was the money."

"But it wasn't."

"No. It wasn't."

"Then, what?"

"Growing up, nobody tells you to read pap."

"No."

"Growing up, you hear about all the great writers of the centuries."

"You do."

"What happens when you've read everything?"

Don and the psychiatrist looked at each other for a long time.

"I can tell you what happened to me. You begin to prefer nameless juvenile bloggers to Hemmingway."

"I see."

UNREMEMBERED MEALS

“That beer, Don. It was no good. It was just different.”

“You know what the first thing I’m going to do is when Frank picks me up in an hour?”

“What’s that?”

“Go to a coffee shop.”



## DIVINELY MYOPIC

We saw some kites. They appeared to be quite far away. We got in our jeep and tried to find the person or persons who were flying them. Then one of our tires went flat.

“Damn,” said Joni, the driver.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Must have been that log we drove over,” she said.

“What must have been?” said Teddy, my brother.

Joni was already out of the vehicle and was examining the tire.

“Okay, hold it right there,” said a voice from the foliage. A man appeared from behind a tree. He was pointing a gun at us.

“You joker,” I said. Then I karate chopped the weapon out of his hand and kicked him in the head. He fell over and was silent. He was either dead or unconscious.

“Thou fool,” said Teddy, and he went over to the man and resuscitated him.

“You know, Ted, you’re not Jesus,” I said, a little bit because I was embarrassed, but mostly because I hated religion, which should, really, have nothing to do with our situation.

“Have you eaten anything lately, guys?” was the first thing out of his mouth.

“Why, no,” said Joni. “I am a little hungry.”

Teddy said to me, “Stacy, go find us some berries.”

I would have said, "Why me?" but then I told myself to grow up. I left our scene and went hunting for something edible.

"What are you guys doing out here in the forest?" asked the man.

"Don't you know?"

The man shook his head. "Should I?"

"Well, you did try to kill us," said Joni.

"I did?"

"He's got amnesia," said Teddy.

"Or else he's acting," I said, appearing out of the bushes, and I threw a handful of the raspberries I had found on the ground in front of the stranger.

"What do you have against me, lady?" said the man.

"I'm just trying to do my part as the only realist in our little group."

"We were searching for a suitable place to bury our friend," said Joni.

"Oh?"

"Yes. He died two days ago back in the city. He loved to come camping in these parts and we thought we should make this his final resting place."

"Thoughtful."

There was a silence.

"Then why would I have wanted to kill you guys, just for trying to honor your friend?" the man said.

I picked up the gun he had wielded at us and pointed it now at him.

"Our friend was a preacher," said Joni.

"I'm not an antichrist," the man said.

"Aren't you?" I said. I turned around and shot Joni through the chest.

Teddy looked up horrified. "Why, Stacy?"

I shot him, too.

"Let's go, Stan," I said to the man, who quickly got to his feet and jumped into the Jeep next to me. Only then did I remember the flat.

"Damn," I said.

"What is it?" said Stan.

"There's a flat," I told him.

"Where were you guys going? I told you to keep the group in this clearing until I could get some shots off."

"What does it matter? They're dead. We got what we wanted."

"What if there hadn't been a flat? Where would that have left me?"

"I would have done the job. I would have made sure they died some other way," I said. Then I got out of the jeep. "They're still there."

"What are?" Stan asked.

I pointed towards the horizon. "They wanted to catch those kite flyers."

"Why?"

"Maybe they like kites. How should I know," I said, getting upset.

"Come on," Stan said. He started walking. I reluctantly followed.

Meanwhile, on the other end of the same forest, a scientist who was also a believer was greeted by an angel. He didn't know it was an angel, for the angel was dressed like a businessman.

"Friend."

Stephen, the scientist, looked up from his campfire.

"Who are you?"

"Take these," the angel said, handing Stephen some more raspberries; the forest was plentiful with them.

The scientist accepted them.

"Now, throw them in the fire," the angel instructed. Stephen did so. There was a loud crackle. Then the fire went out. In the ashes, the raspberries had turned into some kind of adamant cubes.

"Take the cubes and come with me." Stephen did so.

"Hey, friend," said the angel when he and Stephen had reached a forest ranger's outpost. There was a forest ranger there servicing a helicopter.

"Can I help you?" he said.

"Yes, you can. Take us up in your chopper. We are about some important business."

God hardened the forest ranger's heart.

"Why should I?" he said.

"You're not about important business?" the angel asked.

God softened the forest ranger's heart.

"Hop in!"

As they boarded the helicopter, the angel said, "You won't understand why, but I have to blindfold you both. That doesn't mean you still can't do this, for you have the Spirit."

Presently, the three of them were in the air.

"Sir," said Stephen. "Are you a Man of God?"

The angel didn't respond. "Take us over towards those giant Polaroid prints," he said instead.

"What?" said the forest ranger. "You mean those kites?"

"Those aren't kites."

Once they were hovering over the things that weren't kites, the angel told Stephen to take the cubes (which were actually "sacred helium squares," he said) and fasten them to the giant Polaroid prints. Stephen obeyed.

Meanwhile, in another section of the forest, a man was sharpening his knife. He, too, was approached by an angel.

"The universe needs your knife," he said.

The man looked up. "Come again?"

"There are some ropes tied to a boulder. Cut these ropes." The angel turned and started walking farther into the forest. The man and his knife followed.

"If not kites, what are those things?" Stephen asked the angel when they had landed the helicopter back at the forest ranger's outpost. Their blindfolds were now taken off.

"They are Polaroid prints taken by the apostle Paul of Jesus," said the angel.

There was a silence.

"There was a worship service being held in heaven," the angel said. "Paul had taken a few pictures of Jesus singing. These pictures eventually were enlarged somewhat and put in Peter's Polaroid album. One day, Peter was flipping through this album and the pictures fell out and fell through heaven and space and the earth's atmosphere and landed in this forest. God didn't want anyone to see them. So, before anyone could lay their eyes on them, [now they understood why they had been blindfolded] he sent one of us (another angel) to a man who was hanging a hammock with some rope. He took the rope while the man had left his hammock to go fishing in a nearby creek. He found the Polaroid prints high up in the branches of a birch tree and tied them to the ropes and tied the ropes to a boulder and they started to soar like kites."

"Hey, look!" shouted the forest ranger, pointing into the sky.

"The Polaroid prints are flying away!" said Stephen.

"Thanks to your deft hands with the helium squares, your skillful helicop-

ter piloting, and the sharpness of another man's knife as he cut through the ropes, they are returning to where they belong so that, still, none of you will reach perfection without them."

"Them?" said Stephen. He thought he heard some thunder.

But it wasn't cloudy.





## A MORE INTELLECTUAL RESURRECTION

I dropped some dung on the bathroom sink  
I dropped an anti-psychotic on this dung  
Then I took this pill and didn't even think  
I didn't hear any warning bells being rung  
It went into my stomach and just did its thing  
Then I was so worried by what went into me  
I didn't have the strength to sing  
Because I wasn't merry or afflicted  
I could only get up and make a ring  
Of the dung  
Of the pills  
Of my bills  
Set them on fire and dance a lot  
I went up and down and all around  
I danced some more  
Like I said  
I couldn't even pray  
Someone told me to stay  
Right there  
Don't move  
Was it my fridge come to life?  
More likely the books on my bed

ERIC BECK

The Israelites fled  
Now I'm dead  
Since I couldn't wait for the ward, the sun, or the board  
To accuse, tell, or  
Oh hell,  
Or heaven for that matter  
Anyways  
Too many ways  
To spend this my last breath  
Just give me a minor thrill  
Too late

## IN OTHER WORDS

The woman threw the baseball high up into the air. A moment later, when it came down, she hit it with her pool cue. The baseball went flying. The mosquito inside it piloted it out of the planet's atmosphere and it was on its way to Pluto.

This was how space travel happened on Mars: no elaborate take off, no dramatic countdown, no fire and smoke, just a good whack by a very strong female, whose name was Rahab. And of course, with the mosquito being a highly evolved mosquito, and the baseball actually being a diminutive rocket, it didn't take long for this baseball to do its own thing. So here he was, George (that's the mosquito's name), in deep space, with his CD player playing. What was it playing? The Violent Femmes.

And now Rahab put her pool cue down and...why did she use a pool cue, you wonder? She was mathematically the best pool player in the history of the universe; why wouldn't she stick to what she knew? And realistically, a baseball bat probably wouldn't have had any advantages. Not for someone with biceps like Rahab's.

She put down her pool cue and bit into her sandwich.

"I hope George knows what he's doing," she commented to her boyfriend.

"George is one of the most experienced baseball pilots on Mars."

"Of that I'm confident. I just don't know if he can make it past Jupiter with that stuff playing."

"He insisted on bringing the entire Violent Femmes discography with him."

"I know. And they're a great band. But the Junkmen of Loomzo don't think so."

"The Junkmen of Loomzo?"

"Yeah, they loiter out in different places throughout the Milky Way; if their equipment picks up a band they don't like... Let's just say they become more than just a little bit annoyed."

"The music snobs!" Rahab's boyfriend spat.

"Let's not worry about that now. Come on, I'll race you to town."

---

Rahab and her boyfriend, a guy named Pete, who was also a member of the Martian Space Force, started running. They had been by themselves in a derelict baseball diamond not too far from one of the two settlements still existing on their humble planet.

When they got to town (Rahab was the victor in their little contest), they entered a bar. Sitting over their drinks, Pete said, "Funny I wouldn't have heard about these Junkmen. I'm high up in the Space Force, after all."

"Oh, don't worry about it."

"But is George in danger?"

"Not of his life, at least."

"But what could happen?"

Rahab stared down into her stein. She looked up at Pete. "I don't know." They finished their drinks in silence.

---

It was the night before. George was getting his things together. He lived high up in one of the few trees that now grew on Mars. He had a tiny little house. Everything in his tiny house was tiny. Including his Violent Femmes CDs. He put them in his satchel. He wasn't sure what he'd find on Pluto; nobody did; that's why they were sending him. It would be an adventure. He went to bed.

In the morning, he heard Rahab yelling.

"Wake up, George!"

George picked up his satchel and flew down to where Rahab and Pete

were waiting. Rahab had the baseball/spaceship in her hands. George crawled into it. They walked to the park.

After Rahab had used her pool cue, and he was on his way, George put in *New Times*. As he was singing along to “I’m Nothing,” he took a direct hit from a laser gun. He whirled around in the baseball cockpit. “Where did that come from?” he said with growing concern.

Then he saw it. A huge spacecraft was about to swallow George and his ship. He closed his eyes. Then he said a prayer.

“But I’ve just got to go, don’t you see that?”

“No, I don’t, quite frankly.”

“Pete. I’m a pool player. This is what I do.”

“What about George?”

“George would want me to go.”

“Would he?”

“Yes!”

Rahab had gotten an invitation to participate in a Galactic Pool tournament. Pete thought she should wait to see George’s safe return. First things first, was his philosophy. Especially since she was aware of the Junkmen. Maybe she could –

“Pete! Rahab!” another member of the Space Force burst onto the scene.

“What is it, Dave?”

“George has been...”

“What’s happened to George?”

Dave caught his breath. He said heavily, “Come with me.”

Pete and Rahab followed Dave out of their house and to the Space Force headquarters. Where they learned of George’s fate.

“Can anything still be done? I mean...is he still alive?”

“We have no reason to conclude that George is dead. Best case scenario, he doesn’t make it to Pluto. The mission will have to be—”

“To hell with the mission.”

“No, George won’t die,” Rahab said.

“You’ve been so sure of that since the beginning. Why?”

“Because George can’t die.”

“What?”

“George is immortal.”

Presently, George put in *Freak Magnet*. As he was rocking out, he peered out his window.

“Where am I?” he said to himself.

“Shut that crap off!” came a booming voice.

George pushed pause on his CD player and got out of the baseball. He was in what must be the garbage room of this very mysterious spacecraft. It smelled awful. He walked past the copious dumpsters to a door. The door opened when he touched the handle. Inside was a spacious lounge. There were a couple of sofas. Both red. There was a book shelf. There was a bar. There was a record player. George walked towards this. There was a table with some records. All of them Rush albums.

“What gives?” George whispered to himself.

“Does something have to give?”

George whirled around. There was a man standing in the lounge.

“You were going to Pluto, am I right?” said the man.

“That’s right. Who are you?”

“My name is Dumbass.”

“Well, Dumbass, what do you want?”

“That is the question I was hoping for.”

They looked at each other for a moment.

“I want you to put all your Violent Femmes CDs in one of those dumpster out there and then—”

“Screw you, Dumbass!”

George ran back to the baseball. He tried to fire up the engine. It wouldn’t start. Just then, George remembered his pistol. He got it from beneath his seat and walked back towards the lounge. He found Dumbass relaxing on a sofa.

Georg said, “Okay, dude, enough of this cryptic nonsense. What do you want?”

“I was being the antithesis of cryptic. If you had let me finish—”

“Wrong answer.” George shot the man dead. Then George turned his mind back to the baseball. He spent several hours working with the wiring and

other parts of the tiny ship. But it still wouldn't start. George walked back to the lounge. He decided all he could do now was take a nap.

---

It had been several weeks since George and the baseball had been sucked into the Junkmen's garbage room. During that time, several attempts had been made by the Martian Space Force to communicate with their top pilot, none of them successful. Then the Junkmen's ship had left the galaxy and was now out of range of the major satellites. Rahab had decided to participate in the pool tournament, which was on Earth. She won first prize. After the last eight ball fell in the pocket, she decided to explore her old country, which had been Finland. Then she flew back to Mars to rejoin Pete.

Meanwhile, George was working on his Rush exegesis. Which he was able to do in a surprisingly easy way; after Dumbass was dead, he hadn't met anyone else; he was left alone and so had started playing the records; the time went by; he learned to like what he was listening to (uninterrupted); eventually, he started a journal.

"Will I ever be able to publish this?" he wondered.

Presently he was listening to "High Water," from *Hold Your Fire*.

"Almost makes me want to become a Darwinist," he wrote in his journal. "If evolution ever needed a hymn, this would be the best one," he continued.

He heard Geddy Lee sing, "Something swam through the jungles/where the might rivers roam."

George wiped away a tear.

A man burst into the lounge. "Alright you little insect, let's go." The man was holding a glass jar. He forced George into it and put the top on. He carried the jar to the airlock and threw George into deep space. "Have fun," said the man, smiling sardonically. He went to the lounge and put on *Test for Echo*.

---

Fifty trillion years later, the glass jar and George finally landed on a planet. Since George was immortal, he had been bored but he hadn't aged a day. A young boy on this planet found the glass jar in a field. He took it home to his parents.



“George? Is that you?” said the mother.

“Rahab?”

“Yes, it’s Rahab! I can’t believe this. Pete, Jimmy found George!”

“George who?”

“What do you mean, George who? George!”

“So you guys finally tied the knot, hey?”

“We did. Hey, Pete, we should tell the Lord.”

“The Lord?” George said.

“Yeah. The Lord.”

“So the Kingdom finally came.”

“Oh, yeah. A long time ago.”

“I thought there wasn’t supposed to be any more time.”

“There isn’t. But there is still English.”

George found a home in Rahab’s and Pete’s and Jimmy’s eternity. And finally he could work on his Bachelor’s Degree. He majored in Russian. This afternoon he was attending Professor Dostoevsky’s class on science fiction. He found it exciting.

Was this?

## DIAGNOSED

James had lived with his stepfather for close to two years. It was just he and him in the medium-sized house on the highway at the edge of the forest. Today, Dan, the stepfather, was going to work. But he had a chore for James while he was going to be away.

“James?” Dan said from the kitchen doorway.

“Yes?” said James, appearing from the living room.

“I want you to get started on the firewood. Go to the garage and get the handsaw. Do you remember where we walked to yesterday?”

James nodded.

“I want you to at least get started on one of those trees. When I get home from work, I’ll come out and see your progress. Don’t worry if you can’t get a whole tree down. I’ll give you a hand when I get home.”

“Yes, sir,” said James.

Dan ruffled his stepson’s bushy hair. He left for his job.

James went to the garage and found his tool. He remembered doing this last fall, before the snow fell. Only this year, the trees were...different. But it was supposed to be another rough winter. So he knew the importance of his assignment. He started walking out to that bit of the forest where his stepdad had taken him last night. They had made a campfire and enjoyed some meat. Then Dan had pointed to a group of trees. Those were the ones. Presently, James was there again. He walked up to a tree and, with a back and forth motion, started sawing. This tree had neon purple bark. That’s how he knew he

was working on the right one. After a quarter hour of exertion, he had made only an incidental wound in the trunk. He sat down to rest.

There were about a dozen trees in this little area of the woods that had the unusual color. His stepdad had told him about them last night while they enjoyed their hamburgers. James had always wondered about them since he first came to live with Dan. But he had never asked about them. Finally, the night before, his stepdad volunteered the information. He said that he had planted them himself when he was a boy. He had ordered some scientifically altered acorns off the internet. When they came via currier, his mother asked him, "What are these?"

"My meds."

His mother was satisfied.

Dan took them out back and put them in the ground. Very slowly, they began to grow.

When Dan was a teenager, his mother and father were killed in a plane crash. His aunt came and was his guardian until he came of age. Then the house became his. He met James's divorced mother at a bar. They were married. James and his mother moved in with Dan. A month later, Dan killed his new wife.

---

"What are you doing?" said Dan.

James awoke with a start. "I'm sorry. I must have fallen asleep."

Dan examined the tree. "Give me that saw," he said.

James handed over the saw and his stepdad went to work. James stepped back and was an observer. After a few minutes, Dan paused to rest. "Come over here and do this." James relieved his stepdad and Dan walked back to the house. He didn't come back. So James worked on the tree in spurts until it was quite dark. Then he also walked back to the house. He found Dan sitting in a chair. He had a bottle of vodka on the table next to him.

"Dad, you shouldn't be—"

"Shouldn't be what?"

"Because of your—"

"Go to bed. I'm off tomorrow. Together I think we can get down a couple of those trees. See you in the morning." Dan took a drink. James went to sleep.

The next day, the duo did indeed fell two trees. They chopped them up into logs and, using a wheelbarrow, brought them into the house and put them in a giant box next to the fireplace. Presently, they were eating dinner.

"You did good today, boy," said Dan.

James, not looking up from his carrots, nodded silently.

"Tomorrow morning, I'll go into town to buy another saw. We can double our efficiency."

James continued to stare down at his plate.

"Finish your vegetables," Dan said.

James stabbed a green bean with his fork. After dinner, they went to bed.

The next day, with the extra tool, they were able to cut down three trees. The giant box was filling up nicely. When winter came, they wouldn't be cold.

That evening, Dan said, "I work again, tomorrow. Why don't you take the day off; don't work on the trees. Rest."

"That'll be great, Dad."

In the morning, when James awoke, he walked into the living room. Next to his dad's chair, there was a small mountain of empty beer bottles on the floor. He looked at the clock. Then he raced up the stairs and shouted at his father to get up. He was going to be late for work.

"Ah, screw work," he mumbled, and rolled over in bed.

James didn't know what to do. He just knew he needed to get out of the house. So instead of resting, like he thought he was going to do, he grabbed a saw and ran out into the forest. As he massacred the tree like a demon, the tears wouldn't stop. When night came, he walked back to the house. He silently walked up the stairs and entered his bedroom. He slept. Later, he awoke. It was still dark outside. But he heard a noise. It sounded like a wild animal was trying to claw its way into the house from downstairs somewhere. James got out of bed to check it out. As the noise got louder, he realized it must be coming from inside the kitchen closet. He opened the door. He saw his stepdad: he was in the corner on the floor.

"Dad? What's going on?"

"These cobwebs are delicious! Have some!"

Dan turned around. James realized he was eating the cobwebs. He also appeared to be digging a hole beneath the floorboards. "I'm laying these spiders to rest. Would you say a few words?"

"Our Father in heaven—"

"Yes, Lord!" Dan yelled.

"Receive these meek insects safely into your kingdom."

"Yes, Lord! Amen!"

Then James turned and ran upstairs. He sobbed himself back to sleep.

The next morning, the light was streaming into his bedroom, bright and peaceful. He walked downstairs. His father was in the living room, apparently in his right mind. Was this a kind of sanity-hangover?

"I'm going into town," Dan said. "I'll be back in a little while." He left.

James quickly ran out the backdoor and through the forest. He was headed for Mrs. Carlson's, their nearest neighbor. When he got there, she answered the door.

"Oh, James! So nice to see you! How are you and your father?"

"Not so good."

Mrs. Carlson's face suddenly turned stony serious. She looked past James, into the forest, as if she were trying to see all the way to infinity. She nodded gravely and hoarsely told James to come inside. She shut the door.

Mrs. Carlson had lived in her house for sixty years. She knew all about Dan's history. And she had an idea of what must be up.

"Is he finally tying to harvest those trees?"

"Yes, we're cutting down those neon purple trees, but, Mrs. Carlson, please listen, there's something more, he's—"

"Undoubtedly there's something more. But those trees are enough to worry me."

"What's with those trees? My dad said he ordered these strange acorns or something, and now—"

"Is he home right now?"

"No, he went into town. But he said he'd be back shortly."

"Then we don't have much time. Come with me."

Mrs. Carlson led James out her backdoor and together they headed even farther into the forest. Eventually they came to a little hut. James had never seen this hut before. They entered. There was a man in there, an old man,

who was wearing a certain piece of jewelry around his neck. He was playing some kind of videogame on his computer. He turned to greet his visitors.

"Ah, Mrs. Carlson! And James, too!"

James wondered how he knew his name, but the strangeness of the situation wouldn't let his mouth open.

"I was just about to beat this game, but when I do..." James followed the old man's eyes down to where a strange kind of electronic device was attached to his computer. "But when I do," he continued, "more multicolored trees for the forest."

Mrs. Carlson didn't seem nonplussed. But James certainly was.

"Watch this," said the old man. He turned back to his computer game, made a few quick deciding moves with his controller, and a small batch of acorns fell out of the strange electronic device.

"I've been playing that game for twenty-five years. Finally, I can move on."

"Pete, James's father—"

Pete, the old man, looked sternly at Mrs. Carlson. "What's happened?" he said, almost angrily.

"You've got to come and help him, or at the very least—"

"Did you send my dad those acorns?" James could now speak.

"Yes, I did. After I beat my first videogame."

"Pete, please!" said Mrs. Carlson.

Pete, with sudden alacrity, darted out of his hut. James and Mrs. Carlson followed.

When they reached James's house, Dan was on the back porch. He was kneeling down and washing his hands in a bowl full of his own urine. Pete approached him and guided him back into the house. Mrs. Carlson and James waited outside. Presently, Pete returned. Alone.

"What's wrong with him, sir?"

"Your stepdad is..."

"Yes?"

"James, I'm afraid your stepdad is...well, he's crazy."

"He's crazy?"

Pete was silently somber.

James said, "I could have told you that. And I'm not even a priest!"

Pete frowned. Mrs. Carlson wailed. James grew up and became a plumber.

The mystery of the neon purple trees remained a mystery. Until some hot pink trees started to grow. But by then, there was a psychiatrist working in town. He came out to the woods and told the adult James that the trees were “unhealthy.”

## PEACE AND SAFETY

“Are you going to hell?” said the little red bunny rabbit.

“I don’t understand the question,” said the chrome beverage holder.

“Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ?”

“Yes.”

“There we have it,” the computer scientist said to himself, shutting down his program. He got up and went outside for a smoke. Someone was walking down the sidewalk towards him. This someone approached him and said, “Which way to hell?”

“The actual hell or the practice one?”

“The practice one, of course. Nobody knows where the actual one is.”

“I thought it was in the heart of the earth.”

“Whatever,” said the person and continued down the sidewalk.

“Wait!” said the computer scientist.

The person turned around. She was very attractive.

“Do you want to get some coffee?”

The person smiled.

---

“So why are you going to the practice hell?” said Justin, the computer scientist, when their lattes arrived at the table.

“The usual reason,” said Maureen, the attractive person.



It was late in the 25<sup>th</sup> century and Jesus was still tarrying, which got a lot of people searching for an antidote. They knew the kingdom was at hand. They still had the Bible. They just were a little confused. Which was nothing new, of course, except that now everyone on Earth, according to a global survey, was a born again Christian. So what was the hold up? No one could say. That was why people started practicing for hell. Eli Brightstone, the founder of this movement, first started to practice for hell by grabbing hold of his oven rack while it was 400 degrees. He was taken to the hospital. When they asked him why he did it, he said, "If I get myself used to a little heat for a short time, maybe the real heat will be less severe in eternity." Now there was a practice hell in almost every major city on Earth. People could go there and get thrown into a virtual fire. While Eli Brightstone's initial antidote was a very real burn, he didn't want everybody to end up in the hospital like he had, he didn't want everyone to lose a hand like he had. But he still wanted the sensation. He made this happen thanks to a lot of hard work by a lot of brilliant computer scientists, one of whom was presently falling in love.

"You know," Justin was saying, "I think we might be wrong."

"Who is wrong? Wrong about what?" Maureen said, taking a sip of her coffee.

"Anyone can say they are a born again Christian."

"You're talking about the global survey."

Justin nodded.

"But you're forgetting something."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you must be, because it wasn't just a check here if you're born again-type thing. Everyone has been heard saying aloud that 'Jesus is the Lord.'"

"And how is that different from what I just said?"

"No one can say that Jesus is the Lord except by the Holy Ghost."

"I know that scripture as well."

"And you still think the survey was wrong?"

"You still have to believe it in your heart."

"But out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks, or however it goes."

Justin was getting frustrated. "It's down this block," he said. "Take a left. You can't miss it."

“Just like that?” Maureen said. Suddenly she wasn’t sure she still wanted to go to the practice hell. She was enjoying herself. She hadn’t had a conversation like this in some time.

Suddenly, Justin brightened. “I want to show you something,” he said. He took Maureen’s hand and together, leaving their lattes behind, they walked to Justin’s apartment.

“I was just fooling around with this program this morning,” he said, clearing a way through the clutter so that Maureen could sit down next to him at his computer.

“Say, you’re not Justin Isaacs? The famous scientist?”

Justin brought up the page he wanted on the screen. Looking intently at his face, Maureen said, “You are! I can’t believe this!”

As his program was loading, Justin said, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“What’s the longest you’ve ever stayed in a practice hell?”

Because one could choose. When you got to the place, the technician would ask you how long you wanted to be in the virtual flames. Most people stayed only for a few moments. Others stayed longer. For days on end. It was amazing that anyone would want to go back, once their first time was over. But because of the way the world was now, almost everybody did.

“I’ve never been to the practice hell,” Maureen admitted.

“What?” Justin said incredulously, turning to face her.

“But how does one define hell?” she said.

Justin got her point. “Or heaven, for that matter. Have you tasted the chocolate malts at the new restaurant downtown?”

“Let’s have intercourse,” she said.

“What?!” Justin said, shocked, rising and backing up against the wall.

“Oh, Justin, I’m sorry,” she said.

“I’ve got a better idea,” he said.

“What?”

“Let’s go preach Christ.”

“Why?”

“You’re right.”

“What do you think Eli Brightstone was doing? You should know this; you helped build the place after all.”

Just then, Justin remembered the program he had been working on. He had been ready to show it to her before her lustful advance. "I've got to show you this," he said, getting back to his computer.

On the screen there was a rabbit and a drink holder. They started talking to each other. When they got to the end of the their conversation, Maureen said, "Now have them go out for coffee."

"I was thinking they'd—"

Maureen was smiling. Justin saw that she had been joking.

And just then, an ape in a zoo, watching Maureen and Justin on its computer, turned to the Bible for the first time. It read a few pages. It felt like it was understanding it. It turned and shouted something to the zookeeper.

And just before all hell could break loose, the ape took a lick of its ice cream cone.

## MY REFRIGERATOR MY SPOUSE

If “ice is civilization,” as Ali Fox says, I must not be married. Wouldn’t I have remembered a wedding where the bride was a kitchen appliance? Let every man have his own wife and let every woman have her own husband. Don’t I remember reading that? But if Ali Fox went to the jungle leaving the Bible behind with his wife’s dirty dishes, does that mean the closest one can get to a biblical rewrite is let every man have his own fridge? If civilization is “all about sex,” as David Byrne sings, let me just sneak off now and get myself a piece of cheese. My fridge is full of them. If, again as David Byrne sings, civilization is “all about knives and forks,” let me have a girl over. When we’re finished with our dinner, and she’s gone home, I’ll open my fridge and take out a Hamm’s.

But what I really wanted to share with you is something that up until now, only my refrigerator has heard me think. Because my fridge has telepathic powers. How else would it know not to break down and let my milk go bad right when I needed it most, which was when I took a bite out of some jalapeno pizza. My mouth sufficiently cooled off, I can get around to sharing. Sharing what? You must not be my fridge. But we’ve already established that. Yes, I was thinking, the Lord’s Prayer is certainly great! But everybody knows that. But not everyone is married.

But what I really truly wanted to share with you, my refrigerator notwithstanding, is that for the past decade, I’ve been living as a reprobate. It all started after I flicked off my fridge, went down on my knees, and said, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” Then I got up and flew to South America where I lived

as a drug lord. I never thought about God; if I ever uttered a spiritual word it was either accidentally or mockingly. I even thought I might meet Ali Fox down there. Not the one from the novel, but the flesh and blood one. You see, this was all back in the '80s when Harrison Ford was down there filming *The Mosquito Coast*. But I never did.

Then one day, after I had personally shot to death some underperforming coolies, I saw, out of the corner of my eye, as it was, the refrigerator I was using. Something in me snapped. I flew back to the apartment I had kept in the States. The fridge there was still running! I got down on my knees and said, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." And he was. After all, as has been observed, the name of God is mercy. But this time I didn't fly to South America, I didn't become a drug lord. Instead I worked hard every day so I could bring home food to put in my fridge. And, once daily, along with my anti-psychotic, I said, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen." And because I didn't want to overdose on my anti-psychotic, I didn't want to say that prayer more than once a day. But once a day I do say it, and that has kept me sane so far. I just have to keep my fridge well stocked. In other words, I have to keep the faith.

## A BUDDY STORY

"I don't really know where I am. Except that it's some kind of diner. You got to help me. See you, Frank," Jim said into his cell phone. He put it back in his jacket pocket and looked down at the plate of food on the table in front of him. It was half eaten. He looked around at the other patrons. He saw a couple having an argument. He also saw a group of teenagers laughing it up. He put his head in his hands. He was very confused.

"Excuse me...Jim?"

Jim looked up, startled. There was a man standing next to his table. "Yes?" he said.

"So you are Jim. This must be your ID, then. Did you drop it? I found it on the floor near the restroom." The man handed Jim a driver's license. He saw his picture on it.

"Thank you, sir. Forgive me for being careless."

"It happens. Have a good one."

Jim looked at his ID. He saw an address on it. "That must be where I live." He took one more bite of his salad and left the diner. He got into a cab. He gave the driver his address. Presently he was opening his apartment door. He entered. He had a lot of books. "I never knew I was so erudite," he murmured. He was still very tired so he threw himself onto his sofa. But for some reason, he just couldn't fall asleep. He pushed play on his CD player. The voice of James Earl Jones started to come from his speakers. He was listening to an audio Bible. He lay on his couch for a while longer. He tried to close his eyes,

but he was stuck in his wakefulness. He grew tired of listening to Darth Vader talk about the next life, so he pushed stop on his stereo remote. But the scriptures just kept coming. He thought the remote must be out of batteries. He got up and pushed the stop button on the CD player itself. It didn't stop. "Odd," he said. He turned the volume down. Nothing; the recitation continued. He lay back down on his couch. "This is actually kind of getting on my nerves," he said. He tried again, but still the stop button and the volume knob weren't responding. "Shut up!" Jim screamed.

"...the time is short..." said James Earl Jones.

Jim threw a mug that had been sitting on the coffee table at the CD player. It made a dent in the system, but the voice didn't stop. Jim, now in a rage, got up and picked up his stereo and threw it on the floor. It broke in two. "...the kingdom of heaven is..." He trampled on it with his feet. When that failed to silence the Bible, Jim turned to the speakers. He threw them both out the window. The audio holy book kept filling his apartment with its wisdom. Jim reached for his cell phone. He dialed a number.

"Frank! Where are you, man? Tell me something: can you hear this?" Jim held his phone up in the air. He put it back to his ear. "Well? Yeah, it just won't stop. You got to—" Jim collapsed. He lay there in his apartment, unconscious.

---

"Here's your paper work. Let's see what the nurses wrote," Jim's psychiatrist flipped a page on a report. "'He read the newspaper and talked to other patients.' Sounds like you've been behaving yourself, Jim. I think it's time you were discharged." The next day, Frank picked Jim up from the hospital and drove him home. When the two friends got to his apartment, after he had time to look around a bit, Jim said, "My stereo is different. It's a different brand."

Frank looked at the floor.

"Am I right, Frank? But this one looks better. This holds more discs. Frank?"

"Consider it a welcome home gift," Frank said.

"You didn't have to do that," Jim said.

"It was nothing. Look, Jim, it's great to see you well again. I'm headed to my office now, but maybe we can meet up again this evening?"

“That would be great,” Jim said.

Frank shook his friend’s hand and left him alone in his apartment. Jim sat down at his table. He opened his Bible. He was kind of a religious fellow. He started reading from the gospels. He brushed some tears away; Jesus was comforting him. Jim shut the book and lay down on his couch. He turned on the TV. *Star Wars* was playing. Jim sat straight up on his sofa and listened to Ben Kenobi: “Learn about Christ, Luke.”

“The fuck he say?” Jim said. He turned up the volume.

Ben Kenobi said, “God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

Jim reached for his cell phone. He called Frank.

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The next day, Jim, being back in the mental ward, heard a knock on his door. “Come in,” he said. It was the chaplain. He came in and helped himself to a chair. “Have you heard about the Force?” he said.

Jim stood up and yelled, “Frank! Frank!”

A nurse ran into Jim’s room. “What seems to be the matter?”

“I don’t know,” said the chaplain. “I just sat down and he started screaming.”

The nurse called for some help and they took Jim to a different part of the hospital.

A few weeks later, Jim was out of the hospital and working at a fast food restaurant. He saw a priest come up to the cash register and order a sandwich. “The peace of God be with you,” the priest said to Jim when his food was ready.

“Thank you.” Jim said.

When Jim’s shift was over, he didn’t feel like going back to his apartment, so he went to the movie theatre. He got some popcorn and found a good seat, right up near the front where he liked to be.

“I didn’t know you were a film buff,” said Frank, appearing next to him.

“Who invited you here?”

Then Jim laughed. There was nothing else left for him to do.





## LAMP GIVEAWAYS

He was hosting a party that night. There was supposed to be a couple of dozen people over. But he only had a studio apartment. They would be packed in there like sardines. But he was determined to make it work. When the first guest arrived, the first thing she said was, “So many lamps!”

“Too many?” he said.

“I would say so.”

Charley had about thirty lamps in his apartment. There wasn’t an empty space on any of his tables, end tables, counters, bookshelves, or desks.

“What kind of vehicle do you have?”

“A truck. Why?”

“Perfect,” he said. He started to go around his place. He picked up as many lamps as his two hands could carry. “Grab a couple,” he said as he passed his guest, going out into the hall.

“What’s this all about?” She grabbed two lamps.

In the hall, he said, “Lead me to your truck. We’ve got to get rid of these somehow.”

“Oh, Charley, I didn’t mean you had to—”

“No, you’re right. I have an unhealthy lamp fetish.”

They walked down the stairs and out into the parking lot. They put the lamps they were carrying into the back of Cynthia’s (the first guest’s) truck.

“We’ve got to get more,” said Charley. He headed back to his apartment.

Cynthia caught up with him and she asked him as they walked, "So what's your plan?"

"I don't know. I guess we can bring them to a thrift store or something."  
They were back at the apartment.

"I wonder where everybody else is," Charley said. Then he looked at the clock. "Say, you're quite early."

Cynthia said, "Yeah, I thought there would be more traffic."

"No biggie. Grab some lamps."

Now there were less lamps of course after the duo's first trip to Cynthia's truck, but Charley wanted to get rid of even more. Quickly, in his mind, he decided that four was a good number to get down to. Why did he have so many? Most every time someone asked him what he wanted for his birthday, he would say, because he couldn't think of anything else: "A lamp, please." After five more trips, the two hadn't gotten down to Charley's desired amount of four lamps. As they stood by Cynthia's truck, catching their breath and wiping the sweat off their faces, Charley said, "Ok, let's go." Cynthia got behind the wheel and they were off.

"I know of a place we can bring them. Stay on this road a while," Charley said.

As they drove along, they saw a man sitting on the sidewalk.

"Stop here," Charley said. Cynthia put on the breaks.

"Hey, mister, would you like a lamp?"

"A lamp?"

"Yeah, go ahead and grab one or two from the back of the truck. They're free."

The man grabbed a lamp.

"Thanks a million!" he said.

"You're welcome. Enjoy," said Charley.

Cynthia stepped on the gas.

After they drove another couple blocks, Charley saw something odd in his passenger-side mirror. It appeared as though they were being tailgated by an ice cream truck.

"I hate when people do that," he said.

"Huh?" said Cynthia. She looked in her mirror. "Oh, shit! Grab the wheel!"

“What?!” Charley scooted over to the driver’s side as Cynthia climbed out her door. She crawled into the back of the truck. She picked up a lamp and threw it at the ice cream truck. It shattered its windshield. Cynthia threw another lamp. Now there was gunfire coming from their pursuers. Cynthia picked up and threw in rapid succession every last lamp there was in the truck. Then she crawled back up and sat next to Charley.

“What the hell is going on?!” he shouted.

“That was the FBI,” she said.

“The FBI? Who are you?”

“I can explain. Pull over into this alley.”

Charley did so. He parked the truck and turned expectantly to Cynthia.

“I was born Cynthia Bonnie Halverson. Where I grew up we didn’t have—”

“Wait!” Charley interrupted. He looked at his watch. “I have other guests. I have to get back to them. Good luck with...everything.” He leapt out of the truck and walked the mile back to his apartment. When he got there, he realized the others had let themselves in. He was glad. He entered and everyone shouted hello to him. Now he had a story for them. A story he could tell for many years to come. And he sat down on the couch and turned on a lamp.



## THE MAKING OF LAMP GIVEAWAYS

So I sat in my apartment. In my favorite chair. A chair, by my own admission, that I liked to use for thinking. It was my thinking chair. But I also read in it. I also sipped coffee in it. I just liked that chair. And since my apartment wasn't large, it was one of the only chairs I had. And definitely the only one that wasn't a hard backed kitchen chair. So you can see why I call it my favorite. And so as I sat and thought, I thought, I should get to work on a story. I thought some more. I looked at my lamp. Why not a story about a lamp? Or better yet, copious lamps. So I didn't need some great conjuring up of inventive plots or locations. Just a lamp. Is that being creative, or just desperate? Anyways, I went to work.

Like usual, I took an in medias res approach. I placed a character in his own apartment. What kind of apartment? Why, one just like mine. I wished I could be having a party, so I gave my character a party. Then as I wrote, I realized, there has been no mention of a mental ward or religion. I didn't even want to mention that fact to myself, just like teammates of a player pitching a no-hitter don't mention the no-hitter while the game is going, for fear of a jinx. But I was almost in the fifth inning and no one was being committed or having church on Mars. People may ask themselves, what makes this snack so good? Salt and fat is always the answer. If you ask, what makes my stories interesting? Some religious component or someone with a mental illness seems to always be the answer. As an experiment, I wanted to try to change that with this story. Then I thought I would have to do a lot of rewriting, but I just kept

on typing. I almost concluded that this would have to be a novel if anyone was even going to bother reading it. I kept on typing. But this was a story for my new collection. And luckily for me, because the story was absurd, it could end in any way. So I discarded my novel approach, and like Uncle Ethan in *The Searchers* hollered out, "Put an amen to it!" while they were having a burial service, I had to think of a way to move on. Ethan knew there was more at hand, and so do I. So I just had Charley race back to his apartment with a story he could tell at every party he would ever go to.

I pitched the no-hitter.

Now I can listen to more Rush albums.

Then I'll sit in my thinking chair again, and who knows what I'll think about.

Maybe I'll think about "Lamp Giveaways."

I'll think, I'll write "The Making of Lamp Giveaways."

How about the title, after all? It was inspired by David Letterman's meat giveaways, which he frequently had on his show. But instead of steaks and pork chops, this guy just hands out lamps.

How about the scene with the lamps being used as ammunition. That was where I started to think it would have to be novel. When I was writing it, I was thinking, this is like James Bond. Am I serendipitously writing my way into the creation of an iconic character that can provide a series of lengthy adventures? But that was when I remembered that this was for my short story collection. And that was when I started thinking about Uncle Ethan.

So now maybe I can go put in a certain DVD, and "just as sure as the turning of the earth," I'll find my way back to my writing.

## UNDERESTIMATED CALORIES

Jeff was six years old. He sat in the back of the small church, next to his mother and father. It was a hot summer day. He watched the other worshipers listening to the preacher with pious attention. He quickly got up and started worming his way down the pew.

“Jeff, where are you going?” his mother whispered.

“Let him be, dear,” his father said.

Jeff went outside. He looked around. He saw some other kids climbing a tree. He climbed it himself.

“I’m a monkey!” he told the others, once he had reached the top branch.

“I’m a monkey, too!” said a girl from down below.

“If you’re a monkey, climb up here; monkeys don’t stay on the ground.”

She started to climb the tree. Soon she was standing on the limb next to Jeff. Together, they laughed.

“Hey,” said Jeff, “what’s this?” He had discovered a hollow space in the trunk.

“Hey,” said the girl, “I’ve got a crayon and a napkin. Let’s write a message and put it in that hole!”

They did so.

Then the congregation started filing out into the yard; the service was over.



Jeff was thirty-six years old. He sat in his grandmother's kitchen. He examined the newspaper as she prepared their dinner.

"Thought about going back to school?" she said as she placed the mashed potatoes on the table.

"It's a possibility." He turned to the sports section.

Presently, their meal was almost over.

"Finish those carrots," his grandmother said.

"Oh, I couldn't; I'm stuffed."

"There's only two left. Don't let them go to waste."

Jeff ate the two carrots.

---

Jeff was sixty-six years old. Today was his first day of retirement. He had worked at a craft store for a long time. Now he was planning a road trip.

"I've always wanted to go to this national park," he told his dog, as he looked over some travel brochures.

Jeff decided that that was where he was going. He and his dog got in his Volvo and he started driving. After many miles, Jeff was hungry. He stopped at a casual restaurant. He ate his lunch happily. He took his leftovers with him. Outside on the curb, a homeless man said, "Could you spare anything?"

Jeff said, "Sure," and handed him the bag he was carrying with half a sandwich in it.

"Thanks."

Jeff smiled and nodded.

"Say, friend."

Jeff turned back. "Yes?"

"I notice you're wearing a cross. Do you believe in God?"

"I do."

"Last week I was out here and a couple came out of the restaurant. I asked for some food. The wife gave me a Bible. Before I knew it was a Bible, I said to her, 'What's this?' She said, 'You can't survive on bread alone, but by every word in that book.' They went their way. I opened the Bible. The first thing my eyes landed on were these words: 'If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye

warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?' I was wondering, do you want this?" He held out the Bible to Jeff.

Jeff stuttered.

"Of course. You already have a Bible. What am I thinking?"

"No, that's okay. You keep it. And here. Buy yourself some dinner with this." Jeff handed him some cash.

The man nodded his appreciation. Then he went on, "I wasn't always like this. I taught school for many years. Then I had some marital problems. Without going into a long story, to this day, I'm still waiting for Godot."

"We," said Jeff.

"What?"

"We are waiting for Godot."

"You're alright, Vladimir."

"Let me leave you with this thought: we might be waiting for Godot to come, but that doesn't mean that Jesus is not the Christ."

"I'll think about that," said the homeless man. He turned and walked around the corner of the restaurant. He was carrying Jeff's leftovers and the Bible.

"He's gonna be okay," Jeff said to himself. Then he returned to his car, gave his dog a dog treat from the back seat, and they were back on the road.

---

Jeff was ninety-six years old. He was back at his old church. He sat in the back pew with his oxygen tank. He was very frail. He wore hearing aids and his sight was almost gone. When the service ended, he went out into the yard. He looked at the tree he remembered climbing as a kid. Then he remembered the note he and his companion had left in it. He had often thought about it over the years, but not so much recently. Still, he had never climbed back up to recover it. By now, he couldn't remember the words they had written on the napkin.

"Say, youngster," Jeff said, catching the attention of a small boy.

"Yes, sir?"

"If you climb up that tree, how much do you want to bet that you'll find a secret message?"

“I’ll find it for you!” The boy climbed the tree and came back down with a napkin. He handed it to Jeff. Jeff peered at it with his foggy vision. He couldn’t see the writing. He handed it to the boy.

“What does this say?”

“It doesn’t say anything.” The boy went off to play with some other children.

“Don’t forget to eat your veggies!” Jeff called after him.

## THE HUMAN

There was an explosion in my apartment building this morning. It woke me out of a deep, satisfying slumber. That's not the part that annoyed me. If that had been what annoyed me, I would be the most callous person. But what do you suppose did annoy me? And why was I merely annoyed? Shouldn't I have been frightened? But I haven't told you how big of an explosion it was. Shouldn't I have been traumatized? But I haven't told you the consequences of the explosion. What if no one was hurt?

The next day, someone let a dog into the building. It was a strange dog. And it ended up biting a toddler.

So the explosion wasn't that extensive. A dog was able to get into the building. None of its foundations or load bearing walls were effected. The mail didn't stop for even one day, so...well, let's just say, it didn't get on the world news.

It didn't even get on the local news.

The explosion took place in the laundry room.

It just crippled a dryer.

Yes, it was that contained.

Why write a story about it, then?

Because in that dryer was my work uniform. That was annoying. I called my boss.

"Jerry? This is Ted. You're not going to believe this. Somehow the dryer in my building blew up while my uniform was in it...oh, yes, it's under control...no, no one was hurt, but as you can imagine, my uniform was destroyed.

Do you have a spare one there that I'd be able to change into?...Ok, great... I'll try to get there on time, but I might be a little late...Ok, thanks, Jerry."

As was mentioned, someone coming home to the apartment let a strange dog into the building. It was roaming the lobby when someone's little daughter went to pet it. It bit her finger. She would need stitches.

Now it's been a week since the dryer explosion. It has been blamed on some faulty wiring. Anyways, life goes on. And today, my second novel arrived in the mail. It was a box with twenty-five copies. I eagerly took one of the tomes out, held it in my hands, and glowed with accomplishment. Then I went to work. I worked in a landfill.

"Hey, Ted," said my boss.

"Yes, Jerry?"

"I'm performing my dance routine at the cabaret theatre tomorrow night. Do you want to come?"

"Absolutely!" I said.

That evening, while I was watching TV in my apartment, there was a knock on the door. I opened it.

"Theodore Smith?" said a policeman.

"Yes?"

"We want to take you down to the station for some questioning."

"What's this all about?" I said.

"Come with us."

"Can I at least say goodbye to my python?"

"It won't miss you. Come with us."

When I was at the police station, a man in an expensive-looking suit came up to me and nodded in greeting. He had a red hand. That is, he appeared to have a tattoo that was all red. This solid red tattoo went from the tips of his fingers to his wrist. That is what made his hand red. He also had a purple ear. Same thing with that: a solid purple tattoo. His hair was green. Dyed. His nose was big. Surgery.

"Won't you step into my office," he said to me. I followed him. He sat down. I sat down. We looked at each other for a few moments. Then he smiled and leaned forward on his desk.

"So your boss is going to be at the Capra Theatre tomorrow."

Surprised, I uttered, "He is."

"So am I."

"Do you dance?"

"I do."

"Should be a fabulous evening," I said.

"Of course you know there will be a trophy."

"A trophy?"

"Yes, for the better dance routine."

"Should be a splendid competition," I said.

"Oh, there will be no competition. Or, there will be, but there won't."

"Huh?"

"Because I'm going to have it fixed."

"You can't do that!"

"I can do what I want! I'm the fucking chief of police. Who are you?"

"I'm a published author. And I'm not going to let you get away with this."

I got up and stormed out of the office. I went home. Someone had let a cat into the lobby. I petted it. It bit my finger. I swore at the animal, and then in my rage, I picked it up and brought it to my apartment. I fed it to my python. He seemed to think it tasted good. I sat down in my chair. The TV was still on; I hadn't been able to turn it off before the cops showed up. Shaking in fear, anger, and confusion, I sat up all night in front of the TV. I don't even remember what shows were on; I was that discombobulated. Finally, around 7 A.M., the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Ted. It's Jerry. Something kind of unusual has come up. Could you come down to work a little earlier today?"

I said I'd be right there and hung up. I think I kind of knew what had happened.

---

"Furball! Furball!" Sammie yelled from his back porch. Then he went inside.

"Dad, have you seen Furball?"

"No, I haven't. Can't you find him?"

"Well, yesterday he was laying on the porch all day. But this morning, he's nowhere to be seen."

“He’ll show up.” Sammie’s dad seemed confident. But the fact was that Furball was being digested in Ted’s python’s stomach.

Someone should really let Sammie know. But who?

---

“As you can imagine, with that kind of money, neither of us would have to work at this landfill anymore.”

Jerry had just got done explaining to Ted that late last night, a strange man had come to his house and told him he would get ten million dollars if he purposely did lousy at his dance routine so that the police chief could win the trophy.

“It just sounds too absurd,” Ted said.

Jerry gave a little chuckle. “It really does, doesn’t it.”

“This man who came to your house last night. What did he look like?”

“He had a red hand and a purple ear.”

“Jerry! That’s him!”

“The police chief?”

Ted nodded emphatically.

“Then he must have been referring to himself in the third person.”

“Well, he’s a major scumbag.”

“Obviously. So, what do we do?”

“We do nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Or everything. Depends on how you look at it. You perform your routine like only you can and we humiliate the bastard.”

“But that would mean—”

“Mean what, Jerry?”

“Nothing. You’re right. Come on, we have to clear all those pallets, and then we got to get down to Capra Theatre.”

---

That night, Jerry was amazing. There was much applause after his routine. The thing was, the police chief was also amazing. There was a little louder applause after his routine.

"It's going to be a tight decision," Jerry said to Ted as the two stood in the wings.

"You kidding? You blew him out of the water."

Jerry smiled.

Presently, the ceremony was beginning.

"And tonight," said a woman in a dress, "the trophy goes to...Chief Martin!"  
More applause.

---

Next week, when Ted showed up at the landfill, there was a stranger working there.

"Are you Ted?" this stranger said, holding out his hand.

As they shook, Ted said, "Who're you?"

"My name is Sean. I'm your new boss."

"Where's Jerry?"

"Moved to France. Bought a huge house there. I guess he's retired."

That night, in his apartment, Ted started work on his third novel. The phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Ted!"

"Hello, Jerry."

"Ted, it's not like you think. I didn't throw my routine. Chief Martin was just better than me."

"If you say so."

"I do say so, because it's the truth."

"Then why take the money?"

"Ted, move here with me."

Ted hung up the phone.

Ted worked late at the landfill the next day. When he got back to his apartment, there was a horse in the lobby. Thinking this highly unusual, Ted didn't know what else to do, so he got up on it and rode the horse into the sunset.





## FINDING MY PLACE

“Do you think Uncle Allan will like this, Mommy?”

“Oh, that’s a splendid picture, dear.”

“I drew it all myself, too!”

The family got in the car and drove to the hospital. When they got there, they took the elevator to the fifth floor, the psyche ward. Allan and a large group of his friends had recently been admitted. They had all been behaving bizarrely. Now they were being analyzed. Presently, Allan, sitting on a couch and toying with the string to his hospital gown, saw his niece walk onto the unit.

“Betsy!”

“Uncle Allan! I drew this for you! Do you like it?”

“Amazing! Where’s your mother and father?”

Betsy turned around and Allan looked up. Here came his sister and brother-in-law. They were smiling at him. He did his best to smile back.

They began to chat. A few minutes into the conversation, Allan’s sister said, “You know, that beginner’s accounting course starts this fall. You had expressed some interest. Do you think you still care to give it a try?”

“Possibly.”

“Allan,” said a nurse, “We’re having a group meeting. Do you want to...?”

Allan glanced at his visitors. His brother-in-law said, “We should be on our way.” They left and Allan joined the other patients.

Two weeks later, Allan and all fifteen of his friends were ready to be discharged. As they were walking collectively to the unit's exit door, about half of them broke off and lingered towards one end of the east wing.

"Look at that," one said.

"Yeah, those chairs look comfy," another said.

"Those shelves would be great for our books," said a third.

This segregated group started drifting down the hall. They got to the end and looked around.

"We can use this lounge-type area to set up our ministry." It was the same area they had sat in often during the previous fortnight.

Allan, who had remained with the others, walked back to talk to the renegades.

"What's going on, Pete?" he said.

"You guys should go on. We're staying."

"What are you? A bodhisattva?"

"We're the children of Reuben."

"Then at least see us off in the land of Canaan."

"Where's that?"

"Downstairs. See us off. My sister rented a party bus for us. At least come and see it. Then you can come back here and set up your sheepfolds."

That's what they did. Allan and seven of his friends got on the party bus. As they drove down the street to start their lives, the other seven patients waved to them. Then these turned and shuffled back to the fifth floor, much to the chagrin of the psychiatrists treating them.

In the days that immediately followed, Pete and his friends turned the lounge into kind of a worship center. From there, they ministered to all the new patients coming into the hospital.

"You don't really think I'm crazy, do you, Pete?" asked one.

Shaking his head, Pete said, "The Lord has promised to give us a sound mind." Then he gave him a copy of *Mere Christianity* and told him they'd discuss it at lunch.

Meanwhile, in the outside world, Allan was pursuing accounting. But today, he and his new girlfriend were going to a small Bible group at a church.

As they all took their seats, the leader saw that Allan had his finger on a place towards the beginning of the holy book.

“Are you in Numbers?” he asked him.

“Why, yes I am. That reminds me, I should really be studying. Call me, Lisa.” He kissed his girlfriend and drove to the library at the community college.

He found it very peaceful.



## FROM ONE MEAL TO THE NEXT

In the remote past, that is, the late '90s, I spent a couple days at my brother's apartment in South Saint Paul. We ordered pizza for dinner. The delivery man delivered it and we enjoyed it. Somehow, we passed the rest of the evening, and then it was time to sleep. First thing in the morning, my brother sends me to the fast food restaurant for breakfast. How did we know it was time to eat again? Obviously, our stomachs helped. So did the clock. But for some reason, this event sticks out in my memory. Was I just learning "like humans do" (as David Byrne sings) how to feed myself as an older...I guess I was still a teen then...but who knows? What if we somehow forgot about breakfast? Would we suddenly stop what we were doing or talking about and say, we should really get some food, and then put some of it past our lips like we were just tanks to be filled. Or what if we purposely forsook breakfast like we were Kramer and his companion trying to get the dealership's car as far past empty as they could before they returned it? We know how that episode ended: they ran out of gas and were stranded. Could we get to the point where we were going to pass away if we didn't quickly get some vittles in us? Like Geddy Lee sings, "I do not know of from dust to dust/I live from breathe to breathe," could we live from calorie to calorie? What would that look like, I wonder? Jesus taught us that none of us can add a moment to our lives by taking thought. But does that mean we shouldn't even feed ourselves? I'm standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon—surely I can think, "If I don't step off this ledge, I have a better chance at surviving." But I guess that's why God warns

us not to “tempt Christ.” After all, we couldn’t have even gotten to the edge of the Grand Canyon without God’s care. The Israelites couldn’t even have begun to beg for manna if God didn’t first deliver them from Egypt. I couldn’t have even gotten to the fast food restaurant that morning eons ago if my dad never met my mom. Indeed I wouldn’t be writing this essay if I hadn’t eaten thousands of meals since that stay at my brother’s apartment. If this book had credits, like a movie does, then would I have to, like a movie credits the caterers, thank every baker of every pastry I ate while writing this thing, and every barista, and cook, and grocery store cashier... But there has to be some reason for the humanities, right? Otherwise, we never would have made it past year one, and we would be tillers of the ground only, without ever a thought of the heavens, where Jesus lives. Where he is even now, not to put too fine a point on it, directing his angels as they prepare a “banquet,” to use the scripture’s very word. Not a fabulous painting to look at, or a symphony to hear, or a movie to take in, but a “supper.” But there has to be some room for the Spirit, right? Otherwise, Jesus wouldn’t have warned us not to sin against the Spirit, and we would only be searching for the “meat which perisheth.” But this essay is moot next to the thoroughness of the gospel. “Seek first,” our Lord said, “the kingdom of God,” and you’ll get your meals. Which was why I told the psychiatrist during a stay at the hospital that I didn’t fill out tomorrow’s menu because I expected to be discharged the next day. “There’s wisdom in that,” he admitted. Wisdom—that is what we all need. So please excuse me, I’m going to step away from the computer and fast for a couple seconds...no, really, that’s it, no more words, that’s the end of this essay. Go play some records.

## THESE POWERFUL

Tim called his friend on the phone. “I have diarrhea,” he said.

His friend said, “I don’t really want to hear your disgusting exhumations, Tim.”

“Sorry. Do you want to meet at the coffee shop?”

“Sure. I’ll bring my chessboard.”

Presently, Tim was walking through the door of the local bistro. He saw his friend, Eric, sitting at a table, getting the chess pieces set up.

“Hello,” Tim said, sitting down.

“What’s on your mind?” Eric said.

“Do you really think Judgment Day will only be twenty-four hours long?”

Eric paused in putting the rook in its place, looked up at his friend, then leaned back in his seat, crossed his arms, and waited for Tim to continue.

“I mean, think about it. We’re all of us supposed to give an account of our lives, which includes every idle word we speak, as it says in the gospels. Now think of all the people that have ever lived. How can God get through all of them on just that one Great and Terrible Day?”

“It is puzzling, but—”

“And say you were an unbeliever; you might get up to the great white throne and now knowing your destiny, you might want to prolong this little talk with God by going on and on about why you once used the word hamburger. The others behind you in the queue might get restless and say, ‘Get on with it.’”



Eric said, "I've thought about this myself some."

Tim said, "Oh? What did you conclude, if anything?"

"Well, you've heard about the theory that there are only seven stories in the world."

"I think so."

"I think there are only seven responses that can be given to God on that Day."

"Curious," Tim said. "Go on."

"Of course, since every knee shall bow, I think God can give kind of a silent, knowing look into the eyes of each person and they'll know, both God and the soul, that the Judgment is just."

"Without even bringing up any words or works?"

"Well, I think they'll all be comprehended in this one tacit glance."

"No words, huh?"

"Oh, there'll be words; they'll have to be. But that's why I mentioned the seven responses."

"Yes, what about them? Do you want some coffee?"

"Not now," Eric said. He gently pushed the chessboard aside and folded his hands in front of himself on the table. He looked at his friend.

"I have a list. Here goes. 1: 'I worked hard and made a lot of money.' 2: 'I was married to my spouse for fifty years.' 3: 'I tried to be a rock star but I ended up just living with my mom.' 4: 'I was a rock star.' 5: 'I ate and drank and was merry.' 6: And this is the one William Faulkner will use—'I wrote the books and I died.' Lastly, number 7: And this is the one the Apostle Paul will use—'I fought the good fight, I finished the race, and I remained faithful.'"

Tim was silent for a moment. Then he said, "That definitely is interesting."

Eric said, "Of course, there will be as many slight variances as there are people, but, well, that's my theory. And it's just a theory."

"I have to use the bathroom," Tim said, getting up.

While his friend was gone, Eric brought the chessboard back to the center of the table and thought about his opening move.

Just then, a middle-aged man walked by and slipped a little bit and spilt some coffee on Eric's coat.

"Asshole," Eric said.

## UNREMEMBERED MEALS

The man apologized and went on his way.

Tim returned from the bathroom.

“I think I have to cut back on my dairy,” he said as he sat down. “Is that your first move?”

Tim ended up beating Eric at the chess game four hours later. The two parted and went back to their respective houses.

As Eric got into bed that night, he thought about his words. He wept.



## UNCOMMON GROUND

Her skates were pink. Or, at least, mostly pink; there was a very thin line of blue that went all around the bottom of the things, which she was presently putting on her feet. She noticed that they were somehow muddy. She found a paper towel nearby and went to work scrubbing. Once they were again relatively clean, she ventured out onto the skating rink. It was an ice skating rink. And it was one of her favorite things to do on the weekends. She went there with her mother and her brother. Today, she was determined to beat her brother in the race they had been talking about all week.

“Okay, Luke. Get ready to get your butt kicked.”

“You’re dreaming,” he said back to her.

Now they were at the starting line. They just needed someone to say, “Go.”

“How are we going to make this official, Lisa?” Luke asked.

“Mother!” she shouted.

Their mother appeared at the edge of the rink.

“Watch us, Mother, and tell us who wins!” And Lisa was off.

Luke shouted, “Hey!” and he, too, was off.

They skated around the rink like a couple of Olympians.

Lisa was the victor. But Luke had stopped midway through the contest. He stood in the center of the rink, looking down at something in the ice.

“What is it?” said Lisa.

“I don’t know. Come and take a look for yourself.”

Lisa skated over to her brother. She saw a strange, dirt mound coming up out of the ice, with some roots and pebbles in the mix. Suddenly, it got sucked back under, leaving just a hole. They saw through the hole into some darkness. Luke, daringly, stuck his arm in there.

"Luke, what are you doing?" cried Lisa.

"I don't feel anything; there's nothing down there," he said.

Just then, the ice they were standing on caved in. They shouted in fright. They fell about eight feet and landed on their backs on a floor of wood. They looked around. They were unhurt. Their mother came running out to them. She looked down at her offspring.

The area that had caved in was about the size of a pool table.

"Oh dear, oh dear," cried their mother.

Lisa said, "Mother, go find Mr. Jacobson." Mr. Jacobson was the ice rink manager.

Just then, a small girl came up to them from out of nowhere. She was wearing roller skates.

"Hi, there," the girl said.

"Hello."

"You have nice ice skates."

"You have nice roller skates."

"I got the colors backwards."

Lisa looked at the girl's skates. They looked like hers, only instead of being all pink with a blue stripe, they were all blue with a pink stripe.

Their mother appeared back at the edge of the hole with Mr. Jacobson, who had brought a ladder with him. He lowered it down to them. They climbed back out onto the ice. The girl remained below.

Lisa said, "Won't you join us?"

"I have to get back to my people," she said, and she roller skated away.

"Mr. Jacobson, what is going on?" said Luke.

"I have no idea, my boy."

---

That night, at the dinner table, the family discussed what had happened.

"And Mr. Jacobson didn't know who the girl was?" asked the father.

"No," said Lisa.

She looked down at her shoes. They were muddy.

“How did that happen?”

“We’re all trying to figure that out, dear,” said her mother.

“No, it’s that my shoes are muddy.”

“Why are you wearing them in the house, anyways?”

Just then, the part of the dining room where their father was sitting caved in. Their father fell in, leaving the other family members standing up in horror. This time, it wasn’t a wood floor below. It was a lake of fire. Their father was dead.

---

Dave had just gotten hired at the hotel restaurant. He was working in the dish room, when the floor caved in. He landed in a rocking chair.

“I could get used to this,” he said, when suddenly, the chair, as if it was hooked up with some rockets, propelled Dave forward at an incredible speed. He was traveling in the dark. If he wasn’t so shocked, he would have been aware of the extreme cold. Then, just as suddenly, the chair came to a halt. Dave got out and walked forward. There was a steel wall in front of him. He felt a knob. It was a door knob! Dave turned it. He was in a stair well. It was dimly lit. He ventured up a few flights. He reached a door and went through it. It appeared that he was in a department store. He walked up to someone who he assumed must be a shopper.

“Where am I?” he said.

“This is Jillman’s Department store, downtown.”

Then Dave realized he must have been travelling in an underground grid of some kind until he reached the foundation of one of the big skyscrapers.

“Oh, that’s a nice shirt,” he said, and walked over to a clothes rack.

---

Jared was in the middle of a heated meeting with his colleagues, when the floor caved in. It was like all the other incidents that had been happening throughout the city, except that this heated meeting wasn’t taking place on the ground floor. They were on the 50<sup>th</sup> floor. Yet, they didn’t land on the 49<sup>th</sup> floor. They landed in some mystical country.

“Where are we?” said Jared.

“I have no idea,” said Tom.

“Let’s go check out that building,” said Rebecca. The group, comprised of seven souls, started walking. They got to the building and entered.

“It’s an ice rink!” said Jared.

They found some skates and began to skate like they were in the third grade. The heated meeting they were having was forgotten like it had never started. Just then, the roof caved in and a girl with roller skates fell down to the ice.

This is where my story takes a short detour. For it was I, the author of this story, who was the next victim of this mysterious plague of the unpredictable. I was writing this story when the floor caved in. My desk with my computer and a bunch of other furniture fell down with me into a musty room full of cardboard boxes. I soon learned that these boxes all contained Rush albums. I didn’t need 200 copies of *Moving Pictures* or 300 copies of *2112*, so I left them behind as I crawled up, and using the boxes as a kind of stairs, was able to worm my way back into my apartment. I had carried my laptop with me and I went over and sat down on a chair in my living room and I’m now resuming this story.

The girl with the roller skates looked around at the others. She smiled.

“I got them right this time!” she said.

“What was that?” asked Jared.

“Our skates match. Only yours have blades while mine have wheels. I did it!”

Jared quickly compared their footwear and saw that the girl was accurate.

“Can I help you up?” said Rebecca.

“Do you know Lisa? Or, Luke?”

“I’m sorry,” said Rebecca, “I don’t know anyone with those names.”

“How do you like our village?”

“Oh, is this your home, this place?”

The girl nodded. “Let me show you something,” she said. The others followed her out of the building.

“Which floor, please?” said the elevator man.

“The next floor.”

“But, sir, the next floor is the roof.”

“I know that, Carl. Take me up.”

Presently, the man was walking out onto the roof of the skyscraper. He got down on his knees and raised his hands to heaven and yelled, “Help us!”

---

The small group and the girl with the roller skates were walking through the forest.

“If your shoes get muddy, don’t worry,” the girl said.

They finally reached a fenced in area.

“Here comes George.”

A giraffe appeared out of the foliage. As it was walking up to them, the ground caved in.

They found themselves in an office.

“Hey, we’re back at work,” said Tom.

“But this isn’t our office. This looks like Sid’s.”

Sid worked in the office on the 51<sup>st</sup> floor.

“Let’s go take the elevator down.” They did so.

---

The pornographers were setting up a scene when the floor caved in.

They found themselves in a church. They did their best to cover up and started listening to the sermon, which sounded like it was almost over.

“And so it is,” the pastor was saying, “that since we can’t take the very air we breathe for granted, it means plumbing isn’t a spiritual institution, and short story writing isn’t a divine occupation. The truth is in Jesus. Amen.”

They sang a hymn. One of the pornographers walked up toward the altar. He saw the pastor and was going to complement him, but then he looked at his feet.

“Why pastor,” he said, “your shoes are all muddy.”

The pastor said, “Imagine that.”





## PERDITION IN THE PARK

Jeremy had to defecate. Then he thought, I'm going to have to go again eventually, why don't I just stay here in the bathroom? So thirty hours later, still sitting on the john, another stool came out of his rear end. Then he remembered that he'd have to eat something to make his colon function. So he cleaned himself, got up, and went to the kitchen to cook some hamburger. As that was heating up, he turned on the evening news. And found out that the Anti-Christ, or what most evangelicals in America were assuming was the Anti-Christ, had suddenly found out that, according to the Bible, he was supposed to be tormented day and night forever and ever. That freaked him out, so he instituted a worldwide fast.

"Beginning at midnight tonight," the newscaster was saying, "everyone is to begin fasting."

"One last meal," Jeremy said to himself. He turned off the TV and went to check on the meat.

He thoroughly enjoyed his hamburger. He put lettuce and tomatoes on it. As well as pickles and mustard. Then he called up his friend, who was quite knowledgeable when it came to the scriptures.

"Larry, what do you think about this fast?"

"Well, first of all, I don't see how it can possibly be enforced. What is it supposed to be like? Someone sneaks a cracker for lunch and someone comes and puts them in jail? And secondly, this is really causing a lot of confusion at my church."

"How come?" Jeremy asked.

"Well, because, suddenly, the Anti-Christ seems to have started to fear God."

"So?"

"It goes against Revelation."

"So?"

"Do you want to throw the football around?"

Jeremy was caught off guard by this. But he was also glad to hear his friend want to pick up their old pastime.

"Sure!"

"I'll meet you at the park," Larry said.

They met at the baseball field on the edge of town.

"Is that a new football?" Jeremy said.

"No, it's the one we've always used. I just washed it off a little."

Larry threw the football to Jeremy. He caught it and threw it back. They did this for about an hour, until the sun went down.

"I guess we can't eat anything now for a while," Larry said, as he and Jeremy sat down on a bench to enjoy the evening sky.

Suddenly, Jeremy remembered something. "What about Monica?" Monica was Larry's wife. She was a cook at a restaurant.

Larry said, "Yeah, I suppose they won't need her at work."

Jeremy said, "Larry, what is going on?"

"I think I joined my church for the hymns."

Jeremy frowned at his friend; it wasn't the response he was expecting. But he also saw that Larry had more to say, so he remained silent.

"But then I got heavily into the doctrine. I found that it was just as satisfying. And I realized the hymns were a musical expression of the doctrine. Anyways, I guess what I'm saying is that, no matter what we read or sing about, what's happening over there, in Jerusalem, and now everywhere I guess with this fasting thing, is that this is really happening. And we have to deal with it."

"Why?"

"What?"

"What time is it?"

Larry looked at his watch. "It's 12:15."

Jeremy took an apple out of his pocket and took a big bite.

“Got one of those for me?”

Jeremy handed Larry a pear from his other pocket.

“Remember what our friend Jake used to say?” Jeremy said.

“I remember he used to say a lot of things.”

“One time you told him that one day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like one day. Then Jake said, ‘God must have patience up the ass. He thinks to himself, should I do the Resurrection now? No, I think I’ll wait another thousand years.’”

Larry smiled. “Go out for a deep one!” he said.

Jeremy tossed aside his half eaten fruit and started running into the grass with his hands in the air. Larry threw a gem.

That night, Jeremy opened his Bible and read about the end.

Aloud, he prayed the penultimate verse: “Even so, come, Lord Jesus.”

The last thing he did before he went to bed was to set out a bowl for his cereal.



# 1 SOUL SISTER

## *Chapter 1*

This letter is from Eric, a believer, to my soul sister. Greetings! In the recent passing of Norm Macdonald, I remembered that he once said that he thought God was more than just a force—He was a personage. I started to think about this. If God is a personage, is he an old man with a beard? If so, maybe some of the existentialists have it right when they say, “If God had all of eternity to think about creation, couldn’t he have come up with something better than the Klu Klux Klan?” But then I thought, couldn’t he have come up with a world where he didn’t have to kill His own son on a tree? I’m remembering right now that the Preacher in Ecclesiastes wrote, “God has made man upright; we are the ones who go astray.” But if God isn’t a personage, what is the difference between God the Holy Spirit and God the Father? I once asked that question at a Bible study. And I followed it up with another question: How can Jesus sit at the Father’s right hand if the Father is nowhere? Nowhere? “He is always somewhere,” says Conan O’Brien. But the existentialists don’t have it right because Jesus has taught us that “God is a Spirit.” So, for example, when one is trying to fall asleep at night, it isn’t like there is a Brain up there that can either zap you to sleep or make you have insomnia. God is a juggernaut. That’s why the scriptures are so sacred. If editing gives a film its spirit, and grammar makes the publishing world go around, “the existence of the Bible is the greatest benefit ever bestowed upon mankind, and any attempt to belittle it, I believe, is a crime against humanity.”

## *Chapter 2*

So, if God is Alacrity, what turned the baby Jesus into the crucified Lord? Time, surely. God's grace, definitely. But when the Infant came into this world, was it the second eternal Boffola? What was the first? Possibly the big bang, or, maybe when Jacob wrestled with the angel, or maybe the book of Genesis as a whole...But like a refrain in a symphony, the scriptures always refer to Israel coming out of Egypt. And that doesn't stop with the New Testament. Or like Sibelius's great *Tapiola*, where one small section is the basis for the entire eighteen minutes, is it the Law that is, like Nick Cave sings, "the throne from which I'm told all history does unfold?"

## *Chapter 3*

In the end, we can conclude that God, after all the philosophies fall short, is sovereign. If anyone doubts this, just take a look at this beautiful world he made. Well, I hope you are doing well. I am doing okay. God always picks me up when I fall. And He does it quicker and more powerfully every time. It's like when I had fallen behind in high school; the assistant principal called me out of class and tried to get me to take on all these different courses, at night if necessary, so that I could graduate on time with my class. Well, God is working overtime on me, because He knows these are hard times for Christians and that the end of all things draws closer all the time. Not that I can say, "I have cleansed my heart; I am pure and free from sin." But we never give up. And pray for me also, that as I start a new job, I will maintain a good attitude, knowing that I'm working for the Lord. "Be not moved away from the hope of the gospel." Amen.

## 2 SOUL SISTER

I hope this letter ends up being long. Because you've probably got a lot of free time. Or maybe not. But if you're going to sit down to read something, you want the author to make it worth your while. Who gets all dressed up to go see *Breath* performed, unless it is also to see *Hamlet* the same evening. Like they put an overture by Beethoven at the end of a disc with one of his symphonies. But you can buy a CD with a single on it. Although it would come with a B-side. But still, it's not a fifty-minute album. Is this letter going to take fifty minutes to read? Probably not. But hopefully more than five. Which is why I've already wasted some ink with this desultory preamble...I digress.

I remember sitting in my car after a visit to the bookstore. I thought, should I enter in my GPS the address to a Jimmy John's I could apply at, or pursue a career in writing? I ended up working at Jimmy John's for eight and a half years. But still, I published *The Haters of Reality* eventually. Will it be a one and done thing? I don't want to rest on my laurels, so maybe I should get working on my next book. Wait, you're reading my next book.

I mentioned the laconic Beckett play above. I thought about producing a play where two men walk past each other on the stage. One pauses to ask the other, "Do you believe in God?" The other answers, "Yes." "Nice," says the other man, and they continue on their way to the wings. Curtain.

I remember writing an elaborate script. We came to shoot it. The actors were on the set. A question arose about one of their costumes. I said, "Let's get rolling." My friend who was there said, "You're taking the time to make



this thing, and now when you want to know what he should be wearing, it's just whatever he has on." If they made *Lawrence of Arabia*, and a shot had a boom mic in the frame, after such a painstaking production, I doubt Lean would have said, "Oh well." Even if it had to be screened that night or else.

A man preaching a sermon at a church related a biblical story: "This man was born blind. Who sinned? His father or his mother?" When actually the verse says, "Who did sin? This man or his parents?" But that's not a false gospel. A false gospel is one that says that Jesus is not the Christ. As another example, I got into the Bible reading the King James Version. So it had the word "Yea" in it. One time my friend asked me would I like a cheeseburger? I said, "Yea." He said, "You can say 'Yes.'" Then the Bible goes on to say, "Let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay." So another friend asked me a question. I said, "Yes, yes." He said, "One yes." I didn't know what to think. Until I read the NIV that says, "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes.'"

U2 sings, "Then they put Jesus in show business/Now it's hard to get in the door." You can hear the same words at a Megachurch or at the most austere small congregation. And if you are a believer, your face might get red watching the most histrionic TV preacher. But that doesn't mean I want to be irreligious. Another U2 song sarcastically goes, "And I have no religion/And I don't know what's what." One could be as humble as Moses, but if he stopped to tell a secular passerby that he believed in God, the passerby might automatically assume he's a freak. One could be as faithful as Abraham, but if he lived today, where would he decide to spend his Sunday mornings? If I dare say so myself, that's a good question, which I think I could have avoided if I didn't overthink or overly mystify. For example, one time when I was in the hospital, I quoted a verse to the social worker who came into my room. He asked me, "What does that mean?" Stammering, I tried to make some esoteric interpretation, when the social worker said, "I think what Jesus is saying there is to just have faith. And if you have this simple childlike faith, you don't have to fear anything." Wow!

The professor at the community college asked if anyone had read *The Bear* by Faulkner. I raised my hand. She asked, "What did you think?" I said I couldn't remember it that well. She said, "That's typical—not of you, but of all." You can read the Bible once or every day of your life...now you ask me why I didn't get in with the published heroes. And on top of that, the time is getting shorter and shorter.

I don't know if this letter was long enough for you, reader. If not, can I suggest you get into Stephen King?

## LATER TODAY IS NOT TOMORROW

The principal handed him his diploma and he walked off the stage. Instead of reseating himself with his classmates, he made an ironic left and turned down the long hallway that leads to the backdoor of the school. He walked outside and into a waiting car.

“You sure about this, Kevin?” said George from the driver’s seat.

“Let’s go,” Kevin said.

The two friends were now on their road trip. They were planning on going to Seattle, which was a good long way from their hometown in the Midwest. At first, Kevin was a little worried that his mom and dad would be upset. They were expecting him home that evening for a celebration. But after a couple hours on the interstate, the excitement of the journey made him forget his troubles. Made him forget everything about the “crap pile” that he called his high school. Even made him forget his parents.

“Let’s stop here for the night,” Kevin said, pointing out the window at a motel. George pulled into the parking lot. They got to their room and were presently hitting the hay.

“Kevin?” George said from his bed.

“Yeah?”

“We have our whole lives ahead of us.”

“I know.”

“Are you scared?”

“Not at all.”

“Good night, Kevin.”

“Good night, George.”

They awoke early the next morning. Kevin was already down getting his free breakfast while George was still in the shower. But he joined his friend soon enough and they enjoyed the day’s first victual together.

“What’s the plan?” George said as he drank the last of the milk from his cereal bowl.

“We just keep driving.”

Which they did. But Kevin was at the wheel now and George had elected to recline in the backseat. As he sat there, he noticed something brightly colored on the floor. He reached down to see what it was. And he discovered a whole collection of interesting rocks. He put his hand further beneath the passenger seat and found even more.

“Kevin, what’s with this trove of pebbles back here?”

“What are you talking about?” said Kevin, eyes on the road.

“Pull over. You should see this.”

“Oh, are you talking about Emily’s rocks?”

“I don’t know. Are they Emily’s?”

Emily was Kevin’s sister. She was always working on some landscaping project or another.

“Must be. She was using this car to haul some material for her new garden.”

Just then, one of the rocks spoke to George. Not actually or audibly, but as if in his mind. And he began to scream. What it said was unknowingly you have impregnated Emily and when she gives birth your offspring will be a cyclops.

Kevin screeched to a halt and tried to calm his friend.

George said, “I swear I never touched her, Kevin. Never.”

“What are you talking about? What’s the matter?”

George opened the door and fled from the car into a field. He didn’t stop running until he tripped on something and fell face down in the dirt. He was still crying when Kevin caught up with him. Kevin got him to his feet and led him back to the car. He helped him into the back seat. Kevin got behind the wheel and looked at his friend in the mirror. George had stopped crying and he was now staring blankly ahead.

“I guess we should turn back,” Kevin said. He didn’t know what else to do.

“No,” said George. “I’m fine. Let’s go to Seattle like we planned.” Then he started to wail uncontrollably.

Kevin turned the car around and they were headed back to their families. On the trip back, after George finally quieted down, he lay on the backseat catatonically and gazed out the window.

When Kevin finally turned into his parents’ driveway, his mother came running out to the car.

“Kevin!” she said. “We were so worried. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. George is not.”

She looked into the backseat. “What happened?”

“I don’t really know. Mom, I’m sorry. We shouldn’t have run off like that.”

“It’s okay, dear. You’re here now. Let’s get George inside.”

Which they did. Kevin’s dad was calling for the ambulance when George pulled himself up from the sofa that they had laid him on and grabbed hold of his friend’s collar.

“Kevin,” he breathed hoarsely.

“Yes, George?”

“Don’t let them take me. We can still get away. We just went in the wrong direction. We have to go east, towards New York. That’s where our destiny lies. I know. Jesus spoke to me in my dream. Kevin!”

Suddenly, Kevin remembered the words of his favorite Soul Asylum tune, “Close.”

“If we ever get split up, I’ll always be on your side.”

George smiled. “Cause we’re close,” he finished for his friend. “But Kevin,” he went on, “we’re not going to get split up. Jesus is your Lord, too. We can trust him.”

Kevin’s dad came into the room. “They’ll be here any minute,” he said.

“Ah, Dad, could you go fix George and me some lemonade while they’re on their way?”

His dad smiled and went to the kitchen. Kevin quickly and quietly got George to his feet and they got themselves back to the car.

They were just turning onto the main road when the ambulance passed them.

“Suckers,” George said.

“What happened back there?” Kevin asked after they had gone a few miles. “Back there when you started screaming?”

"I had a schizophrenic break," George said.

"Wow. You easily diagnosed yourself. That never happens so quickly with schizophrenia."

"Well..." George said, and he watched the towns go by for a while. Eventually, he spoke again. "Tell me again about the time you went on your Wander."

"That's old news," Kevin said.

"But it has become important again. After all, what are we doing now, if not wandering?"

"I thought you would know. You convinced me that something waited for us out here."

They had come to a stoplight. The car ahead of them had a bumper sticker. It said, "Remember Lot's Wife." The light turned green. They sped through a few more towns and were soon on the open freeway.

Kevin began, "Well, I was walking through some stranger's backyard. They called the cops on me. When the police car caught up with me, the officer asked me where I was going. I said, 'Wherever the Spirit leads me.' She said, 'And what is the Spirit saying now?' I said, 'Jesus is the Lord.' Immediately I could tell that she feared God, because she said, 'Ah, Jesus,' and she put me in the car and brought me home. Can you imagine if I had said that to an unbelieving cop?"

George said, "Well, they wouldn't have kept your saying so readily."

"That's for sure. Hey look, ice cream."

They pulled over to an ice cream stand. They had gotten off the interstate because Kevin had to use the bathroom. Before they got to a lavatory, this little kid's business caught their eye.

"How much for a scoop of vanilla?" George said.

"Fifty cents," said the kid proudly.

"I'll take one."

As they enjoyed their snack, Kevin asked, "What are you going to do with all your money, kid?"

"I'm saving for college."

Simultaneously, George and Kevin looked down at the pavement. They swallowed the last of their ice cream and were back on the road. After Kevin used the toilet, they didn't speak for a long time. Finally, Kevin broke the silence. "Pretty precocious."

“What?”

“That kid.”

“Yeah,” George said.

They drove for a good long while. This time, George had to use the bathroom. As he sat on the john, he noticed a carving on the door. “There is an afterlife,” it said. He and Kevin bought some carbonated water from the gas station they had stopped at and then continued on their trip. But was it a trip? Were they planning on going back sometime or was this a permanent abandoning of everything? They fancied themselves that they were being like Abraham. But Abraham never had a GPS. What if he had?

They stopped outside of Cincinnati at a motel and considered what they were doing.

“Let’s sleep on it,” Kevin said.

“Good idea.”

They got in their beds and soon were slumbering. Kevin dreamed about his Wander. The one George had asked him about. When he was in the ninth grade, Kevin had decided to live on the streets. He wandered around the town for two weeks before that cop had brought him home. Whenever he thought back on that time, he would always call it his Wander. That was the nickname his friends and family referred to it by. But in his dream that night, when the cop approached him in the car, it was a man this time and when Kevin told him about the Spirit and Jesus, he didn’t take him home, but to the mental ward. He was lying in his hospital room when numerous snakes started to slither all over him. They had come up from out of the toilet. One of them went into his ear and started to gnaw away at his brain. He woke up screaming.

“What is it?” George said, concerned.

“Oh, nothing,” Kevin said, looking around at the morning light coming through their motel room window. “Just a nightmare. I’m fine.”

“Kevin,” George said, looking at him earnestly.

“What is it?”

“I have the address.”

“The address?”

“Where we’re supposed to be going. Jesus revealed it to me in my dreams last night.”

“George, I never knew you to operate in the prophetic so much!”

“Well, I’ve read the Bible.”

“So have I.”

“We can’t stand around here all day. We got to go!”

The two friends quickly got dressed. They went out to their car. They had entered the address for Madison Square Garden in their GPS just because they knew that would take them towards New York, but now George typed in the address that he had received from the Son of God himself. And it led them to an old farm house out in the country.

“What is this place?” Kevin said, parking the car in front of a pigpen.

“Let’s look around,” said George. They got out and looked around.

“Hey you!” said a voice.

Kevin and George froze.

“Yeah, you. You two young fellows. Come on up here.”

It was an old man speaking to them from the loft in the barn. They climbed up and introduced themselves.

“And my name is Jethro Tull. Yes, that was my name long before Ian Anderson was even born. So don’t confuse me with the band. There’s absolutely no connection. Beyond the appellation.”

The old man then poured them some coffee from a thermos. They thanked him.

“Oh, by the way,” the man went on, “I’m having a book of proverbs published. Take a look.”

He handed them a large manuscript. George took it and turned to a page right in the middle. He read: “Better to be known as someone composed than someone creative; better to be known as someone mentally ill than someone unfriendly.”

“Well, I suppose you want to meet your spouses,” the old man said, taking back his manuscript.

“Spouses?” Kevin and George said together.

“They’re my daughters. So they’re not spontaneous woman, be assured. And while their not as inexperienced as Pris from *Bladerunner*, as naïve as a mole woman from Kimmy Schmidt, or as unconnected as an Amish person, they’re not as cosmopolitan as Elaine Benes either. You’ll find them lovely, I’m sure. Oh, girls?”

Suddenly, two very attractive young ladies stepped out from behind a separation and came and stood before the wayward adventurers.

They ended up playing a board game the old man had, during which they all got to know each other a little bit. When the game was over, the two couples got into the car and started driving. They drove back to their hometown. When they got to Kevin's house, he and George introduced their new fiancés. Kevin's mom was overjoyed. His dad was a little leery, but he would come around. They started planning the wedding.

"I guess sometimes you do have to leave your own backyard," commented George.

"Where should I matriculate?" Kevin asked his new lover.

"Let's eat this cake first," she said.

Although it was a tad tardy, they had their graduation party.

Now all they had to do was die.





## ADVENTURES OF YOUNG PRINCE

I had been carrying the stein around with me all day. The beer inside it was virtually gone. Now I entered the music store. I knew this would be where I'd find it. And though I didn't know exactly what I was looking for, I said to the clerk, "A bass." Was it a word of knowledge directly from the Lord?

"What color?"

I hesitated. I held up my libation.

"Ah," he said. I went home that day with a red four-string.

I walked out of the house the next morning with a purple coffee mug.



## AN OCCURRENCE

Sunlight was shining through Fred's window. He was lying in bed. He squinted and raised himself up onto his elbow. The nurse came into his room.

"Wake up. The doctor has something to tell you. I think you're really going to like it."

Fred put on his slippers and waited for the psychiatrist to arrive.

There came a soft knock on his door. "Fred?"

"Come in, Doc."

The doctor told Fred he was being discharged that afternoon. Finally, after two months, he could leave the mental hospital. His parents came and picked him up about 3:30. The first thing they did was go to a coffee shop. The woman in front of Fred and his parents in line was getting really upset because the barista fouled up her order.

"Let's go," Fred said to his Dad.

"Don't you want a latte?"

"I don't want to listen to this. Let's go."

Fred and his parents went home. Fred made himself a cup of joe from the stuff they had in their kitchen, and went to work deciding where he wanted to matriculate. He had a bunch of catalogues. He decided on a nice state university right on the river. He was accepted. He signed up and put all his energy into his studies. As a result of his efforts, he graduated with quite an

impressive GPA. He married and had a family. He retired and now his coffin (with him in it) was being nailed shut—

Fred woke up and squinted against the sunlight. The nurse came into his room. “Time for you medication,” she said.

\*An homage to An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

## SERENDIPITOUS SALVATION

It was the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Andrew was 45 years old. He was also an ardent atheist. Today he was going skiing.

“Come on, Gorgeous, or we’ll be late,” he said.

Andrew often referred to his wife with that adjective. He and she were meeting a group of their friends at the lodge before they hit the slopes. They quickly got all their equipment in the car and were on their way. At the first stoplight they came to they saw a bumper sticker that said, “Repent.”

“I wonder if the North Stars are playing today,” Andrew said, turning on the radio.

He got news talk. He turned it off.

Two hours later, they were at the resort.

“There’s Bill,” said Andrew, waving down his friend.

“Hey, Andy!”

Andrew and his wife were presently sitting down to lunch with Bill, Stacey, Thom, and Fran.

A stranger came up to their table and handed Thom a tract.

“Thanks,” he said.

The stranger went on his way.

“Take a look at this, Andy,” Thom said, flinging the literature on the table.

Andy picked it up without looking at it, set it back down, and said, “Hey, Bill, you going to the Vikings game next week?”

“Sure am.”

"I'm jealous," Andy said.

The group enjoyed their food and now they were ready for some of their favorite sport. They had been skiing for a few hours and it was just getting dark when Andrew wiped out majorly and broke his arm. When he woke up in his hospital room the next morning, there was a chaplain sitting next to his bed.

"Can I pray with you?" he said.

"Where's my wife?" Andrew said.

"I'm here," she said, appearing at his side and taking her husband's hand.

"God bless you," the chaplain said and quietly exited the room.

"I hope I don't have to miss work," Andrew said.

Gorgeous said, "You shouldn't."

The next day, Andrew got to go home. He had been told that his cast could come off in a few weeks. He lounged about the house most of that afternoon. Then he called the principal of the school where he was a math teacher and he said Andrew could still come to class even with his busted extremity. And so, the next morning he was explaining least common denominators to some teens, one of whom, in the begging stages of her proverbial fist fervor, came up to him after the bell rang and said, "Are you a Christian, Mister Lewis?"

"Don't forget," Andrew answered, "chapters 3 and 4 for tomorrow."

After his cast was taken off, he and Gorgeous went out for dinner. They ate their evening victual while they talked about who they thought would win best actress at the Oscars. The couple went home.

The next morning, Andrew got up and went downstairs and walked outside and started eating some snow. His wife saw him and she said, "Andrew!"

"Can't talk now. I've got to get this driveway plowed."

"There's the snow blower."

"No, all gas powered equipment is evil. I know. Mickey Mouse told me so in my dream last night."

Gorgeous called for an ambulance. They took her husband to the hospital.

"Who is the president?" asked a mental health professional.

"Ronald Regan."

"And what year is it?"

"1985."

“And who is the Christ?”

After a brief pause, Andrew said, “Jesus of Nazareth.”

“Your husband isn’t crazy,” the nurse said to Gorgeous.

But that wasn’t the very next thing that Andrew heard. Because he had died; his heart stopped. And now he was standing before a luminous figure in a garden, who said, “What did you just say?”

Andrew said, “I said that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ.”

“Correct,” said the luminous figure. “Welcome to paradise.”





## MAJOR MOVIE FILM MINOR

My girlfriend and I walked out of our college classroom and headed to the local cinema. On our way there, we were accosted by a homeless man.

“A couple of bucks for a meal?” he pleaded.

“Have you seen *Letterman for the Ages*?” my girlfriend asked.

“Cindy, let’s just give him a quarter and let’s go. The movie starts in ten minutes.”

“No, I haven’t,” the destitute man said.

“You’ve heard about it, yes?” Cindy said, lengthening the conversation.

“It’s supposed to be the best movie ever made.”

“That’s right. Do you want to come and watch it with us?”

“Cindy, what are you doing?” I interjected.

“Would I ever! I wasn’t always this down and out; I had a wife; she and I would go to see films all the time.”

This last statement intenerated my heart and I said, “Let’s all go. We’ll treat you. Come on, the theatre is just around the block!”

*Letterman for the Ages* was being hailed as the perfect movie. In fact, many active filmmakers were considering retiring because, well, they couldn’t improve on this new feature that was taking the world by storm. After Cindy, the homeless man, and myself saw it, it had the opposite effect on me; it made me want to study film at our university. I was a meteorology major and knew very little about film history. Maybe that’s why I reacted this way to the piece of entertainment the three of us saw tonight; had I been an inveterate cinema-

phile, I might have thrown up my arms like the rest; instead, maybe like Orson Wells starting out with no prejudices about a camera, I thought, "Even if I can't make a better film, I can make a different film."

"I can make my film," I continued musing. Just to give up like you were Friedrich in *Lisbon Story*...I just didn't get it. Why play nine innings of a baseball game? One will do. Why play another season of baseball? Whichever team wins it all this year is crowned eternal champion. Why don't we finally figure out how to stop the world from turning?

"What did you think?" I asked Henry. Henry was the homeless man.

"Wow!" he said.

"I concur," said Cindy.

"I'll see you in class tomorrow," I said absently and started down the sidewalk.

"Nick, I thought we were going to have a drink."

I stopped and turned around. "Oh, yeah, well, maybe another night." I started walking again.

Cindy turned to the homeless man. "What's gotten into him, Henry?"

"I don't know. Could have been the movie we just saw."

"Yeah, well, it's definitely odd behavior. Here's a twenty. I hope things turn around for you."

"Thank you, miss. Have a good one."

Cindy went back to the library to study. Henry went to find somewhere he could buy a hot sandwich.

When I got home that evening, I watched the weather man on TV. As he spoke about a cold front and some precipitation, I began to weep; the atmosphere had always been my one true passion—before I saw *Letterman for the Ages*. Did I still want to be that guy who tells you whether you'd need an umbrella or some suntan lotion? If I didn't, why was I crying? Was I moving on? If so, to what? I got into bed. Several minutes later, I was asleep.

Early the next morning, before my first class started, I went to see a guidance counselor.

"How can I help you?" said the friendly woman in the green blouse and rather large eyeglasses.

"I was wondering if the university had any film courses," I said.

"Oh, many. In fact we have a whole department."

"There's a whole film department?"

"Yes," she nodded, smiling.

"Sign me up," I said emphatically.

"Okay. Can I ask what is your major?"

"It's meteorology."

"Did you want to change it to film, then?"

"You mean I could major in film?" I said incredulously.

"Yes." Again the old woman nodded.

I leaned back in my chair and sighed loudly.

"Or, it could be your minor," she suggested.

"My minor? Yeah, I'd like that. Let's do that."

The counselor utilized her computer.

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"What did you do last night?" Cindy said to me after our class later that day.

"I saw *Letterman for the Ages*," I said.

"Nick, we saw that. I meant afterwards. What did you do after the movie?"

"I just went home."

"Nick, what's going on?"

"Cindy, I'm going to have a film minor."

"That's great, Nick," she said.

"Yeah, up until yesterday, I had no idea a movie could be so powerful."

"Henry was right."

"Henry?"

"The homeless man. I asked him what had gotten into you; he said it was probably the show. I kind of knew that, too; obviously it's a very impactful film. Have you signed up for any courses?"

"I just did this morning. I thought there might be two or three film classes; I had no idea I could have a minor. In fact, you can even be a film major, but I'm not totally sure I don't still want to study the weather. I wasn't ready for that big of a jump, at least not right away."

"Sounds very prudent."

"What are you doing tonight?" I asked her.

"Studying. You?"

"I'm watching...I'm studying a bunch of Hitchcock movies."

"Then we're both being very responsible!"

Cindy and I both laughed loudly and she went to the library and I went to sit in front of my TV.

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As the weeks went by, Nick turned into a real film scholar. He still pursued meteorology with all his might. But he had fun learning about mise en scene (he liked how that theory was akin to knowing what was going on in the elements; what if *Singin' in the Rain* was filmed in a drought?), and, like sense would have it, the movies he discovered about nature were his favorites; he liked *Waterworld*; he liked *The Perfect Storm*; he liked *Twister*. He thought he would really love *Rainman*, and he did, but for reasons he didn't expect. Then it was Oscar season. Would it even be a contest this year? Or, how about this century? The night the ceremony aired on TV, Nick and Cindy were together. After a while, they were both sickened by the vanity of it all and turned on *Cheers*. They had a few laughs. Then Cindy went home. Nick got into bed and sang, "Yes, Jesus loves me." He fell asleep. He dreamt he was in *Letterman for the Ages*. Not that he was acting in it, but that he was living (in the flesh) in that world. David Letterman kept being reincarnated. In this very chimerical way, Nick went to see his show (he sat in the audience) in the year 4002. The late night host by then had lived, died, and come back to life numerous times. When the taping was over, Nick went for a walk in Central Park. Someone came up to him and said, "We're doing a documentary. Could we interview you?"

"Sure," Nick said.

The little band of filmmakers set up their camera.

They asked him, "Now, if someone gave you an atomic bomb, what would you do with it?"

"What?!"

"What, Nick?"

"What?"

"Nick, are you okay?"

He looked around him. He was in the coffee shop. Cindy was sitting at the table across from him. He shook his head.

“Sorry. I must have been hallucinating.”

“Well, I think we should go to church. They’re going to have a prayer meeting for the citizens of France.”

“Why France?” said Nick.

“What do you mean?”

“What happened to France?”

“Nick, you know it was bombed.”

“Bombed?”

Cindy looked at him with deep concern. He abruptly got up and rushed to the bathroom. He looked in the mirror. He was old. But Cindy had looked as youthful as ever. With an immense effort, he calmed himself and returned to the table with sangfroid. He sat down. He noticed he had a ring on his finger. He looked up at...he knew that she must now be his wife. “Cindy, what year is it?” he said.

“*Letterman for the Ages* just won best picture—does that give you a clue?”

“Then I didn’t...I’m not...there wasn’t...”

“Come on.” Cindy grabbed Nick’s hand and they went to church.



When Cindy and Nick got back to their house that evening, Nick noticed a bunch of tennis rackets hanging on the garage wall.

“So many tennis rackets,” he observed.

“It’s your favorite sport,” Cindy said.

“Really!” Nick walked over and got one down.

“Could you hand me that?”

“Hand you what?”

“That green sponge.”

Nick looked down at his hand—he was holding a green sponge—like one you’d use in a—

Nick was working in a scullery. He handed the sponge to his coworker. When his shift was over at the restaurant, he went home and listened to Shostakovich symphonies. When he went back to work the next day, there was a film crew in the kitchen. Martin Scorsese was behind the camera. They were filming a sequel to *Taxi Driver*: they were filming Nick’s very own script of *Dishwasher*.

“Ah, Nick, glad you’re here,” the legendary director said to the star actor. That day they went on to capture the last couple scenes of the production. When the movie came out, it won best editing.

The next day, Nick woke up in a warzone. The battle raged around him. When the fighting was over, he and his comrades tuned into the president’s radio address. The conflict was over. When Nick laid his head down on a rock that night, he didn’t have to fear his dreams: finally, he was living in a world without mental wards.

## AS STRANGE AS REAL LIFE

Al the homeless man awoke just as the sun came up in that part of Deer County. He was staying in a cardboard box next to a tree by the river. He squinted into the brightness and rolled over onto his side. He eyed a beetle which was crawling towards him on a leaf. He flicked it away with his finger and got to his feet. Like always, he was hungry. He started into town. Once he got to a garbage can, he opened it and looked inside. There was a pizza. Yes, an entire pizza. A little on the done side, but Al was not picky. He lifted it out and took a giant bite. He silently thanked his God and walked on.

“Hey!”

Startled, Al looked around.

“You think you can just have that, do you?” a man with a red beard said.

Al looked down at the pizza he still carried in his hand. “Ah...Ah...” he stammered.

“My brother made that.”

“It’s good,” Al said.

“Really?”

Al nodded.

“Look out!” the man shouted.

Just then two killer kangaroos hopped into the street from behind a shrub. One of them bit Al’s ear off. The other one punched the man with the red beard in the gut. The man took out a gun and shot the thing. He looked over at Al. “Heads up!” he said. Al fell on his face as a bullet whizzed past him. A



second later, both animals were dead. The man walked over and extended his hand, helping Al to his feet.

"Sorry I made such a point about the pizza. Name's Fred."

"Al."

"Good meeting you, Al. Come back to my place. I'd like to introduce you to my brother."

Still holding a hand to the side of his bleeding head, Al said, "Could you take me to the Emergency Room?"

"Ah, heck, my brother can sew that thing right back on ya."

"It's kind of missing."

"Let's look around."

Al and Fred walked up and down the block where the recent encounter took place. Al kicked over some rocks. Fred kicked over some leaves.

"It's here," Fred finally said. Al walked over to him. He was prying Al's ear out of the teeth of the late marsupial.

"I don't know if I want, ah, if I want..."

"Nonsense. We'll get it all sanitized and ready to go back on ya. Come on!"

The man started walking quickly the other way. Al had to jog a few yards before he came abreast. "Who is this brother of yours?"

"My brother is a chef."

"He's not a doctor?"

"No. If your worried about your operation, don't be; a chef has to have defter hands than a surgeon."

The two walked down a couple alleys and got to a tall apartment building.

"25<sup>th</sup> Floor," Fred said as he and Al got in the elevator. As it ascended, they heard some creaking noises from above. They looked up. Another one of those pesky kangaroos was peeling back the roof of the car and reaching a foot down through the opening. This foot caught Al in the other ear and it, too, came off. Fred fired his gun. There was a loud thud; the kangaroo lay dead. The elevator door opened. Al picked up his other ear and followed Fred down the hall. Soon they were at the chef's door. They knocked.

"Come in," said a voice.

They entered.

"Tony?"

"Yes, Fred?"

“This is Al.”

Tony, Fred’s brother, the chef, looked up. He had been stirring something in a large pot.

“Well, Al, your just in time. I have been preparing a—Jesus! What happened?”

“Al and I have been accosted twice by those damn kangaroos. They got to Al.”

“Come into my kitchen, man,” Tony said, putting down his ladle and opening a cupboard. He took out just what was needed. Al came over and sat down on a chair.

“Do you have the...?”

Al handed him his ear. Fred handed him Al’s other ear. Tony set them down and considered his first move.

“Fred, could you hold this up to our friend’s head while I—”

“Of course.”

As Tony sewed Al’s ears back on, the three men had a conversation. It began by Tony asking Al, “Where do you live?”

“Right now I live in a cardboard box.”

“How’d you come to be homeless?”

“Well, I was an optometrist for ten years. Then I had a midlife crisis. I wanted to live the creative life. I quit my job and started writing. When I couldn’t get anything published, I’d just as soon get a job at Wendy’s than go back to my practice, so I adopted a fuck it attitude and so...”

“You know everyone who has made it has had that same outlook. They say, ‘I’m going to be an artist or die trying.’ Not that I think you’re going to die.”

“No, I know. Because I’m still trying; I got several notebooks in that cardboard box of mine.”

“It’s a good thing you met us,” Fred said. “Tony has connections.”

“If you gave me those notebooks, I might be able to make something happen.”

Tony had finished with the right ear.

“Wow! That’d be wonderful!”

“How do you know Fred?”

“I caught him eating your pizza.”

“Ah,” Tony said.

“And it was good. What was it doing in the garbage, may I ask?”

"Well, we were over at our friend Carrie's house having a cooking contest and I lost."

"Yeah?" said Al.

"I guess I'm a sore loser."

"So you threw your pizza in the garbage?"

Here Fred started to chuckle loudly. He patted his brother on the back knowingly.

"Finished!" Tony announced.

Fred held up a mirror.

"Well done!" Al said. "Thank you."

The three of them enjoyed the spaghetti Tony had been making and they went to bed. But not before they all agreed that in the morning they'd go recover Al's writing from the cardboard box.



"I had them under this bundle. I can't believe they're gone!" Al said. He ransacked his own home, desperately searching for his writings.

"They'll turn up," said Tony.

"What do you mean, they'll turn up? They could be anywhere."

"Al! Tony! Over there!" Fred said, pointing at a kangaroo sitting in a canoe as it floated past them down the river. It was reading Al's notebooks.

"Great literature!" it shouted from the water.

"Those things talk now?" said Fred.

"I'd like to know what the deal is with these kangaroos," Al puled.

"They escaped from the zoo," Tony told him.

"Ok."

"They're was a mad scientist working there. He went a little too far."

"Thank you for the inspiration, fellers," Al said. He kicked Fred in the head. He kicked Tony in the head. He threw their bodies in the river. He walked to the library.

"Can I sign up to use a word processor?" he asked the librarian.

"Certainly," she said. She told him there was one available by the magazine rack. He walked that way. He saw a kangaroo reading *American Cinematographer*. He sat down at the computer. He typed the words 'Al was a homeless man.'

# A SCREENPLAY

STEPHEN, ERIC, AND ADAM (ROOMMATES) ARE OUT ON THE TOWN HAVING A BLAST.

THE NEXT DAY. MORNING. THE ROOMMATES' HOUSE.

INSIDE. STEPHEN IS PLACING A CALL ON THE PHONE.

**Stephen**

Hello? Is this Chuck? Chuck Bravestomach?

CHUCK IS SITTING IN HIS OWN HOUSE. HE IS AN OLDER PERSON.

**Chuck**

This is Chuck Bravestomach. How can I help you?

**Stephen**

I was wondering if you could put some shelves in my friend's room.

**Chuck**

Bookshelves?

ERIC BECK

**Stephen**  
That's right.

**Chuck**  
Of course.

**Stephen**  
Great. Well, I want it to be a surprise, so could you come and put them in this weekend while we are away?

**Chuck**  
Whatever you want. What's your address?

CHUCK TAKES DOWN HIS ADDRESS IN A LITTLE NOTEBOOK.

**Chuck**  
And how will you be paying for it?

**Stephen**  
I'm not sure. How much will it be?

**Chuck**  
I'd have to say about...14.2 billion dollars.

**Stephen**  
That's a lot.

**Chuck**  
Well, I am the best builder of bookshelves in the Midwest.

**Stephen**  
Yeah, I know. That's what you advertise.

**Chuck**  
So?

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**Stephen**

Do you take credit?

**Chuck**

I do. Just tell me your card number.

STEPHEN TAKES A CREDIT CARD OUT HIS WALLET AND HOLDS IT IN FRONT OF HIM.

**Stephen**

Ok. Are you ready? The number is

CHUCK TAKES THE NUMBER DOWN IN HIS LITTLE NOTEBOOK, NODDING AS HE DOES SO.

**Chuck**

Ok. We're ready to go. I'll be over there this weekend. I'll have the bookshelves all done by Monday morning. Have a good one.

CHUCK HANGS UP HIS PHONE AND TURNS IMMEDIATELY TO HIS WIFE, WHO IS SITTING IN THE SAME ROOM. HE HOLDS UP THE PAPER WITH THE CREDIT CARD NUMBER ON IT.

**Chuck**

Pack your bags, Rachel. We're going to Italy!

RACHEL STARTS HOLLERING AND DANCING.

BACK AT STEPHEN'S HOUSE. STEPHEN IS SITTING, THINKING. IN WALKS ERIC.

**Eric**

Hey, what's going on?

ERIC BECK

**Stephen**

Eric. Great. I'm glad you're here. I just hired somebody to put in some bookshelves for Adam, for his birthday.

**Eric**

That's a good idea.

**Stephen**

I want to surprise him, so we have to get him out of the house this weekend.

**Eric**

Let's take a trip to the Boundary Waters.

**Stephen**

Yes! That's perfect. Now –

ADAM WALKS INTO THE ROOM.

**Adam**

Hi, guys.

**Eric**

Adam, we're going to the Boundary Waters this weekend.  
Want to come?

**Adam**

I would like to but I kind of wanted to—

**Stephen**

You have to come.

**Adam**

Oh?

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**Stephen**

Yes. The president called and—

**Adam**

The president?

**Eric**

That's right. The president of the United States of America called and he is personally tasking the three of us to go to the Boundary Waters and deter a group of space aliens who landed their UFO there from infiltrating further into the country.

**Adam**

You don't say.

**Stephen**

This is a big deal, Adam.

**Adam**

But why us? What are we supposed to do even if we do come across any aliens?

STEPHEN AND ERIC LOOK AT EACH OTHER.

**Eric**

Ah...we show them this!

ERIC PICKS UP A WRENCH THAT WAS SITTING ON THE TABLE.

**Adam**

A wrench?



ERIC BECK

**Stephen**

That's right. The government found out from research that these particular extraterrestrials are irrationally afraid of wrenches.

**Eric**

It's their kryptonite.

**Adam**

I see.

**Stephen**

Yeah. So when we see the aliens we hold up this wrench and they'll know that humans have access to such hardware and they'll want nothing to do with us and the hope is they'll get back in their ship and fly away.

**Adam**

Well, I want to do my duty as a citizen. When do we leave?

AT THE BOUDARY WATERS. THE BEAUTY OF THE PLACE: A MONTAGE. THE THREE ROOMMATES ENJOYING THIS BEAUTY: PART OF THAT MONTAGE.

THE THREE ROOMMATES AT THEIR CAMPSITE. EARLY MORNING.

**Adam**

Guys, look!

STEPHEN AND ERIC LOOK. THEY SEE THE ALIENS.

**Stephen**

It's the aliens!

**Eric**

Adam! Quick, the wrench!

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ADAM TOSSES THE WRENCH TO ERIC, WHO HOLDS IT HIGH ABOVE HIS HEAD AUTHORITATIVELY.

**Stephen**

They've got three heads!

**Eric**

They've got eight arms!

**Adam**

They're getting back in their ship. They're leaving! We did it!

THE THREE ROOMMATES CELEBRATE.

BACK AT THEIR HOUSE. STEPHEN PULLS THE CAR INTO THE DRIVEWAY. AS THEY ENTER THE HOUSE, ADAM IS TURNING TO WALK UP THE STAIRS TO HIS BEDROOM. STEPHEN PREVENTS HIM.

**Stephen**

Adam, why don't you and Eric put on some coffee. I'll be right back down.

STEPHEN GOES UP TO ADAM'S ROOM. HE LOOKS IN. HIS FACE FALLS.

IN THE KITCHEN.

**Eric**

How's everything look?

**Stephen**

What? Oh, well...

ERIC BECK

ERIC FROWNS.

**Adam**

I'm gonna go change clothes.

ADAM WALKS UPSTAIRS.

**Eric**

Well? How do they look?

**Stephen**

They're not there.

**Eric**

Not there! You paid good money for some shelves. They  
should be there.

**Stephen**

I'm calling Mr. Bravestomach.

STEPHEN DIALS THE NUMBER ON THE PHONE.

**Stephen**

No answer.

**Eric**

We got duped.

**Stephen**

Big time.

THE TWO OF THEM SIT Languidly ON THE COUCH.

**Eric**

Well, at least we still remember how to read.

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**Stephen**

And that's really the most important thing.

THE TWO OF THEM EACH PICK UP A BOOK AND START READING.  
THEY READ ON.

THE END



## TRAMPLED

Paul was the fourth of five sons born to Frank and Darlene. One summer day, when he was still very young, Paul found a snake in the family swimming pool. At the time, he was the only one around, so he wrangled it by himself and put it in a box that normally held cleaning products. After he put the lid on, he found a big enough rock in the trees to set on top of the box so that he knew the slithering creature wouldn't escape.

"John! John!" Paul called for his younger brother. Paul and John were the closest of all the boys in the family. The three older siblings were all kind of loners, but the two youngest ones stuck together.

John was in his room studying some history for school, but when he heard Paul through his open window, he stuck his head out and yelled, "What?!"

"Come down here! I gotta show you something."

Presently Paul and John were standing over the box with the large rock on it.

"What's in there?" John said.

When Paul hesitated, John impatiently stepped forward and threw the rock aside and took the lid off the box.

Just as Paul was saying, "No, wait!" the snake slithered its way upwards and grabbed John's wrist. John yelled out in pain. Paul tried to get a hold of the animal, but when he couldn't, John's writhing took him to the edge of the pool. He swung his arm around violently in one last attempt to free himself and he fell into the water. Paul dived in after him. He could now see blood.

He finally got a grip on the thing and yanked his hardest. The snake no longer was hanging onto John, but the snake had a chunk of John's flesh in its mouth. Even as he was screaming, John was desperately flapping his way towards the shallow end. Using the same technique that he used to get the snake in the box in the first place, Paul was able to again contain the slithering thing. He rushed over to his brother, who was crawling his way out of the pool, but once he was on the concrete, John collapsed.

"Dad!" Paul yelled.

"Dad, tell us the story of how uncle John died," said Stephanie.

Paul sighed.

"Come on, you always do on the anniversary of his death. Plus, I think Jane would like to hear it; she hasn't yet."

Jane was Stephanie's new best friend.

Resignedly, Paul, now an old man, sank back into his chair and opened his mouth.

"It was a summer day and I was out in the pool swimming. I saw a long object in the deep end. At first I thought it was a stick, but then it started to move."

"It was a snake," Stephanie said to Jane.

"Who's telling this story, dear?" Paul asked his daughter.

"Sorry. Go on."

"Somehow I was able to get it out of the water. I put it in the box where the chlorine tablets were kept. Then I found a small boulder on the edge of the woods and put it on top of the box. I knew John would like to see it, so I called him down. When we were standing over the box, I was going to warn him to be careful, but he was so curious, he bravely threw the top off. Suddenly, the reptile was hanging from his wrist."

"From his wrist, you say he said?" Jane's father asked when she relayed the account to him later that evening.

"That's what Stephanie's dad said."

"Obviously, he wasn't as strong as Paul."

"No, he was—"

"I mean the Apostle Paul."

"Oh," said Jane.

"When the Apostle Paul had a snake on his arm, he shook it off into the fire and walked away perfectly unharmed."

“Is that so?” said Jane.

“You can read about it in the last chapter of Acts.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying, don’t hang out with that girl anymore. If she came from a faithful family, her uncle would be alive today.”

“But, Dad—”

“I mean it, Jane. Now, let’s pray that my cancer is cured.”

Tom, Jane’s dad, was 400 years old. Every time he got sick, he prayed that he would recover. And every time he did. It was almost like he had no need of the Resurrection; if you’re going to believe your way out of the grave, you’ll never have to be raised from it; at least, that’s how he thought. Until later that week. Later that week he took his seventh wife and went on a hiking trip. A bear mauled him.

---

A decade passed. Then one day, Bethany’s granddaughter asked her, “How did my grandpa die?”

“He was eaten by a bear.”

“Why didn’t Superman fly down and rescue him?”

“What?”

“Obviously, a death like that tells me he wasn’t a righteous man.”

“Who? Your grandpa or Superman?”

“Let’s talk about something else,” said Linda.

She and Bethany started to talk about their day—how would they spend this first day of summer.

“How about the zoo?” Linda said.

“You can’t be serious,” said Bethany.

---

When Linda was hit by a car, the priest told her daughter that the curse was broken.

“Yeah, well, faith can stop the mouths of lions, but when a girl drives drunk...”

“Maybe we should ask Mickey Mouse what he thinks.”



"You're not getting me anywhere near a pet store."

"Carol, haven't you heard?" the priest said.

"Heard what?"

"The elephants that day were the last kind of animal to—"

"Let's get something to eat."

"I've only got mixed vegetables." They were sitting in the priest's kitchen.

"Let's go out."

"But that means..."

"Yes, but at least we won't be here when your apartment building collapses."

"How did you know how my father died?"

"I didn't, but we can't just—"

Suddenly, a man burst into the apartment home and shot the priest and Carol.

---

After a century passed, Jason was exploring his second cousin's attic. He found a book. He opened it and read a little bit about this relative: Apparently, he was dirt poor. He and his best friend. So when they decided to go on a vacation, they had to steal a canoe if they wanted to get on the water at all. Before they drove to a boat landing, they hooked up a couple of toy wagons to the back of their car. When they got to the lake, they stealthily swiped a canoe off the roof of a truck when the owners were not around. They set it on the toy wagons and sped off to a different nearby lake. Before venturing out, they went to work setting up their fishing lines. After the second cousin had everything finished, he turned to his friend and said, "Wait a minute. Where's the handle for this reel?" Apparently it had broken off. Whatever happened to it, it was definitely missing. His friend said, "Look at this mess." His rod had fishing line tangled all around it in impossible knots. "Let's just go out there and paddle around," he suggested. And that's what they did. For about three minutes. Then the wind got going real good. The waves were too much for their little craft and they capsized. It was still early spring and the water was cold. But before they could catch hypothermia, a giant fresh water shark (This animal had gone into Noah's Ark alone. It was the male. After the flood, God caused

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it to land in this lake. Throughout the centuries God had a special eye on it, keeping it alive because it had no mate.) swallowed them and they lived a few days in it's belly. But eventually, they ran out of sustenance.

The next thing Jason found was an old yellowed obituary that had been clipped out of an ancient newspaper. He had himself a good laugh.



# THE COEN BROTHERS,

## THE QUINTESSENTIAL FILMMAKERS, AND THE MYSTERY OF TIME (QUALITY TIME, SPECIFICALLY)

So I used to work at a snack bar. In between customers, when the time would lag, I would try to replay movies in my head. I would think about *Empire of the Sun*, a two and a half hour long film. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't fill that amount of time with just remembering scenes. I would think about the first shot of the movie, and the next instant I would be thinking about the last shot. If I had a TV set and a DVD, obviously things would be different. But what I really needed was someone to order a bag of popcorn or a hot dog.

I also used to work in a dish room. I would think of each dish and utensil that passed through the sink as a word in a codex. A colleague of mine, who worked the morning shift, would sometimes inform me of how many "units" (dishes, pots, pans, forks, etc.) he estimated he washed that day. Not entirely unlike how at another job of mine, the managers would measure the shifts in how many dollars worth of sandwiches we sold.

Speaking of a codex, what if that character at the end of the *Twilight Zone* episode that broke his glasses just when he had all the time he wanted to read books, what if he was a speed reader? Wouldn't the episode be just as tragic? Let's just say he had 1,000 books. He could read each one in a couple of minutes...do the math and you'll see that he wouldn't back down from serving a bowl of soup to a kid if he had access to a kitchen like I had at that snack bar.

But we're living in time. Soon, the Bible tells us, there will be "time no longer." Then, and only then, let's be realistic, will there be a digestible "epic of peace." But now we have Coen Brothers films. They are unapologetic about filming things happening. Maybe the closest thing we have to an "epic of peace" is a bar. For a bar where nothing ever happens is "Heaven" by Talking Heads. But maybe being in a bar with no books or films or dishes to wash or pretzels to heat up, maybe we'd be right back to where this essay started. But now we have Coen Brothers films. They can film a kidnapping, a murder, a divorce, and we are suddenly at the end of one of their movies. Wait a couple of years, and they'll come out with another film. What do we do with ourselves in the meantime? We have books, *Empire of the Sun* is out on DVD, and we can slurp down some shaved ice.

As far as time goes, it goes. Use the word "time" in any sentence or phrase and you have enough space to fill as much of the stuff as you need. What did I do with myself between when *Fargo* came out and when *The Big Lebowski* came out? That's all in the past. But right now, I'm really wondering what to do with myself between when I finish writing this essay and when I go to bed (also known as "bedtime"). Rush wrote "Time Stand Still," and every man's "time" comes. But for now, well, I'll just put in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, and in the morning, maybe I won't be either.

But if I do wake up, I'll go out to Miller's Crossing. If I can find it. Obviously, it's a real place, meaning, those were real trees and leaves the Coens captured on their third film. But where was it in this world. I could much more easily, if I do wake up tomorrow, find my way to Fargo, the city—I could find my way to the cabinet in my apartment and take out *Fargo*, the DVD—or I could use less gas and stay at The Hitching Post, the small motel in Forest Lake, MN that stands in for one in North Dakota in the film. Then I could pretend like I was on the run like Jerry. Let's see, going back in time again, the movie was filmed around 1996...who's to tell if my teenage self was not just down the road buying a candy bar at the gas station while William H. Macy was being dragged out of the window of that motel (Forest Lake is my hometown). But places fill in for other places all the time in the movies. You can film in New York when your story is set in LA. To extrapolate, you can film *A Serious Man* in 2009 when Larry is breaking down in the '60s. Time and Places. Places and Time. Time to edit the video of my trip to Omaha. Uh-oh. A scene

is missing, and I'm already back to my Minnesota apartment. I'll just go outside when it gets dark and film a streetlight; no one will know it's a streetlight in the Twin Cities rather than in Nebraska. But alas, by now everyone knows that the jawas were filmed in Tunisia rather than on Tatooine, which is as real as Miller's Crossing, which was filmed on Earth as opposed to Endor. Do we have time to go to *Raising Arizona*...?

Of course. I have the day off so I'm spending my time writing this. But maybe you're reading this and you have to go to work in the next five seconds. In that case, of course not. But this will be here when you get home. Pick the book up again then, please. You're still there? Well, everyone knows that H.I. and Ed had to have the time of their life to get to the place at the end of their life that may or may not have been Utah. That's why yet another Rush song goes, "When all the bones are buried there is barely time to go outside and play." Because of the title of this essay, I'm trying to use the word time as much as possible—after all, in most cases the tone of a particular piece depends on its very diction. And I hope it jumps out at the reader: "There's that word again," I hope you say. Remember a scene from Hitchcock's *Sabotage* where the female lead keeps on hearing the word "knife" repeated. Her husband's dialogue is all muffled except for that particular weapon: she hears Knife Knife Knife until she drops what is just a piece of cutlery from her hand in fright. Maybe before you get to the end of this essay, you'll have read time time time until you drop the book from your hands and decide you can't spare another second so you go out and buy *The Hudsucker Proxy*, on DVD again, of course, and watch it for about the one hundredth...

Time has brought us to the part of this essay where we talk about *No Country for Old Men*. In the film, those old men had to live a long time to become old men. They had to see enough of life to know that everything wasn't just "waiting on you." I don't know about the rest of the world, but one thing I got out of this movie was that God was biding his time. And although it seems like the bad guy won, God is still good. When Josh Brolin asks Woody Harrelson about what the deal was with this Bardem character, he says, "Let's just say he doesn't have a sense of humor." That kind of makes me think it suggests that, contrary to some views, God (or Jesus) does have a sense of humor. That He is Sense of Humor as much as He is Love. After all, Dante's work is called the *Divine Comedy*. But before you can object by throwing verses at me like, "Sor-

row is better than laughter,” or, “Be afflicted and mourn and weep,” the Coens had to spit the heaviness of this award winner out of their mouths with their next film, the hilarious *Burn After Reading*.

Which, in a way, is more tragic than its immediate predecessor. Perhaps the juxtaposition of when these two were released forms a kind of two-act tragicomedy not entirely unlike Mr. Beckett’s. The first is ostensibly tragic while the second is ostensibly comedic, so you don’t know when to laugh or feel dread. When I hear John Malkovich talk about the “idiocy of today,” it reminds me of when Thom York sings, “Has the light gone out for you/Because the light has gone out for me/It is the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” Way back when, it seems like you kind of knew who your enemies were. That’s why *The Pilgrim’s Progress* preceded *The Hollow Men* by centuries. Meanwhile, time shoots on by.

Enough time for me to watch *Hail, Caesar!* Which is so...I don’t know if the right word is holistic or ecumenical. Let’s compromise: it’s entertaining. And that’s what the Coens are good at. And in this particular film, it takes all the time that has made up Time to pass the time it takes to get to the end before you can put in *Barton Fink*, who is running out of time to get his wrestling picture written. But who knows, perhaps in the extended Coen universe Eddie Mannix might hire Turturro’s character someday. Because the two movies are about movies. Even I make movies. And I like to dare to think that I understand film grammar as much as Joel and Ethan. In *Hail, Caesar!* there’s a scene that ends with a character picking beans out of his teeth, after which it cuts to another scene—a kind of punctuation. But long before this movie came out, I made *That One Movie*, which ends with Stephen Rettner’s character picking cheesecake out of his teeth: the same type of punctuation. The Coens have admitted that what they do today isn’t all that different than what they did when they were kids playing with their camera, except that now there’s a lot more people on the set. Maybe what I do today isn’t all that different from what the Coens do, except that there’s a lot fewer people on the set.

Well, I don’t have the time, or I have way too much time (if I may offer a riddle like G.H. Dorr does in *The Lady Killers*) to write an exegesis on every piece of dialogue from *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* or a dissertation on the Dude or an ode to *Blood Simple*, because one has to choose how to use their time. I could say I watched every Coen Brothers movie and then my weekend

## UNREMEMBERED MEALS

was over, or I could say, I made my own movie and then my summer was over, but I know I will say: ...and then my life was over. Time enough for a good western.



