

## The Man

By James H. Jenkins

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*This story was not written to “preach” to anyone--except maybe me.*

### CARAWAY’S

He’d seen the derelict a hundred times outside Caraway’s: a stocky, black, mangy-haired bum, maybe sixty years old, leaning half-drunk against the wall by the entrance, his hand perpetually outstretched. As Brian Whitcomb pulled his Mazda into a parking space near the door, he sighted the man and winced.

How many times, he thought; how many *times* have I seen that guy here, and always the same damn thing? But, Brian had promised his wife a bottle of Merlot for dinner, and Caraway’s was convenient. So, he sighed, got out of the car, and made his way toward the door.

“H...Hey, friend,” the man intoned, as Brian reached for the handle: “do..do..do ‘ya gotta’ money...” He paused, catching his breath, groping for the words. “Y..Y..You got some change you could spare me?”

“Get a job, man!!” Brian shouted, brushing away the trembling hand and opening the door. He snatched the Merlot from the shelf, then moved toward the counter. “Hey, Keith!” Brian shouted. The proprietor of Caraway’s emerged from behind a partition, striding toward the cash register. “What’s up, Brian?” Keith grinned. “How was work, today?”

“Fine, fine!” Brian snapped. “Hey, Keith, why does that bum sit there by the door and bother everyone? Can’t you call the cops on him or something?”

“Sure,” Keith answered; “I’ll call the cops on him--just like a dozen times before. And it’ll be the same.” He made a sweeping motion with his hand toward the door. “They’ll pick him up; take him to the drunk tank. Tomorrow, he’ll be right back outside. Cops say they got bigger fish to fry in this town right now, and so long as the guy doesn’t make any real trouble, they’ve told me not to bother ‘em about it anymore. So I don’t.”

Brian shook his head. “I’m sorry, man,” he sighed. “I just wish there was something you could do about him. I mean, he panhandles everyone that comes in here. What if he gets crazy, or something?”

“Naah,” Keith grinned. “Just ignore him. He’s gonna’ bother you for a second when you come in here, and one more when you go out.” He reached over and slapped Brian on the shoulder. “So what’s that gonna’ hurt, huh?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Brian sighed, rubbing his bicep. “Anyway, thanks, Keith; I’ll be

seeing you!” Brian grabbed his wine and pushed open the door, rushing wordlessly past the fingers that feebly grasped for his coat as he passed by. He jumped into his car, threw it into reverse, and headed for 435.<sup>1</sup> With any amount of luck, he could still make it to Mission Hills before rush hour really kicked in.

Brian was still angry when he pulled onto Front Street. He never saw the semi, never felt it hit as it broadsided him at fifty miles per hour. There was merely a blinding flash of light, a loud “thump” inside his head--then Brian Whitcomb’s world went black.

## HOLDING PATTERN

“His name was Sonny.”

Brian winced as he opened his eyes, blinded momentarily by a bright light that seemed to come from everywhere. As his eyes slowly acclimated to the brightness, Brian gingerly looked around, trying to locate the source of the voice he had heard.

“His name was Sonny,” the voice repeated; “Sonny Preston.” The voice seemed to come from directly beside him, but Brian still could not see anything in the light. Gradually, however, he began to make out the shape of a man sitting next to him, on what appeared to be a park bench. Funny: while he appeared to be seated on the same bench, and could feel it beneath him, he could not feel his own legs or any other part of his body. His eyes finally focused on his neighbor: a bearded middle-aged man, clad in blue jeans, t-shirt--he couldn’t quite make out the logo--and a black leather vest.

“W...Whad’d you say?” Brian asked. “Who’s Sonny? And...where am I?”

“Sonny was that drunk over at Caraway’s,” replied the stranger. “And, as for where you are....” He smiled. “I think you already know the answer to that.”

Brian snickered. “You tryin’ to tell me I’m in heaven, or something?” he chortled. He looked around; if this *was* heaven, it wasn’t half bad! The two men were seated--alone, so far as Brian could tell--in a beautiful botanical garden, in which Gardenias seemed to predominate. And that *scent!* The aroma from those flowers was utterly overpowering; Brian had never smelled anything so intense in all his life. Funny: Brian had strong seasonal allergies, and should be sneezing uncontrollably. Yet, he could not even feel his nose.

“No, Brian,” the stranger responded, “you’re not in heaven. At least not yet. Think of this as a kind-of holding place, where you’ll have a chance to relax a bit before being taken to see The Man.”

“The Man?” Brian asked, confusion in his voice. “You mean--God?”

“Yes, Brian: God.” The stranger smiled. “You know anyone else around here who could

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<sup>1</sup> Interstate 435, which circles the Kansas City area, where this story is set.

be called ‘The Man?’”

“No, I guess not,” Brian responded. He looked at his companion sheepishly. “D...Do they really call him *The Man*?”

“Well, that’s what *you* called him, wasn’t it?” the black-vested man replied. “Didn’t you used to call him that all the time, back when you were in school?”

“Yeah, I guess I did....” Brian trailed off. “I hope he isn’t too mad at me about it.” He tried to crack a smile, but couldn’t quite manage it.

The stranger laughed. “Oh, I reckon not. He’s been called a lot worse things than that. But let’s not worry about all that right now. He’s got much more important things to talk with you about.”

Brian wanted to ask exactly what those “important things” might be, but he felt a sudden twinge of fear, and decided it might be better to wait. He looked once more at the beauty around him, then turned back to his companion. “S...So I just sit here until he calls me, or something?”

“Yeah; that’s pretty much it. But don’t worry; you won’t be alone. I’ll be here with you. In fact, that’s part of it. I’m here to help you; prepare you to meet The Man. So--let’s talk for a few minutes, shall we?”

“Sure--I guess,” Brian shrugged. “But who are you? Are you like, my guardian angel or something? Do you have a name?”

“Hmmm....” the black-vested man replied, scratching his chin. “‘Guardian Angel?’.....I guess you could put it that way, if you want to. As for my name: why don’t you call me ‘Josh?’ Sound good?”

“Sure,” Brian shrugged. He stretched out his hand. “Nice to meet you--I guess.” Funny: while he could feel the stranger’s hand, he could not feel his own. But maybe that would come with time, just as his eyesight had.

“So,” Josh asked, leaning back on the bench, “Tell me, Brian: would you say you’re ready to see The Man?”

Brian leaned forward and stared at the ground for several minutes, his elbows on his knees. “Well...I guess I am,” he finally replied; “I mean, I’ve been saved; I accepted Jesus as my personal Savior back when I was fifteen, and I got baptized after that, and I mean...” He trailed off for a few moments, then continued. “I mean, I know I haven’t been all that good and what-all, but didn’t it say that ‘whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved?’<sup>2</sup> I mean, isn’t that *it*: just ask Jesus to save you, and you’re in good with him?” He hesitated a few minutes more, then leaned back on the bench with a sigh.

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 10:13.

“So I guess I’d have to say I am. I can’t see that I really have anything to worry about--do I???”

Josh looked at Brian, shaking his head. “It never ceases to amaze me,” he replied, “how very many people in your world build their Bible around their beliefs, rather than building their beliefs around their Bible.” His voice seemed so soft to Brian--and yet so very, very firm.

“What do you mean?” Brian exclaimed. He was starting to feel scared--very scared. And why had Josh mentioned that loser from Caraway’s? What did *he* have to do with any of this?

“Haven’t you ever considered what Jesus said in Matthew’s gospel, about the people who would come to him in the Day of Judgment, claiming to have cast out demons in his name, and done many great miracles in his name?<sup>3</sup> Do you remember what he said to them?”

“I’m not sure....” Brian hesitated; he could vaguely remember reading something about that when he was a kid, but damned if he could remember what it said, now! Not even to save his life....

“He said that he would tell them: ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of iniquity.’”<sup>4</sup> Josh leaned forward. “Now tell me this, Brian: if everyone who calls on the name of the Lord is saved, then why would Jesus expel these people, here? He never denied that they’d done the miracles or cast out the demons; yet, he insists that he never even *knew* them.”

“You see,” Josh continued, “there’s just a little bit more to salvation than your preacher ever bothered to tell you. It’s not as simple as calling on Jesus’ name, or asking him to save you. That’s important, but it’s only the beginning. After all, did not Paul tell the Philippians to ‘work out your own salvation, with fear and trembling?’<sup>5</sup> If all you have to do is ask Jesus to save you one time, and you get a permanently-punched ticket to the Big Mansion in the Sky, what is there to ‘work out?’ Why ‘fear and tremble?’ Doesn’t seem to be anything to ‘fear and tremble’ about, does there? And yet Paul tells them to do just that.” Josh smiled. “You seem surprised, Brian; haven’t you read that part of your Bible before? I’d be willing to wager that your preacher didn’t preach too many sermons on that particular passage, did he? Or maybe he just found a way to blow it all off, so that it would conform to his own misguided understanding. The blind, leading the blind. And you’ll all fall into the ditch together, just like The Man said.”<sup>6</sup>

Now Brian was *really* frightened. This was not going at all the way he had imagined. He began to shake, amazed at how he could do so even though he could not feel his limbs or

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 7:22.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 7:23.

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 2:12.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 15:14; Luke 6:39.

skin. He looked around frantically, the urge to run welling up within him--but where to? There seemed to be nowhere to go; the Gardenias stretched on endlessly in all directions, and furthermore, Brian seemed rooted to this spot by a power he could fathom, but which he knew himself powerless to resist.

“So,” Brian blurted out, looking desperately at Josh. “What DID the Bible say about how to get saved?”

“The real Biblical teaching about salvation,” Josh replied, “has a name. And that name is ‘*Sonny Preston.*’”

Brian shook his head in bewilderment. “I don’t understand,” he replied. “What does he have to do with me?”

“Everything, Brian,” Josh responded, a profound sadness in his voice. “Sonny Preston has *everything* to do with your salvation. Because believe it or not, when you go to see The Man, his whole criteria for judging you will revolve one-hundred-percent around Sonny Preston.”

“I don’t understand.” Brian was starting to cry, amazed at how one could cry when one could not feel one’s flesh, or one’s tears--and yet, he could sense them somehow just the same. “Can’t you help me, Josh? I’m completely lost here, man!” Brian was sobbing now; clearly he was but one step away from hell, with no idea of how he had even gotten here. He looked up at his neighbor, a look of desperation on his face. “Can’t you please help me??? *Please???*”

Josh smiled wanly as he arose from the bench, then gently touched Brian on the shoulder. “Let’s go for a walk, Brian,” he said gently. A path Brian had never noticed before suddenly appeared, leading over a low rise. “It’s okay,” Josh said; “I’m not taking you someplace bad. I promise. Let’s just take a walk--okay?”

“Okay,” Brian sighed, rising from the bench. “But can you at least tell me if there’s not something we can do, before I have to see The Man?”

“I’m not sure about that,” Josh replied. “But I’m going to see what I can do for you. For now, let’s just go for a walk.” He turned and headed up the trail, followed closely by his charge. As Brian reached the crest of the hill he had seen, he turned for one last look at where he had been--but the bench and its environs had disappeared, into that same bright light that had first greeted him.

## AS I FIND YOU

Southern Pines. *My God*, what a forest, Brian thought as he gazed appreciatively at his new surroundings. He had forgotten the woodlands of his youth: thousands of acres of ramrod-straight timber that turned even midday into twilight for all who dared to enter. Flashbacks rode the gentle breeze here, mingling with resin and damp straw, wildflowers

and honeysuckle, yellowhammers and mockingbirds. He could almost hear his own voice mingling with those of other children among the trees. Vignettes of a happier world, long ago forsaken.

“Remind you of something?” Josh queried.

“Yeah, it does....” Brian paused, lost in his memories. “I grew up in a place just like this.”

“Opp, Alabama,” Josh replied. “Yes, Brian, I know. You lived there until you were ten, when your dad brought you to Kansas City. Didn’t think too much of that move, as I recall.”

“That was hard,” Brian admitted; “hard, to adjust to the big city after living in the country all your life.”

“And even harder when your parents are divorced,” Josh offered.

Brian looked down at his feet, the tears starting to form again. “I don’t want to talk about that,” he finally whispered. “She left us. She fuckin’ *left* us!” He caught his mouth with his hand, then winced. “I’m sorry, Josh; I didn’t mean to say that.”

“Don’t worry about it!” Josh smiled. “Come on; it’s just a bit further.” Josh resumed his journey into the forest, with Brian in tow. After a mile or so they emerged into a clearing; Brian could discern several run-down shacks, all inhabited by black folk who were evidently of the poorest class. Visibly nervous, Brian hung back on the edge of the clearing, reluctant to enter the village.

“Don’t worry,” Josh said reassuringly; “they can’t see us. Nobody can see us here at all. *Nobody*. Think of this like you’re watching a movie. Only you’re right in the middle of it, instead of seeing it on a screen. Everything you see here already happened, a long time ago.”

“W...Where are we?” Brian asked, sheepishly.

“Forrest County, Mississippi. Near Palmer’s Crossing, to be exact. The year is 1959.”

“W-Why are we here?”

“Because Sonny is here.” Josh pointed to one of the tin-roofed shanties near the edge of town. “Right over there.”

“I still don’t get it,” Brian exclaimed. “What does The Man’s opinion of me have to do with him? I didn’t even *know* him!”

“Know him?” Josh queried. “Seems to me you knew him quite well, back at Caraway’s.

Well enough to call him a ‘bum,’ well enough to tell him to get a job, well enough, even, to want him arrested. And we’re not even going to talk about all the things you *didn’t* say--at least not out loud. But I can guarantee you that The Man will ask you about each and every one.”<sup>7</sup>

Oh *shit*, Brian thought; I think I can see where this is going, now.

“Ahhh,” Josh softly spoke: “Enlightenment. Do you begin to understand what’s going on here?” Brian nodded, but that puzzled look refused to leave his face. “But you said,” he asked, “that my whole judgment would hinge on Sonny Preston, and I don’t get that. I mean....why is that?”

“Because Sonny Preston--or rather, your rejection of him, your negation of him, your judgment of him, your condemnation of him, without really knowing one single thing about him--is the *last* place you were in life when The Man called your number.” Josh pointed to a large stump on the clearing’s edge. “Sit down, Brian,” he said. “You’ve had a long walk. Take a rest.”

Brian seated himself on the stump, his head in his hands. Funny, how he could do that while still not feeling his face or hands. Josh knelt down next to him, putting his hand on Brian’s shoulder. “Brian,” he whispered, “you and I are going to spend some time getting to know Sonny Preston.”

“But why?” Brian groaned. “Why? This isn’t *fair!*”

“Fair?” Josh replied. “What’s unfair about it? The thief on the cross confessed Christ at his last moments, and Jesus forgave his sins and admitted him to Paradise, even after a life spent in horrible deeds.<sup>8</sup> Isn’t it just as fair that The Man should require the soul of one whose last moment in life was spent rejecting him?” He paused a moment, then continued. “There’s a saying the Russians once attributed to The Man: ‘As I find you, so I judge you.’ If you’ll check your Bible, you find that saying is true--whether he ever actually said it or not.<sup>9</sup> That’s where all of that ‘fear and trembling’ that Paul spoke of comes in.”

“All of this,” Brian sighed, “because I refused to give that loser money?”

“No, Brian. All of this because at the final moment of your life, you *rejected* Christ. That’s why.”

“But I believed in Jesus!” Brian shouted, leaping to his feet. He shook a finger in Josh’s face. “You can’t say that I didn’t! You’d be a liar!”

“Ultimately, Christianity is not about what you believe;” Josh replied; “even the demons

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 12:36.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 23:39-43.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 24:42-51; 25:1-13; Mark 13:34-37; Luke 12:35-48.

believe in God--and tremble.<sup>10</sup> It's not about baptism, or 'getting saved,' or speaking in tongues, or any of that. Nor is it about some imagined 'holiness of life.' Some of those things are important, but none gets to the heart of it. Christianity is about acquiring the *heart* of Christ--the same heart that bled and died for those who rejected him, made fun of him, beat him senseless, crowned him with thorns, and then nailed him to a cross." Josh paused, looking toward the village. "And yet, on that very cross where they'd nailed him, one of the very last things he did was to beg his Father to forgive them. If you want to follow Christ, you have to acquire his heart. If you don't have it, you can't go where he is.<sup>11</sup> If you don't have Christ's heart, none of that other stuff is really going to matter."

"I don't believe you!" Brian exclaimed. "Where does it say that in the Bible?"

"Well, you could start with I Corinthians 13; the 'love' chapter. It says that even if you speak in tongues, correctly prophesy the future, understand every mystery, give all your goods to the poor, are willingly martyred, or even move mountains by your overwhelming faith--if you don't have love, 'it profits you nothing.' We could add to that Matthew 6:14-15, Matthew 18:21-35, Mark 11:25-26, Luke 6:37, and Matthew 25:31-46. I could name still other texts, but those will suffice. Maybe your preacher didn't preach too much from that part of the Bible. Or, if he did, he twisted it to conform to his 'by faith alone' nonsense."

"So what do those passages say?" Brian asked. "I mean...I don't remember much of the Bible."

"No problem." Josh smiled. "The first four deal with forgiveness of others. The Man basically says that if you don't forgive others, he won't forgive you. Simple as that. The grudges you keep--even one--will keep *you* out of heaven. But if you *do* forgive others, he promises to forgive you everything. Tell me something: if your preacher was right that one could be saved simply by believing in Jesus without any further ado, then what does he do with those texts? If salvation is as unconditional as he says, why did The Man put conditions on it? He didn't have mush in his mouth when he said this; it's all pretty straightforward."

"I don't know," Brian admitted. "This is all pretty new to me."

"Doesn't surprise me," Josh replied. "But let's not leave out the fifth passage, for it puts a third condition on salvation, besides loving and forgiving others. It says that if you refuse to help any brother of his who you see in need, when you are in a position to do so, The Man will refuse to help you, when you come to see him. Do you see, now, what I've been talking about?"

"But who are his 'brothers?'" Brian asked. "Doesn't that just mean Christians? Certainly it can't mean those who aren't even saved, or...." He glanced toward the shack

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<sup>10</sup> James 2:19.

<sup>11</sup> John 12:24-26; 13:13; Luke 6:46; John 13:24-25; 15:17; Romans 13:8; I John 4:7-12, 20-21.

Josh had pointed out, then toward the ground.

Josh smiled, slowly shaking his head. “You don’t get it, do you, Brian? Are not all of you descended from Adam and Eve? Did not Paul say that God made you all of ‘one blood?’<sup>12</sup> Did not The Man tell the Pharisees--the big ‘Bible-thumpers’ of his day--that whores and sinners would enter his Kingdom before them?<sup>13</sup> Did he not say: ‘I did not come to call righteous men, but rather sinners to repentance?’<sup>14</sup> Did he not say: ‘I would rather have mercy, than sacrifice?’<sup>15</sup> Did he not say that to help widows and orphans, the poor and the needy, was the *true* religion; the way to *really* know him?<sup>16</sup> Didn’t you hear what I said a moment ago, about how he loved and forgave even those who hated and murdered him?”

“Are you saying that *everyone* in this world is my brother?” Brian ventured.

“Haven’t you ever heard of the Good Samaritan?”<sup>17</sup> Josh asked. “Samaritans were hated by the Jews; no Jew would ever consider a Samaritan his brother! And yet, a Samaritan is the hero of that story. The Man wasn’t just saying the Samaritan was the wounded Jew’s neighbor; he was his *brother*.” Josh glanced toward the town. “In fact,” he continued; “If The Man were telling that story today, he’d turn the injured Jew into the Grand Wizard of the local Klan, while the one who helped him would be a black man--from one of these shacks, right over there.”

Josh paused momentarily. “That’s the real tragedy here, Brian,” he continued: “Everyone you hate, everyone you kill, everyone you reject, is your *brother*--the same as Randy or Todd. And when you reject even the least of your brothers, no matter the reason, you reject Christ.” He pointed toward the shack he had indicated earlier. “Which brings us back to Sonny Preston. Are you starting to understand what that so-called ‘loser’ has to do with you?”

“Yeah,” Brian sighed. He still didn’t like this very much, but there seemed to be nothing he could do. “So where do we go from here?”

“Right over there,” Josh replied, pointing toward Sonny’s home. “Your brother’s house. That’s where it all began.”

“What?”

“You’ll see. Let’s go.”

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<sup>12</sup> Acts 17:26.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 21:31.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 9:13; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 9:13.

<sup>16</sup> James 1:27; Jeremiah 22:16.

<sup>17</sup> Luke 10:30-37.

## OLD DOGS AND CHILDREN

“Sonny!!!!” The woman’s voice called out from the door of the shack. “Where ‘you at, boy??”

Brian and Josh made their way toward the ramshackle house that Sonny Preston called home. In the door stood a short black woman clad in a calico floral print dress, hands on her hips, her hair bound in material of the same pattern. “Sonny!!!” the woman called again; “Boy, don’t you make me come out there ‘an find you!! I’ll whip you good, boy, if you don’t get in here ‘an eat your supper!!” When Sonny still failed to appear after a few moments, the woman disgustedly stomped down the steps and around the side of the shack. A few minutes later she appeared, dragging a young boy by the ear. “I tole’ you, boy, to get in there ‘an eat your supper! We ain’t got time for this foolishness with those cats! I tole’ you to stop feeding them strays, anyway! Why you ’no listen to your Auntie, boy?!?”

Remembering the man he had seen outside Caraway’s, Brian stared at the waif being so rudely escorted into the house. He could see the resemblance in the face, and that nose was definitely the same. Funny; for having spent so little actual time with the man, Brian still remembered that feature. He stood hesitantly, unsure whether to follow Sonny and his aunt into the house. But Josh held up his hand, then pointed to the direction from which Sonny had come.

“Let’s go around back for a moment,” he said; “I want to show you something.”

Josh led Brian around to the rear of the house, where a small shed stood about fifty or so feet behind the structure. Opening the door, he pointed to a small wooden ammunition box on the dirt floor in the corner. Brian walked over to the box where he saw the strays to which Sonny’s aunt had referred: five small tabby kittens, huddled together on a burlap sack.

“Their mother was killed,” Josh observed. “Just like Sonny’s.”

“How?” Brian asked, quickly adding: “his mom--not the cat.”

“Raped. Raped and murdered. Ten years ago, not long after Sonny was born. The cops never made too much of an effort to find the perpetrator--but The Man knows. And if folks like him don’t repent and get right with The Man, they’ll see someday that heavenly justice isn’t as easy to escape as the earthly variety.” Josh paused. “All of the books *will* be balanced, Brian; everyone *will* pay their debts. Far better to balance them in life; much harder after you die.”<sup>18</sup>

“Who did it?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Josh replied. “That’s not the issue here. You are.”

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew 5:25-26.

Brian exited the shed. "So, what now?" he asked.

"Take a look." Josh nodded toward three youths stealthily making their way toward the shed. "Stupid Sonny," one whispered. "Playin' with 'dem cats of his. We'll teach him to tell on us to Ole' Man Parsons." While two watched the house, the third slipped into the shed. Brian heard the unmistakable clink of a shovel, followed by several quick whacks and muffled meows, then silence. "He won't be playin' w' dem no more," the kid snickered as he emerged from the shed.

"Children are cruel," Josh observed quietly. Always trying to imitate adults, you know." Brian turned away, his mind engaged in combat with a memory he was fruitlessly trying to suppress.

"What's the matter, Brian?" Josh whispered, placing his hand on Brian's shoulder.

"Why'd they have to do that?" Brian whispered, staring into space. "He wasn't hurting anyone. He was just a dog. Why'd they have to kill him? He was all I had--my very best friend."

"Because someone told them it was a 'manly' thing to do. Someone who should have known better. They'll answer to The Man, too, if they don't repent." Josh looked toward Sonny's house. "All Sonny wanted was someone he could love. His Auntie loves him very much, and he loves her, but those kittens were *his*. You never know what'll tear a hole in a kid's heart." He paused. "Just like you and Chelsea. Adults tend to forget that a broken heart is a broken heart--no matter how 'silly' or 'trivial' the cause." He turned back toward Brian. "And telling that kid to just 'get over it' somehow doesn't quite cut the mustard. Doesn't work too well for adults, either--though they tend to forget that, too."

Brian sat on the shed's step for several minutes. Suddenly he heard voices coming from the front of the house, followed by the opening of a door. "I'm just gonna' take 'em these chicken skins," Sonny hollered; "I'll be right back, Auntie Pearl!" Brian rose quickly and turned to Josh.

"We gotta' get out of here, man!" Brian insisted. "I can't handle seeing this."

"Okay, Brian," Josh responded. "No problem. I don't want to hurt you. That's not why we're here." No sooner had he spoken than he and Brian were standing just outside a large brick structure. "DePriest Consolidated," Josh announced. "Where all the black children go from Palmer's Crossing--in 1966." He nodded toward the door. "Let's go to school."

Josh entered the building, followed by Brian; they made their way down a hall into a crowded classroom. Brian quickly recognized Sonny, seated near the back in a rather dilapidated wooden desk. The boy appeared to be paying close attention to the teacher,

who was describing an algebraic equation. He was reasonably well-dressed, with a clean blue shirt, slacks and a necktie.

“His Auntie worked very hard to buy him those clothes,” Josh observed. “For Pearl, the most important things in life are God, family and education. It’s the same for most of the folks in this town--no matter what you’ve heard otherwise.” He nodded toward Sonny, who was frantically taking notes. “He really tries. Sonny knows that the only way out of this place is the military, or an education. There’s just one problem: try as he may, Sonny has an issue with numbers. He occasionally transposes them, and that makes math rather difficult.”

“Can’t they help him?” Brian asked.

Josh laughed. “Brian,” he asked, “where do you think you are? New York City? Kansas City? Chicago? This is Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in 1966. Change is in the air, and a lot of folks around here don’t like the way the wind is blowing. There’s no Federal school programs, yet; no special tutoring. The schools haven’t even desegregated yet, although the Supreme Court banned segregation years ago. Big Cheeses in these parts think there’s already too many ‘uppity niggers’ getting too much education for their own good, and they’re not going to spend any more money than they absolutely have to on it. They certainly don’t care about one poor black kid, or his future. But then, his future’s about to change, anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Brian asked.

“Just watch.” At this moment, Brian and Josh found themselves standing once more outside Sonny’s home. The front door opened and Sonny emerged, making his way to the mailbox beside the road. Reaching into the box, he withdrew several letters and a long manila envelope. “Draft notice,” Josh said. “Sonny’s just finished high school, and to honor his achievement, Uncle Sam has invited him to spend two years as his guest in the United States Army. Not that he can refuse, mind you. There’s nowhere else to go for him; he can’t go to college, and Sonny wouldn’t run off to Canada, even if he could. For him and the rest of the poor--black or white--there’s one choice: go to Vietnam, or go to jail. Simple as that.”

“Holy shit.” Brian covered his mouth again. “Sorry,” he sheepishly said; “I keep doing that.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Josh turned and began to walk up the road. “Come on, Brian,” he said, motioning for Brian to join him. “We’re not through with our walk yet. Not by a country mile.”

## CRUNCHING NUMBERS

*Crump. Crump. Crump.*

The sound of detonating mortar shells filled the air, as pandemonium reigned among a

long line of men making their way through a field of elephant grass. Shrapnel, mud and vegetation flew through the air, as the twenty-odd men from Bravo Company, Third Battalion, Twentieth Infantry tried frantically to dodge the incoming rounds, desperately seeking a cover that, for most, proved all too elusive. One young man was suddenly flung fifty feet into a nearby stream, minus a leg. Two more simply vanished into a cloud of dust, blood and flesh, that marked where they had been standing seconds before. Brian searched frantically for an escape, before remembering that it was all a *vision*; the shells couldn't hurt *him*.

“Binh Long province, Three Corps, Republic of Vietnam,” Josh softly announced. Brian was amazed that his guide could speak to him without having to shout above the din, but then nothing surprised him anymore in *this* place. “First Infantry Division. Our young friend’s home, for the last ten months and two days.”

“Short-timer!” Brian exclaimed. He scanned the frantically-scattering men for Sonny, finally spotting him behind a large tree, radio strapped to his back and a handset in his hand. “Sonny’s an RTO?”<sup>19</sup> he queried.

“Straight-leg infantry,” Josh affirmed. “All the way.”

“Bravo two-six, this is Delta six-three: over!” Sonny was screaming into the mike.

Funny, but Brian could hear the reply just as if he were holding the handset to his own ear.

“Delta six-three, this is Bravo two-six: over.”

*Crump*. Yet another G.I. was cut in two, just a few feet from Sonny’s position. Sonny ducked his head, frantically trying to keep his sanity amidst the chaos. A soldier ran up to him, flung himself to the ground beside him. “Preston!” he screamed. “The L.T.’s down! Sergeant Cooper’s had it, too! Ya’ gotta’ get some Arty in here, NOW!” Two more *crumps* rent the air, joined now by the distinctive *pop, pop, pop* of AK’s and M-16’s and the *bloop* of M-79’s. Another man thrashed from side to side in agony, screaming and clawing at his leg, which bled from two bullet wounds. Sonny crouched lower, trying to hear himself think.

“Bravo two-six, this is Delta six-three. Heavy contact; break!” Sonny let off the mike for a fraction of a second, just as he had been taught to do to avoid triangulation on his radio signal. “Actual down! Stand by for fire mission. Over!!” He rapped the handset against his helmet in frustration.

“Where’s the map?!?!” Sonny screamed. “Get me the map!!”

The same soldier who had talked to Sonny moments before reappeared, flinging the map to him as he threw himself behind an adjacent tree. Sonny fumbled with the bloodied

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<sup>19</sup> Radio-Telephone Operator. The radioman for any infantry, cavalry or other military unit.

laminated sheet, trying desperately to ascertain Charlie's location and coordinates. While he had called in many fire missions during his tour as an RTO, he had no experience in plotting one.

*Crump.* More screaming. Funny, Brian thought; he could actually hear Sonny *think*. Right, then up. Sonny frantically struggled to remember what he had learned in his Map Reading class back in Infantry School. That was it--wasn't it? Right, then up. He had to get these numbers right. *Crump.* Shrapnel tore through Sonny's left leg; he screamed in agony as he struggled to plot the enemy's location. There--that had to be it. Yeah--that's it! Six-one-niner; four-two-three. I'll get those suckers now! He grabbed the handset, struggling to speak through the unspeakable pain and the cerebral mist that was closing in around him.

"Two-six," Sonny gasped into the mike, "This is...six-three. F-Fire mission! Grid six-one-niner; f-four-three-two!" He broke again, grabbing at his mangled leg, then resumed. "Direction six-one-z...zero-zero. E-Enemy mortars. Fire for effect! Over." No time for spotter rounds.

"Six three," the radio crackled, "this is two-six. Solid copy; stand by; out."

Sonny ripped his field dressing from its pouch and rolled onto his side, struggling to wrap the bandage around his wounded leg without making himself a target for enemy snipers. *Soon*, he thought; soon Charles is gonna' pay. The Man back at Firebase London is gonna' put a hurt on him he'll never forget.

Brian instinctively knew that something was wrong as soon as he heard the incoming rounds. They were much too close; he'd heard artillery fire during his own time in the Army back in the eighties, and this definitely did not sound right. Sonny sensed this, too, and he frantically grabbed for the handset. But it was too late. "Short round!" he heard someone scream, as six 105-millimeter shells detonated within a few meters of their position. Sonny rolled over in anguish, weeping uncontrollably and pounding his fists into the ground as he lost consciousness.

"Transposition," Josh whispered. "The same thing that got him back in math class, got him again out here. Only it didn't get just *him*, this time. A simple mistake; very easily understandable, given the circumstances." He looked toward Sonny, who lay still among the shattered remains of his comrades. "This good-hearted kid, who loved animals and his Auntie, who only ever wanted to do the right thing, now has to carry *this* around for the rest of his life. You see, Brian, of the twenty-one men on that patrol, only Sonny Preston survived. He'll spend the next two years in a V.A. Hospital, learning to walk again." Josh knelt beside Sonny and placed his hand on his head. "But learning how to forgive himself for his mistake, for living when all his friends died--because of him--that won't be so easy."

"Man," Brian exclaimed softly, as the screams and other sounds slowly faded. He shook his head incredulously as he turned to Josh. "Guess I see how he ended up outside

Caraway's."

"Not quite." Josh replied. "You haven't seen the half of it, yet. But you will. You think this is bad? There's *much* worse to come." He pointed to the trail up which the patrol had come. "Let's go."

## THE SCARLET AND THE BLACK

The din of plates, silverware, voices and machinery filled the air at the Brandon Heaton Mission in downtown Kansas City, Missouri. Brian instantly recognized the place; he'd driven past it a thousand times or more, but never stopped. Now, it seemed, he was going to see it from the inside, for Josh was heading straight for the door. Passing through it, he turned back and beckoned to Brian, who followed him inside.

"How's it feel to be home?" Josh asked.

"Good....I guess." Brian looked around at the sight of two or three hundred shabbily-clad persons eating a hot meal of stew, bread and salad. "Homeless people?" he queried.

"Yes, Brian, homeless people. Looking for Sonny?" He nodded toward the rear of the building. "You'll find him over there. Go on; check it out."

Brian made his way toward the back, where the food was being distributed. While he had expected to see Sonny somewhere in the line of people waiting to be served, or perhaps seated at one of the long tables that filled the main hall, he was surprised to see him behind the counter. Sonny had clearly aged, yet here he was, a far cry from the run-down derelict he had seen at Caraway's. He was clean-shaven, clearly sober, and wore a blue t-shirt with a cross encircled by the words "Heaton Mission: Jesus Turned No One Away, Neither Do We!" emblazoned on the front. He was rapidly dishing stew into bowls, and handing them to a middle-aged African-American woman with short, curly hair, clad in the same kind of shirt as his. The woman was handing the bowls over the counter to each patron, one-by-one. Her smile and friendly demeanor immediately impressed Brian; she definitely lit up this room.

"Brian, meet Sharon Preston," Josh said, indicating the woman next to Sonny. "Sonny's wife. The mother of his two daughters."

"Cool." Brian turned to Josh with a puzzled expression. "I don't get it! This *can't* be all that long ago: there's a big-screen in that corner; everything here looks pretty modern." He shook his head. "This is just a few years back; so how'd he get from here to Caraway's?"

"Well, first let's discuss how he got here. And, by the way, the year is 2002."

Just eight years ago, Brian thought. So what happened?? It just didn't compute.

Josh led Brian back out the door to the front steps of the mission. “Take a seat,” he said, pointing to the rock railing.

“When Sonny came home from Vietnam,” Josh revealed, “they sent him here, to Kansas City. Sonny’s Auntie had moved up here to be with family, and Sonny wanted to be close to her. He met a nurse’s aide here at the hospital, Sharon Morrison, who seemed to be the only person who could get through to him. Sonny had a lot of anguish, a lot of guilt--and that fueled a lot of rage. But Sharon showed him a way out of that. A way to get free of it all.”

“What way was that?” Brian wondered if Sharon was into drugs. Maybe *she* had driven Sonny to drink? Brian found it difficult to imagine that the friendly, smiling woman he had seen could be like that--but he’d seen plenty of other friendly, smiling women who were. Plenty of friendly, smiling *men*, too, if he wanted to be truthful about it. No, it still didn’t add up.

“Not even *close*.” It was as if Josh had read Brian’s thoughts. “No, Brian, it wasn’t dope, and it wasn’t booze, that Sharon introduced Sonny to. He’d already seen all of that in the Army. She didn’t drive him to drink. You see, Sharon was onto something, something that most of the preachers, popes, so-called theologians and other religious types never seem to get: the true meaning of religion. What it’s *really* all about. The whole teaching of Jesus Christ, in a nutshell. The *one* thing that will separate the sheep from the goats, as The Man said.”<sup>20</sup>

“What???” Brian asked eagerly. “What is it?”

Josh grinned. “Brian,” he asked, “how long has it been since you’ve been to the boats?”

“*The boats????*” Brian replied, incredulously. “As in.....*casinos????*”

“Yeah--casinos. Ameristar. Harrah’s. Isle of Capri. Argosy. Seventh Street. Take your pick.”

“Are you *serious????*” Brian exclaimed. “What does a casino possibly have to do with the true meaning of religion? I mean, unless Roulette, Poker or Slots are your religion!” He began to laugh.

“Let’s go find out, shall we?” Josh smiled, pointing up the street toward the Missouri River, where the gambling boats lay. “Pick one. Any boat will do.”

“Okay,” Brian shrugged. “Harrah’s.”

“No problem,” Josh replied. “We’re there.” No sooner had he spoken than they were standing beside the distinctive multi-story clock tower that framed the main entrance to Harrah’s North Kansas City casino. “Let’s play some roulette, shall we?” Josh nodded

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew 25:31-46.

toward the door.

“Roulette???” Brian shook his head as he followed Josh into the casino. This was so far beyond his comprehension anymore that he’d decided simply to go with the flow. Might as well enjoy the ride, Brian thought. It wasn’t as if he had any choice about being here, anyway!

Up to the second level they went, to the center of a large, well-apportioned room where the roulette wheel stood. The crowd was sparse: only five people were playing at this particular moment. “How much do you know about roulette, Brian?” Josh queried, as they took their places around the table.

“Not much,” Brian replied; “it was never my game.”

Josh smiled. “This is probably going to sound pretty corny to you, my friend, but you can learn a great deal about religion at a roulette wheel. Much more, sadly, than you’ll ever learn in the average church.”

“How is *that*???” Brian shook his head incredulously. Whatever it was, he was sure that Josh would not neglect to tell him.

“I’ve never played roulette,” Josh replied; “but there’s really nothing to it. The numbers are assigned to one of three colors: red, black or green. You can bet on a number, a range of numbers, or a color. Now just for our purposes, let’s discard the green. On *our* wheel, there are only two colors: red and black. And everyone gets only one chip. Are you with me, so far?”

Brian nodded. “Okay,” Josh continued; “here’s the deal: you place your bet, and the man starts the wheel and ball spinning. So long as that wheel turns, you can change your bet; however, once the croupier stops the betting, that’s it. Wherever you are at that moment is where you remain, until the wheel stops--and the ball drops. Winners get paid; losers pay the house.”

“So you’re saying life is like a roulette wheel?” Brian asked. He couldn’t get Sonny and Sharon, back at the mission, out of his mind. He seemed so *normal*. What had gone so terribly wrong???

“In a nutshell: yes. Think of it as the choice each of you makes as to what kind of life you will lead. Some put their faith in the “right” church, the right belief, the right lifestyle, the right interpretation of the Bible--the “right” whatever. Each of these is represented by a number. Others never choose--never realizing that even atheism has its spot on our little table. Everyone bets their future on *something*, even those who refuse to admit that they *have* any future beyond the grave. Now, so long as that ball keeps spinning, so long as you are drawing breath, you can always move your chip and change your bet. But for each of you, that moment inevitably comes when The Man calls your

number, and all betting ends.”

“Which for me, came out on Front Street,” Brian observed. “So you’re saying I chose the wrong number?”

“You put your chip on the ‘right belief,’” Josh replied; “the idea that simply believing in Jesus and accepting him as your ‘personal Savior’ would be enough, even though the Bible says something different--if you’d only read it. Problem is, The Man doesn’t really pay much attention to the number you bet on. I’ll let you in on that little secret. In the end, he only cares about what *color* you chose. And you, my boy, bet on the black--when you should have bet on the red.”

“*Whaaat????*” Brian asked, puzzled.

“Yes, Brian: the wrong *color*. You see, no matter what religion, church or lifestyle--or lack thereof--you pick, all of you fall into one of two categories: those who put others before themselves, and those who put themselves before others. Red or black: other-centered, or self-centered. It’s which *color* you’re on when the ball stops--*that’s* what determines how The Man judges you.”

The sound of excited voices interrupted Josh’s discourse; the wheel had stopped turning, and an excited young Asian woman clapped with glee at her sudden good fortune. “Good for you!” Brian whispered appreciatively. Even after all he had seen, after all Josh had told him, he was still fighting this.

“For instance,” Josh continued, “even though this belief of yours was flawed, there are still those who believed *exactly* as you did who will be saved, while others who believed that very same way will be lost. Their salvation or damnation never depended upon their belief, but on their *hearts*. The ones on the red acquired the heart of Christ: they put others ahead of themselves. Not in some superficial way; no, selflessness *was* their life. Those on the black, on the other hand, put themselves above others, no matter how ‘unselfish’ they might have seemed on the outside. In the end, heaven will be filled with Catholics and Protestants, prostitutes and preachers, Muslims and Jews, gay and straight, and a host of other allegedly incompatible groups of people--all of whom share the same *heart*, even if their beliefs, lifestyles, and so forth seem utterly at odds with each other.”<sup>21</sup> Josh smiled. “There’s even a place for *atheists*,” he revealed, “on the *red* side of the board.”

“*Get out!!!*” Brian retorted. “You’re telling me that even an atheist can get into heaven, if he or she lived a life putting others before themselves?” Brian chuckled. “Man, now I’ve heard it all!”

“Let me tell you about someone I met once,” Josh replied; “his name was Barry. Barry Denton. Barry was an atheist; he simply didn’t believe in God. He wasn’t belligerent about it; he just didn’t believe. Simple as that. But he lived a life that outdid most of the

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<sup>21</sup> Acts 10:34-35.

so-called 'Christians' I've ever seen. He had a son, a drug addict who constantly stole from him, abused him and made his life a living hell. In and out of prison that boy was, and yet, every time, his dad was always there for him. Friends told Barry: 'you need to quit helping that kid of yours; he's just going to take you again!' But Barry didn't listen; that was his *son*, and his son needed him. So he was always there for him, even after he got taken, time after time. And it wasn't just his son; Barry was that way with everyone he met."

"Do you know what happened when The Man called Barry's number?" Josh asked. "It was really something to behold. Practically everyone believed they knew where *this* guy was going: straight to hell. But a funny thing happened on the way there: The Man didn't behave at all as everyone expected him to. He looked at Barry, and he asked him one question: 'Barry, do you believe that I exist, now?' 'I sure *do*,' Barry replied, trembling in fear. He, too, figured he knew how this would end--but The Man had a little surprise for everyone. He simply smiled, and said: 'Welcome to Paradise, Barry. Your sins are forgiven.' Simple as that. And Barry Denton, atheist, was admitted to heaven. I know--I was there."

Seeing the look of shock on Brian's face, Josh observed: "he's *God*, Brian; he can do that. He doesn't have an ego problem, like all of you do. He doesn't need affirmation from anyone to feel good about Himself, and he doesn't need anyone to tell him that he exists; he already knows that. He doesn't need anyone's permission to suspend the rules; he wrote the rules, and he can rewrite them any time it suits him."<sup>22</sup> Josh paused. "He's *God*. He doesn't care about what you *believe*; he cares about what you *do*. Simple as that."

Brian could say nothing; he simply shook his head in disbelief. The sound of clapping and excited voices interrupted his musing: the wheel had stopped once more, and this time an elderly man claimed the prize. Brian turned back to Josh, a look of incredulity on his face.

"This was Sharon's secret," Josh continued; "*this* was what she turned Sonny on to at that V.A. Hospital that forever changed his life. So long as you're focused on yourself and your own issues and problems, you'll never find true happiness. Even if all the world was to be dumped in your lap, you'd still never have peace. There'd always be something to drag you down, always some concern to arise--but Sharon saw past that. She heard what The Man meant, when he said: 'save your life, and you'll lose it; lose your life, and you'll find it.'"<sup>23</sup>

"Sharon was never too concerned about Sharon; she was concerned about Sonny, and Sarah, and Mary, and Pearl, and Michael, and all of those people she served at Heaton and elsewhere. She knew that if she concerned herself with *them*, The Man would take care of *her*. And so it was. Once she taught Sonny to do the same, a remarkable miracle

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<sup>22</sup> Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5.; Luke 5:18-26; Luke 7:36-50; Exodus 33:19; Romans 9:15-18.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; 17:33.

took place. Something no V.A. shrink, no matter how well-intentioned, could ever have managed.”

“So what happened?” Brian asked. “How’d he get to Caraway’s, from there?”

“Let’s go find out,” Josh replied. They exited Harrah’s, and began walking toward the highway.

#### SCENE OF THE CRIME

The glow of flames was visible long before Brian and Josh reached the accident scene. Twilight had fallen, and the wind blew cold with flurries and freezing rain. Funny, Brian thought; he could tell it was cold, but it didn’t feel in any way uncomfortable; in fact, it didn’t bother him at all. He could hear the screams of a woman, coming from within an overturned minivan, which had slid off the road and down an embankment. Brian ran toward the vehicle, where he could see a young black woman frantically beating against a window glass; her legs were pinned, and she could not escape. Two other women lay still within the blazing wreck. Brian ran toward the minivan, forgetting that he was a spirit without the power to intervene.

“You can’t help her, Brian,” Josh softly said. “All of this happened five years ago, now.”

“Sharon?” Brian asked breathlessly; “Sonny’s girls?”

“I’m sorry.” Josh’s eyes betrayed the sadness he obviously felt.

“But how?!” Brian exclaimed. “Why?!”

“They were headed for KCI,<sup>24</sup> running late, when they hit black ice. ‘Storm’s just begun; salt crews haven’t had time to treat the roads. They were going to pick up Sonny; he was coming from a conference at Homeless Helpers in L.A.. But now, they’ll never make it--and Sonny will never be the same.”

“How?” Brian asked. “It wasn’t his fault.”

“Sonny won’t be so easily convinced. You see, he was *supposed* to have come home on a 10:12 flight, but his old nemesis struck again. He transposed the numbers, and thought they said 12:10.”

“Oh, God,” Brian replied. “So, except for his mistake, he’d have been home on time--and Sharon and the girls would have missed the storm.” He looked away sadly. “No ice--no wreck.”

“Yep,” Josh responded. “You got it. And that’s how he came to be at Caraway’s.”

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<sup>24</sup> Kansas City International Airport.

Suddenly, Brian turned on Josh, his fists clenched in rage. “So *why* did The Man allow this?!?” he screamed. “*Why*???” If he’s as good a God as you say, *how* could he let *this* happen?!?”

The sound of sirens was approaching; soon the rescue crews would arrive, for all of the good it would do. Josh took a still-fuming Brian by the arm, turning him away from the wreckage and toward the bank. “Sit down, my friend,” Josh said grimly; “I need to ask you something.”

“Brian, do you honestly think The Man set up this accident?” Josh asked. “Do you think he just sits around up there, zapping planes out of the sky, sinking ships, starting wars, or causing car wrecks? Do you think he looks at each infant, and decides: ‘I’ll make this one normal, or that one deformed?’ Do you *really* think that’s how he operates?” Brian did not reply; he stared at the ground, still shaking with rage. “I hate to tell you this, but your idea about The Man--an idea most of your human brothers and sisters share in--is a shortsighted, downright *childish* approach to reality. So I’m going to set you straight. Right now.”

Brian raised his head; he wasn’t used to hearing Josh speak so forcefully. He shook his head in frustration. “Go ahead!” he fumed; “set me straight!! You’ve been doing that ever since we met!!”

Josh squatted beside Brian. “Brian, one of the biggest mistakes every human being ever makes is to think that the world begins and ends with them.” He pointed toward the city, visible through a stand of leafless trees that lined the road. “A very long time ago, when the first man and woman appeared, God gave them the power to determine not only their spiritual destiny, but their future on earth as well. Do it my way, he said, and everything will be gravy. No death, no suffering, no hours of endless work with no real reward. No rich, no poor; plenty enough for everyone. Or, said he, you can do it your way, in which case you’ll have to live with the consequences. I have given you the power to procreate your species, and the inescapable urge to do so. So it’s not only *you* that your decisions will affect, but the generations that follow--thousands of generations to come. That’s free will: a formidable gift, but with an equally-formidable price tag, if the wrong choice is made.”

“*Whatever*,” Brian retorted; “you still haven’t told me *jack*!!”

“I’m getting to that,” Josh responded; “in fact, you should be able to see it, if you’d only open your eyes. When man chose the way of the evil one, of ‘me first,’ he fell--and that altered the *dynamic* of the whole universe. Take a look around: everywhere you see the effects of man’s self-centeredness--but there’s so much *more* you *can’t* see. It’s not just here on earth; it extends to every corner of the universe. Paul spoke of this, when he said that all of creation shared in the effects of the fall--and continues to ‘groan in agony’ even

now.”<sup>25</sup>

“What kind of crap *is* this?!” Brian shouted. “What are you trying to say?!” When man fell,” Jose responded, “he entered into an existence in which death and decay dominate everything. His intelligence, for instance, led him to invent ships--which, due to the kind of universe he lives in after his fall, sometimes sink. Or to invent cars--which sometimes wreck, because of mechanical decay, or human error. Or maybe just because of a freak storm--which comes about because of the disharmony that man’s rebellion has provoked. Machines crash, parts wear out, people make mistakes, diseases multiply and become more complex, leading to birth defects as well as suffering for other folks. Is *any* of this The Man’s fault? Or is it *yours*? You’re living with the choice your ancestors made--a choice that each generation after, right down to your own, has reconfirmed. I’m sorry, but you’re stuck with the world you’ve made for yourselves. The Man didn’t make it--*you* did.”

“*What-ever!!!*” Brian shook his head, still angry at the scene transpiring below him. The fire was out now, and the ambulance crews were working frantically--but futilely--on the young lady Brian had seen. Finally, all efforts ceased, blankets were pulled over the women’s faces, and their remains were prepared for the coroner’s arrival. Brian turned away, in tears.

“But there *is* a way out,” Josh offered; “a way not to avoid the tragedies of life, but rather to transcend them. The Man has promised a day of restoration, when all disharmony will cease, death and suffering will be no more, and all will be as it was in the beginning.”

“But you don’t have to wait until then,” Josh continued, “in fact, if you wait until then, it will be worse for you. Far better to get right now, to change not just your outward ways, but your *heart*. For that, you need something called *grace*: forgiveness and power from The Man, which he gives to all who ask--so long as they in turn are willing to do what he asks of them.”

“Which *is*?” Brian replied sarcastically.

Josh shook his head sadly. “Have you heard nothing I’ve tried to tell you?” he asked. “I have been telling you this whole time, but you aren’t listening. The Man doesn’t ask for your praise; he doesn’t ask for your groveling; he doesn’t ask for you to change your music, your clothing, or the length of your hair. And heaven knows, he doesn’t ask for your money--no matter how many preachers, priests and popes try to tell you different. But there *are* others out there who need it--people like Sonny. That money which, after all, belongs to The Man in the first place. *He* gave it to you; *he* gave you the means of earning it. *He* gave you sobriety, and a life that didn’t lead you into vice or despair. And all he asks for in return is your heart.<sup>26</sup> He asks you to become like he is: forgiving, loving, good to everyone--whether they ‘deserve’ it or not.<sup>27</sup> Once you do that, all the

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<sup>25</sup> Romans 8:20-22.

<sup>26</sup> Proverbs 23:26.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 5:38-48.

rest tends to fall into place.”

“But he’s judging me on the basis of something I never *knew!*” Brian cried. “I didn’t *know* all this! Why is he judging me as though I did? And why does he want to send me to hell for rejecting Sonny! I didn’t know his life’s story; how *could* I have known? If I had, maybe I would have done differently--but I DIDN’T KNOW!!!!” Brian grabbed at a clod of dirt to fling against the burnt-out minivan, but his fingers only passed through it. “It’s just not fair!!” he screamed in frustration, flinging himself to the ground once again.

“Ahhh,” Josh softly spoke. “Now, we’ve finally arrived.”

“What do you mean?!!” Brian shouted.

“We’ve finally arrived, my friend, at the *reason* for your condemnation; the reason why your talk with The Man will not be a pleasant one. You see, you didn’t know Sonny at all that afternoon, when he asked you for money and you treated him just like the worthless scum you thought he was. You didn’t know him--and yet you judged him as though you did. And it is for *that*, Brian, that you will be condemned, when you stand before The Man. Not for anything else you ever did, or didn’t do; *that* alone will be enough to bring you down.”

“Have you ever read Matthew chapter seven?” Josh asked. “verses one and two? ‘Do not judge,’ it says; ‘because whatever kind of judgment you inflict on others, is precisely the same judgment The Man will inflict on you.’ Or, you could take The Man’s words in Luke 6:37: ‘Do not judge, and you won’t be judged. Do not condemn, and you won’t be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.’ No exceptions. Here’s yet *another* condition The Man placed upon salvation; another blow to your cherished *sola fides*<sup>28</sup> doctrine. Matthew 7:21-23 really starts to make sense, now. Can you understand where you went wrong, now?”

“*Screw you!!!*” Brian screamed; “And *screw* The Man, too! *Send* me to hell! I don’t care anymore! I’m tired of this shit!! It isn’t fair!! *It isn’t fair!!!*” Feeling his impotence only increased Brian’s rage. He wanted to smash something, to lash out, to hit Josh or anyone he could find, but he was utterly powerless to do so. “Just *get lost*, man! I didn’t know *any* of this stuff, but he’s gonna’ send me to hell for it, anyway! So just *DO* it, and *get* it over with!!!”

“You want to go to *hell*, Brian?” Josh replied. “Okay--to hell let us go.”

### THE THIRD SPIRIT

Brian instantly regretted his angry outburst the moment he became aware of his newest surroundings: a place of utter darkness, the air thick with sulfur and punctuated with the hideous shrieks of those in obvious torment. But shouldn’t there be fire? He could see no

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<sup>28</sup> *Sola Fides*: “By Faith Alone,” the cornerstone of all Protestant dogma, which says that a person is saved by faith alone, without works--in direct contradiction of James 2:24, which says exactly the opposite. The term was invented by Martin Luther, who wanted to “trash” James’ epistle because it opposed his teaching.

flames, nor feel any heat. But that sulfur was *rank*! If he had to be *here* forever, he was already in trouble. And if The Man ever lit that proverbial burner, things would definitely get worse.

You *asked* for it, Brian thought, as he looked around for Josh. He could not see his guide, but gradually became aware of a presence beside him in the blackness. He could only hope it was Josh, and not someone else.

“This is hell, Brian.” Josh’s voice was firm and even. “Here is where all the books are balanced, and every debt paid. The Man offered you a settlement in life, but you turned him down--told him to ‘get lost.’ So, here you are. You *did* ask to come here, don’t you remember?”

“I didn’t mean that,” Brian replied softly. “I was just mad. I’m sorry.”

“‘Sorry’ doesn’t cut it much, in this place,” Josh responded. “*Everyone* here is sorry to be here; everyone regrets what they did--or didn’t do--to get sent here. But the debt is fixed, my friend, and you won’t come out until it’s paid--in full.<sup>29</sup> And nobody but The Man knows how long that will take.”

“So why do I owe *him*? I understand about Sonny, but what’d I do to *The Man*?”

“Suppose you were destitute,” Josh replied, “living out of a trash can, without one bit of hope. Just like Sonny. Now let’s say I walked up and handed you my platinum Master Card, and told you to go down to this nice loft over on Quality Hill, and put a year’s rent on the card. Following this, you were to go to Neiman Marcus on the Plaza and get some nice threads, then fill up your fridge in your new place. Then after all that, I drove you up to Aristocrat Motors and bought you a brand-new Mercedes--*gratis*. Then I took you to a friend in Johnson County, and got you a nice job with him. Would you not say that you *owed* me--bigtime??”

“Uh, *sure*, I guess I would.”

“Would you not equally agree that since the card was mine, I have a perfect right to put any limitations upon its use I wanted to? Especially given my extreme generosity toward you?”

“Yeah...” Brian replied hesitantly.

“You’re right. But let’s up the ante’ a little. Let’s say that instead of being grateful for all I’d given you, you chose to take my generosity for granted. You used my money to buy drugs, or prostitutes, or gamble, or whatever, even though I told you the card was just for food, clothing and rent. Nothing more. But that wasn’t all: you wrecked your new car while driving drunk, and embezzled thousands from my friend. Wouldn’t I be justified in insisting that you owed me every dime you had misappropriated--*plus* what

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<sup>29</sup> Matthew 5:25-26.

I'd given you to begin with?"

"I think I get your point."

"He's your *creator*, Brian," Josh replied. "He gave you life; you wouldn't *exist* without him. You came *into* this world owing him, but he'd much rather give than collect. All he asks of you is a few simple things: be good to everyone, don't judge anyone, forgive everyone. Don't be self-centered. But you took the life, the nice things he gave you, and you misused them. You *stole* from him, *and* from his friends, and when he offered you a chance to make things right, you had the audacity to tell him to get bent. Does *this* answer your question?"

Brian sighed. "I guess. But I didn't *ask* to be born! So why *should* I owe him?? That's not fair!!"

"Sure it is, Brian. You had no choice about being born, nor did you have a choice about the evil that influenced your existence from the moment you first drew breath. The Man's well aware of this, and he's written off the things you ultimately had no control over. You won't be judged for any of *them*. But there are other things--your reaction to Sonny, for instance--that you *did* have power over: that 'free will' thing; remember that? You can't blame your attitude toward Sonny on society, or your parents, or anything but yourself, if you're truly honest. That you *did* have power over, and it is for *that* that you are here. The Man offered to settle your debt with you in life, for next to nothing. But you told him to 'get lost.' So, just as with an earthly creditor, the time for any settlement is past. Now, you've been sent to collections. And here, you *will* pay all you owe--with interest."

"Fine, okay--I get it now." Brian paused a moment, then sighed. "So...is this *it*?"

"Everyone experiences hell differently," Josh replied, "according to the degree of their debt.<sup>30</sup> I've known some who experienced the Full Monty: flames, brimstone, extreme torture; the works. Others have experienced only a vague feeling of discomfort, like when you enter a darkened room in a supposedly 'haunted' house. Every experience is unique, but one thing they all have in common: no release is possible, until their debt is paid."

"Paid?" Brian asked. "I thought that those who went here, went here forever."

"Wrong. The Bible says that the punishment is eternal; it doesn't say that those who are enduring that punishment endure it eternally. God doesn't have an ego problem, Brian; were he to punish those who rejected him in hell *forever*, it would serve no purpose other than the assuagement of that pride you humans falsely ascribe to him. On the contrary: he's the one who said: 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they should repent.'<sup>31</sup> If you'll think about those words, you'll understand something about

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<sup>30</sup> Luke 12:47-48; James 3:1; Matthew 23:14; Matthew 10:15; Mark 6:11.

<sup>31</sup> Ezekiel 33:11; II Peter 3:9.

God.”

“What?” Brian replied.

“God thinks in terms of eternity,” Josh responded; “and eternity is a very long time. It serves no purpose for him to send people to hell forever merely for rejecting him, as if he had some vanity issue; nor does it serve him to send them to hell forever for the evil they do. He *loves* everyone, Brian--even ole’ Satan himself. He created Satan, and he remembers a time eons ago when Lucifer, as he was known back then, was one of the good guys--there were no ‘bad guys,’ then. And that’s the way he wants it to be once more. Thus, this place.”

“Kinda’ like...*Star Wars*??” Brian queried.

“You could say that. No matter how evil Anikin Skywalker became, there was someone who still believed he could be good again: his son, Luke. And in the end, Luke was right: Darth Vader recovered his true name, his true identity, and rejoined the ranks of the Jedi. And this is what The Man wants for all--even Satan himself. And he *will* have it--no matter how long it takes.<sup>32</sup> Those who turn to the Good Side during their earthly lives will have it easy; those who refuse, come here. Here, they will learn that the power of the Dark Side has been crushed, and here they will learn the absolute futility of their rebellion against the Good. Even though Satan believes that he can still triumph over God, if only by proving that God couldn’t make the devil change his ways, here he will learn that he is wrong--just like everyone else.” Josh paused. “This place will break even Satan himself, one day.”

“So.....” Brian hesitated; “hell’s not really meant for punishment, but for...correction?”

“Isn’t that what all punishment is for?” Josh replied. “If it’s just, if it’s the right kind of punishment, not something inflicted out of blind rage or to satisfy someone’s offended pride? *All* punishment is ideally for correction; you don’t want to hurt the one being disciplined; you want them to straighten up, and fly right. And that’s what God wants for all of you, even now. Even a guy like Hitler, or Stalin, or Satan himself. He doesn’t want to ‘take something out’ on them; he’s their *Father*. He just wants them to straighten up and fly right.”

“So...you’re saying I’ll get out of here, someday?”

“Yes, Brian, once your debt to The Man is paid. Of course, what you’ll go through in the meantime isn’t enviable. Trust me: that ‘paying’ part can be unbelievably, hideously painful. If you won’t break for The Man, he’ll break *you*. Whatever it takes, to get you where you need to be. As it says: ‘every knee *will* bow, and every tongue confess.’<sup>33</sup> No one will force anyone to do this; that’s not The Man’s way. No, you’ll all do it of your own free will. But what it takes in the meanwhile to bring you to that point--that’s what this place is all about.”

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<sup>32</sup> I Corinthians 15:24-28; Romans 5:18-19; Matthew 5:25-26; John 12:31-32; Ephesians 1:10.

<sup>33</sup> Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:11-12.

“Let me tell you a little tale,” Josh continued, “about a man whose name you’ve probably heard a million times: William Tecumseh Sherman, the great Union general of your Civil War. Now Sherman is most famous--or infamous, depending upon what part of the country you’re in--for burning vast sections of Georgia during his ‘March to the Sea’ in 1864. Southerners hated him then; they hate him today. But do you know *why* Sherman did it?”

“I guess he must have hated the Southerners,” said Brian; “for starting the war and all.”

“No way. In fact, Sherman was a great admirer of Southern culture, before the war. he didn’t even oppose slavery. Although he was originally from Ohio, he had been stationed in the South during his early days as an officer, and had actually explored much of the territory he would later fight over. He had many Southern friends, who thought very highly of him. When the war began, Sherman was the President of what is now Louisiana State University, in Baton Rouge. He was even offered a commission in the Southern army.”

“Whoa,” Brian exclaimed. “So, what happened?”

“The war happened. Sherman may have admired the South, but his loyalty to the Union outranked that admiration. To him, what the Southerners were doing was *treason*, simple as that. Dirty, rotten treason--and he would have no part of it. In fact, he informed his old friends that he would fight against them with everything in his power, until they saw the light and stopped their rebellion. He was cordial; friendly, even. But he warned his Southern acquaintances of the utter *folly* of what they were doing. No agrarian nation, he said, had ever successfully made war upon an industrialized one, especially one with a common border as long as the one between North and South. The Southerners might tell themselves that the ‘Yankees’ wouldn’t fight, but they would be proven wrong. Add to that the immense Northern superiority in weaponry, factories, railroads, money and other necessities of war, and the ultimate outcome was certain: the South would lose. But far too many good men on both sides would die in the process. And *that* Sherman saw as a heinous crime.”

“Okay, so what does Sherman have to do with this place?” Brian asked. He snickered for a moment, amazed that he could do so in a place like this, with what clearly lay in store for him. “Unless you’re telling me that the Southerners got their wish--and he’s burning here!”

“Whether Sherman is here or not is not the issue,” Josh responded. “Let’s get back to my story, and you’ll see what hell is *really* all about. Let’s fast-forward to 1863. Sherman and his boss, General Grant, have captured Jackson, the capital of Mississippi. Just like in Louisiana in ‘61, he gathers several prominent local Southerners for a talk about their condition. A fine dinner is spread, plenty of wine and liquor flow freely as Sherman tries to talk some sense into the rebellious Confederates. He tells them the same thing he told

his old friends in Baton Rouge--with the same, sad, results.<sup>34</sup> In the Fall of 1864, having conquered Atlanta, Sherman did the very same thing, one last time. Can't you *see* how hopeless your cause is, he asked? You have no chance whatever of winning this war--but thousands of men are still dying each month because you refuse to admit it! Once again, Sherman was polite--cordial, even. And once again, he was rebuffed.<sup>35</sup> So, Sherman decided to send his message another way. If the Southerners wouldn't listen to reason, he was going to give them something that they *would* listen to. And the rest, as they say, is history."

"I guess I see your point," Brian said. "But why are you telling me this? Isn't it too *late* for me?"

No answer.

"Josh?!?" Brian exclaimed; "Josh, where *are* you?!?"

Silence.

"Josh!!! *Josh!!!* Don't leave me!!!"

Still no reply; the darkness seemed to be closing in even more, and the stench of sulfur was worsening. "Josh!!" Brian screamed. "Josh!! *Don't go!!!* I'm sorry!! *Please don't go!!!*" Silence. He sobbed uncontrollably now, as the realization of his abandonment slowly set in.

He could hear the screams of others; folks he could not see, and whose physical presence he could not sense. *Those screams*. All he knew of these others was their shrieks, and this tormented him all the more; to be here was bad enough, but to endure this torment *alone*--but within earshot of others--was worse.

The intensity of the darkness, the sulfur and the screams was increasing--and then there were those *beeps* in the background. What was *that*? The beeps were growing louder; now they were pounding inside his head, as the darkness, the sulfur and the screams threatened to crush him into nothingness--no relenting; just that hideous beeping. He was going to go stark-raving *mad*, if someone didn't stop that noise....

"Oh my God!!!" an excited woman's voice echoed, seemingly from far away. "*Get in here!!!!* It sounded like....was that *Cheryl*? What was his wife doing here???"

Suddenly, Brian was jolted by a furious shaking. As his vision cleared, he was stupefied to find himself in a hospital bed, wired to a beeping heart monitor, being shaken by his wife. "Honey, *wake up!*" she cried; upon seeing him stir, she shouted to someone outside the room: "Kids, *get in here!!!* Your dad's *alive!!!*" A bevy of people rushed into the room: children, nurses and doctors, all pushing their way toward Brian Whitcomb's bedside.

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<sup>34</sup> See Lloyd Lewis: *Sherman: Fighting Prophet*, University of Nebraska Press, 1932, pp. 296-98.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 422-44.

“It’s a *miracle!*” Cheryl shrieked; “*a miracle!!* Brian, can you *hear* us??”

“Yeah...honey,” Brian whispered, weakly. “I can...hear you. Is it...really...you?”

“Of *course*, honey--who’d you *expect?!?*” Cheryl exclaimed.

“I’m sorry, baby...I’ve...been out...of it. How...how long have I...*been* here?”

“Since yesterday,” Cheryl replied. “We thought we’d *lost* you, after that semi T-boned you out on Front Street! They weren’t even sure if you were going to live!!” She paused, wiping away her tears. “Just a few minutes ago, you flat-lined, and we all thought you’d *died!*!”

“I thought I was a goner, too.” Brian stared at his wife, his tears flowing freely. “I really did.”

Three doctors had been pawing at Brian, reading their instruments, then consulting in one corner of the room. “Brian,” Dr. Martin said, “we’re going to send you down for an MRI and x-rays, just to be sure, but I believe something incredible has just happened. You had multiple fractures when they brought you in, ruptured spleen, concussion: the works. But we’re not seeing any evidence of that, now. It’s just like the accident never happened at all.”

“The Man...” Brian whispered incredulously, shaking his head.

“*The Man???*” Doctor Martin replied. “*What* man?”

“It’s nothing, Doc!” Brian replied, with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Nothing at all.”

Brian slowly began to sit up in his bed, touching his arms and chest, amazed that he could feel them again. He looked around, drinking in the wife and children he never thought he would see again. *The Man*, he thought; he’s given me a second chance. But why? And why *me?*

Suddenly, Brian thought of something. “I’ve *got* to get outta’ here!” he said, pulling the wires and leads from his body. “I’ve got someone I’ve gotta’ see.”

“You *can’t* go!!!” Cheryl shrieked; “they need to look at you; make sure you’re all right!!”

“Honey, I’m fine!” Brian insisted. He turned to Dr. Martin, and reiterated: “*I’m okay*, Doc; I *really* need to get out of here. I need to see someone. RIGHT NOW.”

“Fine; fine, Brian,” Dr. Martin replied; “we can’t make you stay. But will you *please* promise to come back later, so we can check you out? Just to be sure that you’re really

okay?"

"Sure, Doc; I'll be back first thing in the morning. Right now, I've got somewhere I've gotta' go."

"*Where* are you going?!?" Cheryl cried.

"Honey, I've got someone I've *got* to see, *right now*. You guys just go home, and I'll be there in an hour or two; I *promise*." Brian grabbed his wife by the shoulders, suddenly realizing he hadn't kissed her since his return. He flung his arms around her, kissing her passionately, then drew his children into their embrace.

"I really *love* you guys!" he wept. "I never thought I'd see you again!! I have so much to tell you about--but now there's just someone I've *got* to see. So I'm gonna' go see him, and then I'll be home. We'll have a nice dinner, and I'll tell you all about it. I really will. I promise!"

"I can't *believe* you!!!" Cheryl cried, still in tears. "*Who* is so important, that you have to see them, instead of us, at a time like this?!?"

"Babe, I can't *tell* you right now! I'd love to explain it, but there's no *time*. Please try to understand! Something happened to me while I was gone; something incredible! And I need to see this guy; take care of something." He gestured in frustration; how was he going to explain all of this? "I...I can't explain it all, right now. I've just *got* to see this guy! *Now*."

"Can't we go with you?" Cheryl asked. She reached into a bag beside the bed, producing a pair of jeans and a polo shirt. "I brought these...."

"No, honey," Brian replied. "I need to do this alone. *Please* try and understand." he turned to his son. "Jason, did you drive the Mustang here?" he asked. "Sure, Dad," Jason replied. Sensing what was coming next, he reached into his pocket for the keys, then tossed them to his father. "Fill it up when you bring it home, will you, Dad?" he quipped.

"Sure thing," Brian grinned. He grabbed his boy and hugged him once again, expanding his embrace to include his wife and daughter. "I know this sounds crazy," he said softly, but I *have* to do this. I'll explain later. Go home now, and I'll be along shortly." Cheryl and the children reluctantly complied, shaking their heads as Brian quickly dressed and prepared to leave.

What will I *say*?? Brian asked himself. He didn't know, but he was going to Caraway's anyway.

## REUNION

After checking out of the I.C.U., Brian made his way through the crowded parking lot to his son's car. Climbing into the seat, he momentarily savored the feel of the leather and the scent of Jason's cologne, still trying to take in all that had just happened. After a few moments, Brian put the car into gear and headed for Caraway's. He still wasn't sure what he would say to Sonny once he arrived, but he was certain that it wouldn't be what he had said before.

Brian frantically scanned the front of Caraway's as he drove into the parking lot, but no Sonny was to be seen. Had he left; moved on? A man was leaning against the wall by the pay phone; perhaps he would know. Brian threw the car into park, leaped from it and ran over to him. The man turned to look at him--and Brian stopped in mid-stride.

"*J-Josh??*" Brian exclaimed; "w-what are *you* doing here?" He felt as if he'd been struck by lightning; was all of this starting over again?

Josh smiled as he walked toward Brian. "Let's go for a walk," he said.

"Awww, *no!!*" Brian sighed resignedly; "and I told Cheryl I'd be home in an hour!" His voice cracked, as the realization of what this might mean suddenly hit him. "I-I guess I'm not *going* home...am I?"

"Actually, you said 'an hour or *two*.' We won't be long. We're just going to your car."

"And I...get to go home, afterwards??" Brian asked. His eyes were misting; he couldn't stand the thought that, after seeing his family again, he might lose them a second time.

"You're going home tonight, Brian," Josh affirmed. "I promise. Let's just sit in your car for a minute."

"Okay," Brian sighed. He led Josh over to his son's shiny red Mustang, unlocking and opening the passenger door. "Nice ride," Josh nodded appreciatively, as he took a seat inside.

"Thanks," Brian replied. "Jason and I picked it out together."

"I know. I was there."

Brian closed the door. "So...where's Sonny?" he asked hesitantly. "I was coming to tell him how sorry I was, to see if there wasn't something I could do for him, to tell him what I'd learned from you. I wanted to help him, if he'd let me. Even if he wouldn't, I wanted to tell him how *sorry* I was, for being such a jerk. For thinking he was just some rotten, deadbeat bum. After what you showed me, there's no way I just could sit back and do nothing."

Brian paused, looking out the window toward the store. "So...where *is* he?" he finally asked.

“Sonny died last night,” Josh softly replied.

“*What???*” Brian exclaimed. “*How???*”

“He’s been very sick, for a long time. Agent Orange. His drinking binges, poor diet, and life in that homeless camp didn’t help much, either.” Josh paused. “Nor did the rejection he received, from people who knew nothing whatsoever about him, but who might have helped him, nonetheless.”

Gripping the steering wheel with both hands, Brian began to weep uncontrollably. His head struck the wheel, and his tears flowed unrestrained. Josh reached over and put his hand on Brian’s shoulder.

“Brian,” Josh whispered, “It’s okay. Sonny’s with *me*, now.”

“*You?*” Brian replied. Suddenly, he understood. “*Y...You’re The Man???*”

“Yes, Brian,” Josh replied. “I’m The Man.”

Brian started to shake uncontrollably. “W-Why??” he stammered; “w-what’s all this about?”

“Brian,” The Man replied; “when Sonny died, he didn’t go to that ‘holding area’ where I met you. Instead, he came straight to me. And after I’d told him that he was going ‘uptown,’ as they put it in that one film,<sup>36</sup> I asked him if there was something I could give him, in compensation for that degradation he’d endured after Sharon’s death. Anything within reason, I said; just name it, and it’s yours.” He paused. “Do you know what he asked for?”

Brian shook his head. “I can’t....I don’t....”

The Man pointed at Brian. “He asked that I give *you* a second chance.”

Seeing the look of shock on Brian’s face, The Man continued: “Think of it: he could have asked for anything--but he never thought of himself. He thought only of you, even after all you’d done to him. *That’s* the heart of Christ, Brian; that’s *my* heart. And though I don’t usually grant such requests, I did *his*: a second chance--for you. So...here we are.”

“W-What should I do?” Brian was still trembling with fear. “W-Why *me*???”

The Man laughed as he gently squeezed Brian’s shoulder. “Brian, if Bill Gates pulled up in his Porsche, right next to us, and handed you a case containing fifty million in cash--all of it good--sure, you’d ask ‘*why me?*’ But would you let it get in the way of spending all

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<sup>36</sup> *The Heavenly Kid*, an Orion Pictures production from 1985.

that money?”

Brian grinned. “I guess not,” he chuckled. Relief spread over him like a wave; maybe this would end well, after all.

“Course, you wouldn’t!” The Man smiled. “But I’ve given you something more valuable than Bill Gates, or *anyone*, could ever give.” His voice softened. “Question is: what are you going to do with it?”

“The right thing--I hope,” Brian sighed. “I mean, I know I’m screwed up, but I *want* to do right. I just don’t know if I can. I mean, look at me; what’s to say I won’t do someone like Sonny the same way, next time? I’m not saying I *want* to, but have I *really* changed all that much?”

“That’s where *grace* comes in,” The Man replied. “Grace is what I do for you, after all you can--or can’t--do for me. It’s also what I give you to begin with, to enable you to do anything in the first place.<sup>37</sup> It starts out small, like a mustard seed.<sup>38</sup> But if you nourish it, exercise it, let it grow--it’ll fill your whole life, then branch out to bless others’.”<sup>39</sup>

“How do I get it?” Brian asked.

“All you have to do is ask--and *do*. *What* do you do, you ask? You should already know the answer to that. It all boils down to one simple imperative: *strive to put others before yourself*. Don’t judge anyone, don’t condemn anyone, no matter what their provocation might be; struggle to forgive everyone. Make your life a life of service to others, as much as possible. When I came to earth long ago, I said: ‘I did not come to be served, but to serve.’<sup>40</sup> Emulate me, as much as you can. Let the other guy win. Give freely of what you have, without stopping to ask whether the recipient is ‘worthy’ or not. Think about it, my friend; were *you* worthy of one thing I’ve ever given to you--including your new lease on life?”

Brian shook his head. After a moment, he spoke. “Can I just ask you *one* question?”

“You want to know about the deadbeats,” The Man replied. “The ones who panhandle all day out by the interstate, then climb into their Caddy or SUV to go home at night. Brian, I’ve never asked anyone to subsidize laziness. If you refuse to work when you are able, you have no right to subsist on the charity of others.” He paused. “But be absolutely certain that you *know*, before you refuse anyone. Don’t just look at the color of his skin, or his external appearance; don’t *assume*. You’d better *see* them get into that Caddy, that SUV, with your own eyes. Because one day, you’re going to answer to me, for each and every time you rejected someone. Simply assuming--I can promise you, *that* won’t cut the mustard. We just came from there, and we don’t want to go back.”

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<sup>37</sup> Ephesians 2:8-10

<sup>38</sup> Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:31-32; Luke 13:18-19.

<sup>39</sup> John 7:37-39.

<sup>40</sup> Mark 10:43-45; Matthew 20:25-28; John 13:1-17.

“So what about the dangerous ones? I mean, not everyone’s like Sonny.”

The Man chuckled at Brian’s question. “Brian, some of the most dangerous folks are not found in alleys or shelters, but in the boardrooms of banks and corporations. They’re also found in churches and classrooms, sadly enough.” He sighed. “I’m not asking you to suspend common sense. If you feel uneasy in a given situation, then you’re not required to endanger yourself. Just remember, though: I know all of your innermost thoughts and motivations. If you refuse someone because you’re justifiably afraid, that’s one thing. But if you refuse for some other reason, such as your prejudice or selfishness-- then I’m going to know *that*, too.”

“So,” Brian inquired, “do I need to stop watching TV now, or listening to music?”

“Brian,” The Man laughed, “I don’t give a *damn* about the kind of music you listen to, or what TV shows you watch, so long as they don’t get in the way of what really matters. True religion involves providing for the destitute, while ‘keeping uncorrupted by the world.’<sup>41</sup> But what *is* ‘the world?’ People tend to forget that the two greatest sins on my list have nothing to do with music, movies or sex. Rather, they involve the things we spoke of: forgiving and not judging others; and being good and generous with *everyone*, without asking whether they ‘deserve’ it or not. ‘The world’ is not specific sins, it’s the entire *culture* of evil and self-centeredness that permeates your earthly existence. Many Christians never realize this, and they’re going to find themselves in a very bad place in the next life.”

The Man paused. “That doesn’t mean go out and do whatever you want, by the way.” he continued. “People use movies, music, clothing, sex and many other things for selfish ends, and that’s the high road to hell. There’s a reason for all those do’s and don’ts in the Bible, and I’m not telling you to ignore them.” He looked out the car window, then back at Brian. “What I’m *telling* you is to get your priorities right. ‘This you should have done, and not left the other undone.’<sup>42</sup> It’s all common sense, really.”

“I get that,” Brian replied. “But shouldn’t you warn them about this? “I mean, I’m not trying to disrespect you, or say you *haven’t* told them. But *I* didn’t know, until I met you.”

“As Abraham said: ‘they have Moses and the prophets.’<sup>43</sup> Indeed, they’ve already been warned, in that very passage of Scripture: the story of the rich man who rejected Lazarus, and what happened to him as a result. And they’ve been warned numerous other times-- if they’d only turn off their television, put down the X-Box, pick up the Good Book, and *read*.”

“I understand,” Brian replied. He returned to the subject at hand. “So....Sonny’s with you?”

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<sup>41</sup> James 1:27.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42.

<sup>43</sup> Luke 16:29.

“Yep. Sharon and his girls, too. And his mom, and Aunty Pearl. And someday, even Ty Waltram--the guy who killed Sonny’s mom.” Seeing Brian’s surprised look, The Man replied: “Why are you surprised? Sure, he did a bad thing; a *heinous* thing. And his deeds caught up with him: he died in prison, about three years ago. Now he’s paying for the rest of his sins. But ultimately, at a time known to me, his heart will finally turn to the good, and he’ll ask my forgiveness--and I’ll pardon him, just as I forgave those who crucified me.”

The Man reached for a small woven cross dangling from Jason’s rear-view mirror. “You see this cross?” he asked softly. “You hang it on your walls, adorn your churches or cars with it, and wear it around your necks. But do you know what it really *means*?”

Brian shook his head. “I’m not sure.”

The Man smiled. “I’m not surprised; most of you don’t. Brian, because of my death and resurrection, one day Ty, and you, and Sonny, and Sonny’s mom, and everyone who’s ever lived--even Ted Bundy, Hitler, and Satan himself--will *all* be with me in Paradise. I’ll erase every memory of this life, except for the good parts, and even the *remembrance* of evil will be consigned to oblivion.” He paused. “Just like that last scene from *Return of the Jedi*: all enemies reconciled; everyone together again--even as it was, so very long ago.”

“And it starts right here,” Brian responded, “by what we do for others.”

“Exactly. You’ll see a guy under a bridge, or here at Caraway’s, and even though you know nothing about them, you’ll know all you *need* to know: who they *really* are, and where they’re going to be, one day. You’ll know there’s no difference between them and you, except for how long it takes to respond to me, no matter how I choose to manifest myself to each of you. And you’ll know that one day, everyone *will* respond--some’ll just need more time, and prodding, than others.<sup>44</sup> You know the how the story ends now, so it’s a lot easier.”

The Man put a hand on Brian’s shoulder. “You’ll begin to live in eternity, like I do. You won’t see a bum, a rapist, a child-molester; you’ll see a brother, sitting with you around my table in Paradise, *however* long it takes him--or you--to get there. And that’ll make it easier to refuse to judge, to condemn, to turn away. It’ll even make it easier to endure the evil that inevitably comes your way, as well. Did you ever wonder how all those old-time Christians could endure torture and death, all while singing joyfully and even *praying* for their enemies? Well, now you know. Give it a try, Brian; you’ll be amazed at the results. You don’t necessarily have to go looking for people to help; I’ll see to it that they head your way. But be sure not to let even *one* go by. Because that one that slips past--will be me.”

Brian chuckled. “I never thought *I’d* ever be one of those ‘bleeding hearts.’”

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<sup>44</sup> John 6:37.

“Brian,” The Man replied, “Have you ever asked yourself where you might be, if *I* didn’t have a ‘bleeding heart?’” He sighed, then shook his head. “When I said ‘turn the other cheek,’ I’m wasn’t saying ‘let criminals do what they want.’ That’s why governments exist.<sup>45</sup> The courts have not only a right, but an *obligation* to punish evil; this prevents vendettas, and controls anarchy. Those who refuse to reform *should* be restrained, to protect folks who would otherwise be the innocent victims of their lawlessness. That’s why the state exists, at least ideally. *That’s* not what I’m talking about here; I’m talking about your *attitude* toward the criminal--real, or merely imagined, like Sonny. I’m not saying: ‘don’t punish crime;’ I’m saying: ‘forgive *everyone*, even those you rightly or wrongly think are the worst, with all your heart. Don’t judge anyone; be good to all--even to those who do you wrong.’ If you’ll read my Sermon on the Mount,<sup>46</sup> you’ll get the picture.”

“I’ll do that,” Brian replied.

The Man opened the door and stepped from the car. “I’m going to leave now, Brian--but only in the visible sense. If you’ll follow my advice, and take advantage of this chance I’m giving you, I’m sure you’ll do all right. After all...” He pointed to the sky. “You’ve got some people up there, besides me, who are interested in you.” The Man now turned toward the road. “But it’s still up to *you*, Brian; you’ve got to *do* something with what I’ve given you here. Don’t just let it slip by. Because I can promise you: there won’t be any third chance.”

“I understand.” Brian reached for the gear shifter; then looked at The Man. “Thank you,” he said. “I...I don’t know how to thank you...but...*thank you.*”

“Sure, you do,” The Man replied. “You want to thank me? That’s easy. Just thank me the next time you see me outside of Caraways, or down by the railroad tracks, or under a bridge. Thank me each and every time you have the chance--in *deeds*, not words. Trust me, that kind of thanks goes a lot further than any song and dance you could give.” He paused. “Thank me, when you go home tonight. That’s where it all begins.” The Man gave Brian a half-salute, then turned toward the store. “So long, Brian. I’ll be seeing you again.”

“Wait!” Brian cried; “I never asked your name! What *is* your name?”

“Brian,” The Man smiled, “I’ve been called a thousand different names, by a thousand different cultures. In Assyria, I was Ashur, while Akhenaten knew me as his namesake, Aten. I am Ahura Mazda to the Zoroastrians, Zeus to the Greeks, Allah to the Muslims, and Jehovah to the Jews.” The Man glanced toward the store, then back to Brian. “The Hindus call Me Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva and several other titles. In New Zealand I am Rangi and Papa, while the Wiccans see Me as their Mother Goddess. To Native Americans, I am the Great Spirit. To you, I’m just ‘The Man’, and that’s okay by me. I am Jesus Christ, Brian, and I am all things to all men, in the hopes of reaching at least

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<sup>45</sup> Romans 13:1-5.

<sup>46</sup> Matthew chapters 5 through 7.

*some of you.*”

“So...you’re the Christian God with me; but I guess with the next guy, you can also be...whoever.”

The Man winked at Brian. “You got it.”

Brian shook his head. “Thanks again. I really don’t know what to say.”

“You’ll find it, the next time you see me--which won’t be very long from now. In fact, I’d bet you’ll be seeing me before you get home tonight.”

The Man started to walk away, then suddenly he turned back toward Brian. “Oh, and by the way,” he offered; “those who willingly choose to give something to a deadbeat, even after *knowing* what they are--now *those* folks are *really* close to my heart. Much closer than they know.”

“Sonny--and you,” Brian replied softly. “And *I’ve* been the deadbeat. This whole time.”

The Man grinned at Brian, then turned and walked across the lot, disappearing into an alley running adjacent to Caraways. Brian put his car into gear, and headed it toward his home in Mission Hills--but not before stopping at 435 when he saw the panhandler. As he handed him the \$20, Brian momentarily thought he recognized this man--naah...it *couldn’t* be....

Or, maybe so. It no longer mattered to Brian Whitcomb, anyway. He already knew Who he was.