

**Reverend Mike  
and His  
Light Being  
Love Posse**

*a novel by*

**Steve Gillard**



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*Rev. Lovejoy:* We'll send you someplace safe  
till the heat dies down.

*(Later, in the cockpit of a plane getting ready to fly ...)*

*Homer:* Great, but why am I on a plane?

*Rev. Lovejoy:* Homer, how would you like to be a  
missionary in the South Pacific?

*Homer:* Wait! I'm no missionary! I don't even believe  
in Jeebus. Let me out!

*Pilot:* Sorry, no can do.

*(Homer pounds on the fuselage door ...)*

*Homer:* Save me, Jeebus!

“The Simpsons” (*Season 11, Episode 15*)

\* \* \* \* \*

*A sense of humor, properly developed, is superior to any  
religion so far devised.*

Tom Robbins - *Jitterbug Perfume*

**posse**

3. *Slang.*

A group of friends or associates:

*hanging out with your posse*

ORIGIN OF POSSE

... from Medieval Latin *posse* “power, force,” noun  
use of Latin infinitive: “to be able, have power,”  
contraction of *potis* “able + esse ‘to be’”; see potent.

*Dictionary.com*

## Prelude

Mike Ballman opened his laptop, brought up his browser search page, and typed in *easiest way to commit suicide*.

He scrolled quickly past the scary ones - *firearms, cutting or piercing with a sharp object, hanging, jumping from high places, or stepping in front of a train or other vehicle*.

What kind of moron steps in front of a train when you can, apparently, use an inert gas? *Suicide by helium inhalation has become increasingly common in the last few decades in Europe and the U.S. because it produces a quick and painless death*.

Now we're talking. This was much more aligned with his *path of least resistance, easy way out, comfort at any cost* approach to adult life.

Yes, this approach had led to being seventy without once traveling outside the state of Washington (too much trouble), and his short list of possessions did not include a car with reliable brakes (he only had to drive six blocks to work), or a house with a decent paint job (that's the landlord's problem.)

Nor had any woman agreed to share his one-bedroom, no-yard (no lawn to mow!) cabin in the forty-two years he'd lived there, at the end of a *cul-de-sac* just off the main highway through Port Halcyon, a small village on Washington's Olympic Peninsula that was being slowly gentrified by escaped Californians.

He knew his landlord would accept the first offer she received over three-hundred thousand, and he'd be looking at a two-month notice to fill cardboard boxes with his random shit, load them into his '87 Toyota Corolla, and get his ass on the road to the nearest low-rent apartment in Port Townsend, a few miles north.

\* \* \* \* \*

"It's to fill balloons for my friend's retirement party," he told the hairy young dude at All-Star Equipment Rentals. Did high school girls actually go for guys with braided beards and top knots?

"I didn't know Mickey D's had a retirement plan," the kid chortled. "Isn't that where I've seen you?"

He was the oldest counter-person at the McDonald's in Port Halcyon by at least twenty years. He'd been there for forty, since the place opened in eighty-three.

"My friend doesn't work there," he choked back the *asswipe* he wanted to add, but he needed that helium cylinder.

On the drive back to his cabin he imagined calling that new Suicide Hotline - 988 - and asking for help in the Donald Duck voice

he remembered from the time he and his buddy, Jangles, had taken hits off a similar helium balloon inflater and laughed themselves berserk improvising imaginary phone calls from a kid asking a girl out for his first date, or some loser calling the cops to report his neighbor's backyard naked lawn party.

Now all he needed, according to what he'd read in an article called *Toxicological analysis after asphyxial suicide with helium and a plastic bag*, was a garbage bag and a polypropylene tube.

A quick stop at Hank's Hardware and he was in business.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first thing he noticed, as he floated somewhere near the ceiling above his body, was how wrinkled his neck was. His face was still covered by the black plastic of the garbage bag, but he didn't have time to think about how he was looking at his neck from eight feet overhead, because he floated through the ceiling and into a blackness that felt thick enough to swim in.

Which would have been interesting, except he didn't have a body. So how was he seeing and feeling anything, let alone swimming? And why wasn't he terrified? He hadn't felt this good since the Class of '71 Senior Sneak when Janie Cavanaugh let him explore the landscape under her *Some Days It's Just Not Worth Chewing Through the Restraints* t-shirt.

Before he could finish the highlight reel of that adventure, he felt himself - whatever he was - being propelled forward at increasing speed, until he was thrust out of the darkness into a warm inferno of blazing white luminescence that should have blinded him, but only hyped his *joie de vivre* into overdrive. This was better than the magic mushrooms the dishwasher kid had given him at Mickey D's.

And just like that he had a body. But this one wasn't wrinkled and didn't need clothes. There was nothing to hide. He moved his arms and fingers, if that's what they were. They looked like they were made of the same light he was standing in, only more solid.

He wondered if he had a butt-crack. He certainly didn't have a dingus, which was mildly disappointing. He wondered what a dingus made of light would look like. Or feel like. As soon as reached around to examine his netherlands, he was seeing himself from behind. No butt-crack.

Without warning, out of nowhere, two Beings made of the same light appeared in front of him. He couldn't make out any facial features, they were a little blurry, but he knew these two! He'd known them forever.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two minutes later, or two centuries - elapsed time seemed irrelevant here - he was seated between his two light buddies in the front row of a theater. He'd been here before. Many times. He remembered craning his neck then, too. Maybe they should move back a few rows. They had the place to themselves.

Just like he remembered, they were here to watch a movie. Houselights went down and the screen lit up. He couldn't remember if Light Beings could eat popcorn.

There was no title or other intro, just a scene of his mom clutching his tiny pink self to her breast, her cheek resting atop his baby head. His eyes filled as he felt her love.

In fact, the theater was awash in what he could only call, without trying to wax poetic, Love, with a capital "L." He remembered why.

He knew the movie playing on the screen was *This Was Your Life, Mike Ballman*, and he knew the subtitle should be, *The Good, the Bad, and You May Want to Fast Forward Past The Next Bit*.

He knew the Love he was feeling was meant to extinguish any thought that had the taint of guilt or shame or imagined painful consequence, sentiments not allowed in The Light.

"We adore you, Mike," he felt his companions say, though say was hardly adequate to describe the instant, wordless awareness that transcended any definition of *speaking*. "Everyone, including The Maker, thinks you're rocking it this time around. Even when you're peeking under t-shirts." Apparently Light Beings can giggle.

Rocking it? Were these two watching the same movie? Serving french fries and cleaning toilets, at seventy, when he'd graduated *summa cum laude* from the University of Washington Law School? It wasn't worth the screen time, unless you were a fan of bad Saturday Night Live sketches.

Like the one where a lawyer misplaces a document, makes up a phony replacement with a forged signature, gets caught, disbarred, bankrupted, and forced to move to a small town in a remote corner of his home state to make sure nobody recognizes him. All before he turned thirty.

And that was the entertaining part of the movie.

His light buddies leaned in from either side and wrapped their glowing arms around his glowing shoulders.

Euphoria rose through him like a flash flood, as they laughed at him.

"My friend of many lifetimes," the one on the right said to him -

again the laughable inadequacy of the word *said* - “you chose this *sketch*, as you call it. Remember?”

No, but there was something about his friend’s insistence that felt like a ridiculous truth.

“You wanted the experience of being an old guy who wakes up as a seventy-year-old, serving Happy Meals to bright-eyed five-year-olds, suddenly stoked with the daydream of spending the next ten years doing something straight out of Jimmy Stewart in *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

“Let’s finish the movie and we’ll talk afterwards. Want some popcorn?”

*It’s a Wonderful Life?* What the actual fuck.

\* \* \* \* \*

After the movie his shiny pals did something that whisked the theater away and now they were sitting in what appeared to be a light-crafted replica of Vincent Van Gogh’s *Café Terrace At Night*. He only recognized it because the owner of the Mickey D’s franchise where he’d spent Act II of his life had hung a print of that painting in the men’s john.

“Yeah,” one of his companions remarked, “we knew you’d like it here.”

“So let’s talk,” the other one said.

“First off, you have to go back. Let’s get that on the table.” Along with the *croissants* and *espresso* that appeared by more light magic. Yum.

“Back? *Shit*,” Mike swore, which brought more giggles.

“But it’s going to be the adventure you wanted,” the Being on his left replied.

The two Beings were slowly morphing into something more recognizably human-ish, even including facial hair and contemporary-looking Hawaiian shirts and khaki slacks. Mike knew, somehow, that it was for his benefit, so he’d feel more comfortable saying *shit* and taking the last *croissant*, as if they were just coffee shop buddies.

“How about we start the adventure right here?” Mike asked them. “Earth sucks. There’s a reason I left that dirt ball and it wasn’t just to drink coffee with you two at Vince’s Coffee Shop. I seem to recall there are some other road trips available in the Cosmos that make Earth look like a boring video game. I’ve been there, done that. A few hundred times, as I recall from that snoozer of a movie we just saw. Not to mention this last time around was the *third* time I spent my adult life behind the counter at some dive. What’s up with that,



anyway?”

“You tell us,” the other Being replied. “You planned it.”

“*Not*,” Mike countered. “This last time around I had it all set up that I’d go to seminary and be a minister.”

“So why’d you sign up for Law School?” the Being asked.

Mike sighed, then buried his face in his propped up palms.

“You saw the movie,” he said. The truth was nearly too ludicrous to believe.

On the day he had gone to his newly appointed grad school advisor, to sign up for classes meant to lead to a Masters Degree in Pastoral Studies, his advisor blew off the appointment, according to the receptionist, for a last-minute lunch date with another grad student, a young woman who, rumor had it, was a former runner-up for *Miss Washington*.

This had so incensed our *wannabe* minister that he decided it was a sign from God, left an incendiary note for Professor *No-Show*, and signed up for Law School a few months later, after finishing in the upper one-percentile on the LSAT and being offered a full-ride scholarship.

After passing the Bar Exam four years thereafter, it took less than a year for him to be disbarred and bankrupted. Fortunately the manager at the Port Halcyon McDonalds didn’t ask for a *resumè*.

“Could you two tell me your names again?” he asked the Beings.

“Sure,” one of them said. “I’m Elvis, for reasons I won’t go into right now, and he’s Clarence,” he said, pointing at the other, “because he’s still in training and we’re fans of that movie you hate, *It’s a Wonderful Life*.”

It was true, he hated holidays (and holiday movies), in general, and Christmas, in particular. His ex-wife had adored the general messiness of holidays, especially those involving compulsory family gatherings, and she worshipped Christmas above them all.

So much so that she had chosen to arrange their wedding for Christmas Eve, the same year he got his Law degree.

Two years later she officially memorialized her affair with their bankruptcy attorney by an overnight stay in the lawyer’s *beaudoir* while she was allegedly visiting her mother. On Christmas Eve. He only caught her because her mother ratted her out, revealing her failure to appear when he called to ask his cheating soulmate where she’d put the extra house key.

He had his reasons for despising Saint Nick and shitty Christmas gifts.

“Listen, Mike,” said the Being now known as Elvis. “We know this whole Law School, lawyer, french-fry-schlepping business has seemed

like a sidetrack, but it's all good.

"And, by-the-way, you may *diss* the Earth gig as a ho-hum video game, but you know damn well there are Light Beings lining up, figuratively speaking, to book a lifetime in an available human body. This is the *crème-de-la-crème* of available incarnation venues. Life on Earth is like the extreme sport of the Cosmos for Light Beings who like a challenge when it comes to that whole Love overcoming Fear thing.

"This *dirt ball* is where the real Light Being jocks want to put on a skin suit and have a go at the Love Olympics."

"You know it's not too late for you to go back to Plan A, Mike," Clarence chimed in. "*Reverend Mike* can still compete. It just requires some creativity, and you know how much The Maker *loves* being creative."

"I'm not sure I'm up for being twice as old as my *Pastoral Counseling* professor," Mike snorted. "Plus there's that tiny bit about getting into grad school to begin with."

"Agreed, my ancient friend," said Clarence, laughing. "But we have something way more fun in mind."

"Yeah," said Elvis, "we're thinking you should start your own religion. Then appoint yourself the first minister or high priest or whatever."

"You could call it *The First Church of Jeebus*," interjected Clarence. "But, like everything else, it's only if you want to."

"The *what?*" Mike asked, laughing for the first time since chugging his helium cocktail.

"Yeah, you're an ex-lawyer," Elvis said, "or you can find one who would help you. Set it up, and do the paperwork, to make it a *for-real*, official, legal church, then use it for all kinds of good things. But do it with some humor. That's the *Jeebus* part. The Maker thinks most religions don't have enough laughter."

"Really? *Jeebus?*" Mike asked.

"Yeah, it's from that *Simpson's* episode where Homer has to go to the South Pacific as a missionary to atone from some especially egregious Homer Simpson sin. He ends up saying *I can't be no missionary, I don't even believe in Jeebus*.

"Then, as the plane's lifting off, he's got his face pressed against a window, crying '*Help me, Jeebus.*' There've been some serious theological treatises published on how beautiful and inclusive that episode was. One guy wrote about how it was Homer's grand Epiphany."

"Wait, you two watch *The Simpsons* in heaven?" Mike asked.

"The For-Real Jesus thought it was hilarious," Elvis said.

"Listen, guys," Mike began, but before he could say *give me a*

*few minutes* there was a flash, and he was back in his moss-frosted cabin, lying on his lump of a mattress, coughing in the face of a paramedic.

“We thought we lost you, man,” she said. “Welcome back.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Aside from a couple of locals he couldn't look in the eye, it was as if nothing had happened. The two he avoided were on the aid car crew that responded when the Amazon driver looked through his cabin window and saw him sprawled on the floor in front of his couch, with a garbage bag over his head.

He had told them the same balloon-filling yarn he told the rental store kid, explaining that he'd read somewhere about getting high and the experiment got out of hand. None of them tried to hide their arched eyebrows, but none of them filed a police report.

When he returned the cylinder to All Star Rentals, he checked for smirks, but the oldtimer who reached over the counter to reclaim the inflater was occupied with whatever he was chewing. Something brown, guessing by the leakage from one corner of his mouth.

*C'est la vie.*

## IANDS

It was while he was scrolling through Google searching for *beings of light* that he came across a link to the *International Association for Near Death Studies*. At first he figured it must be a gang of bullies in white lab coats out to prove that Near Death Experiences are artifacts of hypoxia, or what happens when surgeons use past-the-pull-date anesthetics. He was wrong.

Ten minutes later he'd joined the Seattle Chapter and made a calendar note about their next meeting. He hadn't been to Seattle in years, but now he had a reason.

Four hours and a pot of coffee later he'd watched a dozen *YouTube* videos of *Near Death Experiencers* describing their own versions of meeting up with Light Beings after accidental visits to the Light, along with a few deliberate visits, like his own, though none of the suicide attempts he read about involved helium. Mostly pills, a couple of bridge leapers (into water, in both cases,) and one dude who submerged an electrical appliance in his bathtub and nearly lost use of what he called his *tallywhacker*.

Along with many intriguing individual variations on the common themes, there was one thing all of the NDEers had in common:

The experience left the returning death-trippers all-but-tongue-tied when attempting to describe how over-the-top *beloved* they felt, by *whatever/whoever* is in charge of what most called *The Other Side* or *Over There*.

He started a journal, based on advice he read on the *IANDS* website, to record his own experiences before he forgot any details, although *forgetting* seemed unlikely. All he had to do was close his eyes and think *Clarence and Elvis* and he was back in that theater, or licking butter off *croissants* at a table in Vince's Café.

From the videos he found on *YouTube*, he made notes about NDEer claims that God or Source or All That Is or ... Monique or Billy Bob (a name for The Maker was one thing there was little agreement about,) Whats-his-her-name fawns over us like your favorite grandma did when you were five and she let you have as much chocolate chip ice cream as you wanted, and brushed it off when you broke her favorite bowl, the one *her* grandmother gave her, when you insisted on dishing up the ice cream on your own, so you could make *sure* you'd have as much as you wanted.

"Don't you bother your cute little noggin about it," she said to you, "there are plenty more bowls where that one came from."

One of the *YouTube* testifiers put the *we're all adored* claim this way:

*I grew up in what you'd call a Pentecostal Holiness Bible-believing Church - my dad was the pastor - and I figured when I got to the Pearly Gates I'd be whisked away to a courtroom somewhere and put on trial before the Great White Throne of Judgment. Jehovah God would be The Judge. Jesus would be my public defender, and he'd "plead the blood" of His Crucifixion as a substitute sacrifice in place of my own blood being boiled in Hell.*

*Instead, there was no gate, only a gathering of family members who'd passed over before my visit, along with about a dozen Angels, or whatever they're called Over There.*

*They were all over me, hugging and kissing my cheeks and saying I was home.*

*It did feel like home, more than anywhere has felt to me before or since. Over There you could float in the love that filled the place. If you came across the same thing on earth it would knock you on your ass, and you'd never want to get up, just lie there, submerged in it.*

*I guess I could use words like unconditional love or no judgment of anything you've ever done, or thought, or said, or none of that bleep you've been beating yourself up about here matters Over There.*

*Being on Earth is just an adventure in living in a body in an extreme environment. Sure you're going to bleep it up! You're human! Next time around just do a little better."*

## The First Church of Jeebus

It took the better part of six weeks, and the services of Sid Benowitz, the only lawyer in Port Halcyon, and likely the only lawyer anywhere who had lunch at Mickey D's, every day, and ordered the same thing without fail:

*A large order of fries and one of those frappuccinos, please.  
Cookies and cream.*

He always dined solo and always had a book to read. Usually serio-comic fiction. He and Mike appeared to share a fondness for reading and re-reading all of Tom Robbins' *oeuvre*.

Six weeks to create a new religion.

"Yeah," he told Mike, "it was kind of weird. The same day I heard from one of the deputy sheriffs who lives next door about your little helium adventure, I had the weirdest dream. I never remember my dreams, but my memory of this one is sharper than my memory of whatever we were yammering on about two minutes ago."

They'd been sitting in Mickey D's having lunch - Mike's first time back in two months - talking about the likelihood the Supreme Court was going to set the country back to the 19th Century before the next generation of voters could figure out how to stop them.

The startling part was that Mike knew what Sid was going to say next, before he said it.

"Yeah," the lawyer said, "in my dream two weird looking dudes were telling me to help you with some mysterious project. You may recall that I called you before you could call me.

"I was told not to charge you anything. And I was to tell you about the dream. Consider yourself told."

"Weird looking?" Mike asked.

"Yeah," Sid replied, "like they were made out of light. Ordinarily I'd have a little laugh and ignore this sort of thing, but, like I said, I hardly ever remember my dreams and this was more real than any dream I *have* remembered. Like it wasn't even a dream.

"Any of this mean anything to you, other than you just got a thirty-five-hundred-dollar gift because I was told to give it to you by two light dudes in a dream?"

Mike had never been a decent liar, but he gave it a shot:

"Wish I could say it did," he said. "If I knew there were two Light Beings going around telling people to give me free stuff, I'd have quit working here a long time ago. If you see them again, tell them I'm truly grateful."

"If they show up again, and tell me to give away more free time, I'll be telling them to go piss themselves," Sid replied. "Not that I mind

this one time.

“I kind of like knowing that someone with your history - no offense intended - is going to be Chief Priest of The World’s Newest Religion. At least for a minute or two.

When Mike had moved to Port Halcyon he’d confided in Sid about his aborted legal career, when Sid had pulled him aside one day, shortly after his move, and showed him the article about his disbarment in the State Bar Association magazine. So far as he knew, Sid had not shown the article to anyone else, or otherwise talked about it. That was the first gift Sid gave him.

Mike had considered having a legal name change at the time, but in his forty-two years in Port Halcyon the subject never came up again.

The morning’s text message from Sid had been concise:

*You’re a real Reverend as of three days ago.*

“Yeah! It’s a miracle,” the lawyer announced, in person, an hour later while they stood in line waiting for Mike’s newly hired replacement at the counter to fill their orders.

“The IRS cleared your 501(c)(3) application in less than two weeks. That’s unheard of in my experience. I would have been ecstatic if they’d approved it in two months.”

Mike was pretty sure he’d be hearing Elvis and Clarence gloating and taking credit the next time they summoned him for coffee at Vince’s Café.

“Since the Secretary of State’s Office and Charitable Organizations people also accepted your filing within days of receiving it in Olympia,” Benowitz continued, “there’s nothing standing between you and your legal ordination but humility, and I’m guessing you shed that about the same time you decided to create yourself a religion.

“So, in spite of the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state, I hereby waive the all attorney fees in the interests of seasoning justice with mercy.”

“Wow!” Mike exclaimed, “your petition for sainthood just took a giant step forward. Thank you!”

“Don’t mention it,” the lawyer said, “and I’m dead serious about that. Do not talk about it. Nobody can know that I waived a thirty-five-hundred-dollar fee in order to curry favor with a deity that would allow Him or Herself to be associated with something called *The First Church of Jeebus.*”

*If only you knew, Mike thought. Maybe someday I’ll tell you the*

*rest of the story.*

Benowitz laid the manila envelope, thick with the paperwork he'd brought, on the table, and helped himself to another fingerload of fries.

"So what's your next move, Reverend," Benowitz asked, "now that you can legally officiate at weddings and funerals?"

"I'm not sure I should officially sanction the union of two people who would choose to hire me for the big event," Mike said. "Seems like they'd already be entirely too frivolous about the whole thing."

"*Au contraire, mon frère,*" the lawyer replied. "Take it from a former family law practitioner. The sooner a little silliness can be imported into a marriage, the better. I'd have high hopes for a hitching that got blessed by Jeebus. If you officiate while wearing a baseball cap that says *What Would Jeebus Do?*, I'd practically guarantee at least twenty-five years."



## Let the Gloating Begin

"We deserve to do a little gloating," Clarence said, stirring sugar into his cup, a cup which had *What Would Jeebus Do?* printed on one side, opposite a grinning Homer Simpson on the other. Mike made an inner note to inquire. Maybe The Church could make some tax-exempt income with a line of *Jeebus* merchandise. He'd already ordered a cap for himself.

While he was inner note-taking, Clarence was yammering on about how he had appeared in a dream to an IRS employee in the Exempt Organizations section in Cincinnati.

"Yeah," he said, "the guy was in the middle of an X-rated deep sleep episode involving a hotel hot tub and his *fiancée*, and I show up in a suit and tie, carrying a briefcase, and climb right into the tub with the two of them.

"You should have seen her scrambling for a towel and running for the nearest exit.

"After I got him calmed down and convinced him he needed to stay in the tub or it could cost him his job, I told him I was from the main office in D.C. and I needed to talk to him about a filing.

"I told him The First Church of *Jeebus* application needed to be streamlined in a week or there'd be hell to pay."

Clarence waited a couple of beats, glancing at Elvis and Mike. The three of them were seated at the usual table in Vince's *go to Café*.

"See what I did there?" he said. "*Hell to pay.*"

"Ha ha," Elvis muttered. "You need some new material."

"What stick did you sit on?" Clarence muttered back.

"Anyway," he continued, "I came back the next morning and hung around their hotel room and listened to him tell the dream to his *fiancée*. It turns out she has quite a spiritual bent - for a minute there I was afraid she might see me. She didn't, thank God ..."

"Yeah, we see what you did there," Elvis said.

"So she tells him he needs to pay attention to the dream," Clarence said, "that if he doesn't it could have a ripple effect that he might not want to deal with."

"Sure enough, two days later when he's back in the office he pulls the application from the bottom of a two-foot high pile on his disaster of a desktop - a real desktop, not his computer - and slams it through in an hour. You're welcome, Reverend."

"Wow," Mike said. "does The Maker know you two behave like that? Showing up in hot tubs and whatnot?"

"Of course," Clarence replied. "The Maker's sense of humor is the stuff of legends."

“Not in the church I grew up in,” Mike said. “Humor is the last thing we associated with The Maker.”

“Whatever,” Clarence said. “One of these days we may show up when you’re in the middle of a deep snooze and pull you out of your body and you can sit with us at one of Robin Williams’ shows on The Other Side. There’s actually a replica of The Hollywood Improv over there and he shows up at least once a week. He and George Carlin and Gilda Radner are right at the top of the Maker’s List.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Mike said. “One of these times I’m not going to make it back into my body and I’ve got things to do now.”

“We haven’t messed up yet,” Elvis said, “and we’ve been helping people like you in and out of their bodies since we helped with the first Dalai Lama reincarnation.

“It’s not the ones who *want* to get back in that are the problem. It’s the ones we have to fit back in while they’re squirming around and begging us not to. It’s like that joke about squeezing toothpaste back into the tube.

“But enough about toothpaste. You’re right. You have things to do. We’ve got a couple of ideas.”

Mike groaned. “I’m not ungrateful, guys. I’m starting to look forward to getting up and at ‘em in the morning, for the first time in fifty years, but I don’t need any more on my plate. I’m supposed to be retired.”

When he’d turned seventy-one a week prior, he’d immediately taken advantage of finally qualifying for his maximum Social Security benefit.

“Then we’ll go with just one of my brilliant ideas,” Elvis replied. “It’ll help remind you about the mission we came up with for The First Church of *Jeebus* when we were first talking about it. You probably don’t remember, it was a couple of lifetimes ago, back when you were working as a stripper. I think it was only your second incarnation as a woman.”

“If that’s true - that we talked about The Church that long ago - why did I choose a lifetime working for Ronald McDonald this time around?” Mike asked.

“You already know the answer to that, *mi forgetful amigo*,” replied Elvis. “It’s all about the challenge. Being a stand-in parent to a crew of surrogate kids behind the counter at Mickey D’s, when you had a law degree gathering dust in your junk drawer, then waiting till you’re old enough to have great-grandchildren to start living the daydream. The weirdness of it appealed to you.

“We’re your biggest fans, Reverend Mike. This is like an event in the Incarnation Olympics. You’re in contention for a medal. The judges

are even willing to overlook your little helium escapade.”

“You’re a regular comedian,” Mike said. “But I’ll bask in the *attaboys*, even if they’re a bad joke. Now, what’s your big idea?”

“I wasn’t joking, Mike,” Elvis said. “We’re not your only fans on The Other Side, by the way.”

He gave Mike a little clap on the shoulder and turned to Clarence.

“Now stop daydreaming about reincarnating as a front man for a Beach Boys cover band and fill him in, Clarence. My coffee’s getting cold.”

“Right,” Clarence said. “But it’s a Rolling Stones cover band. I call myself Jumpin’ Jack and the Flash.”

“You’re a nitwit, Clarence,” Elvis said, “but I still love you. Now give the Reverend The Idea.”

“So, Reverend Mike,” Clarence began, “what would you say is your main reason for agreeing to be stuffed back into that old body?”

“Let’s see,” Mike said, stroking his chin. “One last chance to understand all the *hoopla* about Viagra before I die? A chance to re-take the bar exam and get my license reinstated? So many reasons to stay alive.”

“You’re such an ingrate,” Elvis said, laughing. “But I like that Viagra thing. I’m going to remember it for next time I have to persuade some geezer to cut short his visit to The Other Side and and crawl back into his wrinkled skin bag.”

“Start by not calling it a *skin bag*,” Mike said. “But, seriously, I’m all ears. What have you got for me?”

“I’m going to suggest that the reason to come back is you’ve got unfinished business,” Clarence said. “When you slid down the chute into your mommy’s little baby pouch, you came with an agenda. And spending your last circles around the sun as a *Jeebus Freak* was only part of the screenplay, so to speak. There was a larger *purpose* for The Church.

He paused and gulped the rest of his coffee. When he set the cup down it re-filled itself immediately, one of his favorite things about these meetups on The Other Side.

“So,” Clarence said, “what do you think is the over-all *purpose* of *The First Church of Jeebus*?”

“I’m going to walk out on a tightrope over the abyss and guess it’s *not* to save souls,” Mike said.

“There are no souls that need to be saved,” Elvis said, laughing. “Except perhaps from self-imposed boredom. Souls, as you very well know, are hand-crafted out of the Maker’s Consciousness, as if they were fractals of a light beam. You encounter a soul, you’re

encountering the Maker. No souls need to be saved. Guess again.”

“Save me from boredom,” Mike said. “Stick a pin in the mystery balloon. Please.”

“Fine,” Elvis sighed. “You know, for a *Jeebus Freak* you’re a real party pooper.

“The overall purpose of The First Church of *Jeebus* - along with everything else that happens, I might add - is to satisfy the Maker’s insatiable thirst for adventure. No pun intended. The only imbibing the Maker does is *drinking in* the non-stop theater you goofballs perform. Over-the-top *improv*, from dawn till dusk - when the fun *really* starts.

“The Maker exhaled and a trillion mini-Makers were born, right after the Big Kaboom shot out a trillion venues for the shows you quirky creatures can’t help putting on.

“You wanna talk boredom, imagine being the All That Is, the Be-All-and-Beyond, and there’s nothing but Yourself to entertain Yourself. *BORING!* So you decide to outdo Yourself by the brilliance of exhaling all those Mini-Me’s onto a bazillion stages and ... raise the curtains and *on with the Show!*”

“Yeah!” Clarence interjected. “And woe be to any Mini-Me’s who try to invent some kind of rating system so the Maker only gets the stuff approved by the guys with the tight collars who only read holy books.

“They have to be reminded, sometimes with a little smack upside the head, that the Maker invented sex and created Robin Williams and the Marx Brothers. Not to mention Bridget Bardot and Halle Berry.”

“Chill, Clarence,” Elvis said. “I know the Maker thinks you’re a hoot when you start going off about how everyone’s life story should be some version of an R-rated *rom com*, but that’s only your fevered R-rated imagination. Lots of those Mini-Me’s are making life movies a little more thoughtful than John Waters doing *Female Trouble*.”

“Hey,” Clarence shot back, “I happen to know the Maker thinks John Waters is also a hoot. When did you turn into such a *prudezilla?*”

“When are you going to grow up?” replied Elvis.

“Guys!” Mike said. “Sometimes it’s hard to believe you’re *Light Beings*. You sound like a couple of junior high school *bratboys* dancing around with your little fists balled up seeing who’s the *alpha male*.

This got grins from both Light Beings and a swift declaration:

“Dude,” Clarence said, laughing, “we’re just trying to clown around and get you to smile once every hour or so. Sometimes you’re too damn serious.”

“We want to make the point - here’s the Big Idea you’ve been waiting for - that the overall-purpose of *The First Church of Jeebus* is to

be an *experience*. An adventure full of adventures, from *are you kidding me* to *zowie*. For you and all the other Mini-Me's, but also for the Maker.

“The Maker *loves* stories and, trust us, The Church is going to be a regular story *factory*. Rated *B* for *Beatific*.”

Before he could ask them to define *beatific*, the alarm on his iPhone chimed out the theme from *Rocky*.

He rolled over on his ancient mattress and felt for the phone on top of the dresser next to his pillow. He managed only to knock it off onto the carpet, behind the bedstead.

## ERLEICHDA

He woke from a dream much more vivid than the vaporous impressions he was accustomed to. That his dreams were most typically ordinary, and the film they were recorded on scratched and hazy, let him know his meetups with Elvis and Clarence were not just sleep-induced midnight flicks, but were more real than what he was conditioned to refer to as *real*.

It made him wonder if his Light Being pals were also dream makers. He made a mental note to ask them next time he saw them. Which made him wonder if he could summon an audience with them at will. *Hmmm*.

In the dream he watched a scene lifted directly from the pages of *Jitterbug Perfume*, his clear favorite of all Tom Robbins' masterpieces.

The word *ERLEICHDA* has been found finger-drawn into the dust of a mantelpiece, a word from a rare language known to the young Kudra, object of a loving search being pursued by Alobar, her lover and former tribal king, who has barely escaped death at the hands of his own people for the heinous crime of getting older.

It occurred to Mike that he has committed the same crime. Perhaps this parallel is what summoned the dream.

In any case, it is revealed that *ERLEICHDA* can be loosely translated as *Lighten Up*, good advice for Alobar at the time he finds the message from his beloved, and good advice for newly ordained Reverend Mike Ballman, who is chewing over the question of what the holy hell to do with a religion having only one true believer and no divine assets other than an association with Homer Simpson.

*Lighten the holy hell up!*

What could be clearer?

He makes another mental note to get a patch for the back of his *What Would Jeebus Do?* cap, to feature Kudra's exotic word of advice.

Still, it would be a colossal waste of a gift of thirty-five-hundred dollars in attorney fees to simply file the legal paperwork in a filing cabinet drawer, to be trotted out for the occasional lighthearted laugh with friends, when that paperwork granted him the same authority to entertain humankind that had been granted to the likes of The Buddha or the Pope.

Clarence and Elvis were Messengers from the Maker. *Right?* He had work to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

He decided to make an official visit to the Port Halcyon

Ministerial Association. He figured an official visit required an official business card.

.....  
Reverend Michael “Mike” Ballman

*Chief Priest*  
***First Church of Jeebus***

754 Halcyon Avenue  
Port Halcyon, Washington 97301  
365.733.4457  
RevMike@FirstChurchOfJeebus.org

*Join us in the Hot Rod of Camaraderie  
as we speed into The Mystery*

.....

He'd had second thoughts about *Hot Rod of Camaraderie*, but left it in. He was lucky that Reverend Al Graeburn, minister at the Unity of Halcyon church, was the current Chairman of the Association's Membership Committee, and not Father Jackson, priest at Saint Patrick's Catholic Church, which happened to be across the street from McDonald's. Father Jackson also happened to be the source of most of the complaints about noise and random shenanigans, allegedly originating in The Golden Arches' kids' play yard, received by the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office

Reverend Al had been nearly hysterical when Mike phoned to inquire about membership.

“This is the best news I've had in a month,” he'd said between giggles. “If I could make you and The First Church of Jeebus a member over the phone, right now, I would, but you have to officially *visit*, and the others have to vote to let you in. At least it only requires a simple majority.

“Will you show up in a costume? Please say you'll show up in that Ronald McDonald's clown suit you used to wear for kids' birthday parties, with a red nose and white face paint.”

The conversation continued over cups of *frappuccino* when Reverend Al met him at Mickey D's to personally deliver the official invitation.

“I don't know why it has to be so damned officious,” he said.

“The group is only seven of us sitting around having lunch over at the Kitty Kat Diner, talking politics and sports. We rarely have an agenda and we only have one community event every year.”

He was talking about the Purdy Creek Park Picnic (*No Alcoholic Beverages Permitted*) every Easter Sunday. The vote had been a tense 4-3 in favor of permitting an Easter Egg Hunt, with Pastor Rawson, of the Halcyon Church of the Holy Spirit, threatening to quit the group if Reverend Al showed up in costume as the Easter Bunny again.

He'd almost quit on the spot when Reverend Al replied that he'd show up as a Playboy Bunny, instead.

As to showing up as a clown, Mike agreed to think it over. He wasn't sure whether he could borrow the clown suit. But, buoyed by his second *frap*, he promised Reverend Al he'd see if the costume was still in the Mickey D's storage room. The idea was beginning to grow on him.

The conversation got a little dicey when Reverend Al asked some questions about the origins of The Church.

Mike decided to serve him the whole enchilada, NDE and all, with only a little editing to attribute the near death part to a mysterious coronary event, rather than balloon gas. Turned out Reverend Al found it quite tasty, chewed it a little, and swallowed it with gusto.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the morning of The Ministerial Association meeting, Reverend Mike picked up the Ronald McDonald costume along with some face paint and makeup left over from the last time the restaurant hosted a birthday party. McDonald's Corporation had long since abandoned the clown as an official mascot, but Max Clemons, the owner of the Port Halcyon franchise, ignored the memo from headquarters. He loved the clown.

Marti Fried, the manager, offered to help him with the paint and lipstick, an offer he gratefully accepted.

Two hours later, costume donned, he was back at Mickey D's to finish transforming himself into a clown. Marti was surehanded and confident. All he had to do was sit back and let her work. When she was finished, she fetched a mirror from her purse and proudly reflected the results to his anxious eye

He need not have worried. He laughed out loud and offered to pay her something, but she laughed even harder and declined. He had told her the purpose of his costuming and she insisted that knowing Father Jackson would be attending the lunch he was dressed for was



reward enough.

He then offered to take her with him and introduce her as The First Church of Jeebus' Secretary-Treasurer, so she could observe the reactions to her artistry, but she had scruples about even that innocent untruth, given the gathering of men of God she would be lying to.

He chose to walk the dozen blocks to the Kitty Kat Diner. Thankfully the brief morning rain shower had stopped and the sunshine that came after was subdued and didn't create a makeup-ruining sweat under the bright red wig Reverend Mike had reluctantly stretched across the top of his head. Marti had insisted that covering his baldness with a Seattle Mariners' baseball cap would spoil his look.

He had brought with him the official documents from the Internal Revenue Service and the Secretary of State, establishing beyond doubt that The First Church of Jeebus was considered a church, along with his own ordination certificate as Chief Priest.

It had taken a phone call from the lawyer to persuade the owner at Imprimatur, Port Halcyon's copy shop and printery, to print the certificates. It didn't help that the owner was head deacon at The Church of the Holy Spirit, Pastor Rawson's right-hand-man.

At the last minute it had occurred to Reverend Mike to grab his copy of *Jitterbug Perfume*. If asked about it, he would explain that it was The Church's primary Holy Book.

He was ready.

\* \* \* \* \*

Before he could sit down at the long table in the back room that the Kitty Kat Diner staff had set up for them, Reverend Al rose to introduce him.

"Let's give a warm welcome to the Chief Priest and pastor of The First Church of Jeebus, who is hoping to become a member after his visit with us today. Gentlemen, I give you Reverend Mike Ballman."

He began applauding vigorously, but the others at the table didn't appear to share his enthusiasm, except for Reverend Jim Ballinger, pastor of the Lutheran church, who clapped twice before surrendering to the silence.

"Thank you, thank you," Reverend Mike said and sat down. He picked up the menu in front of him, intending to join the others in preparing studiously for important decisions about whether to choose from the list of *Burgers To Purr About* on one side of the menu or the *Pawsitively Fresh Salads* on the other. Not to mention the *Wet Your Whiskers Libations* section.

But Reverend Al was just getting started.

“So, Reverend Mike,” he said, sitting down at the end of the table where the newly minted clergyman was seated. “Maybe you could tell us a little about your church. I’m sure they’d all like to hear what you shared with me the other day, perhaps the short version.”

“Yes,” said the man sitting next to Mike, whom he didn’t recall having seen before. “Maybe you could explain why you thought it appropriate to dress as Ronald McDonald when you have applied to become a member of a ministerial association. Do you really expect us to believe you’re serious about becoming one of us?”

“What did you say your name is,” Reverend Mike asked his interrogator.

“I didn’t,” the man replied. “I’m Pastor Darius Finch from the First Baptist Church, over by the High School.

“I heard through the grapevine that Sid Benowitz was telling people he’d done the paperwork to make your so-called church an actual *legal* church and I still did my best to give you the benefit of the doubt. Maybe there was some sort of *do-gooder* thing going on, a way of helping folks who might be more comfortable being helped by a character from a *Simpsons*’ episode than by an actual place of worship.

“I was okay with that. But I didn’t expect the so-called *Chief Priest* to show up at a Ministerial Association meeting dressed as a clown and ask to join us. Maybe you can help me keep an open mind.”

Reverend Mike turned and locked eyes with the man, which was a dangerous thing to do because he felt his own eyes filling up.

He grabbed a napkin and dabbed at his cheeks.

“Sorry,” he said. “But that makes me a little emotional. You’re being kind.

“Okay, I wasn’t going to do this, but here’s the short version.” He paused for more dabbing.

“A few months ago I decided it was time to escape from what I considered to be a wasted life. Not many people know this, but I graduated near the top of my law school class, passed the bar exam on the first try, had a sweet job lined up with a bigtime Seattle law firm, worked there for six months, then spent the rest of my adult working life, until The Church, serving burgers and fries to you all and your kids and grandkids, for reasons I will keep to myself.”

He paused for more dabbing and to let his words gain a little weight.

“You’re the first to know this, but when I was resuscitated by two of our hero EMTs awhile back it wasn’t because I was playing around with a helium balloon filler and accidentally inhaled too much. It was because I wanted out. I was tired of being me.” He stifled an

unexpected sob with a cough.

“During the time between when I huffed the helium and an Amazon delivery guy summoned an aid car, I went to heaven.”

He couldn't help himself, and did a quick scan of his audience. At least two of them didn't want to make eye contact, those being Reverend Rawson and Father Jackson.

“While I was there I met two Angels, or Guides is more accurate, who told me I should return and open up The First Church of Jeebus. I had a choice, I didn't have to return. But I did. I fell in love with the idea.

“And here we are,” he said, sitting down suddenly.

“Wow,” Reverend Al broke the silence that followed. “You didn't tell me the part about the suicide. Wow.”

Father Jackson stood up.

“Gentlemen,” he said. “I'm sorry, but this meeting has gone off the rails. With all due respect, Mike, I don't know what happened during your suicide attempt, but everything I know says that whatever, whoever you supposedly talked to were no Angels. I suspect you had some sort of dream, or, God forbid, you conversed with demons, but I must vote *No* to your application and I'll be leaving now. I hope you don't spread this malarkey around after today.

“If you want to use the nonprofit status of your so-called *church* to do good things, I'll be the last person to try to stop you. But if you start telling people that Angels from heaven are behind your clown show I'll be talking to a lawyer myself, to find out how the IRS or the State might feel about this whole charade.”

He turned from his place at the table and stalked out of the room, followed by Reverend Rawson, who muttered *what he said* as he made his exit.

That left Reverend Al, Pastor Finch, Reverend Ballinger, Father Jack Fulton of St. Peter's Episcopal, and Reverend Timothy Haddon of Port Halcyon Methodist Church.

Reverend Al stood and raised his right hand.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I suggest we take our vote. I move to admit the pastor of The First Church of Jeebus as a member of the Port Halcyon Ministerial Association. All in favor . . . .”

Five hands were quickly raised.

“Opposed?” The empty seats voted *No*.

“The motion carries,” he said.

Five men stood and five sets of hands began clapping. Reverend Mike Duvall remained seated, using his hands to wipe his cheeks.