

# What Would Jeebus Do?



a novel by  
**Steve Gillard**

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*I'm no missionary, I don't even believe in Jeebus! ... Save me, Jeebus!*

- HOMER SIMPSON

*(The Simpsons - Episode 15, Season 11 - "Missionary:Impossible")*

**Jeebus** - Variation of "Jesus" first invented by Duke Ellington so as not to be beaten by nuns. Borrowed by Frank Zappa and, from there, by Matt Groening.

(UrbanDictionary.com - Comment by "mavi", August 30, 2007)

1.

I met Anthony "Jeebus" Morelli when we both showed up in Mrs. Allenby's Junior High Sunday School class the first Sunday after my old man moved my mother and me to Seattle from Boise, Idaho, when he landed a gig as manager of Svensson and Svensson Insurance, in Ballard, Seattle's *lutefisk* swilling Scandahoovian neighborhood.

My father, Melvin Blumann, Jr., (myself being Melvin "Blue" Blumann, III) is Jewish, and about as religious as Groucho Marx, or maybe I'm thinking of Karl Marx, but Pops knew a big church like Green Lake Lutheran would be a fountainhead of business from parishioners wanting to backstop their heavenly afterlife insurance with more prosaic, cash value life insurance. In Boise we'd been Episcopalians, because that's where the money was, he said, plus Episcopalians aligned more with his politics than did the Baptists or the Catholics.

I had barely introduced myself to Anthony (as *Blue*, of course, not *Melvin*, for obvious reasons) when he instructed me to call him *Jeebus* (*Yes!!*) and suggested that we do an improvised re-enactment of the week's Bible study, which featured the time Jesus Rambo'd into the temple and blew up the scam the temple moneychangers were using to rob the poor *schmucks* who needed exact change to buy a pigeon to sacrifice to Yahweh.

We hashed out the details over apple juice and soda crackers, served up by Mrs. Allenby to keep us occupied while she lined up her cast of cloth cut-out characters who would be moved around her flannel-covered board to depict the temple rumpus.

Mrs. Allenby always passed around a ceramic "piggy bank", though I use that term provisionally. It was not porcine in any way, rather it was in the form of a backwoods country church, its glazed walls smeared by decades of sticky fingers. It did have a pig, a horse, and a cow, hand painted on one side by a precocious pre-schooler, which is what made it a "country church" and also gives the lie to my earlier statement. There was a porcine element. I hope I am not turning into one of those "unreliable narrators."

The plan was that I would volunteer to pass the bank around, doing my best to impersonate a moneychanger. We talked about some alternative line readings and finally settled on:

"Hey, hey, hey, two dimes for a quarter, three quarters for a dollar."

Which was half ridiculous. Only Hadley Hanover's parents gave their kids more than a quarter for the little bank. Still, it was better than:

"Get your sins forgiven! Give the priest the bird! Get your exact change right here."

We liked this one, but we weren't looking to have our parents summoned so we could have our ears twisted. Plus, Lutherans don't have *priests*. Martin Luther had pretty much had a gutful of priests when he gave the Pope the bird and went solo.

Then, Jeebus was to come flying out of his seat and tackle me, yelling, "It is written, my house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves."

It would have worked, except I blew the joke and went right to "Give the priest the bird ... etc." Then Jeebus went rogue and improvised ". . . but ye have made it a den of *whoremongers* and thieves."

I was more shocked than Mrs. Allenby. I didn't know what a *whoremonger* was, and I wondered how Jeebus knew. We were banished to the empty Sunday School room that served as solitary confinement, where Jeebus explained what a whore was and I pondered how long it would take me to save up enough to become a whoremonger.

There are a million Jeebus stories, like the time he forced me to climb onto the roof of the parsonage where he used a powertool to remove the skylight. Then he rigged this rope and gunny sack thing so that I could lower him into the middle of a prayer meeting, just like when the crippled dude was lowered into the middle of a crowd in a house where Jesus was. I practically dropped him and I think a couple of old ladies shit their diapers.

The pastor said we had to pay to have Sig Hansen bring his contractor tools and reinstall the skylight. I heard it leaked after that whole affair and Sig had to come back two or three times to fix it. I also heard Sig thought it was the funniest damn thing he'd ever seen. He wouldn't take our money, but we did have to come to one of his jobsites and do some cleanup. I didn't mind, as Sig's daughter, Kirsten, was there that day. It was the middle of July and she was wearing a two-piece swimsuit, working on her tan. This, alone, made it worth having to help

with the cleanup. She did that thing where girls lie on their stomachs and undo the backs of their swimsuit tops. I watched all day, but she never raised up without tying her top back on.

Or, the time Jeebus made me come along to help re-enact that scene from *American Graffiti*, where the Pharaohs car club delinquents make Richard Dreyfuss crawl around and tie a cable to the axle of a cop car, then hook the other end to something solid. Then he and a Pharaoh go speeding past the cop car and Dreyfuss leans out the car window and flips off the cops while yelling, "Here's five for justice." Of course, when the cops take off after him, the cable yanks off their entire fucking back axle. Hilarious.

Except when Jeebus and I did it the cable snapped and the recoil caught some schmuck who wandered into the scenario right in his man parts. His dingus survived, but he lost one of his marbles, if you know what I mean. Still, he had three more kids even with only one marble. We didn't get caught, but I still have nightmares.

Those nightmares are a kiddy cartoon compared to the nightmares I have about finding Jeebus hanging from his garage ceiling. By his neck.

## 2.

I solemnly swear to be a reliable narrator from here on out: Jeebus had issues, but there's no way he would have hung himself and risked having one of his kids find him that way. He was probably cooking up another one of his damn stunts and things got out of hand.

Sure, his parents used to flog him with an extension cord, then make him sleep outside in the doghouse with Mutthead, his Golden Retriever. He told me he mostly enjoyed this - the sleeping outside, not the flogging - except in the dark heart of winter, when he and Mutthead huddled together, like refugees on a raft, trying to keep from going numb.

Then his wife cheated on him with the UPS driver who delivered Jeebus' art supplies every couple of weeks. Jeebus could paint like fucking Renoir, but I could never get him to show his stuff to anybody besides me and Julieann, and she didn't give a shit. It pissed her off to have him spending his overtime check on oil paints and brushes and canvas. Nevermind that she rarely worked more than two days a week, herself, running the till at her old man's hardware store, where she flirted with anything that secreted testosterone, sometimes right in front of Jeebus.

It is true that he didn't take her cheating with Mr. Brown Shorts well. After the divorce he started hitting the meth pipe hard and did thirty days for possession a couple of times. But then he started getting his shit together and opted into drug court, where you have a "get out of jail free" card as long as you stay in treatment and come to drug court every Wednesday, which he did with religious fervor.

He had another setback when Julieann got the judge to deny him visitation with Danny and Janny, their four-year-old twins, and he lost his job at Jensen Auto Parts during the second jail sentence.

But even though we weren't hanging out as much as we used to be while all this draconian karma was kicking his skinny ass, we still saw each other at least a couple times a month. I swear he was looking as good as I'd seen him look in years the week before I found him in the garage.

The neighbors called me when the newspapers started piling up and his classic '57 Chevy hadn't moved from the driveway in a week. One of the tires went flat, and they knew if Jeebus was okay, he would not have allowed his '57 to have a flat tire in plain view of the neighborhood. He was meticulous about that car, just like everything else.

Jeebus cared about things, but he did live his life ten miles over the speed limit, the speed at which you're going to have the cops doing U-turns and coming after your ass with the lights flashing. Still, on those occasions when we did hang out, catching up on who was doing what to whom or how long before the Huskies' basketball coach was sent packing, he was cheerful as a damn songbird. Grinning and waving his hands around, boisterous, like he was at an Italian Thanksgiving.

I never saw Jeebus depressed, not even back when Julieann dumped him every other Friday, right after school and just before she went to Confession, a spiritual practice she kept up until they finally got married. He always had a story and a hug, always made me feel better about my own sadsack self. There's no way he killed himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

I remember one Sunday morning, a month or so after we met, Jeebus said we had to go forward to the altar, the next time there was an altar call, and accept Jesus as our personal Saviour or we wouldn't be able to be baptized. He had me follow him into the men's room where he shared his secret knowledge that Lisa Marie Jensen was on the program for the next baptismal

service, which was scheduled for the following Sunday. Jeebus' mother was the church secretary and knew a week in advance who the candidates for the next baptismal were going to be, since she composed and mimeographed the Church Bulletin.

I had yet to witness a baptismal. They were always conducted after the main morning service, which was over at eleven-thirty. My parents always left promptly afterward. So I didn't understand the big whoop of it, especially to Jeebus.

"Dude," he said ("dude" was just becoming a thing at the time), "you don't understand. The white dresses the girls wear into the baptismal go all see-through when they get wet. You can see their underwear. If they're even wearing underwear."

Now I understood. Lisa Marie Jensen was the Dolly Parton of the junior high class, and seeing her underwear, or - dear God, please - what was beneath her underwear - would be a transcendent religious experience.

"So," he said, "tonight we have to go forward at the altar call." Sunday nights were considered "evangelistic meetings", sometimes conducted by visiting professional evangelists especially chosen for their sales skills. There was always an altar call, according to Jeebus. I wouldn't have known if he hadn't told me, since Sunday Morning Service attendance was deemed enough to establish my dad's credibility with the sales prospects he gleaned from the congregation.

It was easy enough to explain to my parents that Jeebus had invited me to the Sunday evening service. They readily consented, perhaps sensing an opportunity for molesting each other in my absence. For my Dad's sake, I dearly hope that was the case. From what I recall, his libido was more of a problem than mine, even with my teenage boy hormonal advantage.

An odd thing happened when I attended the revival meeting that night.

For one thing, the evangelist was not at all what I expected. Instead of the pompadoured country-western singer wannabes I'd seen introduced on the Sunday mornings prior to a Sunday evening evangelistic service, this guy was a renegade Catholic priest.

Renegade in that he had been married, *and divorced*, all while still a robed-up parish priest. Apparently he'd fallen head-over for a widow in his church and they'd eloped to Vegas to tie the knot. Of course it took about two weeks for his ass to get the right boot of dis-fellowship from the Bishop in charge of his Diocese. Since then he'd taken his show on the road, mostly in non-Catholic venues.



His show consisted of explaining how, after the divorce, he'd become a drunk of the sort who wakes up at ten a.m., on a week-day morning, and can't remember how he came to be where he woke up or how long he'd been there. "Where he woke up" being the sidewalk in front of Macy's, or Woolworth's, in downtown Kansas City, head down in a pool of his own vomit.

At some point he was ordered into treatment by a compassionate Irish judge, himself a Catholic and recovering drunk. During his forty days and forty nights at a remote treatment center in the high desert near Victorville, California, Father Brennan said he came to understand the parable of the Prodigal Son.

The idea that God might be like a father who throws a party for the return of his fuckup son, who left home and wasted a big slice of the family pie on whores and lowlifes, but dad celebrates his homecoming like none of that ever happened, because he just flat loves him: that was a new idea for me, especially coming from a Catholic, for crying out loud. A lot of Lutherans don't even recognize Catholics as being anywhere on the short lists God keeps of those who are insured against falling into the devil's fire pit.

If all this was a minor revelation to me, for Jeebus it was an emotional earthquake. Twenty minutes into Father Brennan's redemption story Jeebus stood up and started crying and moaning, like his old man was flogging him with an electrical cord right there in front of everybody. (That would come later, in the privacy of his home. Jimmy "The Mutt" Morelli wasn't going to stand for a son of his whimpering like a teenage girl who just lost her puppy or her virginity, without making a teaching moment out of it.)

The priest's story came to a halt and an altar call was sounded immediately. The organist launched into the the soundtrack, while the priest crooned the lyrics: "**Just as I am,** without one plea, But that Thy blood was shed for me, And that Thou bid'st me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come! I come!"

Jeebus all but ran down the aisle and laid his snot-smearred cheek on the wooden altar rail at the front of the church. I couldn't believe what just happened.

Afterwards, I made him come with me into the same Sunday School room where he'd first layed out the etymology of the word "whoremonger."

"What the hell, Jeebus?" I asked.

"Dude," he said, "I got it. I totally got it." He sniffed up a snot drip and his eyes started tearing up, again. "Dude, it's like we're prodigal sons."

"That's fucked up, Jeebus," I said. "Your dad's just a dick, that's all."

"No, Blue," he said. "I've done some bad shit."

"You mean like getting baptized so you can see Lisa Marie Jensen's underwear?" I said.

"No, dude," he said. "I'm over that. I mean stuff I wouldn't even tell you about. But it's okay, it's all okay." He was on the verge of actually blubbering, and I was getting a little embarrassed for him. "Seriously, Blue, it's all okay."

## 2.

No fucking way did Jeebus Morelli commit suicide twenty-five years ago *today*. He was thirty-five years old, his life stretched before him like the Yellow Brick Road. If he did, I guess I'll see him in hell.

The threaded barrel of the Sig Sauer P220 Combat .45 tastes like peanut butter and strawberry jam when I slide it between my lips and teeth. It's colder than I expect, no doubt because I keep it in the vegetable crisper of my refrigerator, sealed in a plastic bag along with a dozen or so of those little silica gel anti-moisture packets from my antidepressant medication bottles. It wasn't until I was assembling the pills that I realized some of our fellow Americans need to be reminded, in boldface type, not to eat silica gel anti-moisture packets. I make a mental note to add this to my list of reasons I am fellating a firearm I ordered from Amazon, without first sanitizing the barrel. I don't want to think about where that barrel may have been. I don't floss either, part of a *gestalt* of slothful character defects which have contributed to the melancholy that has afflicted me since I turned eleven, forty-nine years ago.

I must have stowed the piece under the broccoli and leftover tortellini right after packing Lena's *My Little Pony* lunch bucket, with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and some surplus Halloween candy corn, to take with her to Saturday Dance Camp. It was my weekend for her to visit and Trish insisted that I adhere to a strict lunch menu, including peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, part of a nine-chapter, forty-page booklet she'd worked up after the divorce, including "Inviolable Instructions," "Rights and Wrongs," and a catch-all chapter, "Screens, Scrunchies, and Scrambled-Not-Poached." Trish loved alliteration. I feel like she cheated with the "Rights and Wrongs" title, but then I remembered she also cheated with Roberto.

One time I went off-script and picked Lena up early from Dance Camp. We spent a rebellious hour at McDonalds. It was a rare warm day in March and we took our Happy Meals outside to the play area. (I insisted to the bellicose teenager behind the counter, and to her disrespectful raccoon-eyed shift manager - where are these girls getting their makeup tips, Instagram? - that denying me a Happy Meal, on the basis of age, was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. Maybe I should have been a lawyer instead of an insurance salesman.)

My happy little girl slid down the Ronald McDonald slide and let me spin her on the clown carousel until my bad knee went jiggery and I begged for mercy. It was the best day I'd had with Lena since before Trish and I agreed that if she was going to screw Roberto, her boss, during the week, too, it would be more convenient for everybody if I moved my collection of aloha shirts and cargo pants out of our closet, so he could move some of his Italian silk foppery in. Roberto nixed my idea that I move into the guest bedroom, so I had to rent a place of my own, a run-down two bedroom rambler a couple of blocks over.

Trish wrote me up for the MickeyD's violation and re-hired Randolph Rockman, of "Rockman, Rathsome, and Gunsel, Jurisprudential Warriors." It cost me fifteen hundred bucks to re-hire James "Jimmyboy" Layme, of Layme and nobody, to defend against Trish's Motion To Amend Parenting Plan. (I made up the lawyer names, but the *noms de guerre* are truer than the facts.)

Trish's Motion asked that in order to avoid the possibility of any more fast food aberrations, my time with Lena be supervised by Trish's wicked stepmother, Annabelle Lecter (I swear I didn't make that one up), and visits be limited to one Sunday afternoon per month.

The Honorable Jackson Marshall, Judge of the Superior Court for the State of Washington, County of King, denied Trish's motion, much to Jimmyboy's surprise, but tacked on a judicial promise that if Lena and I were caught sneaking under the golden arches again I would be held in contempt.

So, PB&J it is. I don't need anybody else holding me in contempt. Roberto already does.

The booze is wearing off. I remember that, *a.* there is a reason I stopped drinking in the morning, *b.* what kind of asshole leaves a firearm in the refrigerator with his six-year old step-daughter in the house, *c.* even though I am just *rhetorically* sucking off the Sig Sauer, that fucker has a hair trigger, and *d.* God, I miss Jeebus!

Jeebus would never have let me sell out my dream of being a therapist, to settle for working in my old man's insurance

agency. Jeebus always knew exactly what to do. Jeebus would have sniffed out the nymphomania in Trish, like the skinny coonhound he resembled, and forbade me to marry her: my secretary (what a cliché!), twenty years younger than me. She said she thought "it would be cool" for her daughter to have a grandfather figure and live-in baby sitter.

My landline is ringing. Caller-ID shows Trish's cellphone number. I consider ignoring her, but ignoring Trish works about as well as ignoring an infected wound.

"Child Protective Services," I answer. "Children of Adulterous Mothers Department."

"Shut up," she says. "I need to pick Lena up early. Me and Roberto want to take her to see *Hannah Montana*."

"*Roberto and I*," I correct her. "I'm going to ask my lawyer to get me full custody. Lena can't be around someone who can say *Me and Roberto*."

"And *me and Roberto* would kick your ass just like the last time we were in court, dumbass." She has no sense of humor, never did.

I use my cellphone to pull up *Metacritic*, my go-to movie review site.

"Also, Peter Hartlaub of the *San Francisco Chronicle* says, *If you're no longer old enough to carry a Hannah Montana lunch box, this movie will feel like punishment*. I can't allow that, Trish. It's way worse than McDonald's. And, for the record, I think it was your chubby dumbass that got kicked." The *chubby* part is a low blow, but I'm on a roll.

"Fine," I say, "but I expect the same consideration next time I need to change things up."

I actually don't mind the early pickup. It will give me more time to finish off the liter of Costco chablis I've been sipping on and mull over why I am sitting here in my tighty-whities still holding a gun in my other hand. I hang up without saying good-bye. And without finding out exactly when Trish and Robberberto are showing up. *Shit*.

### 3.

Forty-five minutes later I'm alone in the house, wearing one of my aloha shirt and cargo shorts ensembles, and considering my options:

*One.* Retrieve the Sig Sauer out of the refrigerator. (With Lena gone for a week I can safely continue to keep it there. I'm pretty sure I'll remember not to eat the silica gel packets.)

Then, I walk out into the woods behind the *cul-de-sac* and exercise my First Amendment right to perforate my cortex with my handgun. If I could aim carefully enough to hit my brainstem, *Google* says death would be instantaneous.

No. I do daydream about suicide now that my life insurance policy is past the suicide exclusionary period (two years, if you're curious. Standard in most policies, but ask your agent, in a casual, offhand way, before you pull the trigger.)

It would leave a cool million for Lena, with my budster, Ralph "Biggy" Backstrom, as trustee, until she's twenty-five. He'd make sure she had options besides accompanying Trish and Robberberto to cookie-cutter Disney movies.

And, he'd keep Trish from grabbing any of the scratch in the trust to buy butt-lifts or tummy-tucks or whatever-the-hell else she'll need to keep Robberberto from following his notoriously wandering eye to go after someone like Trish's girl-pal, Heidi. Whom I saw, just last week, having a cool one at Johnny's Pub with the R-man, while Trish was at a conference in Seattle. I'm waiting for the right moment to put *that* on the table.

Trish might be twenty years younger than me, make that *I*, but Robberberto is five years younger than *she*. (*She?* That just sounds weird. But I believe it to be correct.)

No, I will not fucking shoot myself in the head. Not yet.

*Two.* Quit my job. *Take This Job and Shove It.* Then what? My suicide daydreams are mostly a product of the day-after-day-after-day unrelenting task of figuring out how to to hide the fact I spend my time at the office on Facebook and Twitter, and maintaining InnerSquirrels.com, my website. Then I still have to figure out how to sell enough whole-life insurance policies to pay rent and child-support. I'm a sixty-year-old man, for crying-out-loud. It seems a bit on the late side to sign up for grad-school, then spend two-years interning for a real therapist so I can get my own license to practice. I just kept putting it off, like every other damn thing. Couples therapy, for example.

*Three.* I don't have a three. Unless you count "same-ole-same-ole".

I get up to use the crapper. When I go into the john I turn on the light and see something on the mirror. At first I think it's just condensation, with drips of water carving out little trails when they slide down the face of the mirror, because Lena never turns on the overhead fan.

When I get closer, I see she's written something. It's deteriorated a little, from evaporation, but it's just barely readable:

"Get your sins forgiven! Give the priest the bird!

I drag in a ragged breath and sink to my knees. I must have told Lena the story about Jeebus and me and Mrs. Allenby's Sunday School Class. But why would I do that? She's six-years old. She's never been to Sunday School and thinks Jesus is the guy who keeps the Easter Bunny as a pet and got screwed over because he has to share his birthday with Christmas. Like her friend, Sally, who only gets one extra present because she was born on Christmas. Even a six-year-old, especially one as wordly-wise as Lena, knows the parents can cheat. There's no fixed number of presents you get for Christmas. They can just pick one at random and say it's for your birthday.

No, Lena did not write this sentence on the mirror.

Maybe Trish grew a sense-of-humor overnight. Not bloody likely. She'd be more likely to grow another boob. *What would Robberberto think about that?*

But that's got to be it. Trish knows the Sunday School story. She must have written that sentence on the mirror when she picked up Lena. Yeah. That's got to be it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Just to be sure, the next day, when she is unexpectedly delivered to my front door by Robberberto, in flagrant violation of the parenting plan - for one thing, he's not supposed be the delivery person, but he's picking Trish up at work and they're going from there to Seattle, for a Macklemore concert - I ask Lena if she wrote something funny on the mirror. I tell her I couldn't read it, that way I'll know if she knows what it said.

"Daddy," she says. "I didn't write anything on the mirror. You want me to? What do you want me to write?"

"How about this," I say, "'My daddy loves me more than anything, even french fries.'" She knows how I feel about french fries. I scoop her up and hold her close. She smells like my aftershave.

"Sweetie, have you been using my aftershave again? You're way too young to be shaving," I say.

"No, dummy," she says. I wonder if she can call her mother *dummy* without repercussions. I know this will change in a few years, but at the moment I'm happy she calls me *dummy*.

"Mommy doesn't let me use her perfume," she says, "so I use your perfume. Do you like how I smell?"

"I totally love how you smell, sweetie," I say. "Who wouldn't love a lady who smells like *Rum and Sandalwood*?"

When Trish and Robberberto arrive at *fucking midnight* to retrieve Lena, who doesn't even wake up when they lift her out of the bed I've set up for her in the guest room, I ask Trish if she wrote on my bathroom mirror.

"I wouldn't go in your bathroom if I was leaking," she says. "I tell Lena not to go in there, either. Didn't I teach you anything when we were together? That mold around your bathtub tile could make Lena sick. But, apparently, you don't give a shit."

After protesting that I gave lots of shit about the condition of the tile around my bathtub, I open the front door so Robberberto can carry Lena out to his still-carrying-dealer-plates Mercedes SUV, parked behind my '91 Corolla still carrying plates with expired tabs.

Then I sit down and open a liter of Costco burgundy and ruminate about the possible identity of the bathroom mirror quipster.

*Jeebus?*

#### 4.

It was Lena who derailed my efforts to forget about the handwriting on the mirror. One morning during one of our weekends together, a month after the mirror incident, she came running into my tiny kitchen carrying a grocery bag.

"Look what I found, daddy," she said. "It was on the front steps when I went out to get the newspaper."

I sat down in the breakfast nook. She sat down across from me and put the bag on the table. She reached in and put what she pulled out on the tabletop between us.

"Isn't it cute?" she said. "Can I use it?"

My heart started pounding like the drummer for *Rush*. It looked just like the coin bank from Jeebus' and my Sunday School Class. In the shape of a backwoods country church, fingerprints all over the sides. A pig, a horse, and a cow, on one side.

I couldn't speak. I was having a hard time breathing. I picked the thing up and held it like the fingerprints were toxic. One end of a slip of paper was sticking out of the coin slot. I pulled it out.

"Daddy, your hand is shaking," Lena giggled. *No shit, little one. You have no idea.*

I read it aloud, forgetting my audience: " ... ye have made it a den of whoremongers and thieves."

"Daddy, what's a whoremonger?" she asked. Great.

"Honey, it's a grownup word for a bad man," I said, knowing I was doomed. She would most certainly tell Trish about this.

I could ask her to not tell her mother about the bank and the note, but that would only make her anxious and I refuse to make her life any more anxious than it already is.

"Look, sweetie," I said, getting up from the table, "I'm going to put the bank up here on the counter. Every time you help me by drying the dishes or folding your clothes or do other helpful things, I'm going to put a quarter in the bank. Then, next time it's your birthday, we'll open the bank and shake out all the quarters. We'll use the quarters to do any fun thing you want to do. How about that?"

She squeals and jumps up from the table, running over putting her arms around me.

"Can I put money in the bank, too?" she asks. *Aha. Time for some good parenting.*

"Of course, honey," I said. "That's a good way to save your money until it collects up into a whole bunch of money." *Suck on that, Trish. I'm teaching our daughter about saving money while you're teaching her about infidelity. I think I win. Even with a penalty for suggesting she squander her savings on a birthday bash, I still win.*

"Daddy," she said, "do you have a bank?"

"Yes, I do, sweetie," I said. "It's at the bank building we drive by on the way to school, the one across from the playground."

"How many quarters do you have in your bank, Daddy?" she asked.

I hate lying to children, especially my own, but there's no simple way to explain the idea of having a negative number of quarters in the bank, which would be the truth, should I attempt to tell it. I don't. And payday is three days away. I blame my parents for not giving me a piggy bank.

"I'm pretty sure I have over a hundred quarters in my bank," I said. "I'm saving some of them for your birthday, too." I think my lie has now been enhanced from a misdemeanor to a felony.

"Daddy," she says, "who's Jeebus?"

"Why are you asking me that," I say, more querulous than I meant to sound.



She went over to the table and reached inside the grocery bag that had contained the bank and brought out a card. She brought it over to me. The front of the card said,

*Happy Birthday, Lena  
Your friend, Jeebus.*

It's a wonder my sixty-year-old bladder didn't empty itself around my shoes. Lena stared at me, probably wondering how I was able to do that with my face. I'm sure it looked like my Walmart 200-thread count Moonlight White sheets before I deliberately started laundering them with colored things in a private act of Trish-defiance.

"Can I open this?" I asked her. "Jeebus was a friend of mine when I was still in school." Mostly true.

"Okay, daddy," she said. "But don't tell me what it says. It's not my birthday yet."

I opened it.

*What's wrong with you, Blue? The card is for Lena. Remember the time we put that grocery bag with a plastic bag full of red paint inside and set it on fire on Reverend Nielsen's doorstep? He totally trashed his suit when he stomped on the bag. He was an hour late getting to church, remember? Those were the days, my friend, we thought they'd never end, but they sure as hell did.*

"Lena," I said, "I'm going to seal the envelope back up and leave the card by the bank until your birthday, okay?" It was only three days away.

"Okay, Daddy," she said. "Remember, don't tell me what it said."

## 5.

Yes, I did remember trashing Rev. Nielsen's suit. I also remember that Rev. Nielsen struck back. Obviously he missed class the day they taught "turn the other cheek" in Seminary. Rev. Nielsen was also a reserve police officer. Somehow, in retrospect, that seems like a conflict of interest. Jesus is all about forgiveness and second chances. I *didn't* miss class the day Mrs. Allenby, our aforementioned Sunday School teacher, told how Jesus' disciples were having a snit storm over the idea that we should just forgive our brother who has screwed us over.

They march over to where Jesus is doing a Q & A after one of his one-man shows and grab a mic.

"Okay, Teacher, how many times do I have to forgive my brother? I mean, my brother is a real asshole. If I just keep giving him another chance, he'll just keep screwing me. In his case he'd probably screw my wife, too. Let's make this really generous and say I forgive him seven times. On the eighth screwover, isn't it time for a little justice to balance all this mercy? How is this dickwad ever going to learn?"

When Mrs. Allenby told a story, she really got into it. She did community theatre, and was pretty proud of her acting chops. She went a little over the top sometimes, and this was one of those times.

She heaves a big sigh, as Jesus, as if he was really tired of answering dumbass questions.

"Listen, Peter, Andrew, John, and the rest of you mooks. Seven is for sissies. I want you to forgive your brother *seventy-times-seven* times. You do the math. And I don't care if your brother screwed both of your sisters, too."

Then she upped the ante with that story where a bunch of scribes and pharisees, the religious rightwingers of their day, hunt down a hooker and drag her in front of Jesus. I think maybe she was caught blowing a married guy. This was adultery times two. If he wasn't married the charge might be reduced to misdemeanor fornication. The penalty for doing the deed with a married man was death by stoning.

These religious douche buckets, who later arranged for Jesus to be crucified, can't wait to get him on the record.

"So, Mr. Messiah, given all this liberal socialist oatmeally-mouthed hoohaw, what do you say we should do with this whore?"

At this point in Mrs. Allenby's line reading, Jeebus is starting to giggle. This is what makes Sunday School worth getting up early for.

Mrs. Allenby pauses for effect. We are spellbound, trying to ignore Jeebus, now snorting like a little piglet. Then she sticks her hand out, fingers splayed and quivering.

"Listen, you brood of vipers, I'm all over this. I'm with you. Let's stone her till her skull caves in. One condition: In my courtroom whoever is going to throw rocks has to have a clean rap sheet their own selves. Which one of you snakes qualifies to throw the first rock? Hey, where you going? Yeah, get your sorry asses out of here, you freaking hypocrites."

Then, Jesus turns to the whore.

"Where are your accusers, madam? (*Madam.* Mrs. Allenby liked a good pun.) You know what, I do not condemn you in the slightest. Not a whisper of accusation. Just go find a better

way to live, okay? You're better than you believe you are. Just don't do it anymore."

By this time Jeebus is silent. There are tears and snot, but probably from laughing himself into a lather.

Okay, long story to say this: When Rev. Nielsen used his reserve police officer powers to force us to clean all the graffiti off our school building, or face juvenile court prosecution, he was acting like a damn pharisee. You shouldn't be able to stand up there blathering on about *Jesus this, and Jesus that*, when you're a cop on the side. I still maintain, to this day, it's a conflict of interest.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fuck it. I'm taking Lena to Micky D's. Every time we drive by the Golden Arches she tracks the playground with her baby blues until the Ronald McDonald slide disappears around the last corner before we're at her school. For some reason I thought there was a law against building Micky D's within a thousand feet of a school. Maybe that's retail pot stores I'm thinking of. Kind of the same thing except the pot shops don't peddle products marinated in high fructose corn syrup, except maybe for the edibles.

I suppose I could take her to a playground that doesn't also serve Oreo McFlurries, but that feels like settling. I don't want Lena to believe she ever has to settle for less than her heart desires. I mentally balance this against the obvious counter-argument that her mother's unwillingness to settle for me has flipped our family world on its axis.

My willingness to defy a court order is also fueled by the Southern Comfort I'm carrying in the hidden pocket of my book bag. Beneath my Journal and Tom Robbins' *Jitterbug Perfume* is a false bottom that holds my wallet and a backup half-pint of the hooch *du jour*. Which is almost always Southern Comfort or Yukon Jack. The thing about whiskey liquers is they taste as good in the morning as they do anytime.

I park my car on the side of the building that's hidden from the street.

"Daddy," Lena says, "Mommy says we're not supposed to be here."

I do some of my best thinking when I've had a couple of hits of SoCo, which I did while Lena was in her room getting ready to leave. I know how to solve this.

"Lena," I say. "You wait right here in the car. I will go inside and get us something yummy, then we'll drive to that

playground over by your dance class. It's important that you do what Mommy says, so we won't stay here and you won't have to go inside. How about that?"

She claps her hands a couple of times and giggles. "Daddy," she says, "you always have such good ideas. Can you get me a Happy Meal? I saw on TV they put a little dinosaur inside each Happy Meal. I want the triceratops." The girl loves her dinosaurs.

"Okay," I say, "I'll be right back." I leave the windows down an inch or two and lock the doors.

Five minutes later I'm back and we drive to the little pocket park next to Chevalier's Dance Studio, where Lena has become a little rock star. Her teacher, Deb Bonafort, told me that she really belongs in the advanced classes, but she'd be at least two years younger than the other students and she's small for her age at that.

I watch Lena run around and hit every station: Slide, monkey bars, merry-go-round, rocking horse. I know she's good for an hour here, so I feel okay about going back to the car and chugging the rest of the Southern Comfort. By time we have to leave I should be fine to drive. I grab my book and go back to sitting at the picnic table I've claimed.

Just in time, too. A forty-something woman who reminds me of Debra Winger in *Officer and a Gentleman* walks into the park with two little guys that look to be around Lena's age.

For Debra Winger I could make an exception to my exclusive right to the picnic table. I make a grand sweeping gesture, inviting her over. She smiles and heads my way after making certain her urchins have been properly introduced to Lena, along with a warning to "be nice to the little girl or kiss the ice cream cones goodbye." A woman after my own heart. Parenting books don't say nearly enough about bribery as a go-to strategy. No need for *carrot and stick* if you make the carrots out of waffle cones and ice cream.

This woman may be even prettier than Debra Winger.

"You come here often?" I ask. I may need to visit one of those pickup artist websites and get some shiny new opening lines. I can do better, especially with a little SoCo in the tank.

"Yeah," she says. "Almost every day after I pick up the boys from school." I'm liking the direction this is headed. Obviously she doesn't think I'm a loser or she wouldn't be sharing her itinerary with me.

"How about you?" she asks.

"Yeah, me too," I say. *Me too?* The SoCo isn't working. "Lena loves it here. If it ain't broke, don't fix it, right?" Wow. *Really? If it ain't broke?* I need to start smoking weed.

She starts fingering the ring on her left hand, which features a diamond you could use as a doorstop. If it's real, her husband must manage a hedge fund. Or be manufacturing opioids in his basement. *Wrong:*

"Yeah, my husband is a cop who works nights so I try to keep the boys out of the house until three or so every day, so he can get some sleep."

Fingering her wedding ring and letting me know she's married to a cop. I can't believe a cop could finance a rock that size, unless he's running a retail pharmacy out of the evidence room, but even if she's lying, I can take a hint.

Before things get awkward, I get up, grab my book, and walk toward the playground. I feel a teensy bit floaty, but nothing to worry about. There was just a couple of fingers of Southern Comfort left in the bottle when I drained it.

"Lena, honey," I say, "it's time to go. Mommy will be wondering when we're coming back." She skips over to me and hugs my legs.

"Daddy, I have some new friends. Donny and Johnny are so nice. I want to play with them again, sometime." *Donny and Johnny?* I would have guessed something like *Skyler and Tyler*. This is the new millenium for baby names, after all, but maybe cops are into the traditional thing.

"Sure, honey," I say, nearly tripping over one of the logs bounding the playground. I take her hand and we head toward the car. I wave and smile at Debra Winger, but she's looking at her cellphone. She probably took a photo of me while I wasn't looking and is running it through some cop database.

I strap Lena into her carseat and slide in under the steering wheel. I can tell I will need to really pay attention to my driving. No speeding or running any red lights. If I get pulled over by Debra Winger's hubby and he makes me get out of the car he'll start asking questions about what I've been drinking besides whatever was in the McDonald's coffee cup in the cupholder. I try reciting the alphabet backwards, silently, as a test run. I can't think of what comes before "z."

I pull out of the parking lot after looking religiously in both directions, several times. Out of the corner of my eye I see the SoCo bottle on the floor of the car. I lean down to pick it up. I lean back upright just in time to see the pickup truck in front of me, not moving. I crunch down on the brakes but I still hit the truck doing at least twenty-five.

My head slams into the steering wheel. I hear Lena screaming. The pickup truck driver gets to my door just in time to see me spew McDonald's hashbrowns and coffee and Southern Comfort all over the dashboard.

\* \* \* \* \*

I wake up in the dark, in a place that smells like something toxic. Could just be the booze. I am desperate to go look for Lena. I start to get up, which makes my head feel like a demon is nailing something to my forehead. Probably the letter "F", for *fuckup*. Plus, I seem to be tied down. There are straps across my chest and legs. I think I pissed myself.

"Hey," I yell. "I need help here."

In seconds I hear running footsteps and light floods my room. A woman in a uniform is hovering over me. When I say "uniform", I mean like a cop, or an overdressed streetcar conductor. Soon she is joined by another woman who is also wearing a uniform, more like a nurse, but without that Florence Nightengale cap. Maybe they don't wear those anymore. I deduce that I am in a hospital room. I also deduce that I may be in a shitload of trouble.

But that's not top of the mind. Top of the mind is the diabolical carpentry and the whereabouts of Lena, in roughly that order.

"Where is Lena?" I croak.

"Lena is fine," the cop says. "No thanks to you."

The nurse leans over me, smiling. I like her attitude better than the cop's. Plus she smells good. "Just lie still, Mr. Levine," she says. "Are you thirsty?"

"He shouldn't be," the cop says, "he drank enough alcohol." This cop is getting on my nerves. They need a course in common human decency in cop school.

"Yes, water," I say. The nurse raises the head of my bed so I am sitting half upright. She brings a plastic cup up to my mouth and I slurp sloppily.

The cop moves to the foot of the bed.

"Mr. Levine," she announces, "I need to ask you some questions."

"Can't this wait?" the nurse asks. I wonder if this nurse is married. I can't see a ring. I'll find out from another nurse.

"No, it cannot," the cop says. "Mr. Levine, you are under arrest on suspicion of driving while under the influence of alcohol or other intoxicants. I want to ask you some questions,

but you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have a right to speak with a lawyer and have a lawyer present when I question you. If you can't afford to hire a lawyer, one will be appointed to represent you before I question you. You can decide at any time to exercise these rights and not answer any questions or make any statements. Do you understand each of these rights I have explained to you?" I nod. "Having these rights in mind, do you wish to call an attorney before I ask my questions?"

"No," I say, "fire away." It's a small joke and the cop doesn't seem to get it. She needs to lighten up. What's her deal? I'm the one with the headache.

"How much did you have to drink before the accident, Mr. Levine?" she asks.

Before I can answer, there's a loud knock on the door to my room. The nurse opens it and a guy in a pinstripe suit and carrying a briefcase strides in. He looks familiar. I probably saw him on a TV commercial, one of those ghouls who haunts accident scenes and hospital waiting rooms.

"I need to speak to my client," he says. "Please give us some privacy."

"And who are you?" the cop asks. "I need to see some ID."

The guy reaches inside his coat and pulls out a card, handing it to the cop. She rolls her eyes after glancing at it, snorts, and hands it back, holding it with pointy finger and thumb, like it fell in the toilet.

"What kind of a lawyer name is *Jeebus Morelli*?"

## 6.

Danny Morelli, Attorney at Law, was as startled as I was to see his dad's name on his business card.

"I print these things myself," he said, while riffling through the rest of the cards in his jacket pocket. They all said "Daniel J. Morelli, Attorney at Law," - just like he remembered printing them and a thousand others before them.

He was reluctant to let me keep the card, but I wasn't about to surrender it. Even now, as I await my hearing in King County Superior Court, I run my finger across it, feeling the raised letters. It is always with me now.

This hearing is not about the accident. It turns out the cop screwed up and didn't get a warrant to draw blood from my doughy body while I was in the hospital. So, while I got a citation for reckless driving, Danny was able to swat down the prosecutor's lame, no evidence effort to get me for Driving

While Under the Influence - which I had been ready to confess to before Danny showed up to interrupt me. Timing is everything.

No, this is much worse. This hearing is on the Family Law Motions Calendar. Even though Danny is my new lawyer and has saved my ass once already, I have my doubts about the outcome of this hearing. Trish has asked that I be denied unsupervised visitation with Lena, and I doubt even Danny will be able to persuade Judge Marshall that I should have additional opportunities to ram my car into the ass-end of parked vehicles with my daughter on board.

Because it's not a criminal trial, evidence of my love affair with Southern Comfort turns out to be admissible and Danny has already warned me that I may have to do some outpatient treatment to even be allowed supervised visitation.

The hearing is short, no need for actual witnesses it turns out, and the only bright spot is that a Social Worker from Family Services will be supervising the twice-a-month two-hour visits I will have with Lena, not my ex-mother-in-law, who once texted me that that she would like to perform an amateur vasectomy on me, with a steak knife, so that I can't reproduce.

The visits will take place at the Family Services office. Danny tells me we'll be in a windowless room with a couple of couches, some bookshelves, a TV with a DVD player, and a pile of beat-up toys. The DVD player is a nice touch, probably wisdom born of experience. Even an episode of *Hannah Montana* beats an hour of meth-daddy trying to sound out the words in *Cat In the Hat*.

"Look at it this way, Blue," Danny says. "The judge left the door open. If you go to all the meetings the treatment people at Redemption Rehab will put on your dance card, and you make every scheduled visitation with Lena, and you don't fuck yourself up again, you might just put some *new life* back into your life and get back to regular visits with Lena. I've seen that happen dozens of times. Plus, did you check out that Social Worker?" He sticks an elbow in my ribs. "You've never had a supervisor that looked like that, dude."

\* \* \* \* \*

I am required to attend an AA meeting every damn day. Since I maintain the suspension of disbelief required to claim that I also maintain a fulltime job, the meetings are at 7 a.m.. *In the morning*. Plus, it turns out that an additional requirement for my supervised visitation is that I limit my alcohol consumption to what I "accidentally" ingest when I take a *tiny* cup of cold



medicine as a health measure in the morning. That's not how the judge put it, but everybody knows the atmosphere is swimming with dangerous microbes.

To encourage me to comply with the court's order, there is a promise that I may be called in, on thirty minutes notice, by a probation officer, and asked to accompany him to the men's john to pee in a cup, while he monitors the operation.

The cold medicine explanation only worked the first time alcohol was detected in my piss. I'm guessing the pee test can detect most mood enhancers, so I may be at an impasse. On a related note, I can tell you that people who talk about getting a "sugar high" are delusional. Or, they've got a piss poor, pun intended, understanding of the term *high*.

At least it brings me a fluid ounce of pleasure to know that a portion of Robberberto's tax bill is paying for Heathcliff, my thirty-something watchdog, to watchdog me urinate. Which is what he's doing right now.

"What's taking so long in there, Mr. Levine," he asks.

"It's a prostate thing," I tell him. "One day you'll get to experience it for yourself." Along with diminished *libido* and increased recovery time after *coitus* before you can *coit* again. For me, it had now been fourteen months between *coituses*. Or is it *coitusi*.

"Well, take as long as you need, Mr. Levine, and shake it off," he says. "You remember what happened last time."

Speaking of prostates, I also remember that when I had my last exam, two years ago, there was anesthesia involved. After I woke up I didn't even recall the doctor molesting me, and a colonoscopy is a significant invasion. Which led to the related thought that *my dentist uses nitrous oxide*.

One summer, as a callow youth, I worked in the warehouse of a restaurant supply business. It was well known among the sales staff that whipped cream dispensers rely on small canisters of nitrous oxide as a propellant. Some enterprising *restauranteurs*, and alleged *restauranteurs*, had figured out how to take hits off the nitrous canisters, and we had to make sure they weren't coming into the store every day to buy more canisters. I wonder if nitrous would show up in a toxicology screen. Worth a try.

This morning at The Meeting, I had engaged the leader, and a few others who weren't snoozing with their eyes open, in a round of point/counter-point on this whole thing about a *Higher Power*. Here are the first three of the AA 12 Steps.

*We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.*

*Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*

*Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.*

Along with the whole gender thing - God is automatically a *Him?* - I'm not sure how much sanity has been restored to the mooks sitting around the table. I didn't know most of them, but I do know James "Poontang" Cummings. The dude also believes he is powerless over his serial adultery and talked the ladies-only sex addiction group into allowing him to attend their meetings. I'm sure it helps that he swims in George Clooney's gene pool.

Then there's Sarah Monahan. Oops. I'm not supposed to be using last names. Too late now. Anyway, *Sarah* believes that Elvis faked his death and later seduced her mother, a Vegas backup-singer, which explains both her uncanny resemblance to The King and her mother's disappearance when she was three years old. But, her Higher Power is a Kardashian, so it makes a certain amount of sense.

And, what responsible mental health professional would ever recommend that you *turn your will and life over to your imaginary friend?* Why would you trust "God" with your life when he can't even figure out how to keep the human race from mutating into Donald Trump?

I've decided that Jeff "The Dude" Lebowski will be my higher power. I've been thinking on this during my wait for a visitation session. Before I can finish re-playing the scene, on my phone, where The Dude is telling The Stranger how The Dude abides, the door to the Visitation Room opens and Jasmine Spenser, my supervisor for visitation purposes, emerges in an ambient cloud of some perfume that reminds me of the one time I've been to Hawaii.

She's wearing a red halter top and a pair of black leggings that had to have been sprayed on. For a fifty-eight year-old woman, she's hotter than it is outside. It's seventy-eight degrees, which is positively sweltering for Seattle. I know she's fifty-three because she noticed we share a birthday when she read my court papers. She mentioned it during our first meeting and I felt emboldened to ask what year she was born.

"Mr. Levine," she says, "Lena is waiting for you."

I enter the room and Lena gets up from where she's been playing with a Ken and Barbie doll tableau, also involving a dumptruck and a toy lawnmower. She runs to me and flings herself

up and into my reaching arms. I bury my face in her neck and hair and hope she doesn't feel the hot tears slipping from the corners of my tired eyes.

## 7.

When it rains it turns into a swamp. A few months ago I was at my desk at work and Ellie the Ancient One, our receptionist, who has been with my dad since the office opened fifty-whatever years ago, came into my office to tell me I had a customer at the front counter.

"Ellie," I said, "have that little hussy who works in the copy room show you how to use the phone to buzz me and tell me these things." Ellie is still amazed that the receiver on her desk phone doesn't have a cord connecting it to anything. She thinks cellphones were introduced by the Antichrist and won't touch one. Once I fired up Facetime to let her have a conversation with her granddaughter in Phoenix. She ran from my office, pale-faced. Later she wanted to do an exorcism on my iPhone 6 Plus. I couldn't help myself: I showed her the face-off between the demon and the two priests in *The Exorcist*, on Youtube, with all that levitation and vomiting and backwards English.

The customer turned out to be a sketchy-looking young woman, probably in her 30's, though she looked ten years older. She was wearing what appeared to be knee-length red basketball shorts and a black tube top, and dragging a pre-schooler with her, which is why I thought thirties.

"Could you close the door," she said. Her kid was already pulling books off my bookshelf, including *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Oh, well. I was pretty sure he couldn't read. "Timmy," she said to him, "leave those books alone." Timmy obeyed, turning his attention to digging in my ficus plant, which I'd just watered, and rubbing the mud from his fingers onto my carpet. Apparently this was okay with mom.

"Mr. Levine," she said, "I'm Jennifer Wilkens and I have a problem. I need health insurance that pays for drug treatment. If I don't get into treatment, Child Protective Services is going to take Sheldon away from me."

Maybe someone *should* take Sheldon away from you long enough to give him a real name, like *Billy*, or *Mike*, so he survives kindergarten. I didn't say that out loud.

I was sympathetic, not always the quality I lead with, because of my own recent experience. I pulled out an application. Within the first three inches of the document it

was already asking disqualifying questions, such as *"Have you ever been convicted of use or possession of a controlled substance."*

"Ms. Wilkens," I asked, "have you ever been convicted of use or possession of a controlled substance?"

"Doesn't that violate my right to privacy?" she asked.

"Absolutely," I said, "but insurance companies who are going to pay for your healthcare get to ask really personal questions. Wait till we get to the sex part."

Her face flushed crimson and she looked over at Sheldon. Of course: Sheldon probably didn't know who his daddy was.

"Only a couple of times," she said. "They didn't give me any jail time, because of Sheldon. I just had to do outpatient treatment and go to AA meetings."

Fuck the insurance company. I went through the application and checked all the boxes that needed to be checked to guarantee the policy would be issued, including coverage for pre-existing conditions and drug treatment. I told Jennifer Wilkens exactly what I was doing. For the record, she was in complete agreement and signed the application willingly.

This morning Ellie trekked back to my office to tell me my father wanted to speak with me. The thirty minutes, including several role-plays, I had spent showing her how to use the phone to message me was apparently wasted.

*Oh great, I thought, he must have found out about when I used the office credit card to buy Mariners tickets. I'll tell him I took Lena, which was the actual truth.*

If only.

"Blue," he said, once I was seated in front of his five-acre desk, "we have to talk about a visit I had with the rep from Millenium Health Insurance."

"Okay," I said. "But I'm feeling like I need to have a lawyer present."

"Not yet," he said, "I'm not a cop. But this isn't over yet, so who can say?"

"What the hell are you talking about, dad?" I asked. "Cop?"

"Maybe I'm over-reacting," he said, "but I tend to do that when my agency is accused of submitting a fraudulent health insurance application. Especially when my son's name is on it."  
*Shit.*

"One more time: What the hell are you talking about?" I asked. As if I didn't know exactly what he was talking about.

Sure enough, he slapped a copy of Jennifer Wilkens' application down on the desktop. (Remember when "desktop" meant the top of an actual desk?)

"This is the hell I'm talking about," he said. "Let me ask you something: Besides running background checks on your female Facebook friends, have you ever used the Washington State Patrol website to run a check on an actual client? In the alternative, did it ever occur to you that the district office might do it, even if you can't be bothered? It turns out Jennifer Wilkens, aka Jenny Wilkens-Johnson, aka Jenny Marvin-Wilkens is one drug conviction shy of being a three-time loser. Let me ask you something else: why do you hate me? Do you have a backup plan in case I do what any other employer would do and ask you to turn in your key and box up your belongings and get your ungrateful ass out of here? That was a rhetorical question, by the way. Don't bother to answer. Just turn in your key and box up your belongings and get your ungrateful ass out of here."

I couldn't move or speak. I'd never had another job, unless you count being a Resident Assistant in my dorm at college. Or supplementing my RA income by selling crappy weed to unsuspecting freshmen. And to that undercover cop. Fortunately we'd both been to Woodstock and after swapping backstories on Country Joe and the Fish he literally slapped me on the wrist and moved on to investigating rumors that Dean Krapnic was doctoring student records in exchange for sexual favors. When he asked me about that I pled ignorance and told him to ask Rita Frey, who I knew would be delighted by the attention.

"What part of 'turn in your key, etc.,' didn't you understand?" my dad asked.

I fished around in my jacket pocket until I found my keys. I removed my office key and tossed it across the desktop. Then I had a brainstorm.

"Okay, dad. Fine. But I want to cash in that whole-life policy you started for me when I was born. It must be worth fifty-grand by now."

It was his turn to be rendered speechless. Without a word he got up, carefully placed his chair at right angles to his desk, and walked over to a row of file cabinets. He pulled open a file drawer and pulled out a policy envelope. He returned to his desk, carefully seated himself, and slid the envelope across the desktop to me. I swear a tear or two splatted in front of him, but he still didn't speak.

I got up and walked out of his office and into early retirement.

## 8.

Cashing in the life insurance policy my father had been paying into since I was born turned out to be easier than I

expected. It was also more lucrative than I expected. The old man had been paying enough into it over the years that it had a surrender value of seventy-five-thousand (!) dollars. Dad even waived the surrender fees, but he refused to make eye-contact when he handed me my check.

He has also refused to speak to me since then. If he is mourning the damage to the father-son bond he has no one but himself to blame.

I was happy coming over to see him Wednesday nights and every Sunday after church, and eating the same dinner every Sunday - fried chicken, mashed potatoes, corn-on-the-cob - which he cooks in honor of mom.

She's been gone for almost ten years now, knocked down by breast cancer and complications of MS, but my father still devotes every Sunday to memorializing her. I come over for dinner, the kind that's served mid-day, after church, and we watch the Seahawks or the Mariners or the Sounders. Dad hates soccer, says "just jam splinters under my fingernails and spare me the endless back-and-forth, back-and-forth, forever back-and-forth," but Mom had played in college and insisted they buy season tickets and go to every home match. So he still buys the tickets, goes to the matches, and watches away games on the tube. Often he'll start the dishwasher just before the game, because the sound of the swishing water coming from the kitchen lets him imagine she's in there, whipping up some chocolate-chip cookies or angelfood cake, like she did every Sunday for the sixty-two years they were married. At half-time, or seventh-inning stretch, or whatever the hell it is in soccer, he'll go into the kitchen and retrieve whatever dessert he's baked up the day before, just like he's mom. He still goes to church because of her.

Buoyed by my newfound freedom as a retiree, and feeling especially benevolent after being able to make my child support payment on time, I decide to show up at my dad's house as if nothing had gone sour between us.

When I park at the curb behind his perfectly maintained twenty-five-year-old Sedan DeVille he doesn't look up from watering his perfectly maintained lawn. I hope it's because he's not wearing his hearing-aids, but I know better. He would be caught without his weekend-only cargo shorts, and the boxer shorts beneath them, before he'd be caught without his hearing aids. He's still pissed. *Tough shit, daddy.*

I open the back door to my new Prius - I used the old man's name to wangle the saleswoman down to five-hundred dollars over dealer invoice - and pull out a classic Callaway "Big Bertha"

titanium driver I bought for the old man. He's been drooling over that driver ever since he saw Tiger Woods tee-off with one on the first hole at the 2004 U.S. Open. In person. It was after getting Tiger's autograph on his program that my father stopped calling black folk "the coloreds."

I pull a tee and a virgin white golf ball out of my pocket. I tee up the ball and set up to drive it into the park across the street. There are a couple of groups gathered around picnic tables over by the small lake, but they're at least two-hundred yards away. I've never driven a golf ball more than two-hundred feet. Unfortunately, the one time I drove one that far was while I was drunk and at a miniature golf course.

I'm into my backswing, facing away from my dad, and I feel him grab the shaft of the club. I turn and he's grinning the grin that has sold a billion dollars worth of life insurance. He shoulders me aside and pulls the driver from my hands. His stance and backswing are as good as ten thousand hours at the Interbay driving range have made them. He rockets the ball in a straight, low arc and it bounces between the two picnicking groups and splashes into the lake. I can see hand gestures and hear muffled yelling from a few of the picnickers.

My father turns to face me, holds the golf club in front of him and lets it fall onto the lawn, like a golfer's mic drop. Then he grabs me and pulls me close. I can smell beer and tobacco, probably one of his contraband Cuban cigars. I can feel the dampness on his cheeks. It could be sweat, it could be backspray from the garden hose. Knowing my dad, most likely it's tears.

"You're an asshole," he says into my neck, then pulls me closer. "But you're my asshole."

I follow him into the house.

"Can I get you a beer?" he asks. I haven't told him about the near-DUI or the court-imposed condition that I refrain from consuming alcohol during my year-long probationary period. I may have neglected to mention that escaping the DUI conviction was not only because of the evidentiary problem for the prosecutor. It was the result of some nifty plea-bargaining by Danny Morelli. If I go for a year with no further law violations, even the reckless driving charge will be dismissed. I swear, that kid is looking and acting more like his dear old daddy every day.

"No, thanks, dad," I say. "I'm trying to lose a few pounds and, anyway, I probably could use a break from alcohol. Last week I filled up two recyclable bins with beer and wine bottles. Embarrassing." I knew this would throw him for a few minutes, a rip in the fabric of habit that keeps him connected to Mom. But

I'm not going to violate the conditions of my deal with the prosecutor just to feed his addiction to ritual.

"C'mon," I say, "We're missing the first inning."

I feel about baseball the way dad feels about soccer: Use a pair of pliers to peel off my toenails, one-by-one, just don't make me watch batters and pitchers play out their elaborate choreography of spitting and pants-hiking and cap-adjusting, before they step off the rubber or out of the batter's box in order to force another take of the whole damn charade, all a prelude to a millisecond of pitch and swing, usually resulting in a whiff of the bat connecting with nothing but air or a foul ball or a weak grounder or another non-event. On the dozen occasions during a tedious game when something that matters happens, it's in service to a final score for one of nearly a hundred-sixty games, any one of which is barely as meaningful as another day at the office. I can't believe I used to care about any of this.

But, I do care about my dad and I hold the door open for him so he can shuffle in and get the proceedings underway. I help him by slicing up the potatoes and shucking the corn, while he carefully dips each piece of chicken in some kind of egg mix and coats it in flour, just like Mom taught him.

After the chicken is crackling in the fry pan, he inspects the ears of corn I have de-nuded, looking for worms he suspects I am too lazy or squeamish to remove, then takes over with the potatoes. Lord knows I can't be trusted to get them cooked and mashed without lumps or too much milk or butter or salt.

It took him twenty-five years of apprenticing under Mom before she ever let him cook a Sunday dinner solo, one Sunday when she was nursing a bum arm. She tried for half-an-hour with a single arm, but even my Mom had to surrender to the laws of gravity, after Sweetie, our pitbull/dachsund mix, beat her to retrieving one of the coveted thigh pieces that fell on the kitchen floor.

(In case you're wondering, I was present when Sweetie was conceived. Her mother, Zsa Zsa, our neighbor's purebred pitbull, was taken advantage of by our Dachsund, Edsel, in a feat of bold seduction and acrobatics that still inspires me.)

After a couple of yawning innings, Dad startles me by breaking the manly silence that is our usual unspoken father-son code.

"When are you coming back to work?" he asks.

This bolt of lightning from left field, pun intended, strikes me right in the throat, which immediately constricts around a chunk of drumstick and has me gasping for air.



A pint of water and two-dozen vigorous strokes to my back, by my surprisingly vigorous old man, and I am able to croak out a safe-for-work version of "what the holy fuck did you just say?"

"I'm ready to let bygones-be-bygones, Blue," he says. He waits a couple of beats and adds, "If you are."

"Geez, Dad," I say. "I'm shocked. That's really out of left field, pun intended." He grins and pats me on the knee. We're sitting on the couch, together, but with a carefully considered eighteen inches between our bodies.

"That's a good one, son," he says. "I'm serious. When are you coming back to work?"

I clear my throat of remaining drumstick and lean back on the couch, my hands and fingers interlocked behind my head. This is my contemplative posture and I want him to know I've been contemplating what I'm about to tell him for awhile.

"Dad," I say, "I'm thinking about going back to school and getting a degree in Psychology."

"What the fuck for?" he asks.

It's only the second time I can remember him using that word. The first time was when my sister, Janine, announced she was considering moving in with Anthony "HotRod" Genova, Junior, the neighborhood delinquent, because she thought she was pregnant with his child. It turns out she wasn't, and we later learned that Anthony was shooting blanks, anyway, and there was never going to be a HotRod Genova, III.

This was shared with us by Anthony, "HotRod", Senior, when he stopped by to invite us to his boy's campaign kickoff event. Anthony was running for precinct chairman, as a Democrat. I remember my dad told a rare lie to avoid the awkwardness of pointing out that, as a Goldwater Republican, he viewed Democrats much as he viewed Sweetie's turds when he stepped in them while trimming the edges of the lawn with a level and a carpenter's square.

The TV suddenly gives off a roaring sound, but Dad doesn't even look over at the screen. I do, but it turns out it's all about the catcher snagging a high foul tip. The earth doesn't even tremble noticeably on its axis.

"I don't know, Dad," I say. "It's something I've always wanted to do. If you remember, I wanted to major in Psychology when I was at the U-Dub (University of Washington, for you out-of-towners) but you threatened to cut off my college allowance."

"Damn right I did," he says. "The world doesn't need any more head-shrinkers getting a hundred bucks an hour to put

people on couches and fill their heads full of more excuses for being dumbasses."

"I guess I take issue with that statement, Dad," I say. "In case you haven't noticed, mental health is a big issue now that we're in the twenty-first century and you can run for president and have a therapist. No, wait. I guess you still can't. But the rest of us can. It's not that different from being a minister," I tell him.

I say this even though I know it took him thirty years to concede that Reverend Frederickson, who became one of my dad's closest golfing buddies, wasn't a flake. It helped that he was a scratch golfer who won the Seattle Pro-Am a few years after he came to Green Lake Lutheran.

Then my dad blows my everloving mind.

"You could come back to work and use that seventy-five thousand you conned me out of to pay your tuition," he says. "I call that win-win."

I turn my head and stare at him. My mouth was probably a little open. His eyes are dancing and look to be brimming with more saltwater. He's only had one beer, so I know it's not the alcohol talking. Nevertheless, I can hardly believe it's *him* talking.

I reach over and take him into my arms. He feels skinnier than his work shirt makes him look. He pulls away a bit, then leans in and plants a soft smooch on my forehead.

"I thought about it," he murmurs. "You were just trying to do a good thing for that girl."

*Whatever, I think. I do know it feels good to be smooched by your skinny old man. If only Jeebus could have had you for a dad. Maybe he'd still be pranking cops and making old ladies fill their diapers. The world would be a better place.*

## 9.

It's only our second supervised visitation session and Lena has already tired of our routine. I think she was tired of it before it was a routine.

First I ask her about school. It turns out Jasper Fox would rather play hopscotch with Kelly Martin than with her, but he picks his nose and then sticks his finger in his mouth, so she's glad he's moved on. It was starting to get too serious, anyway. She's getting "A"s on her homework, which is a good thing, but I have to take a deep breath when she explains that Roberto helped her to "finally understand fractions."

As opposed to her daddy who had to google *numerator* and *denominator* and only confused her when he tried to explain their function using a banana and a table knife. It seemed so brilliant at the time. If you think of the knife as the numerator which *divides* the banana, the denominator, into *halves*. That sort of thing. It did please me when she described how she defended me when Roberto attempted to clarify the confusion I had created. He introduced her to some sort of computer app that quickly had her multiplying two fractions together in ways I can still only daydream about. With great patience she helped me download the app to my iPhone.

In fairness, it turns out Roberto spent a few years as an elementary school teacher before he found his niche in cuckoldery.

The school report is followed by assembling the same jigsaw puzzle we assembled last time. I try to talk her into a reprise of *Green Eggs and Ham* on the prehistoric video cassette player and tiny TV, but she informs me that she's outgrown Dr. Seuss.

We're now all of fifteen minutes into our two-hour session. I know I should have been better prepared, but I'm new at supervised visitation. I just want to grab my daughter and sneak out the door the next time Jasmine goes down the hall to refill our coffee cups.

Speaking of whom, I leave Lena searching for Youtubes of Justin Bieber on my iPhone while I approach Jasmine's desk, where she is apparently using her cellphone to text a play-by-play of her lunchtime visit to a nearby vegan eatery. She's doing that dictation thing, speaking the words out loud, rather than using her thumbs to type. I hope she's got auto-correct turned off, because if I said ". . . and they've got those faux hot links . . ." into my phone, it would auto-correct to *four cuff links* and I would just have to use my thumbs, anyway.

"Say, Jasmine," I say, "is there any chance the three of us could take our phones out to that park across the street so Lena could get some exercise while you and I get busy catching up on Facebook and seeing who liked our Instagram posts?"

She giggles at me. She has a great giggle for a jailer. "I think that could be arranged," she says. "What do you think, Lena?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" Lena squeals and comes over to give Jasmine a hug. "But my mommy makes Roberto leave his phone at home when we go to the park. She tells him to *leave that fucking thing on the counter if you want to come with us.*"

I make a mental note to ask my attorney, Danny, if using that sort of language might be grounds for declaring Trish an

unfit parent. I'm pretty sure he'll say something along the lines of *fuck, no*, but it should count for something.

"Lena," Jasmine says, "you know we only use our good words in here, right?"

"But I was just telling you what my mom says," Lena replies.

"Well," Jasmine says, "I'll have to have a word with your mom next time I see her."

Now we're talking.

It's a startlingly gorgeous day, for Seattle, and as we cross the street to the park I wonder if this is what prisoners feel like when they get out of their cells for a half-hour of whatever prisoners might be getting out of their cells for on a day like today.

There's no one else in the park, and Lena runs off to take her pick of swings and slides and monkey bars (do they still call them *monkey bars*?) while Jasmine and I sit down at a picnic table and wonder why we let Lena persuade us to leave our phones back in the building.

I know it's politically incorrect for me to notice, but I notice that Jasmine looks like an ad from Nordstrom's Summer Catalog (those objectifying dastards!) She's wearing a different pair of those second-skin leggings, a shade of green this time, with a peach halter-top made out of some material that clings to her feminine charms like they were specifically designed to cling to them. But, you have to trust me on this, I'm not objectifying her charms in any way. I'm sure the designers who created her clothing weren't, either. That they've turned her into a stunning object was simply an accidental side-effect of sewing some random pieces of fabric together. Not to mention I'm surprised social workers are allowed to look this stunning.

"Jasmine," I say, "I hope you'll look past the inherent male objectification, but I must say you look stunning this morning."

"Well," she replies, "I hope you'll sense the outrage hidden in my words when I say, 'Thank You' for that observation. And, please don't take it the wrong way if I point out that a pink and black Hawaiian shirt is *exactly* what I would have paired with those bib overalls."

"These old things?" I say. "I just like them for all the pockets."

I reach into one of the pockets and find not one, but *two* tootsie pops. Perfect. I had planned on sharing them with Lena a couple of days ago, but must have gotten sidetracked.

I hold the tootsie pops up for Jasmine to see.

"Care for a tootsie pop?" I ask her.

"Don't mind if I do," she says. I hold them out for her to choose. She takes the chocolate one. Oh, well. I can live with grape.

"Let me ask you," I say, removing my *The Dude Abides* baseball cap. "If I shaved my head, do you think I'd look like Kojack?"

"You'd look *exactly* like Kojack," she says, "but, personally, I like dudes with a little hair, even a little longish, like yours. Maybe it's because of my hippy past. I was at Woodstock, you know."

*Woodstock!* I am still recovering from the electric jolt I took to my first *chakra* at hearing her tell me she liked dudes with hair like mine. Now this? Something cosmic is afoot.

"Yeah," she says, "I was sitting on the ground fifty feet from the stage when Janis Joplin did *Ball and Chain*. For the next ten years after that I wanted to be her."

"Sorry for the fact check, but wasn't Woodstock in '69? I know for a fact you would have been what, ten years old? I was right in front of the stage, too. I don't remember any ten-year-olds."

"Ten going on eighteen," she says. "Why do I think you're making that up? Anyway, I used to go to fifth grade with makeup on. My mom died when I was six and my dad didn't seem to notice when I started wearing lipstick and eye shadow. A few years later he didn't notice when I didn't come home at night. Or else he didn't care."

"Wow," I say. "That's pretty tough. But you seem to have survived it quite well, if you don't mind my saying. And, I'm not making anything up."

"That's sweet," she says, "but there was some doubt about surviving when I was in my twenties and early thirties. I grew up in Chicago and in my neighborhood the cops and social workers were all about getting trouble makers off the streets and into detention. During one of my last stays in Cook County Juvy, the one that lasted almost a year, I promised myself that when I got out I would get my shit together and become a different kind of social worker. Sometimes I wonder if I succeeded, but I will keep trying until they force me to retire."

"From what I've seen," I say, "and I'm not just saying this to score points, you've more than kept that promise to your juvenile delinquent self."

It could be my imagination, but I immediately regret using the phrase *score points*. It seems to draw a frown, and she looks away from me. I don't know if this is a reaction from assuming I

meant *score points* in a flirtatious way or in a manipulative way hoping she'll take my side the next time I'm in court with Danny, trying to get more unsupervised visitation with Lena.

Either way, I don't like the look of that frown.

"You better check on Lena," she says, "and we'd better head back in five minutes or so, Mr. Levine."

Wow. In fifteen seconds we went from my being about to see if she'd be interested in getting coffee with me one day to *Mr. Levine*. I'm sure she gets hit on all the time by predatory fathers like me. I understand completely.

When I leave the building to take Lena back to her mother and loserface Robberberto, I turn to her and say, "Ms. Spenser, I expected this experience to be a lot less enjoyable than it's turned out to be. I hope nothing I said this morning was misunderstood. I really appreciate what you're doing for Lena and me." I meant it, too.

"Blue," she says, "you're a good dad. Keep up the good work and I'll see the two of you in a couple of weeks." She turns and walks down the hallway toward her office. I watch her go and do my best not to objectify.

## 10.

Lena wants a puppy, but Trish is not having any of it. She and Robberberto love to run off to the coast, or take the train to a craft beer pub crawl in Portland, or fly off to one of R's conventions. I may not have mentioned that Robberberto is a Life Coach with two published books, and is often called upon to serve on the faculty of weekend events with titles like *Your LifeScript: The Re-Write* or *YourLife.com: How To To Make Your Personal Brand Go Viral*. A puppy would curtail these high-flying interludes.

Their trysts almost always exclude Lena, so sometimes I get an extra weekend with her. *Bada bing, bada boom*. A highlight scene in my own LifeScript.

Like this weekend. They are off to Taos for a conference called *Ayahuasca: Viña del Espíritu*. I've heard these *ayahuasca* drug triptouts are often accompanied by vomiting. Couldn't happen to a nicer pair of adulterers.

My new therapist, Hank, says I need to stop thinking of them as *adulterers*, but Hank was obviously raised by sexually permissive bonobos and I discount this advice, though I have been pleasantly surprised by how much this forty-five-year-old kid knows about other things. For example, it was Hank who suggested Lena might like to have a puppy.

I didn't bother to tell him that Trish wouldn't permit it. I was prepared to go out the same day he mentioned it and pick one up, to secure my advantage in the Best Parent Competition, but Hank reminded me that Lena might want to be included in the selection process. Had he known that getting the puppy would most likely put a nasty little twist in Trish's underwear, he probably wouldn't have recommended it.

So, here we are at Happy Valley Animal Rescue. HVAR is an old dairy farm near a once sleepy little burg called Duvall, east of Seattle. The township itself has been overrun with overpaid Microsoft riff-raff, but there are still some areas outside of town where old Duvall lives on.

Lena is awash in dopamine and oxytocin. The dopamine is making her wildly euphoric and the oxytocin is causing her to bond with every single fur bundle we've met thus far.

After nearly an hour-and-a-half, Trish finally announces that she's narrowed the field to two finalists.

"Daddy," she says, "take this one for a minute while I go get the other one."

She hands me a squirming little chub she's already named "Goldie", because she was informed by Misha, the sweet teenage staffer, that the pup is a golden retriever mix.

While Goldie piddles down the front of my shirt, I exchange pleasantries with Misha.

"So, you volunteer here?" I ask her.

"Yes," Misha says. "I started a few months ago when I had to do community service for shoplifting. When my case was finally over, I decided to keep doing this. It's so much fun. You wouldn't believe it."

I silently grant a couple of *kudos* to the King County Juvenile Services department. In my youth they would have popped little Misha in the slammer for two weeks, so she could get to know some of the more experienced offenders and gotten some tips on how to steal stuff without getting caught next time.

Lena comes back leading a white German Shepherd who is no puppy. This one is ninety pounds if he or she is a pound.

"That guy is really large for a puppy," I say to Lena.

"Oh, daddy," she giggles. "She is two years old, but I love the way she jumps up on her back legs when she's excited. Watch this."

Lena wriggles around and waves her hands and, sure enough, the dog rears up on her hind legs like a little pony.

"Ah, Lena," says Misha, "you picked a good one."

"Wait," I say before this can become an irreversible situation, "aren't German Shepherds kind of dangerous?"

"No," Misha says, a bit peevishly, "they are not. But, that's irrelevant because Juno is not a German Shepherd. It's a common mistake, but she's some kind of Husky mix, probably some golden in her DNA. The perfect blend of smart and good-natured."

I'm starting to be sold on Juno. At two she's probably past the part of her life where she views shoes as a staple of a proper diet and she's probably learned that humans shit and piss indoors and dogs outdoors, and not vice versa.

I hand Goldie to Misha and kneel down beside Juno. I wrap my arms around her and bury my face in the thick fur of her neck and chest. She turns to me and licks my face before I can move. Her eyes are lit with doggy rapture. Lena kneels on the other side of her and gets her lips licked. She kisses Juno right back on the lips.

It's enough to make me believe in divine intervention.

"Daddy," Lena says, "this is the one. She loves us. She wants us to adopt her. We have to, Daddy."

We do. I'm choking up a little. The dog reminds me of Tippy, our collie when I was growing up in eastern Washington. That dog was the closest friend I had until Jeebus.

"Okay, sweetie," I say, a little quaver betraying me. "What do we have to do, Misha?"

Misha directs us back inside the Sanctuary office.

"Just talk to Jasmine when she gets back from walking Oliver," Misha says.

My life seems to be filling up with Jasmines. Lena instinctively darts behind me when a huge dog and its walker come strutting through the door and I am face-to-face with our social worker. So there's just one Jasmine. So far.

"Holy crap," I say, "you work here, too?" I know that the best ones among us are often underpaid, as in high school teachers and childcare professionals and, apparently, social workers, but this is ridiculous.

"Oh, no, Blue," she says. (*No more Mr. Levine!*) "I'm a volunteer here. Are you and Lena adopting a dog? How wonderful!"

Lena is now floating a foot off the ground in a shimmering love bubble. She is surrounded by a tail-waving dog who is already showing signs of idolizing her, her adoring step-daddy who is reaching for his wallet, and her new court-assigned nanny whom she must sense is looking like an object being idolized by her step-daddy. It's not the classic form, being (mostly) innocent of libidinous overtones, but we're clearly dealing with the *menage* from which *menage-a-trois* come forth.

Thankfully I invited Mr. Plastic along and I am able to find him among the business cards, sticky notes, and other



detritus in my wallet. Thankfully he has enough remaining purchasing power to advance me *two-hundred dollars* to close the adoption deal. I hadn't expected that. In my childhood, we liberated several creatures from the impound cages of the county sheriff's office and never paid more than a nominal license fee.

I have never seen Lena happier.

## 11.

Our first night with Juno in the house was unexpectedly placid. She flopped down on the large pad we found at Costco and knew to go stand by the door when she had business outside. I knew how to use a plastic bag as a glove to retrieve her deposits on the neighbor's lawn and how to invert the bag, without touching the little pile, so that the smelly thing passed, as if by magic, from the outside of the bag to the inside. The neighbor came out briefly to observe, but I waved cheerfully and she seemed satisfied that I was serious about my retrieval duties.

On Juno's third day in her new "forever home," as Misha had called it, Juno was happy to jump into the passenger's seat and accompany me to our visitation with Lena and Jasmine.

"I have an idea," I say, as Juno drags me through the doorway, "let's go to the park and take the path around the lake."

Jasmine gets a threatening grimace on her face, but Lena and Juno are two solid votes for my idea and Jasmine elects not to use her court-issued veto.

"Fine," she says, "but we have to get back in time for you to do your homework."

"Roberto helped me do it," Lena says, "he's really smart. My mommy says he can pull more smarts out of his butt than my daddy has in his entire head, but I don't think that's true, is it daddy?"

Jasmine shouldn't be laughing at this, but I know the coughing spell that suddenly overwhelms her is a cover-up. She has to hit her water bottle and wipe her eyes with a little lacey handkerchief before she can speak.

"Your mommy is wrong about that, Lena," she says. "Your daddy is one of the smartest guys who come here. And she shouldn't be talking about her *butt* in front of you."

As compliments go, this is at best a "2" on a scale of "1" to "10." Most of the guys who come here are on probation for abusing methamphetamines or committing domestic violence.

Whatever. She used the word *smartest* in the same sentence as *your daddy*, and I'll take it.

"She didn't say *butt*, Jasmine," Lena says. "She said *ass*. I changed it to *butt* so you wouldn't get mad."

"Sweetie, when have I ever been mad at you?" Jasmine says.

"Never," Lena says. "But my mommy gets mad at me sometimes and I hate it. I don't want you to get mad at me, too."

I reach down and scoop her into my arms. She's an armload, and I rarely pick her up anymore, but this is exception territory. I hug her so tightly she has to squirm so I'll relax my grip on her.

Later, after we walk Juno, (during which Jasmine and I exchange fewer than a dozen sentences), when I close the door to the room behind me and walk Juno to the car, I am reminded:

*Speaking of asses, you may be the biggest bunghole in the cosmos. What kind of Loser gets drunk and rear-ends a parked car with his little girl onboard?"*

\* \* \* \* \*

Houston, we have a problem. Heathcliff, at Redemption Rehab, has summoned me in for a random pee test in an hour. The problem is that last night, by accident, I stumbled upon the bottle of Yukon Jack I put in my backpack last summer when my friend, Lawrence, talked me into a day hike to Snoqualmie Falls.

Ordinarily I would rather have my teeth cleaned than go on a day hike. The teeth-cleaning is unpleasant, but it only lasts an hour. The *day* part of *day hike* is what is obnoxious. Putting one foot in front of another while scrambling over roots and random rocks, for *miles* sometimes, hard scrambling up the side of some damn mountain or another for *hours*, just so you can see something you could see on your iPhone screen while you finish off a pizza delivered *right to your front door*, makes zero sense to me.

But Lawrence promised it would only take a couple of hours and we could stop by Theo's Ale House and Pizza Porch, in funky little Snoqualmie, east of Seattle, after our trek.

Now, I have found that facing looming boredom with a little pre-emptive *spiritual practice*, where the spirits come in a bottle, can be helpful in getting through the one-foot-in-front-of-another drill with a certain *joie de vivre*.

As it turned out, the Falls were spectacular. Even the walk to the Falls on the trail was stimulating, as Lawrence and I spent the entire time debating how long Angelina Jolie would stay married to Brad Pitt. (Turns out I was right.) Occasionally

Lawrence would point out a huge tree or a bird or some display of *flora* that was actually pretty cool. He knew the scientific names for everything we saw, along with little bios, which sounds mind-numbing but was surprisingly interesting. *Who knew?* It kind of sneaked up on me.

Fortunately it was also a mildly cool April day and I didn't get thirsty, since the canister that I passed off as my water bottle was full of Yukon Jack. The *flora* and *fauna* created enough *joie de vivre* that I figured I could save the bottled spirits for priming the pump a few minutes before we hit Theo's.

It was that self-same water bottle that I discovered when I looked for my backpack yesterday. I had been thinking about inviting Jasmine on the same day hike - with Lena, of course - and one thing led to another. More specifically it led to my finishing off the Yukon Jack while I re-did my Facebook page. (For some reason I had neglected to remove Trish from the *Family and Relationships* section and it was about damn time to fix it.) I don't remember what else I did on my Facebook page.

Which brings us back to the random pee test I have to take in less than an hour. I google *How To Pass a Random Drug Test* and am surprised to learn that you can order packets of powdered urine and that substituting clean urine for your own piss is the most successful method on short notice. But even Amazon can't deliver powdered urine in less than thirty minutes and I don't know where one purchases them. Safeway? Rite Aid?

I think I'll have to go with dilution or adulteration. I settle for drinking as much water as possible, fill an empty plastic two liter bottle, and head for Redemption Rehab.

I'm already in extreme bladder distress when I pull into the parking lot. I wonder if there's a place I can pee before I go in and whether peeing before I give an official sample will negate the dilution effect.

It's too late. Heathcliff is reporting for duty at the same time I arrive and has parked next to me. I am going to have to insist on giving a sample right away or he'll be squeezing bodily fluid from the front of my Dockers.

"Hey, Heathcliff," I say, "I need to pee in a bottle like five minutes ago or you'll be squeezing bodily fluid from the front of my Dockers." I've found that if you just say what you're thinking, without a lot of unnecessary filtering, it saves time and adds the *pizazz* to your small talk that is missing from so much small talk. When people say *he or she has no filter* they mistakenly assume there is general accord that this is a character flaw. They are mistaken. *They* are often mistaken. I consider running my theory past Heathcliff, since he

does have an advanced degree in the social sciences, but he seems a bit edgy.

"I suspect you've been chugging water all morning in order to give a dilute sample," he says, "but it could just be my own experience as a dope fiend talking."

"No," I say, "I've just been unusually thirsty."

"Yeah," he says, "too much alcohol will do that to you."

"That's uncalled for, Heathcliff," I say. "I think you're projecting. A man with an advanced degree in the social sciences should be aware of the danger of projecting."

I didn't help my side of the argument when I overfilled the specimen bottle a few minutes later, with Heathcliff looking on.

"This is what I'm talking about, Levine," he says. "What I'm seeing here is typical of someone who has been loading up with water in order to give a dilute urine sample. You need to understand that if the lab sends the sample back as *dilute*, I will mark it up as a violation and you'll be left with writing postcards to your daughter. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, your majesty," I say, and take a deep bow.

He makes an obscene gesture and waves me away. The man has no sense of humor.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days later I get a call from Heathcliff. "Levine," he says, "I need your ass in front of me in twenty-five minutes."

I don't bother to share my image of bringing *just* my ass to place on his desk in front of him. He seems to be in the same foul mood he was exhibiting two days earlier.

Twenty minutes later I place my ass carefully on a chair in front of Heathcliff's desk and give him my brightest smile. It's sincere - I've just finished reading a series of texts from Lena and am feeling smiley - but he is plainly peeved and feeling frowny.

"Levine," he barks, "tell me the name of your lawyer again."

"Sure," I say, and smile again, "Danny Morelli."

"Could he be related to Anthony Morelli?" Heathcliff asks.

"You mean Jeebus Morelli?" I ask back. What the hell?

"I don't know what his goofy nickname might be," Heathcliff says, "I just know there appears to be an *Anthony Morelli* working for MediMetrics, the company who does our urine sample analyses. This is fishy. If he's related to your damn lawyer there's a problem. Because he signed a report giving you a clean result, and that's not consistent with your behavior. Wait

a second, let me go online and see if MediMetrics has a website." He taps keys for a few seconds then lights up the room with a beatific grin. *Finally*. Proof the guy is human. He spins his laptop around so I can see the screen.

*Holy crap-in-a-waffle-cone!* Heathcliff has clicked on MediMetrics' *About Us* page and there, looking back at me, is a thumbnail photo of Jeebus, grinning like he just saw that Lisa Marie Jensen was *sans* undergarments at her baptism. I reach to click on the photo, hoping it might lead to a bio, but Heathcliff spins the computer back toward him.

"Don't bother," he says, "he's the only one without a bio. Fishy as hell."

He leans back in his chair and locks eyes with me.

"Levine," he says, "I have no idea what's going on here, but I suspect you just got away with something. Nothing I can do about it *this time*. Like the good Lord said, *Go and sin no more, or I'll have your head on a platter*." He waves me away.

I don't bother to tell him that it was John the Baptist whose head ended up on a platter, at the insistence of the same religious types who had Jesus killed. When Jesus let the hooker off with a warning, after flaming the hypocrites who ratted her out, it was love talking. Mrs. Allenby made that really clear.

## 12.

*I'm dreaming, but I know it's a dream. Wild. I feel better than I've felt in so long, maybe ever. Euphoric, expectant, like something is going to happen and I'm going to love it. I'm so afraid I'm going to wake up and when I think that thought I start to feel the cold flow of dread that is a part of my usual wakeup drill.*

*I see the door to my bedroom swing open, but I'm not even a little afraid. Good. I'm back in this thing, whatever it is. I wait, but nothing happens. Nobody walks through the door. I get up and move toward the door.*

*I pass my dresser and mirror, the same one that used to be in the room I shared with Trish. She let me take it with me because Robberberto didn't like it. I look in the mirror.*

*I'm not even startled when what I see in the mirror is high school graduation day me. I look down and, sure enough, I've got on a pair of Levis and my favorite John Lennon t-shirt, the one with his face and him saying 'you may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one.' Ha. Funny. Trish threw that t-shirt out ages ago. I loved that t-shirt. This is the outfit I wore under my graduation gown. Just like that I see myself wearing the gown in*

the mirror. Ugh. I liked the jeans and t-shirt, better, and ... they're back.

I walk out into the hallway and look into Lena's room. God, that little one is even more angelic when she's asleep. She stirs and I quickly move out of the doorway. I walk into the living room.

I am startled, this time, but not surprised. Of course Jeebus Morelli would be sitting on my couch holding one of my coffee cups to his lips. He holds it out toward me, a toast.

"Hey, big guy," he says. "Grab a cup of coffee and catch me up. Like, why the hell are you living in Mrs. Glendenning's house? Actually, don't bother. I know everything, I've been watching you. Don't just stand there with your mouth hanging open, dipshit. Get a cup of coffee and come talk to the Jeebus."

I go into the kitchen. I may have gone back to my my 1974 self, but everything in the kitchen is the way I left it last night, except for the coffeemaker being on. Jeebus has placed my favorite cup beside it. (How did he know that? I just got that cup two weeks ago, at the Farmer's Market. It has a picture of Jesus and he's saying, "OMG, you guys, THAT'S not what I said.") I pour a half cup (a full cup just gets cold) and go back into the living room.

"What's it like being dead," I ask him. "And, while we're at it, why did you fucking hang yourself? Not cool, Jeebus." I could go into details, how much his kids must miss him, how much I miss him, but I won't.

"Dude," he says, "In case you've overlooked it, I'm not dead. In fact, if I'd known I would end up like this after I croaked myself, I'd have done it sooner. Actually, I take that back. I had to go through hell after I did it, and I mean literal hell. This dark pit, just enough light to see all the fucked up people writhing around and trying to hurt each other, moaning and groaning, cursing . . . it was ferociously horrible. Right after I stepped off the stool and my neck snapped - goddamn that hurt - I went flying through this dark tunnel. Before I got to the end I could already hear screaming and carrying on. I came to a stop on all fours looking down into this pit I'm talking about.

"After a minute of freaking out, these three guys, or whatever the hell they were, come up behind me and grab me. They pull me up and start to shove me into the pit. I start yelling, 'Jesus Holy Christ, please help me. Jesus Holy Christ please help me,' over and over. The three guys are laughing like crazy and I'm fighting them off like crazy, and all of a sudden I'm standing on this wooden platform thing looking out over a big

field full of wildflowers and birds flying around chirping and shit like that.

"I feel somebody come up behind me, again, and I turn around ready to punch whoever it is and it's this dude that looks like one of those felt figures Mrs. Allenby used to put on her flannelboard when she was doing her storytelling.

"Long, dark, wavy hair, a beard and moustache . . . of course! It turns out to be Jesus, or a dead ringer for Jesus. He's grinning like a mofo and he opens his arms and says, 'Come on in for some love, Anthony. Bring it in here.'

"I'm completely wiped out at this point, and I stumble over to him and he practically has to keep me from falling down. I'm crying like a snotnosed baby, getting his nice white robe all skeezy, and we just stand there. It felt like a half-hour. He was kind of rocking me from side-to-side, like I was a big baby, which I was totally feeling like, and he kept saying, 'You're home, kiddo, you're home with me.'"

At this point in the dream Jeebus is starting to cry and I look away, a little embarrassed for him, but he wipes his nose on his sleeve, like he always did, and keeps going.

"After awhile he puts his arm around my waist and walks me on this path for about a mile, it seemed like, jabbering away with me like we were old pals. 'Anthony this, Anthony that - nobody there will call me Jeebus, I suppose it's disrespectful, I don't know, I don't really care - and he tells me that although everyone is disappointed that I took myself out, they understand and all is forgiven.

"We come up on this building that looks like a small hotel. It's fucking gorgeous, like you'd imagine a French Chateau on the Riviera, or something. Inside it's totally cool and it's set up exactly like you'd expect. A reception desk, hallways leading off in several directions, elevators, the whole hotel thing. We go up to the desk and this dude with a shaved head and orange robe, like one of those airport monks, hands me a key. The room number is 23, my favorite number. Jesus grins and says he knew that and they saved that room for me.

"Then he tells me to follow him and we go into this dark room. I start to get a little anxious, and he can tell.

"'Anthony,' he says, 'relax. You like movies, right? This movie we're about to see is all about you.'

"Well, now I figure I'm fucked. Now the horsepuckey will hit the propeller. He must be able to read my mind, because he laughs and whacks me on the shoulder.

"'Dude,' he says, 'I've already seen this several times, while we were editing it. It's cool, no worries. No judgment

around here. This is just for your edification. We love you to death, man. Sit back and wait while I grab us some popcorn, and then we'll have some fun.'

"A minute or two later he's back with these huge boxes of popcorn and a couple of Cokes. He sees me eyeing the Coke cans and he says, 'Yeah, they're even up here. We're on them to work toward making this stuff healthier, but it's like trying to push a rope. Oh well.'

"A screen comes down from the ceiling over a stage at the front of the room and the movie starts.

"It was all there: Us playacting Jesus storming the moneychangers at the temple, wrecking the cop car, you lowering me through the roof that time . . . all of it, my entire loser life, right up to when I bit the big one. It was weird, because it's like time didn't exist. How could one movie, that seemed like it was over in ten minutes, cover everything? But it did. It was like my mind slowed everything down, outside of time, so that I saw it all, but when the movie was over I looked at this clock on the wall and no more than ten minutes had passed.

"The clock thing was weird, too. What time zone is a clock in heaven set to? Jesus read my mind, again, and told me it was set Pacific Standard Time, just like I was still there.

"After the movie he asked if I wanted to go get something to eat. I say yes and we walk a couple of blocks to this diner that looks just like Ringo's Diner in Fremont, remember that place? Like stepping back into the '50s when we used to go there.

"There are little mini jukeboxes at each table, and he starts flipping through the selections and pretty soon the Beach Boys come on with 'Good Vibrations.'

"The 'Pet Sounds' album, and 'Good Vibrations' were some of our best work," he says.

"What do you mean?" I ask him. "The Beach Boys were still alive. How is it your best work from up here?"

"For one thing," he says, "'up here' is just plain wrong. It's more like a parallel universe, outside of earth's time and space. I'm just saying that Brian Wilson and those other dudes were channeling some of our best. Mozart had a big piece of it, a lot of that orchestral stuff, some others you wouldn't recognize. Brian said, himself, that it felt like 'something got inside me' on 'Good Vibrations.' Damn straight, something got inside him. Divine inspiration.

"'But, I'm going off the rails here,' he says. 'I really want to talk about your plans, Anthony.'"



"My plans?" I say. "My plan was to fucking obliterate myself, pardon my French. Like I never existed. I felt like I was sucking up air that somebody worth a shit should be using. I couldn't see my own kids for more than a couple days a month, my ex-wife made me feel like I'd ruined her life, kept her from living her dream of marrying somebody who could do something besides re-build car engines and dream up dumbass pranks. None of the people who depended on me to do my job knew how much I hated being in charge of a damn auto parts warehouse. I didn't see any of it getting any better and I figured that, long term, Janny and Danny would get over me and Julieann could finally be able get past the mistake she made marrying me."

"The real problem was you never got over how your parents treated you, Anthony, especially your dad,' he says. 'He convinced you that a piece of deviant DNA like you should consider yourself lucky you were allowed to sleep with your dog. Anyway, I'm not talking about your successful plan to jump the line and get here before your time, I'm talking about your plan starting right now.'"

"Dude," I say, "I don't even really know where I am. Here's a plan: figure out where I am and why I'm about to have a burger and fries with Jesus."

"That would be a veggie burger and fries, my friend,' he says, 'we don't eat the flesh of our animal friends here,' he says. 'That whole eating animals thing was a total misunderstanding and it's taken us eons of earth years to get at least a few people back on board with the Garden of Eden Diet which was fruits and vegetables, just like your mama said.'

"You're back home where you were before you begged us to send you back to earth for another of your adventures in quirkitude. Next time you want to incarnate as the class clown we're going to make you swear under oath you won't leave work early. And hence my question about your immediate plans. It's going to be at least a couple of millenia before you're ready for another reincarnation. What was that last one, anyway. Number 5,607 as I recall, right? Never mind, who's counting, right?"

"We've got a job for you, Anthony. You owe us one.'

"He reaches inside his cloak and pulls out a little thumb drive. He slides it across the table.

"When you go back to your room,' he says, 'you'll find a laptop computer. State of the art, by the way. Steve Jobs is on our tech committee and he got us a sweet deal on a bunch of Apple MacBook Airs. I love those things. Anyway, fire it up and

take a look at that thumb drive. You'll recognize your old pal, Melvin Blumann, III. It's his personnel file.'

"You mean Blue?" I ask.

"'Whatever,' he says. "What is with you people and nicknames? 'Blue?' What the hell kind of name is that? And, don't get me started on 'Jeebus.' What were you thinking? Anyway, the team of angels and guides and other miscellaneous helpers looking after 'Blue' are putting in a buttload of overtime and they still can't keep up. I figure if you could be sort of a consultant to them, maybe you'll bring something new to the table and the bunch of you can get this guy turned around. He manages to screw up everything we try to make happen for him. Anyhoo, see what you can do. They'll text you on that iPhone you'll find with the computer. You'll see that the last four digits of your phone number are 1111. We know how you feel about 1111. Enjoy your veggie burger when it finally gets here. We need to do a training on customer service around here.'"

"Then he gets up and just vanishes. 'Poof!' Gone."

And, just like that I wake up because my damn iPhone alarm is going off and I used Jimi Hendrix' *Star Spangled Banner* as the ringtone. I'm glad I have a habit of getting up about three hours earlier than I need to. It's going to take all three of those hours to process this damn dream.