

## The Waiting Room

I noticed three things.

The first was the clock. It was an unremarkable, vaguely industrial clock, the kind of clock you find in schools, or hospitals. The clock read 9:14. The second hand was not moving.

The second thing I noticed was the chalk board. Directly below the clock, the chalk board read:

S.W.K.  
1.11.08  
-----  
0

The first three letters were my initials. The five numbers below it seemed like a date. And I didn't have a clue as to the zero below the dividing line.

The third thing I noticed was the man behind the bar at which I found myself seated. He had out a small white towel and was cleaning a highball glass. He wore a black vest and a white collared shirt. His hair was beginning to grey and receding at the corners of his forehead. He said I could call him Jack.

Jack told me I was dead.

He looked back over his shoulder at the clock and the chalk board with measured, practiced precision.

"You died on January 11, 2008, at 9:14." He frowned as he read down the chalk board. "And, from the looks of it, you haven't had your first drink yet."

I tried to talk, but the words seemed to catch somewhere in my throat. Coughing, I managed to shake my head. As Jack reached back behind him I noticed a huge bar filled

with bottles of various colors, shapes, sizes. He selected a clear crystal decanter with a dark brown liquid. As he poured the liquid into a tumbler, he smiled. "You'll be able to talk in a couple of minutes. New policy they just enacted. They feel its better that people reflect quietly for a little while." Leaning in closer, Jack whispered, "Personally I think it's a load of shit, but hey, what can I do, right?" He laughed and went back to cleaning his glass.

I looked down at the glass. I didn't know where I was. The last thing I could remember was staring at the clock. Before that I remembered nothing, not just a gap in my memory but a question of whether there had been anything before the clock. Of course, there had to have been. I knew those three initials on the chalk board were my own. I knew I was a money manager with a wife and two children. I could remember my life in summary.

I sat dumbly, staring at the glass with the brown liquid. Jack pushed the glass towards me. "Trust me on this one."

## Drink One

I took a sip. It burned the back of my throat. Then, it made me feel warm right below my eyes. I took another sip. No different than the first. I finished the glass with a loud gulp.

I felt my mouth becoming less full of my tongue. I thought a second before asking my first question.

“Where am I?”

“Purgatory,” said Jack. “Like I said, you’re dead.”

“Purgatory,” I repeated. It made sense. Heaven and hell seemed like moral absolutes. I had always considered myself a member of the moral middle class. I cheated on my girlfriend of two months junior year of high school. I drove drunk twice but was never caught. I tried cocaine once. I masturbated. But I gave money to the Red Cross. I ran a 10k each year for lymphoma. I loved my wife and my children. I would have objectively rated myself a moderately good person. But I was not a saint – I didn’t expect assumption.

“So how does this work?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Purgatory. Do I just sit here ordering drinks indefinitely?”

He shrugged. “I tell people they’re dead and serve them drinks. After the fifth drink there’s a seminar on how things work.”

I smiled. “They want to make sure people are more receptive to the seminar?”

Jack laughed. “Chances are after five drinks most people here would be belligerent or sobbing.”

“But didn’t you just say there’s a five drink minimum?”

Jack shook his head. “You can’t get drunk. Believe me, people have tried. Alcohol works differently here.”

“Then why the drinks?”

“Who knows? Kills time. It’s better than staring at a clock.”

I looked down at my empty glass.

“I think I need another drink.”

“What’ll you have?”

I felt warm. I was starting to sweat. “Gin and tonic. Lots of lime.”

## Drink Two

It was refreshing. I always liked the taste of juniper. Gin and tonic reminded me of the summer. The night I lost my virginity I was drunk off gin and tonics. I told Jack.

“Who was she?”

“Who?”

“The girl.”

“Just a girl I knew. Her family went the same place in the summer as mine.”

I took a sip of my drink.

“Did you love her?”

“You ask a lot of questions for a bartender.”

“Slow day.”

I looked down the bar. It went longer than I could see. It was made out of a dark wood, like mahogany. I was the only one sitting.

“So?”

“So what?”

“So did you love her?”

“No. At least I don’t think so. She didn’t love me, either,” I said. “She wasn’t a virgin. Just me.”

Jack didn’t say anything. He was looking down and cleaning another glass. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

“I just wanted to get it over with. I didn’t care who with.”

Jack kept cleaning the glass. I wanted to change the subject.

“How did I die?”

Jack looked up from his glass. “I don’t know. They don’t tell me. But,” he said, pointing behind me, “you could go ask someone in the booths. They have access to all the files.”

I turned around in my stool. Lining the wall behind me were dozens of booths, each with a dark curtain hanging between the benches so I couldn’t see in. I had noticed the booths before.

I finished my gin and tonic.

“Are you allowed to order the same drink twice?”

“People keep regular drinks for a while sometimes. But then they get bored,” said Jack. “Another gin and tonic?”

“Please.”

### Drink Three

I took my drink and went to the nearest booth. The booths had high wooden backs. I knocked on the side of one of the seats. A woman's voice said come in.

I pushed back the curtain. A woman was sitting down in the booth. She was alone. She was reading a book but I couldn't see the title. She was wearing a white turtleneck sweater and a pair of white slacks. She was older, maybe fifty. Her hair was white and wavy. She had a pair of golden half-moon reading glasses balanced on her nose.

"Hello?"

"Hello," I replied. "My name is Stephen. Jack said you could tell me how I died."

"Jack?" she asked.

"Jack, the bar tender."

"I don't know him," she said, cocking her head to one side.

"He's right there," I said, pointing to Jack. He was twenty feet away on the other side of the bar.

"Oh," she said. "Well I've never met him." She paused. Then, straightening herself, "Regardless, yes, I can tell you how you died. Name, please?"

"Stephen Williams Kampson."

She wrote the name down on a little piece of paper. She pulled a rope hanging down from the top of the booth. A small bell rang. Almost immediately a man in a grey suit came up to the booth. He took the piece of paper. She motioned for me to sit down across from her.

"Well," she said. "Are you nervous?"

"Curious, I guess," I said. "I'm already dead, right?"

She laughed softly. “That’s the right spirit, I guess. Still, you must be anxious. Method of death is often a determining factor.”

“A determining factor in what?”

“Well, judgment, of course.”

“Judgment?”

She looked surprised. “Yes, judgment. The final stage of purgatory. Has no one explained to you yet?”

“Judgment?” I repeated dumbly.

“Yes,” she said. She spoke slowly. “Determining whether the soul will rest eternally in heaven or hell.”

The man in the grey suit returned with a thin book in his hand. It looked like a book from an encyclopedia, only smaller. I saw my name written on the front cover. The woman across from me licked her index finger and thumb. “Date of death please?”

I glanced over at the chalk board. “January 11, 2008.”

She opened the book. She flipped open to a page in the second half. She squinted down at the paper and looked at me over her glasses.

“You choked on a piece of steak at a restaurant in New York. Your airway became constricted and you suffocated.” She squinted even harder at the paper. “A dry aged, sixteen ounce Kansas City rib eye, to be precise.” She smirked. “Don’t worry. You didn’t choke on a piece that was too big. It looks like it was just a freak accident.”

“Why should it matter what size the piece of steak was that I choked on?”

“I agree with you completely,” she said in a tone slightly mocking. “It should be the intent that counts, not the action itself. Of course,” she said, again looking at me over

the half moon glasses, “you ought to be thanking your lucky stars it *was* a small piece. That was a forty five dollar steak.”

She looked at me. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

I shook my head. I took my empty glass of gin and tonic and went back to the bar. Jack already has another waiting.

#### Drink Four

I had always assumed that Purgatory was infinite, a very long vacation in Toledo, inside a Comfort Inn, with free continental breakfast, a dirty, algae covered pool, and basic cable. But I was going to be judged. The bar was impermanent.

“I choked on a piece of steak,” I said. I drank half the glass.

“Was it a big piece of steak?” asked Jack.

“Why does it matter how big the piece was?”

“Tell me first.”

“Fine. No, the woman said it wasn’t a big piece.”

He nodded. “That’s lucky.”

“Why?”

“We had a guy, came in here a few years ago. He had choked on some piece of meat. It was an absurdly expensive steak, some twenty-four ounce piece of Japanese beef or something. Anyway, he put too much of it in his mouth and choked. It was a huge deal, established precedence.”

“Precedence for what?”

“Accidental gluttony. That’s what Peter called it. It was the first opinion he’d written in years.”

“So what happened?”

“Level four. I mean, it’s still a grey area. Obviously this guy had gone out of his way to order something ridiculous. But you get some of the angels and they claim that the letter of the decision means any case of choking on large bites is a case of accidental gluttony.”

“Level four of what?”

“Hell.”

I remembered something about levels of hell. I hadn’t read Dante but I knew enough pop culture to pretend I did.

“How long?”

“How long what?”

“How long do I have until I’m judged?”

“Hard to say. But you see that chalk board?” He motioned to the chalk board with my initials. Where there had been a zero below the line there was now a four. I nodded.

“I have never seen the number below the line contained in a single chalk board.”

My glass was empty again. One more drink before the seminar.

“So what counts as a drink?”

“Pretty much anything.”

I wanted to go to the seminar.

“Can I have a shot of tequila?”

## Drink Five.

There was no salt. There was no lime wedge. I put the shot glass upside down on the bar. By the time I put the glass down the number on the chalk board had changed from a four to a five.

“Where’s the seminar?”

Jack pointed to a door at one end of the bar. I hadn’t noticed it before. I got up from the stool. I had had arthritis for the four years. My knees hurt when I stood up, or sat down, or moved too fast. The usual stiffness was gone.

I walked down to the door. On my left side were the booths, some empty, some with the curtains hanging. On my right side was the bar with empty stools every few feet. It was quiet. I could hear the sound of glasses being put down on a table, and occasionally muffled voices.

When I reached the door there was a man on my right in a grey t shirt and a pair of jeans. He was sitting at a small desk, looking at an old computer monitor. I walked past him and tried the door knob. It turned and I stepped through the doorway.

The bright florescent lighting hurt my eyes after being in the dimly lit barroom. I squinted. When my eyes grew accustomed to the new lights I found myself facing a dark green doorway with an ornate brass knocker. The door seemed out of place for the hall around it. I looked to my left. I was in what looked like a hallway from an office park, with low, cheap grey ceiling tiles. Every few feet there was a door, each different in color or style. The hallway extended on, coming to a single flute point at some end impossibly far away. I turned around. The hallway extended similarly in the other direction. This was

infinity, an altogether different sensation than the feeling of looking up at the night sky and understanding conceptually that space continued indefinitely.

I felt hot. I noticed for the first time the clothes I was wearing: a pair of khaki pants, a dark blue oxford shirt with no tie, a navy blazer, and a pair of brown loafers. The shirt was sticking to my back. I wondered if these were the clothes I had died in.

Jack hadn't told me anything. He had just pointed to the door. I tried the green door. The handle wouldn't turn. I picked up the knocker and gave three hard rasps. There didn't seem to be any response. I turned to face the door I had come from. I heard a noise from behind me. I turned around.

The green door was open. Two men stepped out of the doorway. They both grabbed my shoulders. I tripped over myself. I heard the door close.

I was on the floor of the room. I couldn't see anything. The room was black. I could hear people breathing. I felt a hand on the back neck of my jacket. Someone pulled up. I stood. I could feel someone breathing on the back of my neck.

"What keys are you carrying?" asked a voice. The speaker was a man. He had a deep voice. I didn't hear any accent.

"What?" I asked.

"What keys do you have on your person?"

I thought for a second. No one had told me anything about keys. "I don't know anything about keys," I said. "I just got here."

"What were you doing in the hallway without a key?"

"I was just trying to get to the introduction seminar," I said.

"Check him," said the man. The man behind me frisked me quickly.

“No keys,” he said.

“Out in the hallway with no key,” said the first man.

“I didn’t know you had to have a key,” I said. “Please. I just wanted to go to the seminar.”

I had been mugged once. I was visiting my brother in London. I went for a run. Three boys surrounded me. I didn’t have any money on me. I was hospitalized. I hoped this would end differently.

The door reopened. I couldn’t see. The light in the hallway was too bright.

“Don’t tell anyone this happened,” said the voice.

How do you threaten someone when he’s already dead? The man’s statement seemed more like a request than a command. There was no power in his words. He had no life to threaten.

I was facing the door I had first come from. It was a large, wooden door with a small round knob. I looked behind me at the green door. I tried the knob. I don’t know why. I may have expected the room to be different if opened from the outside. It was locked. I looked back at the original door. I briefly considered what would happen if this door, too was locked. But that seemed more like hell than purgatory. A modern day Sisyphus, giant boulder replaced by locked doors.

I turned the knob, and the door opened. The man at the desk was now looking up at me. He was wearing a smug smile.

“Where exactly did you think you were going?”

“I was trying to get to the seminar. Jack said it was through that door.”

I did not tell him about the green door. I did not want trouble.

“*Everything* is through that door,” he said. He stood up. “Trying to get to the first seminar?”

He turned his back before I could respond. He took a key from a chain around his neck and opened a large metal cabinet behind him. Inside were rows of keys, each on its own hook.

“Like valet parking,” I said.

“Not really,” he responded.

He selected a key, closed the cabinet, locked the door, and turned to face me. He held out the key, then pulled his hand back as I reached out to grab it.

“How many drinks have you had?”

“Five,” I responded. “A glass of something brown, three gin and tonics, and a shot of tequila.”

“Bourbon,” he said, handing me the key. It was a large, old brass key. The handle was mostly rusted and there was a red string tied around the hook at the end. “First drink’s always bourbon.”

I started out the door again, then stopped. “I still don’t know where I’m supposed to go.”

“Red door, third on the right,” he said. He had gone back to staring at the computer screen.

I opened the door again and turned to my right. I felt sick looking down the hallway. I kept my eyes on the tiled floor, glancing up at the doors. The third door was red. The door had no knob, just a key hole. I put the key in and turned to the right. I heard a click. Unsure of what to do, I pushed on the door. The door opened.

I was looking in on what seemed like the private library of a very large, very old home. Directly across from me was a large fireplace. There was already a fire going, with a small stack of wood next to the fireplace. Around the fireplace were six mismatched armchairs in a semicircle facing the fire. Inside the semicircle was an armchair with its back to the fire. I couldn't see if there were people in the semicircle. There was someone in the chair facing the rest of the group. The room had a thick oriental carpet and dark red wallpaper. The lighting came from dim wall lamps and the fire. The florescent hall light didn't seem to come through the open door. The figure in the central chair stood up as I closed the door behind me.

“Here for the seminar?” he said cheerfully.

“Yes.”

“Go grab a drink and come have a seat.” He gestured to my left. There was a small wet bar with a bartender standing behind it.

“What can I get you?”

“Gin and tonic,” I said. I wasn't bored of it yet.

He looked down under the sink. “Sorry. No gin.”

I stared at him. “No gin in a bar?”

“Sorry,” he said. “Private residence. You see the guy leading the seminar,” he asked, nodding in the direction of the man who had spoken. “This is his apartment.”

“Still, entertaining without gin?”

“Gin's not so popular anymore,” said the bartender. “Everyone's drinking vodka now.”

“What's the point?” I asked. “No taste at all. Gin's got character.”

“Fair enough,” said the bartender. “But I still can’t remember the last time I made a gin and tonic. I make vodka tonics all the time.”

“Can’t,” I said. “I refuse to drink them on principle. What else does he have?”

The bartender looked down at the bottles. “Vodka, a decent scotch, Grand Mariner, cognac, and a bottle of Campari.”

“Weird mix,” I said. “No chance there’s an orange kicking around down there?”

He shook his head. “I’ve got some lime though.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “Campari and soda with double lime.”

## Drink Six

It was a well made drink. The Campari and soda was barely effervescent, with the licorice flavor of the anise blending with the limes. It was the first drink I ordered regularly when I came of age. My father had always had a Campari and soda with lime when he came home from work. After the earth tones of my first five drinks, the bright red seemed oddly festive.

I walked over to the semi circle of arm chairs. Five of the six were already occupied. There were two older men. One was wearing a pair of flannel pajamas. The other wore pleated khakis with a light blue polo shirt. Both men looked tired. A young kid was wearing shorts and a t shirt. He didn't look much older than six or seven. He was clinging to the hand of a man in jeans and a grey t shirt standing next to the boy's chair. The final two looked like a couple. They had their chairs pressed up tight against one another. They were young. The man was dressed in a faded blue shirt and a pair of old jeans. He held his hands in his lap and looked straight ahead. The woman was had her hair up in a tangle of blond curls. She was snapping her gum loudly and smiling at everyone. She looked excited. Every few seconds she'd whispered something into the ear of the young man. She would always be looking out at the rest of the group when she whispered. The man would nod without looking at the woman and stare straight ahead.

When I had sat down in the empty seat the man in the front stood up. He was short, and he wore a light grey suit.

“Welcome to the information seminar,” he said in a practiced voice. “I'm sure the news you all have received over the past few drinks has no doubt been difficult to deal

with. We are here to explain how this all works to you and make the transition as easy and comfortable as possible.”

I didn't like the way the man in the grey suit talked. It was the same feeling I got in themed chain restaurants. The man continued.

“You will hear today from various representatives who will explain the process in greater detail. This is a lot to take in.” He gave a fake laugh. It was the same laugh I used when someone told a golf joke at work. “But try to absorb everything the best you can and feel free to ask any questions.”

The man in the grey suit got up and walked over to another door to the left of the fireplace, opposite the door I had come in. In came a tall, blond man. He was wearing a lightweight khaki suit with a white shirt. The collar was open. He reminded me of a government official stationed in the tropics. He looked athletic and walked confidently. When he reached the chair he looked around the room and smiled before sitting down.

“Hello,” he said. “My name is Michael, and before any of you ask, no, I'm not that Michael. Although my mother was apparently a big fan of the archangel.” He laughed. No one else did. I didn't think anyone had made the apparently false mental leap that the man seated before us was Michael the Archangel. “I am here today to clear up a few myths you might have heard about heaven and hell. Don't worry, nothing too scary, just some quick facts and some food for thought.” He smiled. He had perfect white teeth.

“First off, anyone, and I truly mean anyone, can go to heaven. I know we've got a reputation for being a little elitist. But heaven is not an exclusive club. Sure, for some it might take a few more drinks, a few trials, and a little perseverance, but I guarantee that each of you has the potential to one day be an angel. Additionally,”

“Excuse me,” said the gum snapper in a long southern drawl. “But I really don’t see why me and Bobby are listening to this. We sent in our \$21.50 each month to the pastor Billy Ray Jones and we weren’t even sinning or nothing when I smashed up the car so if we could just take the bible test we’ll be on our way up.”

Michael smiled. “There is, in fact, no bible test. I’m very sorry to disappoint you and Bobby.”

The woman’s smile seemed slightly more forced. “I’m sorry, I don’t quite understand. We sent in our money, and now we just need the test. Ain’t no more explaining needs doin’.”

Michael turned from the two to face the rest of us. “While some basic principals in the book are very important, no doubt, photographic knowledge of the scripture is not a requirement.” Turning back to the couple, he said, “But I’m sure that won’t be a problem for you two.”

“Nah, this ain’t gonna work at all for me. We paid the damn money, and we just want to go on up.” I looked around at the others in the chairs. The young boy looked petrified. The woman caught the looks and hastily added, “Pardon my French.”

She turned to the man next to her. “Bobby, have you even been listening to this? Ain’t you gonna do something?”

The young man kept looking straight ahead. “Sounds like the man’s telling it the way it is, Shelia,” he said. “Reckon there’s not much else to it.”

“Bobby, you drunk? The man said the money don’t mean anything! Said there’s not even a test!”

“I heard him,” he said. “And unless you quiet yourself down I won’t hear the rest.”

The man’s voice was calm. He spoke quietly. The woman was seething. Michael took her temporary loss for words and continued on.

“As I’m sure you’ve figured out, purgatory works on the drink counting system. But purgatory is not a drinking game. There are no set benchmarks for when things happen, and things happen at different times for different people. There are just so many of you down here, the drinks are a nice way of us to keep track of trends and make sure we’re keeping up.”

“Excuse me,” I said, raising my hand. “I’m sure you’ll cover this, but what do you mean when you say ‘things’?”

He nodded. “Excellent question. Judgment, as I’m sure you can imagine, is a lengthy, complex process. There are interviews, meetings, appeals, and a whole litany of other mechanisms to ensure we fully understand each candidate. It takes a while, but it’s always been the way it works and it’s worked great for a couple millennia.”

He picked up a large, leather bound book from the small table next to him. “This is the Official Book of Heavenly Process. It looks daunting, I know, but I think you’ll find the individual steps pretty manageable. There’s at least one copy in every bar and if you ever want more we’ve got tons lying around.” He smiled again. “I remember in the old days we used to hand out copies to everyone at the first meeting.”

“What happened?” asked one of the old men.

Michael sighed. “A number of things. There are just too many people here now to print a copy for everyone. And maybe more than that, there are some many minute

changes to the bylaws and rules that we are constantly coming out with new editions. Can you imagine having to hand out a new copy to every soul in purgatory each time some archangel makes a minor clarification in the coveting clause?

“I’m not even going to try and go through the process now. You’ve all heard a lot and I’m sure you’ve got plenty of information for a few drinks. My advice to you would be to talk to one of the angels whenever you have questions. They’re all process experts and there down here voluntarily because they really want to help. Most of them have a specific field that they’d love to talk your ear off about but they can usually answer just about any question you have.

“Remember what I said, though. I mean it. Anyone, really anyone, can get to heaven. It could take a while, but trust me, it’s worth it.”

“How long did it take you?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

“How long did it take you to get to heaven?”

“Actually,” he said, “I was one of the originals. But just so you know it’s generally considered impolite to ask an angel how long it took. It’s bad form.”

“Sorry,” I said. “My mistake.”

“Nothing to worry about,” he said. “No way for you to know. And fortunately you asked an angel who doesn’t have an answer.” He laughed. “Well, I think that’s all for now. Any more questions?” He scanned the six of us. No one moved. “Excellent. Please talk to an angel whenever you have questions. They’re here to help you.”

Michael stood up. He shook hands with the man in the grey suit and walked out the door. The man in grey clapped his hands once and rubbed them together.

“Well, I hope you all found that enlightening.” I wasn’t sure if he was trying to make a pun. He didn’t laugh and neither did anyone else. “Why don’t you all grab a drink before our next speaker?”

The gum snapper, Shelia apparently, grabbed Bobby’s hand and marched him over towards the corner. The boy looked up at the man in the grey t shirt. He nodded, and the boy stood up. The man led him by the hand over to the bar. One of the two old men, the one in the pajamas, had fallen asleep at some point during the talk. The other looked at me and shrugged.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“I say wake him up,” said the old man. “I’m guessing they’ll be plenty of time for napping. He’d probably want to hear all this.”

I agreed. I walked over to where he was sitting, his head back against the high back of the arm chair. I nudged his arm. He moved a little but didn’t wake up. I shook his arm. He sat bolt upright. Then, realizing where he was, he sat back in the chair and looked up at me.

“Did I miss much?” he asked.

“Depends on when you fell asleep,” the other older man said.

“Nothing too important,” I added.

“He talked like an infomercial,” said the first old man. “Made me fall right asleep.”

“My wife used to do the same thing,” the other said. “We’d be watching a ball game and as soon as the ad for the magical bullet came on *poof* out like a light!”

“I’m Stephen,” I volunteered. “Stephen Kampson.”

“Phil,” said the sleeper. “Phil Nash.”

“Bert Starpe,” said the other.

We all shook hands.

I mentioned that they wanted us to have another drink before the next seminar.

The three of us headed over to the bar.

“What were you two drinking?” I asked.

“Beer,” said Bert. “But they don’t have any here.”

“I’m in the same boat,” I said. “I’m a gin and tonic man with no gin.”

“I just told the bartender to bring me whatever he felt like making,” said Phil. “I worked as a bartender for a while. I always liked when people asked for whatever drink I wanted to make.”

“I’ll give that a try.” I turned to face the bartender. “What do you feel like making?”

He looked down and then frowned. “I honestly don’t know. You all were my first customers. I just transferred over from juvenile guide services. Still learning the ropes here.”

“Just tell me what you’ve got down there,” said Phil.

“Same as before. Vodka, scotch, Grand Marnier, cognac, and Campari. Sorry,” he said looking at me. “Still no gin.”

“Do you have any lemon?” asked Phil.

“Lemon and lime,” the bartender said.

“Just need the lemon,” said Phil. “Do you have a shaker back there?”

He did. Apparently our host liked martinis.

“Perfect. Squeeze out the lemon and then mix up equal parts of the juice with the cognac and the Grand Mariner. Will you both have one with me?” he asked.

“Sure,” said Bert. “What is that?”

“As close as I could get to a sidecar,” said Phil.

## Drink Seven

I always expect mixed drinks to be sugary. This wasn't. I tasted the lemon first, then the mix of the brandy and the liqueur. The drink burned the back of my throat. It reminded me of the first bourbon Jack gave me.

"Not half bad," said Phil. "I used to use Cointreau instead of the Grand Mariner but as long as it's not my hooch why not use the pricey stuff?" He took another sip. "Good brandy, too. I almost feel bad mixing it like this."

We went back to our seats. The couple was still off in the corner. The glass of milk in the kid's hand looked too big for him. The man in the grey suit was poking at the fire with a long metal rod. The three of us sat. We were quiet for a while, drinking the cocktail.

"So how did you guys go?" asked Bert.

"What?" said Phil.

"What was it? How did you die?"

"Did they tell you?" asked Phil. "No one told me."

"I think you have to ask," I said. "Choked on a piece of steak, by the way," I added, looking at Bert.

"Heart attack," said Bert. "Nothing interesting."

"I'd been assuming I wouldn't wake up the next day for the past five years," said Phil. "When I found myself here, the guy told me I was dead. It was a relief, actually. Knowing there's something else, you know? I had always figured there was nothing."

The couple walked back over to the chairs. The man was holding two glasses. One for his wife, I imagined. When they sat down the man in the grey suit stood up from his place in front of the fire and stood next to the chair in the center of the semicircle.

“I think that’s everyone,” he said, looking around at the chairs. There were only six of us. There was nothing to think, no way he could have possibly miscounted. I disliked the man in the grey suit.

“I hope you found the first speaker engaging. Personally I always enjoy Michael’s speeches.”

Phil leaned over the arm of his chair. “This guy’s a little fruity, isn’t he?”

The man in the grey suit didn’t hear. He continued. “Please give the second speaker your same attention.”

He got up and went to another door, this one to the right of the arm chair. A man stepped through the open door and nodded curtly to the man in the grey suit. He was much shorter than the first man, maybe only five foot seven. He was wearing a pair of black slacks with a dark purple shirt. He had a black felt fedora on his head. He wore small, circular glasses that made it seem like he was always surprised. He nodded again to us as he walked to his chair and sat down.

“Ladies and gentlemen, what I am about to say will likely directly contradict what you have already heard today. If any of this seems difficult to reconcile, remember please that nobody here ever tells the whole truth. I would tell you that I am the exception to this rule, but if you’ve taken my advice, you won’t believe that, either. All I ask is that you keep an open mind to the information I have to share with you.”

It wasn't the glasses that made him seem surprised. The man had a facial tic. Every few seconds he would close his eyes tightly and then quickly reopen them, raising his eyebrows. It gave him the impression of looking at a new room each time he opened his eyes. His voice, however, showed no signs of surprise.

“What you have been subjected to in the earlier portion of this session in propaganda on a grand scale. It is, simply put, a load of shit.”

The profanity seemed out of place. The man had been speaking calmly. Even when he swore he didn't modulate the tone of his voice. The man in a grey suit rolled his eyes and walked forward, putting his hand on the other man's shoulder. “Orobas,” he said. “We have young children and women in the room.”

Orobas turned in his seat to look at the man in grey. “I see a child and a woman,” he said. “Not women and children. Have they been reducing the size of your seminars? It certainly couldn't be for the lack of souls.”

“Never mind my seminars,” said the man in grey. He was still smiling. “Just watch the profanity.”

Orobas got up from his chair and walked over to where the boy was sitting. He crouched in front of the boy's chair. His face was on the same level as the boy's. The boy stared straight ahead.

“My name is Orobas,” he said. He spoke in the same calm tone he had used to address the rest of the group. “What is your name?”

The boy looked up at the man in the grey t shirt standing next to his chair. The man nodded. The boy looked back at Orobas. “Tucker.”

“How old were you, Tucker?”

“I’m eight.”

“You were eight,” said Orobas. “And now you are dead.”

“What’s the use in scaring him, Orobas?” said the man in the grey suit. “He’s only a boy.”

“What’s the use in sugar-coating things?” said Orobas. He did not turn his head. He continued to look at the boy. “You are dead,” he repeated, “and soon you will have to make a decision.” He stood and looked around at all of us. “You all will, actually.” He looked back down at Tucker. “Did I offend you when I swore?”

Tucker shook his head. Orobas looked at the man in the grey suit as he walked back to his chair. He sat down.

“My name, as the perceptive members of the group are now abundantly aware, is Orobas. And I am here to tell you that, with the possible exception of Tucker, not a single one of you will ever reach heaven. It doesn’t matter, as you’ve been previously misinformed, how long you wait or how much you’re willing to endure.”

“Wait a minute,” said Phil. “Why not? Why can’t I get to heaven?”

Orobas looked at the ground for a second, then back up to Phil. “What is your name?”

“Phil.”

“How old were you, Phil.”

“Seventy three.”

“Seventy four years is a long time to be alive.”

“I was seventy three.”

“Unless you died on your birthday,” said Orobas, “they count any time after your last birthday as its own year. When they review your file, they look at seventy four different sections, birthday to birthday and last birthday to death.”

“Ok,” said Phil. “So I lived seventy four years. So what?”

“So what is that everyone does something wrong in seventy four years. And chances are in seventy four years you do a lot of somethings wrong. And the things we consider human mistakes, or even not mistakes at all, will in the end destroy you.”

Phil didn't say anything. The room was quiet.

“What do you mean, destroy him?” I asked.

Orobas looked around the room. “They don't explain anything about judgment anymore. Who was it who came to you and talked?”

“Don't answer that,” said the man in grey. “He isn't allowed to know.”

“As if it would matter,” said Orobas. “They all spit the same platitudes.” He looked at Phil. “Each time you sin, or possibly sin, or perform an act that could be construed as a sin, that action itself has to pass judgment. Do you know how long it takes to judge seventy four years of human life?”

Nobody answered.

“For you and your human abilities of comprehension, judgment takes an eternity. The system was not designed for the exponential growth of the human race. As we speak, new souls are joining the population awaiting judgment, extending the time frame of each of your final verdicts by a few millennia per soul.”

“So that's it?” said Bert. “We're doomed because we'll get bored?”

Orobas smiled. “Seems ridiculous, doesn’t it? After all, this isn’t so bad. Sit around, have a few drinks. By the way, would anyone like to go to the bathroom before I continue?”

No one answered. I couldn’t tell how long it had been since I woke up at the bar. It must have been at least a few hours. I had an enlarged prostate. Usually I couldn’t go this long without having to urinate. But I didn’t feel the tingling below my stomach or at the tip of my penis.

Orobas continued. “Is anyone tired?”

“I fell asleep a little earlier,” said Phil.

“Habits are difficult to break,” said Orobas. “Do you remember any dreams?”

“No,” said Phil.

“Must not have been a very deep sleep. Did you feel especially tired before you took your nap?”

“It wasn’t really a nap,” said Phil. “I just kind of drifted off.”

“What you did,” said Orobas, “is close your eyes and tune out whatever the idiot at the front of the room was saying. And I can promise you did not remember your dreams because in order to dream you need to be asleep. And you can not sleep. Not here at least.

“And I can guarantee no one has to go to the bathroom. And I can promise that if you feel hungry right now it’s just your habitual response to increased levels of stress. Because here, you don’t need to eat, you don’t need to sleep. Was anyone here retired?”

Phil and Bert both raised their hands.

“Anyone who is retired will tell you that the joy and beauty of retirement lies in the simple routines. Your breakfast every morning at the diner, Tuesday night poker games, the ten o’clock local news and asleep by eleven. The rest of life is no different. Everything is driven by the quiet comfort of routines. Retirement just strips away the artifice of purpose for the more concrete feeling of impending mortality.

“But there are no routines here. There is nothing but the growing number below the line on each of your chalk boards. So yes, eventually, you will each get bored. And when you get bored you will do something stupid.”

“What do we do, order white Zinfandel?” I said. “It seems hard to do anything stupid when all you’re allowed to do is order drinks.”

“There is an alternative,” said Orobas.

“What’s that,” I asked.

“Hell.”

The room was quiet. I looked down at the glass in my hand. There was a little light brown liquid collected at one corner. There was not enough to cover the entire bottom of the glass. The glass was sweating. I put it under my chair and rubbed my hands together. Orobas was staring at me.

“Are you trying to tell me that eternal suffering is preferable to eternal boredom?”

Orobas shook his head. “I said hell. No one said anything about eternal suffering.”

“Isn’t that kind of the point?”

“For some, of course. Don’t worry. The child molesters and serial killers are subjected to permanent excruciating torture. But not everyone who goes to hell is sent to

the ninth circle. For all the talk of fire and brimstone, the lower circles of hell can be very comfortable.”

“Very comfortable?”

“No torture. Some job, clerical work mostly, but some manual labor. Other people, too. Real people. Friendships, relationships, love, even.” He paused. “It’s not paradise. Everything’s not perfect. But if you ask me it’s better than sitting around and waiting for a call that will never come.”

He stood up. “Whenever you’re ready, just find someone in black. There are mostly minions in the bars. Just ask them to summon their demon,” Orobas said. “The sooner you decide to make a deal, the better for you. We can tell when you’re desperate. We won’t put you in limbo when we think we can make you sign into the fifth circle.”

He turned around and walked toward the door. The man in the grey suit held the door open. He did not look as Orobas.

“Wait,” said the boy.

Orobas stopped. He turned around to face the voice.

“You said everyone but me,” he said. “What happens to me?”

He looked at the boy. “Are you Christian?”

“Yes,” said the boy.

“Catholic?”

“Baptist.”

Orobas nodded. “That should be fine.” He looked at the man in the grey t shirt standing above the boy. “I don’t suppose he found out how he died yet?”

The man in the grey t shirt shook his head.

Orobas looked at the rest of us. “A young, innocent Christian. Assuming he died from accident or sickness, he may be one of the lucky few. Nine years is a lot less to process than seventy four. And childhood is much easier to process than middle age.”

He walked over to Tucker. He again crouched in front of him. From my chair I could see both their faces in profile. “You would only be able to appreciate being eight forever if you had once been older.” He put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. He stood up and walked to the door. He did not look back. The man in the grey suit closed the door.

“Take from that what you will,” he said. “Personally I would never put too much faith in the word of a fallen angel.” He sat down. “Are there any final questions?”

“This is just the stupidest thing I ever heard,” said Shelia. Her nostrils were flared. She snapped her gum louder than before. “First that man tells us we ain’t going to heaven even though I told him we prepaid, and now this one says none of us is going and we’ll get ourselves so bored we’ll go to hell instead. And you!” she said, turning to her husband. “You just sit there with your thumb up somewhere I won’t mention. Are you happy with all this? Are you proud of yourself?”

“Shelia,” said the man. “You crashed the fucking car. I’m just trying to figure out what we do now.” His voice was still calm.

“Well then,” said the man in the grey suit, “I think that formally concludes the introductory seminar. Please see yourselves out.”

The man in the grey suit stood up. He went to a third door. The door was on the wall to the right of the fireplace. There were eight of us in the room.

The boy stood up. He held the hand of the man in the grey t shirt. The boy did not look back. There were six of us in the room.

I looked over at Phil and Bert. “Should we leave?”

“Where would we go?” asked Bert.

“Are we allowed to go places other than our bars?”

“Maybe not. But I don’t think we’d get in trouble for trying. We’d just tell them we didn’t know what we were doing.”

It made sense. I asked which bar we should go to.

“I like mine,” said Bert. “Reminds me of a place back home.”

“Where was home?” I asked.

“Michigan.”

“What do you think, Phil?”

“I don’t like my bar,” he said. “Too quiet.”

We walked to the door we had come in. I stopped at the wet bar. “Are we allowed to take drinks into the hallway?”

“I think so,” said the bartender. “I’m not going to stop you.”

“I’ll have some of that cognac straight up,” said Phil. “That stuff deserves to be on its own.”

“I don’t have any snifters,” the bartender said.

“I don’t care,” said Phil. “They’re over rated, anyways.”

“How about you?” the bartender asked. He was looking at Bert.

“Whatever he gets,” said Bert. He nodded his head towards me.

“I’ll have another Campari and soda.”

## Drink Eight

I liked black licorice when I was a kid. I like Campari. Bert did not like black licorice. He called the drink ‘fruity’. He said I was fruity by association. I told him that was fine with me. He said his bar didn’t serve Campari. I told him that was fine, too. I had nothing against shots of cheap whiskey with beer backs. I could run with the proletariat.

We stepped into the hallway. Bert turned to the right. I counted the doors as we walked down the hallway. Bert stopped at the seventh door on the left. My door was ten behind us.

Bert opened the door. It was a wood door with a small square window at eye level. Inside was another long, wooden bar. This bar, however, was filled with people. Sitting on the three bar stools closest to the door were three men in their twenties. They were wearing black suits with skinny black ties and large sunglasses. One of the three men raised his beer when he saw Bert. Bert nodded.

We made our way down the bar until we found three open stools. Music was playing. I couldn’t hear it clearly. The woman to our right was smoking a cigarette. The bar was filled with smoke. Most people seemed to be there with someone else. A few people were sitting alone. They read, or looked down into their drink. The bar crowd seemed fairly evenly split between angels and demons.

Bert ordered a round of beers. The beer came in brown glass bottles. There were no labels. I put my empty glass on the table. Bert’s glass was still half full.

“Does that count?”

“What?”

“Does it count as a drink if you only drink half?”

“Let me check,” said Bert. He walked down the bar. I could see the clock and chalkboard. “It counts!” he yelled over the noise.

“When do you think the cut off is?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Does a sip count as a drink? Does a drink have to be more than half consumed?”

Phil and Bert looked at me. “Does it really matter?” asked Phil.

I picked up the beer. “Probably not.”

## Drink Nine

The beer was cold. It didn't have a taste.

There were no booths in this bar. Everyone was sitting up at the counter. Down at the end of the bar I could see two doors.

"What happens now?" asked Bert.

"This is your bar," said Phil. "Ask the bartender."

Bert raised his hand. The bartender came over. "Another round already?"

"Not yet," said Bert. "We were just wondering what happens now."

The bartender shook his head. "I only know about the first information seminar. Beyond that you're on your own."

"But if that was the first information seminar," I said, "then there have to be other information seminars. Otherwise they would just call it *the* information seminar."

"Maybe there are others," said the bartender. "Or maybe there were. I'm sure someone mentioned the overcrowding problem. I wouldn't be surprised if they had to put all their speakers into the first seminar to handle the volume of new souls coming through."

"So that's it?" asked Bert. "That's all we get?"

"I can't say," said the bartender. "But I only know about the first seminar."

I looked down at my beer. I remembered this feeling. I had once flown from New York direct to Johannesburg. It was an eighteen hour flight. I can't sleep on planes. I was sitting in a coach seat. I didn't fit. The woman in the seat next to me was spilling over the

armrest. It was a feeling of minor discomfort, and the feeling that the discomfort would not end for a long time. It was the closest I'd ever come to claustrophobia.

I swallowed once. I took a deep breath of the smoky air. I closed my eyes.

When I opened my eyes Bert and Phil were staring down at their hands. Phil looked up after a while.

“This isn't so awful, you know. Sitting around, drinking. Plenty of people to talk to.”

Bert nodded. I didn't say anything.

“I think I could get used to this,” said Phil. He laughed. “My wife was always yelling at me for hanging around bars.”

“Mine too,” said Bert. “She hated the way I smelled after.”

I never really went to bars, I thought. I'd go to the hotel lobby bars on business trips, or in airports if my flight was delayed, or before dinner with my wife if there was a wait for a table. I never went to bars to get drunk. I went to bars to kill time.

“I wonder if there's a deck of cards around here,” said Phil. “Something different to do.”

He turned to his right. In the seat next to him was a woman in a light white dress. She was drinking something blue out of a highball glass with a straw. She seemed out of place. “Excuse me,” asked Phil.

Her head moved forward as she let go of the straw. She held up one finger as she swallowed the mouthful of the blue drink. She was pretty. She had curly blond hair that went down past her shoulder. She reminded me of a neighbor growing up who used to baby sit.

She coughed into her fist and then smiled. “Sorry,” she said.

“What for?” asked Phil. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

She chewed on her bottom lip for a second and looked up. “I guess you’re right,” she said. She nodded to herself. She seemed satisfied. She held the straw and brought her face down towards the bar. She took another sip of the blue liquid. She looked up suddenly. She made a small *mmmh* noise. “Were you asking me a question?”

“Not yet,” said Phil. “But I was about to.”

The woman smiled politely. “What can I help you with?”

“We were wondering if you knew where we could get a deck of cards.”

The woman shook her head. “Gambling is a sin. We don’t allow playing cards.”

“What if we weren’t gambling?” I asked. “What about crazy eights?”

“Crazy eights is a gateway card game. It would only be a matter of time before you got bored of that game and moved on to poker or some other tempting game.”

“So no cards at all?”

“Not from me.”

We didn’t say anything. She kept looking at us. She was still smiling politely.

“Well then,” I said. “What do you suggest we do?”

“Well,” she said, “I doubt that you are all experts in judgment laws and procedures. You’d do well to read up. There’s a copy of the manual somewhere in here.” She raised her hand. The bartender came over. “Barkeep? Can you bring these gentlemen the official laws and procedures please?” She smiled. “There. That should keep you busy for a while.”

Bert managed to mumble thanks. Phil and I stared at each other. The woman went back to her blue drink. After a minute the bartender came over with a hand cart. On it was what appeared to be a full set of encyclopedias. He began piling the books onto the bar. There were twelve books in all, four in front of each of us. The books were blue with silver lettering. On the cover of each were the words “Laws and Regulations for Judgment.” Underneath the title was a number in silver.

I opened one of the books. The pages were thin. The spine of the book was stiff. The book had not been opened yet. It smelled like a new book. It smelled like ink and a paper mill, not the mildew smell of old books.

The writing was very small. I had to squint to read. The bartender looked over. “You’ll get used to it,” he said. “It takes a little while for your eyes to adjust to the print.” I looked at the top of the first page. Underneath the title was the edition number, MMMXCMXXXIV. “Look,” I said, pointing to the edition number. “They make typos in heaven.”

The bartender looks over. “That’s not a typo,” he said. “Roman numerals weren’t made for large numbers.”

“So why are only some of the letters underlined?”

“An underline means multiplication by one million. A bar above means multiplication by one thousand.” He looked down at the book. “They’re going to have to figure out what to do when they get to ten billion. Double underline, maybe. That’s what would make sense. But how often does that happen?”

“How often does what happen?”

He looked at Bert. “Your friend here’s a little slow.”

“And fruity,” added Bert. He drank his beer.

“How often does *what* happen?” I repeated. I didn’t like being made fun of.

“How often does a simple, efficient solution like that make it through the holy legislative system without hearings, studies, and extensive polling data? The judicial system is backlogged, but its nothing compared to the legislature. And the worst part,” he said, gesticulating with his dish towel, “is that the angels have come to expect it. They demand input and oversight over every little detail.” He shook his head. “When you demand perfection, it takes too damned long if you ask me.”

I shrugged. “They have the time, though,” I said.

“Guess so.”

The bartender moved down the bar. The three of us were sitting again, no one saying anything. To our left were two men in dark suits. They were facing each other and talking softly. The one with his back to me occasionally looked over his shoulder at the three of us.

I wasn’t nervous.

I grew up in New Jersey. I lived in a quiet suburb. Walking home from school, when I heard a car behind me, I would imagine strangers firing guns out the window at me, or clowns climbing out of unmarked vans to kidnap me. I would watch in mild disbelief as another fake wood paneled station wagon passed. I had learned to hide my anxiety as I got older, but it was still there. But now there was nothing. I was not apathetic to the plans of the two men. But my mind felt no need to invent worst case scenarios. Maybe it was because I was already dead.

I finished my beer. I tilted back the bottle and swallowed the foamy suds. I caught the eye of the bartender and held the bottle up. He reached down under the bar. He popped off the cap with a small bottle opener and handed me the bottle. The bottle was sweating. The room was warm. I didn't mind the smoke or the heat.

## Drink Ten

I closed my eyes and took a long drink. I swished the beer around my mouth. Still no taste.

I opened my eyes and put the beer down on the bar. The men in the black suits were looking at me. The one with his back to me had turned around on his stool.

“Did I hear you boys were looking for a card game?” The man closest to me spoke in a deep, slow voice. He had a day’s worth of growth on his face. His tie was loosened and the top button of his shirt was undone.

“No use,” said Phil. “No cards allowed, apparently.”

“Well now,” said the man, “you aren’t going to get a game from an angelette sipping tiki cocktails in a bar like this. But that doesn’t mean that there are no cards.”

“You have a pack we can use?” I asked.

“No cards on me,” he said. “Something tells me missy over there wouldn’t approve.” He nodded his head at the angel sitting next to us. She was staring intently down at her blue drink. She seemed completely oblivious to our conversation.

“What are you getting at?” asked Bert.

“Let’s just say there might be somewhere with fewer pesky white suits milling around, trying to ruin a little fun.” He smiled. “Completely harmless, I assure you. But you’ve heard them. Uptight crowd. Don’t understand the importance of useful distraction.”

“So let me get this straight,” Phil said. “A pair of devils, propositioning a game of cards to kill time.”

I looked at Phil. "Haven't we heard this one before?"

"If it's the souls you think we're after," said the other man in the dark suit, "you've got nothing to worry about. That's an anachronism that just won't die. We haven't had to play for souls in years. Trust me, our yield is plenty high as is."

"So what's this then," I asked. "Just showing us a good time?"

The second man in the dark suit grinned. He shook his head. "Well, not exactly."

"What?" said Phil. "What else do we have?"

"Well if the three of you are here together," said the first man, "then you've already been to your first seminar."

"So what?" I asked.

"I'm guessing you boys didn't stop at your own bar to drop of your keys before you came here."

I brought my hand up to my chest. The key was around my neck.

"You want to play for our keys?"

"That's it."

I looked at Bert and Phil. Bert's hand was still at his chest, touching the key. Phil was staring at his bottle of beer. Every couple seconds he took a quick sip and then set the bottle quickly back on the bar. I looked at the two men. "Would you two excuse us for a second?"

The closer of the two smiled and turned back around in his stool to face the second.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Bert. "It doesn't sound too bad."

“They seem like pretty straight-up guys,” said Phil. “I don’t think they’d lie about the soul.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But what if this is all some big test?”

“How do you mean?” asked Bert.

“I mean what if the whole point is that we’re supposed to resist the temptation.”

Phil frowned. “The angel at the seminar said they go through our lives year by year. He didn’t say anything about post-mortem behavioral review.”

“But what if it’s a trick,” I said. “What if none of that mattered and the only thing that counts is what you do when you show up here?”

“And we just sit here until they’ve decided we’ve resisted enough temptations?”

I looked over at the two men in the dark suits. “Maybe this is the test for avarice.”

“Avarice?” asked Bert.

“Greed,” said Phil.

I lowered my voice. “What if they parade each of the sins out, and all we have to do is say no to all of them, and we’re in heaven just like that?” I looked over at the angel. “What if she was trying to warn us?” I was getting excited. I felt like I had figured out the twist to the thriller before the detective explained everything to the oblivious audience in the last scene.

Bert shook his head. “It can’t work like that.”

“Why not?” I asked. “We still have no idea how things really work here.”

“Life has to count for something,” said Phil.

I was quiet. He was right. It couldn’t just be a simple trick.

I quit smoking when I was thirty five. I didn't use gum or patches. For two months after I stopped smoking I had a dream. It wasn't the same dream. The situation was different each time, and the people. But at some point in every dream someone would offer me a cigarette. Once a cigarette lying on a counter offered himself to me.

I never remembered my dreams when I first woke up. Over breakfast, or on my way to work, I would suddenly remember the dream of the previous night. Every morning I realized I had rejected the offer of the cigarette. I felt like I had wasted an opportunity, to do something I loved without fear of tar and tumors.

I wasn't dreaming. I could remember back too far. I felt like I had the first drink days ago. There were no clocks. I didn't sleep. There were no meals. There was no natural light. It felt too long to be a dream.

I thought about the mornings after the dream. I took a deep breath of the smoke filled air. I was sitting in a bar where the alcohol did not inebriate. My bodily needs had been removed. The small pains that came with middle age were gone. This was not a place where cancerous cells metastasized.

I tapped the man in the dark suit closest to me on the shoulder. He turned on his stool.

“Any chance I can bum a cigarette?”

He smiled and reached into his suit pocket. He pulled out a pack of Marlboro Reds. I smoked Marlboro Reds before I quit.

I took a cigarette. He handed me a small book of matches. I held the cigarette between my lips and lit a match. I closed my eyes and inhaled.

It tasted familiar. Fifteen years later and I could still tell the brand on smell alone. After I quit I started leaving my building through the delivery door. I couldn't stand the smell of the smokers outside the front entrance. The old Dominican janitor who monitored the delivery entrance kept the space meticulously clean. He shooed away messengers and runners who stayed to talk and have a smoke outside the side entrance. He glared at me when I started using the delivery door. I was wearing a suit. I was supposed to use the large revolving doors at the front of the building. I was intruding on his small domain.

There was an ashtray on the bar in front of the angel. I reached over and grabbed it. I took another drag. I tapped out the ash. I fell easily back into the old routine. I felt relaxed. Maybe nicotine worked differently than alcohol.

“So,” said the man who had handed me the cigarettes. “Have you all made a decision.”

I looked over at Phil and Bert. Phil was smiling. Bert was bobbing his head up and down slightly.

“I think we would like to play cards.”

“I thought you might,” said the man. He and his partner got off their stools. “Might as well grab a drink for the road,” he said. “Makes you feel like you're making progress.”

I finished my beer. I took another drag of the cigarette. Phil motioned to the bartender. He came over with new bottles of beer.

“Actually,” I said before he had opened the bottle in front of me, “I think I'd like something else.”

“We don’t have much else,” he said. “Nothing in fun colors.” He winked at Bert.

“Is whiskey a fun color?” I asked.

“Whiskey we have,” he said. “Straight up?”

“On the rocks,” I said.

The bartender took a rocks glass from a rack above the bar. He grabbed a few pieces of ice from below the bar with his bare hand. He reached behind him and took a clear bottle with a dark brown liquid. He poured the whiskey over the ice and handed me the glass.

“Careful now,” he said. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

I could smell the drink once he placed it on the bar. It smelled like rubbing alcohol. The bartender had probably given me some backwoods moonshine.

I picked up the glass. I could not cough. If I coughed the bartender was right.

## Drink Eleven

There wasn't much liquid in the glass. Two ounces, maybe. I held the cigarette in my left. I raised the glass to the bartender and tilted my head back. I let the whiskey fill my mouth. I swallowed the liquid in one gulp. I felt like I was in eighth grade, taking a little off the top of all my parents' bottles of liquor and drinking the mixture down as quickly as I could.

The whiskey burned my throat. It hurt. I felt like my esophagus was on fire. I coughed once. But it was not a sputtering, weak cough. It was declarative. I had ordered the whiskey. I did not regret that order. I put the glass down on the bar. I did not slam the glass in victory. I was not a rowdy frat boy out with his new fake ID. The bartender reached down and brought up a bottle of beer. He opened it for me. I took a drag on the cigarette and put it out in the ashtray. My Campari was forgiven.

## Drink Twelve

I didn't mind the beer anymore. It reminded me of tap water. If I tried hard, I could find hints of something that was not water. I did not have any desire to try hard.

"Down this way, gentlemen," said the man in the dark suit who had been sitting farther away. He started walking away from the door we had come in. He was headed for the two doors at the end of the bar.

The door on the right appeared to be made out of gold. There was nothing on the door except a small gold doorknob. A man in a white turtleneck and small glasses on the tip of his nose walked up to the door. He stood there with his eyes closed. His forehead wrinkled. After a few seconds he opened his eyes and turned the doorknob. The door turned in on the bar. I couldn't see what was on the other side.

The two men in dark suits were standing in front of the door on the left. It looked like the door of an elevator. It was made of dull reflective metal, with two sides meeting at a crack in the middle. One of the men was standing to the right of the door. Below him was a pedestal. On the pedestal was a small keypad. He pushed a series of buttons and then stepped back from the pedestal. He and the other man stood directly in front of the door. The three of us stood slightly off to the side.

After a few seconds I could hear a mechanical whirring noise. It was a high pitched noise, different from the low grumble of normal elevators. After about twenty seconds a small *ding* sounded and a sign above the door lit up. The number 752785 was illuminated. The doors slid back to reveal a small chamber on the other side. The men in the black suit smiled. "After you," said one of them.

I paused. I thought about what might happen if I stepped in the elevator. Maybe they would shut the door and send me hurtling down to the fiery pits of hell. Assuming there were fiery pits of hell, I reminded myself. Nothing was sure anymore. Bert and Phil didn't seem to be in much of a rush, either.

One of the men in the dark suit turned to the other. "Why does no one ever trust us?" he asked.

"Bad publicist," said the other. "Do you see people walking around on Halloween, dressed as sharply as we are, calling themselves devils? No, we get stupid red costumes with pitchforks and a bad reputation." He sighed and turned to face us. "I'll get in the elevator first. Would that make you all feel safer?"

I nodded. It didn't make rational sense. If he was a demon, going down to hell would be like going home for vacation. There was no reason for me to feel safer when he was in the elevator with me. But it still made me feel better to see him inside first.

I went through the opening into the chamber. It was a tall, narrow room. The ceiling came to a point about fifteen feet above the floor. The walls were made of wood. There were no windows. The floor was carpeted with a thin red rug. Against each of the three walls were two high backed chairs. The chairs had small red cushions on the seat and long, skinny cushions on the armrest. The demon who went into the chamber first was sitting in one of the chairs opposite the door. I sat in the first chair on the right, closest to the door.

Phil and Bert sat in the two chairs on the wall to the left of the door. When they were seated the second demon came into the chamber and pressed a small red button on the wall. The doors of the chamber were made of the same wood as the walls. The came

slowly shut. The demon walked across the room and sat in the chair next to the other demon.

The room was still. The only noise was the faint whine I had heard before. After a few seconds Phil turned to the demons.

“Is there a problem?” he asked. “Why isn’t this thing moving?”

“This thing,” said the first demon, “is a subterranean transport module. And this thing is moving.”

“So we’re moving below the earth right now?” I asked.

“Yes and no,” said the other demon. “Yes, we are moving. No, we are not below the earth.”

“But I thought you just said this thing was a subterranean something,” I said.

“The literature says hell is below the earth. Granted, the authors didn’t really understand that you can’t be below a sphere when there is no up or down in space. But we still call Lucifer’s entire domain subterranean.” He turned to his partner. “Personally I find it quaint.”

“Yes, nothing’s quite so quaint as massively flawed science kept as fact thanks to church oppression,” said the other demon. “Right up there with the Amish and Tiffany lamps.”

It was unsettling to hear cultural references from a demon. “Are you required to take human culture courses?” I asked.

“Even better,” said the first demon. “We lived full lives as humans.”

“We find that the human experience is better lived than studied,” said the other.

“So you weren’t always demons?”

The first shook his head. "I died October 23, 1995. I had nothing to do with the whole battle against God." He held out his hand to me. "Bill."

I shook his hand. "Steve." I didn't know why I introduced myself as Steve. In my professional life I had always introduced myself as Stephen. But the demon had given me his colloquial name first. Bill shook hands with Bert and Phil.

The other demon held out his hand. "Seamus," he said.

"Irish?" I asked.

"Romanian," he said.

"How's a Romanian kid end up with a name like Seamus?" asked Phil.

"Parents moved to Boston before I was born. They didn't speak much English but someone back home told them Boston was an Irish town. They figured I'd fit in with the other kids better if I had an Irish name." He shook his head. "Fifteen years of teachers reading my first name *see-mus* and giving up before they got to Dobrogeanu."

"Your parents didn't think the Dobrogeanu would cancel out the Seamus?"

Seamus shrugged. "They were new here. I don't blame them. They didn't know any better."

I could still hear the high pitched whine. The room felt completely still.

"It doesn't feel like were moving."

Bill grinned. "Pretty amazing, isn't it? It's no secret that we have the best engineers in history. Plug the room number in, wait a few seconds, and then five minutes tops in the transport. It's pretty wild if you think about it." He looked at the beer in my hand. "And you will never spill a drop."

I thought back to the angels standing in front of the door on the right.

“How do angels get around?”

Seamus rolled his eyes. “Prayer.”

“Prayer?”

“Prayer. They just close their eyes, think of the room they want, and ask to go there. Like Dorothy, but without the red shoes.”

“There’s no place like home,” said Bill.

“Must be convenient,” I said.

“Yeah, but at what price?” said Seamus.

“Price?”

“Our transportation system is independent. A machine doesn’t care who you are or what you’ve done. There is no need to prostrate yourself and tremble before the STM, no breast beating or mindless chanting.”

“Science versus faith, huh?”

“Always.”

I finished the beer. I put the bottle down between the two seats. I heard a small *ding*.

“We’re here,” said Bill.

The doors slid open. The room was lit by lamps on the walls. They were not electric, but the flames seemed inorganic. The light had a faint reddish tint. The floor was grey stone. On top of the stone was a large red oriental rug. In the center of the rug was a semicircular ebony table. There were seven seats around the rounded edge of the semicircle and one on the flat. Two figures were already at the table. A man in a green button down shirt and a pair of jeans was standing behind one of the seven seats. He had

a day or two of stubble on his face and he wore small, rimless glasses. He was young, probably in his twenties. A man in a grey t shirt was sitting in the chair behind the straight edge of the table.

“What’s this?” asked Phil.

“You said you were looking for cards,” said Bill. “This is our poker room.”

“*One* of our poker rooms,” said Seamus.

“Now if you boys will just step this way,” said Bill, “we’ll go cash in your keys.”

“What do you want with the keys?”

Seamus shook his head. “Nothing bad, I promise.”

“I’m going to need more than that before I give up the key.”

Bill sighed. “You had to wait five drinks before you could go to the seminar, right?”

I nodded.

“There didn’t use to be a drink limit. You could go to the seminar whenever you were ready. The drink limit is new.”

“The drink limit,” said Seamus, “is bad for us.”

“Waiting room rules dictate that the soul must attend an information seminar before angels and demons can compete for the soul,” said Bill. “They’re going to keep pushing the drink limit back. Push it back far enough and people start dying.”

“We’re already dead,” I said. “We can’t die again, can we?”

“Technically not dead,” said Seamus. The two alternated whenever they talked. They transitioned seamlessly. I felt like I was talking to one person. “You are, of course, quite dead.”

“But there’s been a strange phenomenon recently,” said Bill. “The drink counts are getting higher than ever before. Hundreds of thousands. People get up high enough, they just put their heads down on the bar and close their eyes. They aren’t sleeping; you can’t, physically. But they don’t talk to anyone, not angels, not demons.”

“They just stay that way until judgment. And then of course then end up in level five, level six. There’s some really nasty stuff down there,” said Seamus. “That’s supposed to be for the real sinners. But the high court likes to throw the book at borderline cases that make it all the way to judgment. Reinforces their righteousness.”

“So that’s it?” asked Bert. “You guys are just taking the keys and safekeeping them out of the goodness of your hearts.”

“Is that so hard to believe?” asked Bill.

“Well, yeah,” I said. “Because what does it matter to you? The soul ends up in hell either way, right? It’s just a matter of overcrowding at the lower levels at that point.”

“Well, there is the small matter of commission,” said Seamus.

“Commission?”

“Demons are measured by the number of souls converted. Satan’s big into competition. His answer to the hippie commune upstairs is to be fiercely meritocratic.”

“Of course, the number of demons in hell is growing as fast as humans are dying. It’s not about shaking hands and cold calling anymore. You’ve got to have a strategy.”

“Which is why we’re bullish on keys right now,” said Bill. “Long term planning, sure. But we see a real market for the keys a few million souls down the line. Let people skip over the drinks and go right to the info session in exchange for exclusive bargaining rights.”

It all sounded pretty harmless. I thought back to the dark room and the man with the deep voice.

“I got jumped,” I said.

“What?” said Bill.

“Right after my fifth drink. I went out into the hallway without a key. A door opened and someone pulled me inside. It was dark so I couldn’t see but there were at least three people. Someone asked for my keys and when I told him I didn’t have any someone else patted me down.”

I paused. Bill looked at Seamus. Neither said anything. They turned to look back at me. I didn’t like the quiet. I liked it when Bill and Seamus talked. They played off each other well. I always liked watching people completely within their elements. And now something was wrong.

“Someone take your idea first?” I asked.

Bill and Seamus did not smile. “They tried to take your key?” said Seamus.

“Yes. They patted me down and everything.”

They were quiet again. They were both staring at me. There had been an edge to Seamus’ voice.

“What’s the big deal? Someone tried to take my key. I’m sure it happens all the time.”

Bill shook his head. “Demons aren’t allowed to steal. We aren’t allowed to rob. We can barter and we can bet. That’s it.” He looked at Seamus. “Those weren’t demons.”

“Who else would want a key?” asked Seamus. “Who’s roughing up random souls in the hallway looking for keys?”

“Well it’s obviously not an angel,” said Bill. “Maybe a couple of spirits?”

“What would spirits want with an introductory seminar key?” said Seamus.

“They’re monitored pretty closely anyways.” He took a deep breath in. He held it, then let it out slowly. “It has to be souls.”

Bill nodded. “Rouge bands of souls roaming the hallways looking for keys. Probably hoping for something higher than an introductory seminar.” He grinned. “Well we know we have a market niche.”

Seamus laughed. “I guess so. Scary stuff, though. No telling what a bored soul might do.”

“I’m sorry, gentlemen,” said Bill. “Where were we?”

“You were saying something about keys for chips,” said Phil. He had been quiet during most of the exchange. He had been looking at the table, and the man sitting in one of the seven chairs.

“Right, of course. This way to the cashier please.”

“You want the keys,” said Bert. “Why do we want the chips?”

“The chips are standard currency,” said Seamus. “Redeemable for a number of highly desired products. We’re demons, remember. We have access to certain items you couldn’t otherwise get here.”

“Such as?”

“Actual alcohol, food for the gastronomes who are less than enthused by the forced liquid diet, a nymph or two,” he said, winking at me, “if your tastes run that way.”

“Just for the keys?”

“Just for the keys.”

The three of us looked at each other. We had no use for the keys anymore. I had a sense I would not see my first bar again. The valet at the door did not seem particularly concerned about the whereabouts of the key. There had been no instructions, no threats of fines or penalties if the key went missing.

The two demons led us over to the corner of the room. There was a cashier window cut out of the wall. Behind the window was a man. He was short, fat, and almost completely bald. I put my key on the counter. The man held the key up to the light. His fingers were short and very thick. Shaking hands with this man would have been uncomfortable. I would have come out of the handshake feeling strange for the rest of the day. His hand would have been sweaty, too. I was glad he was on the other side of the metal bars.

He put the key on an old scale. He moved the slides, tapping the smallest slide until the scale was balanced. He wrote down a number. He put the key into a small box beside him. The box went into a cubby on the wall behind him. He took out a small calculator. He punched in a few numbers, then looked up at Bill.

“First seminar?”

“What’s the last time we had anything else?”

The man’s eyebrows came together and pointed down. He stared at Bill. “I have to ask,” he said. “It’s my job. You know I know damn well we don’t get any other keys.”

“Hey, now, take it easy,” said Seamus. “He was just trying to make small talk. He didn’t mean anything by it.”

The man went back to his calculator. He looked up at me. “One thousand three hundred and fourteen,” he said. “Do you accept?”

I looked at Seamus and Bill. “Do I have a choice?”

“Sure. You can take your key and go back home.”

Home. I could not go back home. Home was not a bar.

I nodded. The cashier reached down below him and brought out a plastic tray for holding chips. I took the chips. I stood off to the side while Bert and Phil exchanged their keys. The keys were all the same. The man insisted on performing the same series of tests with a singular masturbatory intensity. He seemed almost disappointed when he gave Phil and Bert the exact same number of chips as he had given me.

Bill and Seamus both handed the man a small plastic card. He wrote the numbers down and gave them both a stack of chips. The five of us made our way over to the table. I took the seat next to the man in the button down shirt. Phil sat to my left. Next to him sat Bill, then Bert, then Seamus. The man to my right already had his chips in front of him. The rest of us took the chips out of the containers and stacked them on the table.

“As you gentlemen can see,” said Bill, “there is not a demon dealing cards.” He smiled. “You’re trusting, but you’re not stupid. Our hired spirit here will be taking care of the dealing duties today.”

A woman in a black cocktail dress came up to the table. She was holding a silver tray.

“Ah, excellent. Libations, anyone?” said Seamus.

“We should warn you though, after the faux alcoholic swill you’ve been drinking these things kick like a mule.”

Bert and Phil ordered beers. I ordered a gin and tonic. The man to my right ordered a club soda.

“Someone’s no fun,” said Bert. The man turned to him and smirked.

“I never drink when I play cards.”

“Cards are just an excuse to sit around and drink with your friends,” said Phil.

“Get away from the wife for a while, you know?”

“But I see no friends. Not yet, at least,” he said. “And I certainly don’t have a wife here to get away from.”

The table was quiet. After a minute the waitress brought back the drinks. I handed her a red chip with a gold number five on it. She looked down at it and laughed. “No need to tip,” she said. “We can’t redeem these.”

## Drink Thirteen

There was more gin in this drink. I tasted juniper more than quinine. The new ratio made the drink less effervescent. I didn't feel anything different when I drank it. Maybe the 'kick' would come later.

"Poker time," said Seamus.

"What game?" I said.

"Five Card Draw," he said. "Simplest game there is. Best, too. Everyone know how to play?"

We all nodded.

"Good. Five dollar ante, jacks or better to open."

I used to play five card draw with my grandparents. They had an old vase full of loose change. We used that to bet. They played Omaha Hi-Lo, Night Baseball, Fiery Cross, Seven Card Stud, but when it was my turned to deal I always chose Five Card Draw.

It was strange that they'd choose Five Card Draw. It was a home game, almost never played in casinos. It was slow. It was uncomplicated. Maybe they wanted us to feel comfortable. Maybe they didn't mind that the game took time. Maybe that was the whole point, to kill time. We certainly had nothing better to do.

The five dollar ante was tiny compared to all our chips. For the first few hands no one seemed willing to bet. A few times the opening bet just checked around and everyone drew for free. The pot rarely got much larger than one hundred chips.

Bill and Seamus seemed to be in no hurry. They joked with the table, congratulated winning players, and celebrated their own victories with a sense of embellished irony. They seemed like a pair of celebrities at a charity poker tournament. The money was all going to a good cause, and they didn't care much whether it was their charity or another's. They already had their keys. Now they just wanted to see if they could get them for free.

I found it hard to keep track of how long we'd been playing. I tried counting the hands but lost track easily. After one hand Bill and Seamus stood up. "Break time," said Bill. "Open bar at the rear of the room."

Phil, Bert and I stood up. The man to my right counted his chips and made neat, color coordinated stacks.

I felt lucid. The real gin, maybe.

The room was warm. Much warmer than any of the bars, or the apartment, or the hallway. My jacket felt heavy. I took it off and folded it across my arm. I unbuttoned the sleeves of my shirt and folded them over twice.

The bartender was the young woman in the black dress who had served me the first cocktail. She was pretty, but not intimidating. It was a shame there was no tipping. She would have made a fortune.

"Could I have a daiquiri, please?"

She looked around. "I don't have a blender here."

I smiled. "I'm not a fourteen year old girl. I'm not looking for a frozen tropical cocktail."

She looked behind her. There was a small stack of books.

“Do you have The Fine Art of Mixing Drinks?”

It was a book my father had bought me on when I graduated college. It has the recipes for six drinks the author believes to be essential. The daiquiri was one of them.

She looked through the books. “No,” she said. “Sorry.”

“No matter,” I said. “It’s pretty simple.”

“Wait a minute,” she said. “Let me write this down.”

“Look, I’m sure there’s a perfectly good version of a daiquiri somewhere in one of those books.”

“Probably,” she said, opening a drawer and pulling out a small black notebook and a pen. “But this way there’s a story behind the recipe.”

“Why’s that matter?”

She shut the drawer. “Someday, someone’s going to come in here and ask me to surprise them with a drink. And I’m going to ask them if they want a daiquiri. And they’ll say they don’t drink sissy drinks for fourteen year old girls. And I’ll explain to them that’s what I thought, too, before a gentleman one evening set me straight.”

“You could have said that, anyways,” I said. “They wouldn’t know you didn’t actually get the recipe from me.”

She shook her head. “We can lie by omission, and we can bend the truth. But we can’t out and out lie. And this way I have a real story.”

“Demons can’t lie?”

“No,” she said.

“Is this some sort of long con? Convince me that demons are incapable of lying and then leave me naked and penniless in the ninth circle of hell?”

She smiled. “That’s kind of like asking if today is opposite day, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“My answer is going to be no either way. So believe what you want when I say I’m not conning you. What’s your recipe?”

I paused to think. I could see the page. “Eight parts white rum, two parts lime juice, and one part simple syrup.” She scribbled into her notebook. “Do you have everything you need back there?”

She nodded. “Is this on the rocks?”

I shook my head. “Shaken with ice, strained. Straight up.”

She measured out the rum, juice, and syrup and put it into a mixer. There was a lot of liquid.

“That’s too much,” I said.

“I’m having one,” she said. “I can’t in good faith serve this to other patrons without trying it myself.”

“That’s funny.”

“What?”

“Good faith. I’d have figured you guys would have a different expression.”

“Faith’s faith. We just have a different interpretation of good.”

She strained a few ounces of the daiquiri into two cocktail glasses. She pushed one across the bar to me. She picked up the other and held it out in front of her.

“Cheers.”

## Drink Fourteen

I took a sip. Nearly perfect. Good rum, fresh lime juice, not too much simple syrup. I looked across at the bartender. She put her glass back down on the table. Her eyes were closed.

“That’s nice,” she said. “I like that. Very clean.”

“Nothing like it’s frozen strawberry cousins,” I said.

The man had finished counting his chips and made his way over to the bar. He ordered a club soda. I introduced myself. He shook my hand. He said his name was Tom.

“Did you exchange your key for chips?”

He said he had. “I figured I wasn’t doing anything with it.”

“Me neither.” I pointed at the club soda. “Why are you taking the card game so seriously?”

“I’m not sure. Something feels wrong, though.”

“With the card game?”

“No,” he said. “That’s the first thing that’s felt normal. That’s why I’m not drinking. This whole process seems fundamentally wrong. And I figure having a demon owe you a favor isn’t a bad idea.”

“Maybe you’re just freaked out about dying,” said Phil. He had been listening in on the conversation.

“Could be,” said Tom. It was clear he did not believe this to be the case.

“It seems as normal as I could expect,” said Bert. “I mean, purgatory is always going to be weird, right?”

“That’s the thing,” said Tom. “This isn’t how purgatory is supposed to work. There’s not supposed to be judgment in purgatory. You’ve just got to be purified before you go up. This is different.”

We were all quiet. I hadn’t known much about purgatory. Finally, Bert spoke up. “Well then, where the hell are we?”

No one said anything at first. Then Phil began to laugh. Tom smirked. I smiled and shook my head. Bert looked confused. Then he realized the irony of his comment.

“We’re not, though,” said Tom. “We’re not in Hell. This place isn’t like anything in the scripture. This is new. That’s why the demons want the keys.”

I looked over at Bill and Seamus. They were already back at the table. Bill caught my eye. He winked. I looked back at the other three at the bar. The bartender was no longer behind the bar. She had gone through a door off to the side.

“Let’s go ask our friends where we are.”

Phil looked at me. “Any chance we get a straight answer?”

“The bartender told me demons can’t lie. Who knows if she was telling the truth, but what good does it do them to lie about where we are?”

“If you ask me,” said Tom, “the demons have been the only straight forward ones here this whole time.”

“Alright then,” said Bert. “Let’s ask them.”

The four of us walked over to the black table. The man in grey was still sitting with the deck of cards in his hand. “Nice break?” asked Seamus.

“Sure,” I said.

“Ready for some more cards?”

“Absolutely,” I said. Bill and Seamus looked happy. “We just have a quick question before we get started.”

“If you’re looking for redemption values for your chips,” said Bill, “There’s a black binder over by the cashier’s table.”

“Thanks. But we had more of a fundamental structural question.”

“Uh oh,” said Seamus. He was still smiling. It didn’t seem forced. “Here they come, Bill.”

“I’m surprised it took this long,” said Bill.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Interesting question,” said Seamus.

“Especially since there’s no real name for it,” said Bill.

“This isn’t purgatory, though, is it?” said Tom.

“Of course not,” said Seamus. “Do you think they’d let us anywhere near Junior Heaven?”

“Junior Heaven?” said Bert.

“If you’re in purgatory,” said Bill, “You’re going to heaven. Did any of you ever read Dante?”

Tom raised his hand. I looked down.

“The official name for this place is the Temporary Pre-Judicial Soul Holding Facility. Rolls right off the tongue, doesn’t it? We call this the waiting room,” said Seamus. “Judgment was meant to be instantaneous. But the system got backlogged, and souls grew so much faster than angels, that they had to find a place to put everyone.”

“Which,” said Bill, “is where you find yourself right now.”

“Where is here, though?” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Physically, where are we?”

“No clue,” said Seamus. “The greatest scientific minds in history have been trying to figure that out for a few millennia and we’ve still got nothing.”

“So we’re all just backlogged souls?” I said.

“All the hospital volunteers, child rapists, tax attorneys, kindergarten teachers, and crack babies lumped together for a few communal beverages,” said Bill. “No sorting whatsoever.”

I took a sip of the daiquiri. The glass was sweating in the warm room. It was a strange feeling. This place, these bars, were not a reflection of who I was in life. I had come to accept my placement in purgatory. Now there was uncertainty. Maybe I was meant to go to heaven and the system was too slow. Or hell. I felt an impersonal anger. The system had broken down. And no one was fixing it. If the demons were telling the truth.

I was nothing. Not quite. I was a number of drinks for long term statistical purposes. I had not been judged. If the demons were right I would never be judged.

“Actually,” said Bert. “That’s not that different from how I thought things worked here. Just a different name.”

“Right,” said Seamus. “Everything else you’ve heard is the same.”

“Well,” said Tom, “That’s less exciting than I was hoping for. Makes sense, though.”

“Cards, then?” said Bill.

“Sure,” said Phil. “We still don’t have anything better to be doing.”

We were still playing Five Card Draw. I was slowly losing the chips in front of me. We had played about a dozen hands since the break. I hadn’t won a hand yet.

The dealer shuffled the cards. His hands moved quickly. He had done this for a long time. I took my cards into my hands. I always held my cards with both hands.

I had two eights, clubs and diamonds, the ten of hearts, the two of diamonds, and the jack of spades. I was first to bet. My eights weren’t high enough to open. I tapped my finger twice on the table. “Check.”

The table check around to Seamus. He bet fifteen. Tom folded. I called. My hand was weak. Seamus’ hand was better than mine. I had no flush draw, a middling pair, and, if I held onto the eights, no chance for a straight. I was getting bored. I wanted to draw. Phil folded. Bill called. Bert folded. It was the two demons and me.

I kept the eights and asked for three cards. Bill took two. Seamus took three. I brought the cards up. Four eights and the five of diamonds. There was not much in the pot, the thirty five from the antes and the forty five from the bets. I looked at my chips. I pushed in two black chips, two blue chips, and two red chips. Three hundred and fifty dollars. More than three times the size of the pot.

Bill folded. He had been on a draw that didn’t catch. Seamus smiled at me. He liked to talk.

“You’ve been pretty quiet this game. Did you finally hit?”

I stared straight at him. I read somewhere that bluffers act more aggressive after they’ve bet.

“Big bet for a small pot.”

I had been bored. I was frustrated by my cards. I was looking to buy the small pot with a disproportionately large bet. Seamus looked down at his chips. He had something. Three of a kind, maybe a full house. He thought he had me beat.

“I’m not going to let you off that easy,” he said. He threw in seven black chips. He had a fondness for chips with higher denominations. Twice already this game someone had had to break a black hundred chip so he could pay the ante. “Reraise to seven hundred.”

I looked down at the chips in the middle of the table. The black chips blended with the table. Only a white inner circle differentiated the chip from the ebony wood. He could have a straight flush. He could have a higher four of a kind. I didn’t think he did. But I thought through each scenario. I imagined him turning over the winning hand. I wanted him to see the look on my face as I imagined losing. I had five hundred dollars in front of me. I pushed it all into the middle. The dealer quickly counted the chips. “Reraise all in to eight hundred and fifty dollars.”

Seamus looked at me again. I stared back at him. I felt nervous. I hadn’t felt nervous in a long time. It felt good. In a minute I would either feel very good or very bad. I hadn’t felt either since well before the first drink. I wiped my hands against my pants.

He called. He had a full house, aces full of jacks. I turned over my eights. He winced. Then he looked at me and laughed. “I guess it was your turn, anyways.” I reached out and pulled the chips across the table with both arms. I began stacking the black chips. I felt skilled. I liked the feeling. I had done something better than someone else. I looked up for the cocktail waitress. The room was still warm. I wanted another

daiquiri. I wanted to go look at the binder with the exchange rates. I wanted to see what I could buy.

I turned around to look for the cocktail waitress. She was not there. Three figures were standing next to one another. Standing in the middle was the woman in the white dress from Bert's bar. On either side of her were large men in khakis and a white button down shirt.

"Bill," I asked, still looking at the woman. "What's going on?"

Bill turned around. He saw the three. He stood up. Seamus turned and stood, too.

"What are you doing here?" Bill said. "This is not your domain. You have no right."

"These men asked me for cards in the bar," said the woman. "I saw them follow you. I had to come save them."

"This isn't your jurisdiction," said Seamus. "You can't be here."

"If I suspect illegal activities I have the right to search wherever I please, regardless of property ownership. And from what I see now," said the woman, looking around the room, "I see gambling, improper spirit use, and, I'm guessing, narcotics."

"Narcotics?" I said.

"The drinks," said Bill. "Technically illegal."

"All three of those are misdemeanors," said Seamus. "Write us a ticket if you want but then get out."

"Hold on," said the woman. She held out a small parchment scroll. "The very latest Angelic Congressional Directive."

Bill read the parchment. "You've got to be kidding me." He passed the scroll to Seamus. He read the parchment and looked back up at the woman.

"You say the legislature just passed this?"

"Well, its been no secret that the AC has been trying to improve key retention," said the woman. "Petty theft isn't so petty any more when bands of thugs are roaming the hallways stealing keys off people. I now have permission to search the premises for illegal keys."

"Now wait just a second," said Bill. He stepped towards the woman. One of the large men moved in between. The man was six inches taller than Bill. Bill stopped.

"You can talk all you want," said the woman. "But I'm still going to perform the search."

The woman seemed changed. She had seemed earnest in the bar. She had seemed harmless. Now she was different.

The woman walked over to the cashier's counter. The short man was no longer behind the counter. She looked inside. She turned back to Bill.

"Open the cage."

"I can't," he said. "Only operable from the inside. You know, prevent thieves and all that."

One of the men took out a pad of paper and a pencil. He handed it to the woman. She wrote on the pad. She wrote slowly. She tore the top page off and handed it to Seamus.

"I'm sure this isn't the first time, but I'm sure you know all fines must be paid promptly or else serious consequences could follow. And trust me when I say I'll be back

with a search warrant and a team of lock smiths if need be.” She looked at the four of us sitting at the table. “And you all come with me now.”

“I think I’d rather stay here, thanks,” said Tom.

“You don’t have a choice,” said the woman. “I’m declaring myself your guardian angels. And since you are obviously incapable of making your own decisions, I make the decisions for you. And I’m deciding you’re going to come with me.”

“I’m entirely capable,” said Tom.

“What are you drinking?” said the woman.

“Club soda,” said Tom.

“Check him.”

One of the men went over to Tom. He pick up the glass and sniffed. He nodded his head.

“Look,” she said, “Either you leave with me, under my guardianship, or I have you arrested for gambling and loitering in a place of sin.”

“Come now,” said Bill. “Both of those are decriminalized. No one gets arrested for that stuff anymore.”

“I still have every right to book him for those charges,” said the woman. “It’s up to the judge to decide the punishment.”

“Fine,” said Tom, standing up from the table.

“And the rest of you?”

Bert and Phil both stood up slowly. I stayed in my seat. The woman reminded me of my third grade teacher. She always assumed the worst of her students. She was the only teacher I ever hated. “Where are you taking us?”

“You don’t get to know that,” she said.

“I’m not going until you tell me where you’re taking us.”

She looked down at the empty glass next to me. “I’m assuming that wasn’t club soda?”

I didn’t say anything. I looked over at Bill.

“She’s going to take you, anyways,” said Bill. “Don’t worry. You haven’t done anything wrong and we’re fine. By the time they get a warrant there’ll be nothing to search. Just do what they say.”

“And the chips?” I asked.

Bill smiled. “Don’t worry. We’ll open an account.”

I stood up. The woman gave me a tightlipped smile.

“Everyone hold hands,” she said.

“What?” said Bert.

“You heard me,” she said. “Hold hands.”

Bert looked at the woman, then at the two large men still flanking her. I was standing on his left. Phil was on his left. He grabbed our hands.

The seven of us were standing in a ring. We were all holding hands. The woman and the two men closed their eyes. I looked at Tom. He shrugged. When he moved his shoulders he lifted the arm of one of the large men. The man opened one eye. He looked down at Tom. Tom mumbled sorry. The man closed his eye.

I was standing in a lobby. The room had not spun. The colors had not blended together. There had been no blackness. I was in one room, and then I was standing in

another. The elevator had been impressive. It was an engineering masterwork. It did not compare to this sensation.

The lobby was large. The entire room appeared to be made of white marble. In front of us were four wide stairs. At the top of the stairs were large marble pillars. Beyond the pillars were doors. The woman walked up the stairs and through the door directly in front of us. We followed.

Inside the door was a small waiting room. The walls were lined with chairs. On the wall to left there was a window. Behind the window was a desk. A woman in a white blouse was sitting at the desk. On the wall opposite the entrance there was a door. There was no one else in the room.

“Go sit down,” said the woman. I walked over to a seat on the wall to the right of the entrance. The woman walked over to the counter. She came back with four clipboards. Each clipboard had a pen and a white form.

“Fill out this form,” said the woman. “Give it to the woman at the counter when you’re finished. She’ll tell you where to go.”

I looked at the form. I wrote down my name, date of birth, and date of death in the boxes on the top of the form. The rest of the form was yes no questions.

*Have you attended the first seminar? Yes.*

*Have you attended any additional seminars? No.*

*Have you ever been convicted of a Temporary Pre-Judicial Soul Holding Facility offense? No.*

*Have you had any contact with a demon while not in the presence of an angel or spirit?* There had been angels in the bar. A spirit had been in the room during the seminar. There had been a spirit dealing cards. In the elevator. Yes.

The form was short. It was printed on an index card sized piece of paper. I finished first. I brought the clipboard up to the window. I stood in front of the window. The woman at the desk did not notice me. I tapped on the glass. She looked up. I held up the index card. She slid the window open.

“Hello?”

“The woman who was here told me to give you this when I was done,” I said.

I handed her the form. She looked at it. She looked up at me. She put the card into a folder on her desk. She wrote something down on a small piece of paper. She folded the paper in half. “Through that door,” she said, pointing to the door opposite the entrance. “Give this to the person inside.”

I walked over to the door. Bert and Phil looked up from their forms. Tom kept writing.

“See you on the other side, I guess,” I said.

“We’ll see you around,” said Bert.

I did not think I would see any of the three again. Bert and Phil went back to writing. I looked at them. They had become familiar. It was nice to have something familiar in that place.

I opened the door. A thin, tall man in a white button down shirt was sitting behind another desk. Five feet from the entrance was another door. There was nothing in the second room but the desk. The room was smaller than the first. I shut the door behind me

and handed him the piece of paper. He read the note. He reached into the desk. He took out a box. He opened the box. He took out two ink pads. One was gold, the other black. He took a stamp out of the box. He pressed the stamp into the black ink.

“Your left hand, please.”

I held out my left hand. He stamped a large letter ‘C’ in black on the back of my hand. He took out another stamp. Below the ‘C’ he stamped a letter ‘S’. He put the black pad away. He took two more stamps out of the box.

“Your right hand, now.”

He pressed a stamp into the gold ink and brought it to my hand. A gold, balanced scale was on the back of my hand. He pressed another stamp into the ink. He stamped a small letter ‘f’ next to the scale. I looked down at my hands. I looked at him.

“What does this mean?” I asked.

“It means the note said to stamp a ‘C’ and an ‘S’ on your left hand and a scale and an ‘f’ on your right hand,” he said. “Black ink always on the left hand, and gold ink on the right.”

He sat back down at the desk. He put the gold ink pad and stamps back into the box. He closed the box and put it back into his desk.

I stood there for a minute, looking down at my hands. I assumed the stamps had something to do with the questionnaire. Four questions, four stamps.

The man was sitting at his desk. His hands were folded on the table in front of him. He was not looking at anything.

“Excuse me,” I said.

“Yes?” he responded.

“What am I supposed to do now?”

He pointed to the door opposite the entrance. “Go through that door. Show the person your hand stamps.”

I walked over to the door. I opened the door. The room was the exact same dimensions of the last one. I closed the door again. Behind this desk was an old man. He had a few strands of grey hair left. He wore large, thick glasses. He smiled at me when I walked in.

“Hello there!” he said.

“Hello,” I said. He seemed far more excited to see me than the other two. The elderly always seem more excited to see you. I had always assumed they were just afraid of dying alone. As long as you were talking to them, someone would be there when they went. It was nice to see an older person still happy to see me even after his was dead.

“What can I help you with?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” I said. “The person in the last room stamped my hands. He told me to show you the stamps.”

The man got up from his chair. “Ah, the stamps, the stamps, of course it’s the stamps!” He bent over the desk. “Hands on the desk, please.”

I put my hands palm down on the table. The man took his glasses and pushed them to the top of his head. He leaned in closer. His nose was almost touching my knuckles. He would look at each symbol intently, then furiously scribble down notes on a pad of yellow legal paper.

When he had examined all four symbols he put his glasses back on and sat down. He reached into the desk and took out what looked like a folding map. He carefully

unfolded the paper. The page took up his entire desk. On one half of the paper was a map. The map looked like an expanded chess board. I counted twelve squares across and twelve squares down. One hundred and forty four uniform squares in all. Connecting the squares were lines of all different widths and colors. Some lines were solid while others were dotted. Some lines started dotted, became solid, and suddenly switched back into intermitted dotting.

On the other half of the paper looked like a rail schedule for the New Jersey Transit. The half was covered with miniscule timetables. The old man would start on the half with the time tables, shift suddenly over to the map, and scribble some more on the yellow legal pad. Every few minutes he would stop to look up excitedly at me. He would grin, say, “Ah ha!”, and dive back into the page.

After about ten minutes I coughed politely. The man looked up from the page. “I suppose you don’t want me keeping all the fun to myself!” he said.

“I was just wondering what it is you’re doing,” I said.

“Mapping, my dear boy, mapping!” he spoke with a slight British accent. “The ancient art of cartography in all its mystical glory!” Upon delivering this proclamation he returned to the time table. I cleared my throat again.

“Yes!” he said. He did not seem the least bothered at my disturbance.

“What do maps have to do with the stamps on my hand?” I asked.

“The stamps, oh the stamps!” He was giddy. “Prohibitions, allowances, keys to secret passage ways: the stamps tell it all!” He leaned in close and dropped his voice down to an excited whisper. “For example, that nasty black ‘C’ festooning your left hand means you have made unchaperoned contact with a demon.” He raised his eyebrows and

drew his mouth back into an 'O'. "Naughty naughty, aren't we! Anyhow since we want to keep you and your potentially contagious sinning away from the innocents we simply can't allow you to travel on any of the red lines here." He pointed down to the map. "They run right past the nurseries and heaven knows we don't want little demon spawn running around, especially not with our cherub shortage and Valentine's Day on the way!"

"But where are you giving me a map to?" I said quickly, catching him before he returned to the map.

"Where are we giving you a map to?" he repeated in a slightly infantilizing voice. The chuckled and shook his head. Then he looked back at me. He cocked his head to the side. He raised his eye brows.

"Oh dear. Where are we giving you map to?"

"I just filled out a questionnaire," I said.

"Well that's rather peculiar," said the man. He sat on his hands, rocking back and forth. He was the sort of old man who seems to have entered a second childhood, full of passion and love of life before dementia and incontinence moves him, in the logical progression, into a second infancy. Took his glasses off, wiped them quickly with a handkerchief, and looked back at me. "I suppose I should page for assistance."

He opened the large bottom drawer of his desk and peered in. "This is somewhat embarrassing I must admit," he said. "I have not had to call in help in quite some time."

"It's mostly my fault, I think," I said. After the two surely angels before I wanted to do anything to keep his spirits high. "I'm the one who barged in here without a destination."

He seemed to perk up when I said that. He was bent over his chair so I could only see his ears and the top of his head. But he seemed to dig with more force after my comment.

After a few minutes of searching he held his hand above the desk. “There she is!” he said. It was a small silver bell, covered in dust from apparent disuse. He blew on it a few times. “This should be all we need,” he said, “assuming they haven’t changed anything.” He laughed. “Well of course they’ve changed *something* since the last time I used it. Millions of things, probably. Always tinkering, always changing. What I mean to say, you see, is I hope they haven’t changed anything with the assistance system.”

I nodded. He stood up from his chair. He moved his wrist back and forth. The bell rang for about three seconds. It made a sweet, high pitched jingle.

A man was standing in the corner. He was there with the same suddenness of finding myself in the lobby. He was dressed like the man from the information seminar: a light khaki suit with a white shirt. This man had a mustache and a crème colored Panama hat.

“Ah, excellent, just as punctual as I remember!” The little old man looked delighted the system had worked.

The man in the suit smiled. “Always happy to please. What seems to be the problem?”

“Well,” began the old man, “we seem to have run into a spot of trouble with the mapping process.”

“Are the stamps ok?”

“Oh yes, stamps are fine. Very nice and orderly.”

“Then can’t you just map out the route if you have the stamps?”

“Ah, well, see, therein lies the complication. Mister...” His voice trailed off. He extended his hand out to me. “Oh, dreadfully embarrassed, but I seem to have forgotten your name!”

“Stephen,” I said. “Stephen Kampson.” He had not forgotten my name. He had forgotten that he had never known my name. Different means to the same end.

“Right, well, young Stephen here is unsure of his final destination!”

The man in the Panama hat looked at me. “You don’t know where you’re going?”

I shook my head. “An angel brought me to the lobby and told be to fill out a form. I made it this far before anyone asked where I was going.”

The man sighed. “What were you here for?”

I thought about lying. I decided against it. “I was playing cards,” I said. “With some demons. She came and assumed guardianship.”

“She brought you here for that?” said the man.

“She said she needed me to give a statement to the judge,” I said.

The man rolled his eyes. “How long have you been here?”

I hadn’t had a drink since the daiquiri. It felt like a very long time ago.

“Fourteen.”

“She brings in a fourteen drink soul she picked up for playing cards with a couple of demons?” He looked at the old man. “Can you imagine what would happen if we tried to book every teenage drink soul who was off experimenting with demons?”

“Abject chaos!” said the old man. “The system would be overflowing!”

“What a waste of resources,” said the man in the Panama hat. He looked at me again. “You didn’t happen to catch this angel’s name, did you?”

I shook my head. “She was blond. She had a white dress on.”

“You’ve successfully described a quarter of heaven’s population.” He looked up at the ceiling. “Man would I love to write her up and report her.”

“I’m afraid I don’t see that happening, Charles,” said the old man.

“Even if I did write her up,” said Charles, “by the time they got around to giving her a performance review it would be so far in the past she wouldn’t even remember it. Besides, all the performance reviews these days are that bull shit new wave constructive criticism anyways. Forget the good deed metric – give me souls saved any day! Let me go out there and brawl with the demons for the sake of mankind!”

“Not everyone was around before a soul salvation was a miracle, Charles,” said the old man. “And as much as I liked bonking a demon or two on the head to start my day there’s no use getting upset about it now. You need a hobby, Charles.” He turned and winked at me. “Like cartography.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

The room was quiet for the first time since Charles had entered. Finally the little old man spoke up.

“In the meantime what do you want to do with Mr. Stephen?”

“Back to his bar, I guess,” said Charles. He looked at me. “Is that alright with you?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Well then that’s what we’ll do,” he said. “Good talking, Cornelius.”

“Always a pleasure chatting with you, Charles,” said Cornelius. The corner was empty. Charles had left.

Cornelius shook his head. “Charles is in such a foul mood these days. He gets caught up in it all, you know.” Cornelius twirled his finger up through the air. “He’s of the old guard, you see. It’s in his nature to save souls. He was very active on earth, you know. Ever heard of him?”

I thought. The only two Charles I could think of were Charles in Charge and Charles Barkley. I doubted Cornelius knew either. “I don’t think I knew him.”

Cornelius rocked back and forth. “Well, you’re a young soul, can’t blame you I suppose. Very active during the Roman period, and stayed on right through when everything got so Byzantine!” He laughed. I smiled. I had suffered through a year of an eighth grade world history class with a teacher with a weakness for historical puns. I found I had since lost my taste for them.

“Anyhow, let’s get you back to your pub,” said Cornelius. “Do you remember what it looks like?”

“Vaguely,” I said. I remembered Jack. I remembered the booths. I remembered the clock and the chalkboard. “How specific do you need me to be?”

“Oh no use in describing it to me,” he said. “You just get the image in your head and leave the prayer to me. Worst is we end up in some other bar, stop in for a quick drink and try it again!” He closed his eyes. “Do you have the image?”

I focused in on the chalkboard and clock. Someone else with my initials might have died at the same time on the same day and consumed the same number of drinks since. But that was a risk I was willing to take. The little old man grabbed my hands.

“Close your eyes now,” he said. “Focus. Focus! Ready?”

I closed my eyes. I could see the chalkboard. I could see the wall between it and the clock. I knew it was my bar. I shut my eyes tighter.

The old man let go of my hands and let out a little yelp. “Goodness!” he said. “I almost forgot to leave a note!”

He tore off the top four pages of the yellow legal pad, covered in now useless notes planning my route. He wrote something on the piece of paper and folded the paper in half. He had one half of the paper flat on the desk. The other half dangled off the side, perpendicular to the desk top. He had written in large clumsy cursive:

*Gone to return misplaced soul. Out for a drink. Won't be long.  
Feel free to browse the maps. –C.*

Cornelius then went over to the door. He took a deadbolt lock from above the knob and pushed the lock in. “There,” he said. “That should be enough.”

“Do you get much traffic through here?” I asked as he came around the desk.

“Oh yes,” he said. “My door opens to whomever is next in the queue for a map. The locked door just means they can't open the door the first time. The next time they pull it opens up to the next available cartographer.”

“Then why the note?”

“Colleagues stopping by to have a chat about new route regulations, my wife stopping in from child services to say hello, they'd be terrified if they came and I wasn't here!”

Cornelius grasped my hands.

“For real, this time?” I asked.

He smiled. “Very much so. Now concentrate, young Stephen. Focus!”

I closed my eyes. Again the image came easily. The chalk board. The initials. The date. The dotted line, now with a number fourteen below it. I could even image exactly how the fourteen would look. I could remember the one and the four from those early drinks. I concentrated on the number. I heard Cornelius muttering something. It didn't sound like English. Latin, maybe. He pulled my hand forward. I heard a door creak. I stepped through the doorway.

When I opened my eyes I was staring at the chalkboard. Cornelius had already let go of my hands. He was sitting in the stool next to mine. He seemed quite taken with the bar.

“You know,” he said, “they say the bars are chosen to reflect the individual. I was never quite sure what to make of that, but if it is at all true that I commend you on your excellent taste.”

Jack was down the bar. He was still wiping a high ball glass. I hoped it was a different high ball glass. I yelled down to him. “You hear that, Jack? Cornelius likes your bar.”

Jack put the glass down and came over. “Glad to hear it. I don't mind the place myself.”

“Elegant without being impersonal, charming and tasteful!” declared Cornelius.

“We need to get this man a drink,” said Jack. I nodded in agreement. I wanted to talk to him, anyways. He was the first angel I met who seemed happy.

“I'll drink whatever you get, Cornelius,” I said. “Your order.”

“Well,” said Cornelius, again sitting on his hands and rocking back and forth, “I had a cocktail the last time I was in a place like this that I quite enjoyed. I can't remember

what its called. It was a young Englishman who ordered it for me, if that helps at all. Some flavored whiskey or gin with something else, lemon, maybe. And cucumber,” he said, holding his index finger in the air, “I remember cucumber.”

Jack looked at me. “Do you know what he’s talking about?”

I smiled. It felt like a very long time ago. My wife and I had gone on our honeymoon to a small island in the Caribbean. We were in a little cottage right on the beach. On the side wall of our cottage was a flag. When we raised the flag a server came over with a pair of cocktails. Our first day there the bartender had come to ask us what we wanted our cocktail to be. We told him this was our honeymoon. We wanted something we hadn’t had before. We wanted something that would remind us. When we raised the flag our drinks had a slice of cucumber as a garnish, too. The drink had lemonade, mint leaves, all different slices of fruit, and a fruit infused gin I had never heard of before. The gin was called Pimm’s No. 1, and the drink was a Pimm’s Cup.

There was no reason for Jack to have Pimm’s. It would not be popular enough to keep in most bars. But Cornelius had said the bars are tailored to the souls they house. If that was true, somewhere in the mass of bottles behind Jack was a bottle of Pimm’s No. 1. I asked Jack if he had any. He turned his head and looked at me.

“I’ll take a look,” he said. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of it, though.”

He went to go look through the bottles. “You’ve heard of it, then?” said Cornelius. “You’ve heard of the drink?”

“Pimm’s Cup, Cornelius. One of my all time favorites.”

It didn’t take Jack long. He came back over to the bar with the bottle of brown liquid in his hand. I told him the recipe.

“Cucumber?” he said.

“Just a garnish,” I said. “Not a problem if you don’t have it.”

“That, I know I don’t have,” said Jack. “I don’t keep many vegetables on hand.”

“Olives,” I said, “And whatever you need for bloody marys.”

“Sure,” said Jack. “Do you want a celery garnish on this?”

“It wouldn’t be the same as the cucumber,” I said.

## Drink Fifteen

It had been a long time since my last drink. The taste of the Pimm's was unmistakable. I thought about my wife.

"Did you say you have a wife?" I said.

Cornelius put his drink back on the bar. "Love of my life, love of my afterlife, eternal love, oh it's wonderful Stephen."

"And you both went to heaven?"

"Well not straight off for either of us. No one did, understand. Just baptized babies, I suppose, get a free pass. But everyone did a brief stay in purgatory. A bit unpleasant, but that comes with the territory, doesn't it? And then that was that. You were in heaven!"

I paused before I asked my next question. I didn't want to seem rude. "Do you mind if I ask when you died?"

Cornelius took a sip of the Pimm's Cup. "I figured you might. I died May 21, 1573."

"That's a little ways back."

Cornelius nodded. "I've kept up pretty well since then. New phrases, cultural references, all that. You have to, really, if you're working with new souls."

I tipped back the cup. One day my wife and I didn't talk at all. We woke up in each other's arms, spent the day drinking and reading and making love. We went to dinner and even the wait staff understood. They brought us food without our ordering. I just sat there and looked at her. I thought to myself, this is the happiest I will ever be.

There was something bittersweet about that, the realization of a zenith. The cocktail reminded me of all that.

“I’m never going to see my wife again, Cornelius.”

He turned and looked at me. He didn’t say anything.

“I’ll never see my daughters again.”

He shook his head. He looked old now. “So much has changed, Stephen. Everything’s bigger now.”

“I want what you have.”

He looked down at his glass. He played with his hands. The fingers were gnarled.

“You have your family. You do what you love. Isn’t that an option anymore?”

He sighed and took another sip. He wasn’t lying to me. I appreciated that.

“I don’t need paradise. I don’t want seventy seven virgins. I don’t want nirvana. I just want to be happy and quiet.”

I wasn’t really talking to Cornelius anymore. He sat there and listened. There was nothing he could say, though.

“What if I went to sleep?” I said. “Someone told me about this. Eventually your body just gives up and it’s just like sleeping. And when you wake up you’ve been judged. Couldn’t I do that?”

“No, Stephen,” said Cornelius quietly. “You can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“The soul just withers,” he said. “When their judgment comes, and they are asked to speak for themselves, there’s nothing but a shell of what once was. Just empty husks.

Every now and then Peter sends one of the shells to heaven, almost as an apology. But mostly he just sends them to the inner circles. They don't know, anyways."

It was quiet again. We had both finished our drinks. He got off his bar stool and stood up. I got up. He reached out. We shook hands.

"It's not fair, is it?" he said.

"Doesn't seem that way."

He looked up for a second, then down at his feet. After a few seconds he took a deep breath and looked at me. "Pleasure meeting you today. It's probably for the best that you didn't go into the interior. You'd probably never have gotten out" He smiled. "What *were* you there for?"

"Someone was investigating key theft," I said. "I traded my key for some poker chips."

"By the time the angels got the warrant the demons would have been long gone," he said.

I nodded. We shook hands again. He closed his eyes and began speaking. It was Latin. I was sure of it.

"Wait," I said.

He opened his eye.

"What would you do?"

He looked at me.

"You've seen the angels who work in the offices before mine. Not everyone in heaven is happy."

"Can you be happy in Hell?"

He took another deep breath. "If you work at it," he said, "You could be happy and quiet anywhere."

I reached out my hand for a third hand shake. He smiled and grabbed my hand.

"I'm not going to heaven, am I?"

He smiled sadly. "I would see what you can get," he said. "The younger the soul, the better."

He walked down to the end of the bar opposite where I had left to go to the seminar. It was dark on that side. The bar seemed to stretch on. I saw his outline against the black. I saw a brief shadow. It looked like someone standing in the doorway of a dark room with a hallway light lighting them from behind. Then he was gone. Jack asked me if I wanted another drink. I shook my head. I needed to think. Taste invoked memory too strongly.

I walked along the wall opposite the bar. Almost all of the booths were empty. Most of the angels and demons had left during my absence. I heard voices from a booth a few yards away. I knocked. Two people inside laughed. Someone said "Come in."

I pulled back the curtain. Inside were three girls, probably not much older than twenty. They were trying very hard not to laugh. They smiled politely. They bit their lips. One of them looked like my youngest daughter. I nodded to them. I closed the curtain. Someone whispered something and they were all laughing again.

I walked all the way down the bar to the door I had left through to get to the first seminar. The laughing girls were the only occupied booth. The attendant's desk was empty. There was a large padlock of the cabinet for the keys. It was locked. I wouldn't know where the keys went, anyways.

I walked back down the bar. I passed my stool on my left. The booths were empty. After twenty yards the lights were much lower. I could see the two doors at the end of the bar, elevator on the left, simple gold on the right. I heard quiet voices from one of the booths I passed. At first I thought I imagined them. I stopped and walked by the booth again. There were people inside.

I knocked on the booth. Someone inside pulled back the curtain. Two men were sitting across from each other. One was wearing a black suit with a purple shirt. The other was wearing a pair of jeans and a black t shirt. On the table between them was a large metal urn. In front of each man was a glass with a clear green liquid.

“How can we help you?” asked the man on my right. He had dark brown skin, almost completely black. He spoke with a slight accent. I couldn’t place it. French, maybe.

“I have some chips stored in an account,” I said. “I was wondering if I could get in touch with the demons who set up the account.”

“We can access the account for you,” said the man on my left.

“Thank you,” I said, “but I’d rather it was them.”

“We understand,” said the man on my right. “You know them.”

“Do you have their names?” asked the other.

“Just first names,” I said. “Seamus and Bill.”

The man on my left stood up. “Do you know where you’re going?” asked the man on my right.

“Central information, ask for the directory.”

The other man nodded. “Good,” he said. “If they work together they’ll probably be listed together. There can’t be that many teams of demons named Seamus and Bill.”

The man on my left stepped out of the booth and walked a few feet to the elevator. He reached down to the keypad. I watched him. He pressed one button three times and waited. I turned back to the booth. The man was watching me.

“You were watching the pass code?”

“Not close enough,” I said. “I only saw it was the same three numbers.”

“666,” said the man. “Ridiculous, right? The engineers thought it was hilarious.”

The man motioned with his arm for me to sit down. I sat down. The seat was still warm from the other man.

“Will you have a drink with me?” he asked.

“What is this?”

“Absinthe.” I must have looked worried. “There’s no need for concern,” he said.

“The wormwood in this is as impotent as the alcohol.”

I nodded. I reached down for my glass.

“Slow,” said the man. “That’s not how you drink absinthe.”

He put a slotted spoon over his glass. On top of the spoon was a sugar cube. He opened one of the spigots of the urn. A clear liquid came out.

“What is that?”

“Just ice water.”

The water dripped over the sugar cube and down into the absinthe. The liquid slowly changed from a dark clear green to an opaque pastel to finally a milky white. He

reached behind the urn and handed me a slotted spoon with a sugar cube. I did what he had done. I watched the liquid change.

When it was white I closed my spigot. The demon across from me picked up his glass. I did the same.

“Do you know any toasts?” I asked.

“What’s the occasion?”

I paused. “None, I guess.”

“Then there is nothing to toast to. We have health, and wealth means nothing.”

“Happiness, then?”

He looked at me and bobbed his head up and down. “Alright then. A drink to happiness.” He didn’t pronounce the h in happiness.

I lifted my glass slightly. I brought it to my lips.

## Drink Sixteen

It tasted like anise. Not licorice – the Campari had tasted like licorice. In absinthe the anise was its own flavor. It was reminiscent of licorice. Something was different. The aromatics, maybe.

It was strong, too. The milky white color had made me expect something smooth. It burned my throat. My eyes felt warm. I was glad he had stopped me and diluted the liquid.

He closed his eyes when he drank. Neither of us said anything. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence. I sipped the absinthe.

He finished before I did. He reached behind the urn. He was holding a clear bottle with a bright green liquid. There was a simple white label. It looked home made. He poured himself another drink. He put the sugar on the spoon and again placed the whole glass under the spigot. By the time his glass was milky I had finished my drink. He held the bottle up. I shook my head. He went back to his drink.

When he had finished the second glass of absinthe he reached for the bottle again. He stopped. He looked at me across the table.

“It's bad etiquette to allow the host to keep drinking while you sit there temperately.”

I smiled at him across the table. “Let's not pretend we're really drinking,” I said. “That makes it too depressing when I realize all I'm drinking is water that burns the back of my throat occasionally. And while I may be a guest in this booth, you, I believe, are a guest in this bar.”

“But you do not own this bar.”

It was true. I did not.

“So we will decide upon the host and guest relationship based upon the higher level of ownership.”

“You don’t own this booth.”

“No. But I own this bottle,” he said, tilting the absinthe bottle forward. “And I own this fountain. And I own the glasses. And I own the spoons.”

“So by not drinking the absinthe,” I said, “I’m not being a bad guest. I’m being to guest at all.”

He thought about that for a second. Then he shook his head. “Almost. But when you had the first absinthe you entered into the host guest relationship. Future abstinence does not excuse you from these social obligations.”

We smiled at each other. I always liked banter that felt like a chess game. I reached for my glass and passed it across to him. He poured about an ounce of the absinthe. He handed me a spoon and a sugar cube. We each opened our spigots. I waited a second after the drink turned white. I hoped my host hadn’t noticed. He would have ridiculed me for taking a weak drink. He seemed absorbed in his own glass.

“To happiness again?” I asked.

“Can’t toast to the same thing twice in one night,” he said. “Unless it’s a woman.”

“What kind of rule is that?” I said.

“And,” he said, ignoring my objection, “that woman must be present. Otherwise it’s pathetic show of cowardice and heart sickness.”

“Well then, what do you propose we drink to?”

He shrugged. “I did not suggest the toast. If there is nothing to toast to, don’t toast. Just drink.”

I raised my glass.

## Drink Seventeen

I liked the new ratio better. The ice water was very cold. It had the effect of both diluting the alcohol in the drink and countering the fire in the throat. I could keep even pace with my friend across the table. Again we drank in silence. Other than our own movements there were no noises. The girls in the booth further down had either moved on, or quieted down. It was an enjoyable silence.

I finished the glass. There was a knock on the booth wall. The man across the table pulled the curtain aside. Bill was standing with the man from before. I stood up. Bill and I shook hands. Bill introduced himself to the man across the table. His name was Jean. I shook hands with Jean. I thanked him for the absinthe. He waved off my thanks. “It is not the kind of thing one drinks alone,” he said. “Even when it means nothing.”

Bill and I walked down the bar. I didn’t want to sit in one of the booths. I sat where I had been sitting before, with Cornelius. Bill walked past my seat and sat on my left.

“So,” said Bill. “Where’d they take you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Some lobby someplace.”

“Lots of marble? Big pillars?”

I nodded.

“That was the capitol building. Scary place. People get stuck in the building for years. I was talking to a guy once happened to be in the main chamber of the Angelic Congress right before a procedural vote. Wrong place at the wrong time. They locked down the chamber for six years for the vote.”

“Wow,” I said. “What were they voting on?”

“Who knows? Probably which Archangel gets his or her own special edition postage stamp.”

“They have mail in heaven?”

“No,” said Bill. “Just postage stamps. It’s one of their highest honors.”

“Odd.”

“Anyways, sorry to put you through that. Usually angels can’t just teleport like that. They need doors, just like us.”

“She just thought our souls were in danger?”

“She just thought she could get some attention making a big time key bust. But we’re not going to leave stuff like that just lying around.” He looked at me. “How did you get out of the capitol building?”

“I made it to a map room and I didn’t know where I was going. So they just sent me back to my bar.”

“Huh. Lucky you.”

“I guess so.”

He looked over at the booth with the two demons. “The guy who got me said you wanted to redeem some of your chips?”

I nodded.

“Did you take a look through the exchange chart? We didn’t really play all that much poker. For the big stuff you need a lot more chips.”

I took a deep breath. “I realized today I’m never going to see my family again.”

Bill's expression changed. He had been facing the bar. He turned in his stool to face me.

"I also had a talk with an angel."

"Oh? What'd he say?"

I looked at Bill. "I'm not a fool. I can figure out how things work pretty quickly. I know that no one goes to heaven any more. I just needed someone to confirm it."

"An angel told you that you couldn't get to heaven?"

"Not in so many words," I said. "But for all intents and purposes, yes."

"Wow," he said. "Unbelievable."

"He was an old guy," I said. "Gave it to me pretty straight."

"Still sucks, though, doesn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Come on. Everyone wants to go to heaven. I did. You did too. That little sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach when you woke up and realized you weren't in heaven? Everyone has that."

The bar was quiet again.

"What now?"

"Now," said Bill, "We figure out how to get you into one of the outer cloisters."

He looked around the bar. "Do you mind if I ask you some personal questions?"

I shook my head. "Be my guest."

"Basics first. Ever killed?"

"A person or anything?"

"A person."

“No.”

“Cheated on you wife?”

“Junior year of high school on my girl friend.”

“Hormones,” said Bill. “Anything before eighteen in the cheating department is usually discounted. Steal anything beyond petty theft?”

“No,” I said. “I didn’t even have a shop lifting phase.”

“False witness against any neighbors?”

“Never really came up.”

“How about coveting with the neighbors?”

“What counts as coveting?”

“Just tell me what you did.”

“The neighbors got a big screen TV. I got jealous. I bought a bigger TV. Just to spite them.”

“Yeah, I think that counts as coveting.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Probably not. A TV is better than a wife.”

“This guy’s wife was a house.”

“Well that makes that easy.”

He took out a pad of paper from his inside jacket pocket. It was a small spiral notebook. It reminded me of old detective movies.

“So other than a borderline coveting we’re clear on the commandments.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “What about all the God ones?”

“Ah ha,” said Bill. “Only an issue at angelic judgment. Not surprisingly, demonic judgment doesn’t put a whole lot of emphasis on the obedience to God commandments.”

“So I’m set?”

“Not yet. It’s amazing how much the Ten Commandments leave out.” He looked up from the notepad. “Some of these questions may offend your mild mannered sensibilities. But I have to ask.”

“Who said I’m mild mannered?” I said. Bill snorted.

“Ok,” he said. “Raped anyone?”

“No.”

“Date rape?”

“No.”

“Not even sex with a drunk girl when you weren’t drunk?”

“NO!”

He smirked. “Any history of violent crime?”

“None.”

“None?”

“I hit Jimmy Posner on the arm in third grade,” I said. “Then I threw up before they could send me to the principal’s office.”

“No history of violence,” said Bill, writing on the pad. “On to sex!”

“What do you need to know?”

“How often did you masturbate?”

I took a deep breath. “As often as I could between the ages of thirteen and eighteen and once a week after that.”

“Wow,” said Bill. “Did you keep a journal or something?”

“Habits.”

“Premarital sex?”

“Yes.”

“Everything?”

“What’s everything?”

“The two major orifices.”

“My mild mannered sensibilities are officially offended.”

“I’m surprised it took this long. Answer the question.”

“Yes. Everything before marriage.”

“Good.” He smiled. “We’re not puritans. No punishment for premarital sex, no punishment for homosexuality. We’ll nail you to the wall if you really sin, but we don’t care if you live happily.”

“Wow,” I said. “Nice marketing.”

“Thank you,” said Bill. “It’s pretty easy when your major competitor is both excessively dogmatic and nonfunctional. Now the two biggies, and probably the ones that’ll give you the most problems.”

“Which are?”

“Greed and Gluttony.”

I sighed. “It was a small piece of steak.”

“What?”

“I died choking on a piece of steak.”

“Accidental gluttony?”

I shook my head. “The angel who told me said it wasn’t large enough to be ruled against me.”

“Lucky you,” said Bill. “Salary?”

“Three hundred thousand dollars.”

“Annual bonus?”

“Thirty to eighty percent.”

“Charitable giving?”

“One thousand dollars to the Red Cross each year.”

“That’s it?”

“No,” I said. “There’s more. I just don’t know who it goes to. My wife runs the philanthropic arm of the Kampson household.”

“Rough percentage?”

“Pre-tax?”

“Sure.”

“We’re usually around fifty thousand dollars over all. So ten to twelve percent?”

“Much better. You had me worried.”

“What’s the bench mark?”

“We generally use the zakat standard. Two and a half percent minimum. Graduated for higher income brackets.”

“Remind me to thank Cassandra.”

“Wife?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” said Bill. He flipped over a new page of notebook paper. “Any absurd purchases I should know about?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” I said. “I drive an Infinity. My wife drives a Volvo. Nice house in the suburbs. Kids at private school. Mortgage paid off. Neat, safe portfolio. Great retirement plan.”

“You’re boring,” said Bill.

I smiled. “Neither of us had much money growing up. We’re savers. We don’t go for the new money visible wealth thing.”

Bill flipped through the notes. “Any other big things I should know about?”

“I tried cocaine once.”

“How was it?”

“What?”

“How was cocaine?”

“Weird. I didn’t like it. My heart was beating too fast.”

“Cool. Anything else?”

“I drove drunk twice.”

“How drunk?”

“I would have gotten a DUI.”

“But you weren’t falling over drunk.”

“I still put other people’s lives in danger.”

“Where were you driving.”

“Residential neighborhood both times.”

“Late at night?”

“Yeah.”

Bill reached his arm over my back. He patted me on the shoulder. “It’s good that you regret it. It means you’re a good guy. But if you’re going to mess up seriously, you could do a lot worse than driving home from a party a little tipsy in the middle of the night.” He brought his arm back away from my shoulder. “Anything else I need to know?”

“I don’t think so.”

“The judges know everything. You’re just hurting yourself if you don’t say anything.”

“I think that’s it.”

“No skeletons in the closet?”

“Nope.”

“Never tortured kittens?”

“Never even considered it.”

“Oh come on. Everyone considers it.”

“Cats maybe. Not kittens.”

“Fair enough.”

He got up from the stool. “I’d say you’re a pretty stellar candidate. And early on in your drinking career, too.”

“So what happens now?”

“I go and file your case to be heard. The judge will decide what circle of hell. After that the details use an arbitration process.” He smiled. “The whole system works

really well. Efficient and successful. And we still torture all the child rapists.” He turned to go.

“One last thing,” I said.

“Shoot,” he said.

“Is this just your commission,” I said, “Or does Seamus get a piece of it, too.”

“There’s no way I could file an official legal petition for your hearing. Seamus loves that stuff. He can’t get enough of the paper work. He says it relaxes him.” He nodded to me. “You’re a good person for asking. A lot of people wouldn’t have cared.”

He turned again.

“What do I do now?” I asked.

“Have a drink,” he said. “Two at the most. I promise you, this is quick.”

He walked down into the dark part of the bar. Jack was already making his way over to my seat.

“Any chance you have Guinness on draught?”

He reached up to the shelf with the stem ware. He brought down an imperial pint glass with a shamrock. He took the glass to the tap. The tap was halfway between me and the door.

There is an art to pouring a Guinness. I worked in an Irish pub one summer. Guinness is made with nitrogen rather than carbon dioxide. You pour two thirds of the beer on the first pull, then let it settle for two minutes. Then you pour the last third. If you lower the pressure on the tap for the last pull, you can draw on the head of the Guinness. By the end of the summer I could make a perfect shamrock.

Jack stared at the beer the full two minutes. I wondered if he was counting in his head. There were no clocks. There were no watches. There was no food to make. There was nothing to bake. Guinness was the last remaining need for conventional time.

He poured the top of the Guinness and brought it over to me. On the top was the faint outline of a four leaf clover. Two of the leaves were much larger than the others, and the stem went right through two of the leaves.

“Sorry,” said Jack, looking down at the head. “I’m out of practice.”

Pouring a Guinness is not like riding a bicycle, I thought. Still, it was almost better that way. I always felt a little guilty destroying a perfect shamrock. I had no qualms about drinking a poorly drawn four leaf clover.

## Drink Eighteen

I liked the first sip of Guinness best. First, the taste of the creamy head, like beer frosting. Then, the smooth, slightly bitter stout itself, cutting through the sweetness. I put the glass down. I exhaled. I let my eyes close. For the first time in a long time, I felt content.

I was only halfway done with the Guinness when Bill came striding through the bar.

“Great news,” he said. “The judge had a no show. Cold feet, apparently. We’re on after he hears the current case and a recess.”

“Now? We’re going now?”

Bill grinned. “I told you it was quick.”

I felt a strange feeling in the bottom of my stomach. “Shouldn’t I prepare something to say in my defense?”

Bill shook his head. “Don’t worry about all that. I’ve got it all taken care of. I know this judge. He likes your type. You’ll be fine.”

I looked over at Jack. He shrugged. He has nothing to do with this. I looked back at the Guinness lying half full on the bar. Bill sighed.

“Would it make you feel better if you took Guinness with you?” he said. His voice was infantilizing. He made the beer sound like a stuffed animal I didn’t care. I bobbed my head up and down in the nod of a young child. “Ok then,” he said, almost cooing his words. “Let’s take Guinness with us.”

We walked down to the elevator door. Bill punched in the numbers on the pedestal. "Seamus is meeting us at the courthouse," he said. "This may be a record for fastest petition ever written."

"Should I be worried?" I said. I was only half joking.

"Nothing to worry about. Seamus works best under pressure. He only gets sloppy if you give him a week or so to write the thing."

The elevator arrived. I sat in the same seat as before, second on my right. Bill sat across from me.

"Are you excited?"

I nodded. "It will be good to have it over with. The outer cloister isn't too painful, is it?"

Bill looked at me. He was stunned. "Do you not know what your getting yourself into?"

I took a nervous sip of Guinness. "Is it that bad?"

"That bad!" said Bill. "It's the Elysian Field! The Ancient Greeks said *this* was heaven. Rolling green fields, castles filled with the greatest minds in art, music, and literature."

"Wow," I said. "That's hell?"

"For the virtuous pagan," he said. "Which, I'm willing to bet, you are."

I took another sip. "What happens if I'm not placed in the outer cloister?"

Bill shrugged. "We appeal. The first ruling isn't iron clad."

"But what is the next level in?"

“The second circle isn’t great. It’s for those who committed acts of lust. You’re blown around by a violent storm with no hope for rest.”

“So we want the first circle,” I said.

“Yes,” said Bill. “That’s what we’re shooting for.”

I finished my Guinness in one big gulp. I was nervous. I wished there was something to eat. They probably would have removed the serotonin from the brownies, anyways.

The doors slid open. Bill reached across. “It’s generally bad form to show up to court with an empty beer glass,” he said. “I’ll take care of it.”

I handed Bill my glass. Seamus was waiting in the lobby of a court room. The lobby was quiet. The floors and walls were wood. It had the feeling of a well maintained municipal court house. Nothing grand or ostentatious.

“The judge has already been briefed about your file,” said Seamus. “He’s going to ask you a few questions. Just tell him the truth and answer honestly.”

A large man in a pair of black jeans and a black button down shirt opened the door to the courtroom. “He just came back from recess,” he said. “Come in.”

The courtroom itself was small. There were benches for the defense and the prosecution, a small jury stand, and four rows of seats behind the benches for spectators. The judge was sitting at a large, raised podium. He had a thick, grey beard and light brown skin. He was completely bald. In the room were the three of us, the judge, the man who showed us into the room, and a stenographer fitting paper into her typewriter. The man who showed us in closed the door.

“Are you Stephen?” he said, looking down at me. He had a throaty voice that made it sound like he was gargling as he talked to you.

“Yes sir,” I said.

“And you are submitting a petition for what today?”

“The outer cloister, sir.”

“The outer cloister of what, son?”

“The outer cloister of hell.”

The judge smiled. He looked at Bill. “Just making sure he knew what he was getting himself into.”

I exhaled. I hadn’t done anything monumentally stupid. The judge was making jokes.

The judge looked through a manila folder. That was my life, I thought. Neatly compressed into a small folder. The judge looked up at me.

“Choked on a piece of steak?”

“Yes, sir.”

“In his defense, it was a small piece, your honor,” said Seamus.

“Noted,” said the judge.

He went through my life, year by year. It was like watching a bizarre version of ‘This is your Life.’ He included only my most morally questionable, shameful actions throughout my life. I was uncomfortable. I had lived a long time. It was a large accumulation of sins. But I rarely made the same mistake twice. I took solace from that.

The judge shut the manila folder. “I believe that covers all grounds on which I could reject this petition. I personally see no reason not to accept Mr. Kampson to the first circle of hell. If anyone has such an objection, please say so now.”

I looked around. There were still only the six of us in the court room. No one spoke. The stenographer examined her notes.

Finally I raised my hand. The judge pointed his gavel at me.

“Mr. Kampson, I do not advise you object to your own petition.”

“No, your honor.” I whispered to Seamus. “Why are we still standing here?”

“New rule,” said Seamus. “The angels threatened to have only mixed sphere courts if we didn’t extend the time for objections.”

“Mixed sphere?”

“Three judges,” said Seamus. “Angel, Demon, and Spirit. The three spheres.”

“Do they have the right to do that?”

“Of course not. But they never actually object to the court proceedings. So we play along and they declare it a moral victory.”

“Mr. Kampson, I ask that you and your legal team keep quiet during these proceedings. It would be a shame to have to hold you in contempt of court.”

“Yes your honor.”

There was quiet. Then, a knock on the door. The man in the black jeans opened the door. A man in blue jeans and grey t shirt was standing outside the door. He was holding a small envelope. He whispered something to the man. He gave him the envelope, then walked away. The man in the black jeans closed the door to the court

room. He brought the letter over to the judge. The judge took his pinky and opened the top of the envelope. He took out a piece of paper. It looked like a scroll.

He looked intently at the scroll. Then he looked down at me. “Mr. Kampson,” said the judge, “it has come to my attention that you are involved in a current angelic investigation into key theft.”

“Your honor,” I said, “I appeared at the capitol when instructed and was excused from all duties there by an Archangel.”

“I believe dismissal by an Archangel recuses Mr. Kampson from any ongoing Angelic legal proceeding.”

“Do you have any proof of this excuse?”

I shook my head. “No, your honor.”

“Then I’m sending you back up. Get your affairs in order, Mr. Kampson. Do not reappear down here until you have a signed document from the Archangel or have completed your role in the investigation.” The judge hit his gavel against the podium. He left the chamber through a door behind the raised podium.

The man in the black jeans led the three of us out the side door we had entered from. Bill entered the numbers on the elevator. The doors opened. We got in. I sat in the same seat as before. Bill sat across from me again. He was still holding the Guinness glass.

“Well,” said Seamus. “That’s different.”

“What does this mean?” I said.

“No idea,” said Seamus. “I don’t think this has ever happened before.”

“All I need is the signature from the Archangel who let me go.”

“Have you met an Archangel?” asked Bill.

“Yeah. This guy,” I said.

“Pretty intense, right?”

“He seemed alright,” I said. “He was wound a little tight.”

“These are the guys who fought along side God against Lucifer,” said Bill. “They go back to when hell was actually bad and heaven was actually good and there was still a competition for souls. No way he signs something that gives you a free pass into hell.”

“What then?” I said. “Finish off the investigation?”

“If this investigation is anything like the others,” said Seamus, “it’s already been open and it won’t close until they find the keys they got the warrant for.”

“Which they won’t,” said Bill.

“What?” I said. “Why not? Weren’t you guys hoarding keys?”

“Market’s shifting with the new legislation,” said Seamus. “Business friend offered to buy us out. The offer was too good. We don’t have anything to do with those keys now.”

The door opened. We were back at the bar. I got out and walked through the dark. I sat down on my usual stool. I put my head in my hands. I touched what hair I had left with my finger tips. I felt old.

Bill was on my left. Seamus was on my right.

“Are we really just going to sit here?”

“We don’t have the code to the capitol,” said Seamus.

I stood up and walked back down towards the doors. I turned around and walked back towards my stool. “Did someone object?”

“Apparently,” said Seamus.

“It could have been an automatic thing,” I said. “Their office sends a message whenever anyone on their database is about to sell their soul.”

“It could have been that bitchy angel,” said Bill. “She probably didn’t like it when you left before testifying.”

“I hope it’s her,” I said.

“Why?” said Bill.

“We could take care of one person,” I said. “We couldn’t do anything with the whole system.”

Bill was looking up at the ceiling. Seamus was writing quickly into his notebook. I was staring down into my hands. All thinking.

“I think I have to go back to the capitol.”

“How do you suggest we do that?”

“Not we,” I said. “We can’t. There’s no chance they’d allow demons anywhere near the capitol.”

“How are you getting there, then?” said Bill.

“Earlier today an angel brought me back to this bar. He didn’t know what the place looked like. I did. All he had to do was the praying.”

“Perfect,” said Seamus. “Just get an angel to pray for you without thinking about anything. Brilliant!”

“Do you have any better ideas?”

Seamus didn’t say anything.

“How are you going to get an angel in the first place?”

I listened for a second. Further down the bar I heard laughing. I grinned. “Come on.”

We walked down the bar until the three of us were seated on the bar stools directly opposite the giggling booth.

“Follow my lead,” I said quietly. “No way are the elevators better than prayer!” I was practically shouting. The girls were laughing loudly.

“You are so wrong!” said Bill. “The elevators are technically superior and far more user friendly!”

“User friendly?” I said. “How about instantaneous travel!”

“Have you ever even traveled by prayer?” said Seamus. We were yelling now. The laughter was starting to die down.

“Not yet,” I screamed, “but I’d sure like to!” I tilted my head towards the booth. “Then we could end this silly argument once and for all and I have to TAKE THE ELEVATOR ALONE WITH YOU TWO!” I remembered that question from the first questionnaire. Direct contact without supervision was bad for my soul.

One of the girls pushed back the curtain. She stepped out of the booth.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation.”

I almost laughed out loud. Our conversation was supposed to be forced and stereotypical. She sounded like a speaker for the play-a-long in a first year English textbook.

“Typical angel,” said Bill. “Butting in to other people’s business.”

“I think this is my business now, too,” she said. The other two angels came out of the booth and stood behind her. She looked at me. “I heard you defending prayer, didn’t I?”

“Yes ma’am you did. Though I’m only going off of the hypothetical. I’ve never actually done it myself.”

“Well,” she said, looking over her shoulder at Bill and Seamus, “I think we ought to prove to your friends the ultimate mode of transportation.” She took my hand. “Right this way.”

Seamus and Bill followed behind us with the two other angels. The angel holding my hand looked back at me. “What’s your name?”

“Ben,” I said. I hadn’t thought to lie. The lie just came out. “What’s yours?”

“Melody,” she said.

“Melody,” I said. “What a pretty name.”

I was old enough to be her father. She was treating me like a ten year old boy. Some sort of angel superiority complex, maybe.

We walked through the dark until we were standing in front of the golden door. “How does this work Melody?” I said.

“We think of a place in our heads where we want to go,” she said. “We think about that place real hard. And then we pray to God and he sends us there just like that!”

“Wow!” I said. “That’s amazing!”

“Certainly better than some stinky old machine,” she said. She turned around and stuck her tongue out at Bill and Seamus.

“So where do we go now?”

She bit her lower lip. “You know, that’s a really good question. Where are we going to go?”

“You know what I think would be fun?” I said. “I think we should just pray to God without thinking of anywhere and see where he takes us.”

“I’m not sure if that would work,” she said. “I think you have to be thinking of a place.”

“We could try it,” I said. “If it doesn’t work the door just won’t open. And if it does work I bet God has all sorts of cool places to show us.”

I looked back and Bill and Seamus. Bill rolled his eyes. Seamus flashed me a thumbs up. I turned to look at the angel. “What do you say Mel?”

She scrunched up her forehead and looked up at the ceiling. This was her serious thinking face. I could tell. Finally she turned to me. “Ok!” she said. “Let’s go for it.”

She turned around and gave her girlfriends an open mouthed look of mock horror. “Ok Ben,” she said. “Close your eyes and hold my hands.” I held on to her hands tightly. I tried to picture Cornelius’ room. It looked like the other two rooms I had been in. I tried to think of something unique. I thought about the bell, still sitting on top of the desk, covered in decades of dust. Melody started humming. Every third or fourth *hmmm* she substituted with *Jesus*. I could not laugh. I had to concentrate. I thought about the bell.

“Are you ready Ben?” she said. She squeezed my hand. I squeezed her hand back. I felt her step towards the door. I heard her turn the knob. She pushed the door. I heard the door jam. I focused harder on the bell. I thought about the table covered in maps. I thought about the little old man, sitting on his hands and rocking back and forth on his desk chair. The door gave. She stepped through. I followed.

When I opened my eyes I was in Cornelius' office. In one corner were Melody and me. Sitting across from Cornelius at the desk was a teenage boy in a soccer uniform. At his desk, pouring over the time tables and furiously transcribing on a yellow legal pad, was Cornelius.

The boy noticed us immediately. He didn't say anything. He looked slightly dazed. Melody looked around the room. "This was a funny choice, wasn't it Ben? I suppose God does work in mysterious ways."

Hearing a voice, Cornelius looked up. Our eyes met. "Stephen?" he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Stephen?" said Melody. "Who's Stephen?" She turned to me. "Ben," she said, "Do you know who Stephen is?"

I looked at Melody. "Stephen is my middle name," I said. "Cornelius here is fascinated by middle names."

"Really?" said Melody. "Me too!" She looked up at the ceiling and put both hands over her heart. I saw her mouth the words 'thank you.'

"Oh yes," said Cornelius. "Middle names and maps fascinate me more than anything in the world."

"Oh I don't like maps," said Melody. "They're confusing. I just let God help me find my way."

"What's your middle name?" Cornelius asked.

"Heart!" she said. "Melody Heart Goddard!"

"Oh my," he said. "That's a very pretty name."

"Well aren't you just the sweetest little man," she said.

I caught Cornelius' eye. I nodded my head toward the corner of the room. He looked at Melody.

"Dear, I'm afraid I have to talk to my mischievous nephew over there. Would you mind keeping young David here company while we're off chatting?"

"Not at all!" she said. "I love meeting new people." She out her hand. "I'm Melody Heart Goddard."

"David," said David, shaking her hand. Young David appeared to be entirely unsure of what to make of Melody Heart Goddard. Cornelius came around the desk.

"What are you doing here Stephen?"

"There's a problem."

I told him about the trial and the judge nearly admitting me to the outer cloister. "Ah, Elysia, where the young run free forever!" He looked at me. I was not young. "What happened?"

"They've extended the objection time. Someone sent a letter saying I was still involved in the investigation of the keys."

"What did the judge say?"

"He told me to get my affairs in order and not come back until the issue is settled."

Cornelius rocked back and forth. He looked up at me. "What does the judge want?"

I sighed. "A signed letter from the Archangel excusing me from the investigation or the successful completion of the investigation itself."

"That investigation was over before it even began."

“The keys have already changed hands.”

“They’ll keep the case open, though,” said Cornelius. “They can point to it as the failure of the legal system when they want to start a special key taskforce.”

“So that just leaves Charles.”

“Yes,” said Cornelius. “Charles or another Archangel.”

I looked over at the bell. “Any chance Charles would just give us the signature?”

Cornelius nodded. “There’s always a chance. If I continually walk into the far wall there is a chance that one day I will push through.”

“I think I’m at the point where that is an appealing option.”

“Alright then.” Cornelius picked up the small silver bell. He shook it gently. The same clear silver tone rang out.

The cramped room was now even more crowded. Charles looked over at Cornelius. “This is unusual for you, Cornelius. Three centuries without any call for assistance and now twice?”

Charles noticed Melody and David first. He stared at Melody. “Who are you?” he asked.

“Hello sir,” she said. She gave a small polite bow. “My name is Melody Heart Goddard.”

“Are you an angel,” he said, “or just someone with the confusing misfortune of dying in a white dress?”

Her mouth dropped open. “I’m surprised at you, sir!” she said. “I am most certainly not a wandering loose soul.”

“My apologies Miranda,” said Charles.

“Melody,” she said.

He looked down at the teenage boy in the chair. He smirked. “How do you die playing soccer? Did you flop too hard?”

“Bad heart,” David said quietly. Charles moved on.

He looked at me. “You. You’re back here?”

“Yes sir,” I said. “There’s been some confusion.”

“I’ll say there’s been some confusion,” said Charles. “Cornelius, are you running a mad house or a cartographer’s office?”

“Well, that’s a ridiculous question Charles,” said Cornelius. “Even if the two *were* mutually exclusive it is clear that I am running a cartographer’s office that has temporarily found use as a mad house. Multitasking, you see.”

Charles didn’t respond. Cornelius bobbed up and down happily at his apparent victory. I moved towards the Archangel.

“Sir, as I was saying there’s been some confusion.”

“Certainly,” he said. “I gave you clear instructions to go back to your bar and I find you here now.”

“He did, Charles,” said Cornelius. “I went with him.”

“But as I said there’s been some confusion.”

“Confusion with what?” said Charles.

“I am apparently still involved in the investigation for which I was originally sent here,” I said. “I need written proof that I was dismissed from these duties by you, Sir.”

“Investigation?” said Charles. “What investigation?”

“The investigation you said was ridiculous the last time I was in this room,” I said. “The one involving gambling and keys?”

“Keys?” said Charles. “I don’t remember anyone saying anything about keys before! Keys have recently been made a top priority by the Angelic Congress.”

“Since when do you care what the AC declares a top priority Charles?” said Cornelius.

Charles ignored the comment. “If you are involved into a key investigation you’ll come with me right now,” he said, looking at me. “You’ve wasted so much time already.”

Before I could say anything he had grabbed hold of my hand. I heard him saying something. I reached out and caught two of Cornelius’ gnarled fingers.

I was standing next to a large armchair in a large, glass office. I could see the people below me through the floor. On my left and right were Cornelius and Charles. Behind the desk was a tall man with a straight back and a cropped military haircut. He was wearing a white uniform with medals covering most of the left side of his jacket.

“Gabriel,” said Charles, “this man was supposed to be part of the key investigation.”

“The key investigation?” said Gabriel. “What key investigation?”

“The Angelic Congress just declared keys a top priority,” said Charles.

Gabriel sat down at the desk. He sighed. His voice was tired. “They would, wouldn’t they? They would take a look at the entire state of Temporal Soul Housing and decide that the petty theft of keys was the issue requiring top priority.”

Charles looked at Gabriel. “If the demons get their hands on the keys, won’t that undermine the entire staggering plan for first seminar?”

“There is no staggering plan. There is just a stagger because we have too many damn people.”

He looked for the first time at me and Cornelius. “You’re the one mixed up with the keys?”

“Yes sir.”

“What did you do?”

“I traded my key for some poker chips.”

“Gambling?”

“Yes sir.”

“With demons, I gather.”

“Yes.”

“And you?” he said, looking past me to Cornelius.

“Merely a cartographer who had the misfortune of being grabbed during a moment of prayer transport.”

He nodded. He looked back at me. “Do you want to go to heaven, son?”

“Sir?”

“It’s a simple question. Do you want to go to heaven?”

I thought for a second. I would go if I could. I had to.

“Yes sir. I do want to go to heaven.”

“Do you plan on going to heaven?”

I paused again. “No sir. I don’t.”

“And why not?”

“Because it’s impossible, sir.”

“Impossible?”

“From what I’ve heard, sir.”

He sighed. “I knew a kid once who tried to wait it out. I talked to him a couple times. Told him how great heaven was. He would get this look in his eye when I started talking about the place. He wasn’t old, maybe sixteen. He figured it would take less time to get through him than any of the other octogenarians.”

He didn’t say anything else. I wasn’t sure if we were meant to say anything else. I did anyways.

“What happened, sir.”

“Two hundred thousand drinks in, he stood up from the bar, walked over to a man in black standing near a door, and wrote his name in blood on a scrap of parchment. He went through a door with a big golden seven on top. The seventh circle of hell is for violent sinners. This kid wasn’t a violent sinner.”

No one spoke. The man’s sudden openness to a complete stranger was terrifying.

“I wish I could say it was ironic, that he was only three drinks away from judgment. But he wasn’t. He was millions away.” He sat down in the seat behind the desk. He was looking off into the distance. “He didn’t want to be tortured. He just wanted to go home.”

I walked over to the table. I took a piece of stationery of the top of the pile. I took a pen from a mass in an old coffee cup. I printed neatly on the piece of paper.

“Stephen,” said Cornelius, “what are you doing? That’s the archangel Gabriel. The angel of death.”

“I don’t know what else to do,” I said.

I passed the piece of paper across the table to Gabriel. His eyes were glazed. He was still staring off into the distance.

“Gabriel,” I said. “I need you to sign something.”

He turned his head slightly. He did not look at me. “Why?” he asked in a soft voice.

“I need to go home,” I said. “Its time for me to go home.”

He nodded dumbly up and down a few times. Then he seemed to come out of his fog for a few seconds. His hand reached down and touched the pen. He blinked his eyes and looked down at the sheet in front of him. He signed his name in small, chicken scratch cursive. The familiar action of signing his name had brought him back under the pretense of routine. Once his name was on the page, he returned to his stare.

Charles walked around to the other side of the desk. He put his arm around Gabriel.

“We should go,” I said to Cornelius. He nodded. As we walked out I heard Charles repeating in a soft voice, “it’s not your fault, it’s not your fault.”

“Your bar or my office?” asked Cornelius.

“Somewhere else, first, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” he said. “Anywhere but here.”

I thought of the hot, smoky air and the clear brown nameless bottles of beer. I held Cornelius' hand. He said the same Latin incantation and we walked together through the clear glass door. We walked into Bert's bar.

The bar was less crowded than it had been. There were empty seats now on the bar between groups. I went over to an empty stool. The bartender came over.

"Have you seen Bert around?"

He shook his head. "Not since you three headed off with the two in the black suits."

"If you see him tell him I stopped by."

He nodded and went back to another group. I looked back at Cornelius. "Alright," I said. "My bar now."

I thought of the chalk board and the clock. It came easily now. The familiar Latin, then the blind steps through the door, and I was at the dark end of the bar, looking at two men in black suits. I walked to them.

They turned in their stools. They looked at Cornelius. I looked at the pair of demons and the old angel.

"What are the rules here?" I said. "Do you turn to dust if you touch?"

"Not at all," said Cornelius. "I am Cornelius." He held out one of his small hands.

Seamus grabbed the hand and introduced himself. "Pleasure to meet you," he said. "Likewise," said Cornelius. Bill introduced himself. He grinned.

"You were the one that told him," said Bill.

Cornelius gave me a dirty look. I smiled. "I am afraid I do not know what you are talking about."

“Don’t worry,” said Bill. “We won’t tell anyone.”

“All I said,” said Cornelius, glaring at me, “is that things have changed. There was never any subterranean endorsement, tacit or otherwise.”

“All right,” said Bill. “Have it your way.”

“Did you get it?” said Seamus.

“Better,” I said, pulling the parchment out of my pocket. He looked down at it.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Is that who I think it is?”

I nodded. “I think I caught him at a weird moment.”

“Blackmail?” asked Bill. He and Seamus laughed. I looked over at Cornelius. He was smiling sadly. The five minutes in the glass office had changed him. Me, too, perhaps.

“So,” said Seamus. “Ready to head back and give this another try.”

“One minute,” I said. I turned to Cornelius. “The bar we were in earlier? That’s where my friends should have been. They were behind me in line at the capitol. They’re probably still stuck in there.” I reached into my pocket. “Their names are on here, too. After I show the judge the letter I’m going to have Seamus and Bill bring it back up here. I want you to take it and show it around the capitol. It should cut through most of the red tape.”

Cornelius reached out his hand. I brushed it aside and embraced him. He was tiny. I could feel his bones. When we broke he grabbed my shoulders with his hands. He didn’t say anything. Something had changed. There was more now than just maps and time tables. I was sorry to have destroyed that for him.

He walked to the gold door. He stood in front of the door for a few seconds. He turned the knob and walked through.

Seamus handed me back the parchment. “You ready?” he asked.

I nodded. We walked to the elevator. Bill pressed the buttons. We took the same quiet elevator ride down to the court house. The man in black jeans told us we would have to wait outside a few minutes while the court proceedings finished up. We sat in the chairs in the wooden waiting room. No one said anything. I was tired. I found most of my silences among demons to be comfortable.

After a few minutes the man opened the door to the court room. I walked over to the judge and handed him the piece of parchment. He took a pair of small half moon reading glasses from the podium and placed them on his nose. He read the letter out loud.

*“To whom it may concern,*

*I, the archangel Gabriel, hereby release Stephen Kampson, Phillip Nash, and Bertram Starpe, from any and all obligations to the angelic community and any subset therein.*

*Signed,  
Gabriel*

He folded the note and handed it back to me.

“Let the record show that the petition for the induction of Stephen Kampson into the outermost cloister of hell is approved by the Third Circuit Subterranean court.” He brought his gavel down on the podium. He looked down on me. “Congratulations.” I nodded.

I turned to Bill. I handed him the piece of parchment. “Cornelius will be up in the bar,” I said. “Give him this.”

Bill nodded. We came together briefly, then shook hands. Seamus pointed to a door on the opposite side of the court room. Bill went back the way we had come.

“So,” said Seamus, “No pardon for that Tom?”

“He seemed like he knew what he was doing,” I said. “I figured he could get himself out of the capitol eventually. I wasn’t sure about Bert and Phil. I didn’t want to try my luck with too many names.”

“So when he gets out and he’s still part of an ongoing investigation?”

“Then it will be his turn to shamelessly take advantage of an emotionally decimated archangel.”

He held the door open. I walked through. We were in a narrow hallway. There was another door at the other end. I walked forwards. I spoke over my shoulder.

“Do you think what I did was wrong?”

“What you did to Gabriel?”

I nodded.

“You didn’t force him to sign anything?”

“No.”

“Well then its not a matter of right and wrong. What you did was incredibly useful for you and your friends. There was no victims as far as I can see. From a utilitarian perspective yes, what you did was right.” He patted me on the shoulder. “It wasn’t wrong.”

I stopped before the next door. Beyond this door was arbitration. My job in the outer cloister, whether my family had preferred admittance into the outer cloister, and a whole army of minutia would be decided in that room. In that moment this would be real. More real perhaps than when I took a small knife to my fingertip and wrote my name in blood on a large yellow contract.

I still couldn't shake the feeling that none of this was real. Logically, there couldn't be life after death. Maybe the millisecond before brain death stretched on for an eternity, suspending all others in my universe in a state of permanent paralysis. The bars, the angels, the demons, all an elaborate ploy of my brain's last breath to keep me from glimpsing the nothingness that really comes. But then another day on the Elysian field and I'm left wondering how I could have thought this was invented. Dante said the difference between the outer cloister of hell and heaven was that heaven was a paradise that could not be imagined by humans. The bounds and scopes of human imagination are enough for me. My name is Stephen Williams Kampson, and I sold my soul.