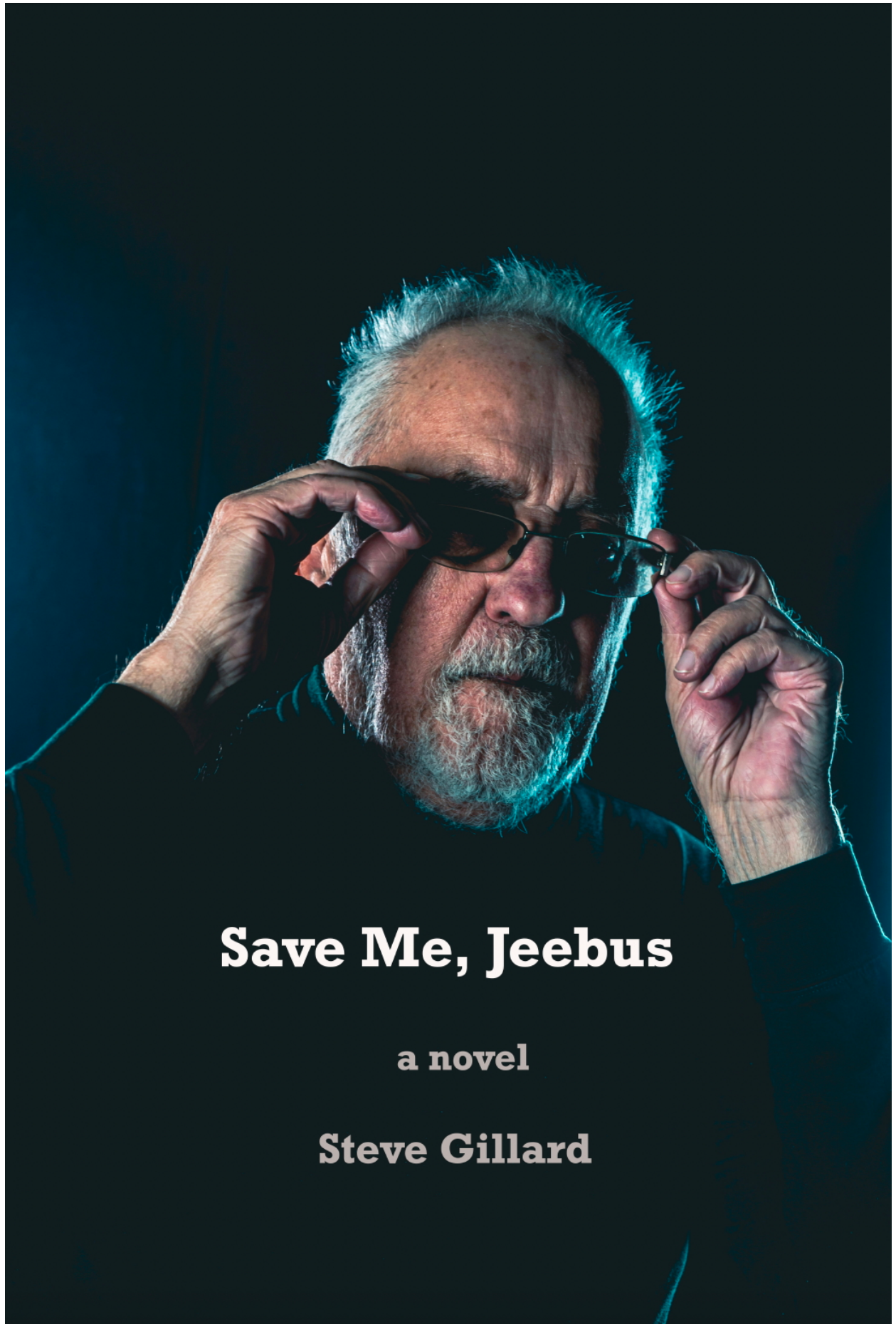




Save Me, Jeebus

a novel

Steve Gillard

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by
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(Cover Photo by Malcolm Brostrom; UnSplash.com)

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*)

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.

It's Sunday morning and I am only an hour away from correcting a clerical error that has cost me forty-five years of my life.

At precisely eleven o'clock a.m., I will rise from my seat in the front row of the Port Halcyon Word of the Lord Church and walk a few paces to stand at the altar, in front of the newly installed pulpit, in the newly renovated former home of Tammy's Tavern.

Ironies duly noted. At least it wasn't a topless bar, though there are a handful (no pun intended) of reports to the contrary.

In spite of my sixty-seven-year-old ineptitude in the manly construction arts, I have actually helped, a little, with the installation and renovation.

Rev. James Brent, a true construction arts adept, is about to ordain me as the assistant pastor of the church, a church which I personally created.

Legally speaking.

Let me explain.

I just retired from my law practice, a career created out of the aforementioned clerical error.

My accidental forty-five years as a lawyer, in addition to bringing me to the brink of bankruptcy, has also given me the expertise to create a legal entity recognized by the State of Washington, and the Tax-Exempt Organizations division of the Internal Revenue Service, as a *religious organization*, with all the attendant rights and privileges, including the aforementioned right to ordain ministers.

A word or two about that clerical error:

I entered the freshman class at Seattle Pacific College intending to prepare for the ministry, after being rescued from a life of mood altering substance experiments and other juvenile misdemeanors - usually experienced in that order - by a friendship with the Youth Pastor at the Port Halcyon Friends of Jesus Church.

Danny Shinn, my Youth Pastor guardian angel, whose bill-paying job was with the Juvenile Department of the Jefferson County Superior Court, persuaded my ripening delinquent self to play basketball for the Apostles, the Church's entry in the Jefferson County Rec Center Hoops League, and to stop smoking weed and stealing beer from Halligan's Grocery Store.

When the Apostles won the League Championship Trophy in '77 - I was starting point guard - I decided to go full-on repentance, asking the Lord's forgiveness for my mortal sins and joining the Jesus Tribe.

Four years later I graduated *cum laude* from Seattle Pacific, with

a major in Biblical Literature, and what I thought was a call from the Saviour to follow in the steps of my former Youth Pastor mentor.

This is when my tribal loyalty was put to the test.

Somehow my 99th-percentile score in the GRE (Graduate Records Exam), the qualifier for my application to enter SPC's grad school, in Pastoral Studies, was mistakenly attached to an LSAT (Law School Aptitude Test) and the test I actually took disappeared, never to be seen again.

When I reported this to my father, an attorney in a small law firm in nearby Port Townsend, he was overjoyed,

Instead of helping me sort out the error, he offered to pay for Law School, at his *alma mater*, the University of Puget Sound, in Tacoma, since the spurious test result virtually guaranteed my admission.

After much prayer and consultation with Danny Shinn, I concluded that the clerical error was an unexpected divine intervention.

I'm sure my agnostic parents were even prepared to believe the same. They had made no secret of their bewilderment about my call to the Lord's work.

All of that said, no spiritual persuasion by Jesus, or other heavenly emissary, was necessary to persuade me to change horses mid-stream, as I had been captain of the Port Halcyon High School debate team. My dad was the coach.

So, for obvious reasons, I had given thought to Law School, in spite of my juvenile rap sheet, before being recruited to the Friends of Jesus basketball team and inducted into the Jesus Tribe.

When I was admitted to UPS Law School, as one of the top five admittees, LSAT-score-wise, I was given a full scholarship.

Another obvious sign from Above.

I assumed Jesus was pulling all the right strings.

* * * * *

When Reverend Brent took me to lunch at the Half Moon Diner, during the week before the Ordination ceremony, I feared some of the strings were being stretched too far and were dangerously near snapping.

The Reverend asked me if there was anything in my past that might come back to haunt me, when I begin my ministry.

I immediately began dumping some of my garbage.

Dating Loretta Larsen, my ex-wife, at Seattle Pacific College, my senior year, was the first piece of rotten fruit I tossed on the table.

To the Reverend's pointed questions about pre-marital sex, I answered with detailed insistence that our backseat adventures in my '65 Corvair had not gone beyond a little innocent arm and shoulder wrestling, and some awkward fumbling with her upper body underwear.

But then I had to confess to nearly backsliding into beer and weed when my best friend, Jimmy Danzen, conspired with Loretta to remove *all* of her underwear, upper and lower, as a prelude to flaunting their betrayals by still being in the dorm room I shared with Jimmy when I got back from a movie Loretta had refused to attend with me.

I further confessed that after Loretta married Jimmy, and they adopted two kids (in order to start a family, bypassing Jimmy's inability to produce even one viable tiny dancer to partner up with at least one dancer from Loretta's ovarian dance troupe), I resumed my connection with her, on the sly, including underwear removal.

It was easy, since Jimmy was away from home, for weeks at a time, building houses in distant places with his construction company, and Loretta was an enthusiastic underwear remover.

But when Jimmy surprised us with an early return, a divorce followed, which was in turn followed by a wedding, starring Loretta and me.

The ceremony was in Las Vegas, since neither of Loretta's adopted kids, nor any of her immediate family, were willing to accept wedding invitations to a Port Halcyon venue.

Plus we both were curious about being married by an Elvis impersonator. It wasn't quite as much fun as we'd hoped. The guy got the costume and hair all wrong.

As I explained to Reverend Brent, Loretta decided to dump me, almost exactly twenty years prior to our present lunch, when my casual approach to practicing law failed to produce enough income to service the second and third mortgage loans necessary for our living expenses.

She took the kids with her when she moved back to her childhood neighborhood in L.A.. I missed them, but even my lazy lawyer experience made it clear there was little I could do since I hadn't bothered to adopt them.

It took Loretta less than a year back home to hook up with a high school principal who helped her get a job teaching first-graders.

She'd taught elementary school in Port Halcyon, so her flirty new boss assigned her to a first-grade classroom in the same building where she'd started grade school herself, before her family moved to Seattle when she was in high school.

As a final toss on the sagging lunch table pile, I revealed that I'd been living, for the past year, with an old high school flame, Tammy Landon.

Tammy also developed a problem with my net income numbers and finally evicted me from her upscale Port Townsend apartment when I couldn't contribute my half the rent for three months in a row.

Fortunately, my responses to additional cross-examination by the Reverend convinced him that I was sufficiently repentant for our Lord and Saviour to forgive me.

I demonstrated genuine penitence, and gratitude for the Lord's mercy, by paying for both our lunches.

Leading to the present moment, with me standing before the altar, head bowed, hands clasped in prayerful pose, awaiting further instructions from the pulpit.

2.

"God and Father of all," Reverend Brent says, having moved from behind the pulpit and descended, from the elevated stage, to stand in front of me.

He has previously informed me that he will be using the ceremony set forth in a book borrowed from Father Bill Wilmot, priest at St. James Episcopal.

"We praise you for your infinite love in calling us to be a holy people in the kingdom of your Son Jesus our Lord, who is the image of your eternal and invisible glory, the firstborn among many brethren, and the head of the Church."

"We thank you that by his death he has overcome death, and, having ascended into heaven, has poured his gifts abundantly upon your people, making some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry and the building up of his body."

The Reverend lays his right hand on top of my head.

I fervently hope the scab that sprouted this morning, from an encounter with the sharp edge of a shelf, isn't leaking.

"Therefore, Father, through Jesus Christ your Son, give your Holy Spirit to Jack; fill him with grace and power, and make him a priest in your Church."

Apparently clerics in the Word of the Lord Church will be known as priests. So be it.

"May he exalt you, O Lord, in the midst of your people; offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to you; boldly proclaim the gospel of salvation; and rightly administer the sacraments of the New Covenant. Make him a faithful pastor, a patient teacher, and a wise counselor."

"Grant that in all things he may serve without reproach, so that your people may be strengthened and your Name glorified in all the world."

"All this we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."

Reverend Brent turns around and reaches behind the altar rail, retrieving a brand new copy of the King James Bible, leatherbound. He hands it to me.

"Receive this Bible as a sign of the authority given you to preach the Word of God and to administer his holy Sacraments. Do not forget the trust committed to you as a priest of the Church of God."

The peace of the Lord be always with you."

* * * * *

I have decided to celebrate my divinely affirmed new identity by returning to the Half Moon Diner.

While there with Reverend Brent I saw a couple of menu items that deserve further attention.

Especially the marionberry pie, a slice of which has just been delivered to my window-side table by Sandi Brennan, who, along with her sister, Marley Mason, are the chief flight attendants at the Diner.

I know Sandi has recently married Wiley Thomas, another old friend of mine from Seattle Pacific College, who also went on to Law School, though it was the University of Washington and there was no clerical error involved.

Wiley ended up in Port Halcyon at my suggestion, decades earlier, when a professional lapse, in his first year as a lawyer, cost him his license to practice, and he needed a place to hide and lick his wounds.

He has recently retired from his position as the oldest employee at the Port Halcyon McDonalds, where he's been prepping and serving burgers and fries for more than forty years.

As for Marley, I know her husband, Mike Ballman, died, just weeks before, from pancreatic cancer.

Which immediately summons unwelcome thoughts about the *suspicious spots*, revealed in a recent MRI scan of my own prostate, that are to be addressed by Dr. Santini, in a couple of weeks, at the new cancer care unit just added to Salish Healthcare, the hospital in Port Townsend.

Just as I'm aiming the first forkload of marionberry, I nearly drop it into my lap, when I'm tapped on the same shoulder that's directing the fork procedure.

"Jack!"

"Wiley," I say, a bit less enthusiastically.

"That's some good pie, isn't it?" the intruder says. "Mind if I join you?"

I do mind, I'm not a fan of spontaneous socializing, but I motion toward an empty chair with my non-pie-bearing hand.

"I heard you just retired," he says, as his spouse approaches with a coffee pot and fills his cup.

"Morning, sweetie," she says, grinning. "Pie for you, too?"

"Yeah," he says, "and put our friend's pie on my tab."

She grins and spins away, returning in seconds with another slice.

"Thank you, my dear," he says.

"Thank you both," I say.

Sometimes there's an upside to spontaneous socializing.

"I've seen you coming and going from that new church in what used to be Tammy's Tavern," Wiley says. "What's it called? The Word of the Lord?"

"Right," I say. "I've been helping James Brent - Reverend James Brent - get the place up and running. Our first service is in two weeks,

"I did the legal beagle stuff to make the church official.

"And," I say, pausing for another bite, which adds the dramatic effect I was hoping for.

"And," I say, "I've been ordained as the assistant pastor."

"Wow!" Wiley says. "Good for you! I had no idea Jack Sutherland, Attorney-at-Law, was a pastoral candidate!

"I'm a Reverend, too, you know. I should have tried to enlist you for the Temple of Jeebus."

I laugh without comment.

The First Church of Jeebus is a local joke, another recently created Church, as envisioned by Mike Ballman, *RIP*, and Wiley.

The Temple is in an historic building formerly housing Port Halcyon's only movie house.

Not everyone thinks the joke is funny, especially the Port Halcyon Ministerial Association, which has been infiltrated by enough Jeebus Freaks (their own words) to gain effective control of the organization. More on that later.

Suffice to say, for now, that the *Jeebus* reference is from a *Simpsons* episode.

I need to re-route the spontaneous socializing.

"You know," I say, "I went to college intending to prepare for the ministry. I don't know if you knew that."

Although Wiley and I had been Seattle Pacific College classmates, we hadn't been close, and I'm sure he had no idea, or interest, about my career plans at the time.

"I did *not* know that," he says. "What happened?"

I tell him the whole story, clerical error and all.

"Wow!" he says. "You should write a book!"

Sounds good to me.

* * * * *

Somehow our spontaneous socializing becomes a confessional for me, and I end up giving Wiley the same sad resumé I dumped on Reverend Brent during our Half Moon Diner lunch.

"Wow, again!" he says. "Do you have time to hear about *my* pre-ordination journey?"

"Sure," I say.

Since retiring, my *Comfort Complex* (a phrase I actually learned from Wiley; more on *that* later) means that free time is my *status quo*.

"Well," he says, "you know a little about the first part. I made the fatal error of forging a client's signature on an important document.

"He had signed the original, but I couldn't find it. So I printed another one and signed his name to it, when I couldn't find him prior to a hearing we had coming up.

"It turned out he had changed his mind, and during a visit to my office, when I wasn't there, he demanded the original from my secretary, which he destroyed in her presence.

"On the day of our hearing, she was at a medical appointment and hadn't bothered to tell me about the reason for the missing document.

"Since the hearing was a motion being argued based on the documents, not actual testimony, I didn't bother to tell my client what I'd done. After all, he'd actually signed the same exact document.

"When I referred to the document during the hearing, he interrupted the proceedings and told the judge that he'd destroyed it, that it wasn't the truth.

"When the judge produced the forged document I had created, to replace it, the client was furious, as was the judge.

"They both filed complaints with the State Bar Association and the rest is my history as the oldest and longest serving McDonald's employee at the Port Halcyon Mickey D's."

"Wow!" I say, in turn.

"I knew you'd been required to turn in your license to practice, but I guess I never asked for the details. Wow."

"Now this is where it really gets interesting," he says. "If you still have time."

This is exactly the sort of storytelling that could make me a spontaneous socializing convert.

"Of course!" I say.

"Well," he says, "about two years ago I was transported to Heaven by a helium balloon filler."

"I assume you're speaking metaphorically," I say. "I once got high with one of those, back in high school, at a friend's birthday party. I guess I could have called it *heavenly*."

"Perhaps so," he says, "but I'm talking about *HEAVEN* heaven."

I withhold my reservations for the moment. Getting into heaven usually requires a scene with a Great White Throne and formal Divine

Judgment, at least according to my Biblical Literature studies at Seattle Pacific.

“Okay,” I say, stretching the word a little, to suggest my initial doubts, without closing any doors. “I’m listening.”

3.

"A couple of years ago I tried to kill myself," Wiley says, before loading the last forkful of marionberry pie into his mouth.

Which abruptly halts my own upload, though my mouth stays open.

"Holy cow," I say. "With helium?"

"Much more user friendly than, say, ingesting a bullet," he says.

"And that got you into heaven?" I say.

"Where I went to church growing up, and where I'll be going now that I'm ordained, suicide gets you on the hotseat. Maybe forever.

"The one in Satan's house, where your ass literally gets burned."

"Trust me," Wiley says. "I was terrified.

"My soul, or whatever you want to call that part of us that never dies, floated up out of my wrinkled old meat suit and I was sucked up through the ceiling of my living room and shot out into a black space, like the sky without stars or planets or any other light.

"I immediately started thinking it would start getting hot, I'd see flames, and be greeted by the snarly dude with the forked tale and pitchfork.

"But what actually happened was I kept flying.

"It stayed cool, but pleasant, and I started feeling like I just smoked the best weed ever.

"It felt like I was headed for a party where I was the guest of honor and my mom would meet me at the door and start hugging me, like she did on those rare occasions I actually went home for Christmas. And that's a pitiful comparison.

"I felt like I'd swallowed a love pill, or ecstasy, only way better. It was as if the darkness itself adored me and was embracing me.

"That sounds ridiculous, but there just aren't words.

"Believe me, I was still watching for flames and a sudden heat spell, if you know what I mean."

"Were you still in some kind of a body?" I say.

"I guess you could call it that," he says, "but it was more like I was made out of a glowing cloud, but still in a sort of human shape.

"Without clothes, I might add.

"Later, I noticed I didn't have a buttcrack or a dingus, which was mildly disappointing. I'd have liked to know what a dingus made of light felt like.

"Back to my flight.

"All of a sudden, with no warning, I'm sitting in a movie theater, with seats and a big screen.

"I'm sitting between two light beings, I'll call them, just like me,

except we've become *solid* enough, I guess you'd say, to have faces.

"And I know them!

"But I don't know their names or remember how or why they seem familiar.

"They actually make a big bag of popcorn appear in my lap and start reaching in and eating. It's hilarious!

"I remember complaining that we should each have our own bag, but they just laugh and say *it's more fun to share*.

"Suddenly a movie starts up on the screen and it's all about me! From the time I was born until I chugged the helium.

"They're laughing at stuff we're watching, even the parts that make me cringe or feel guilty or shameful.

"Later, which I'll talk about in a minute, we went elsewhere, where we looked different, actually wore clothes, ate *croissants* and *espresso*, and talked more about the movie.

"But, during the movie, the two of them insist that *The Big Kahuna*, which is what they call *God*, thinks I am *hitting it out of the ballpark*, to use their words.

"They say I have nothing to be ashamed of or feel guilty about, this human life is all just a kind of training or learning experience, and I've done the best I could.

"And I'll say this before we move on to the next scene:

"They insist that although these places are a part of what we call *heaven*, or the *other side*, or the *afterlife*, and I have truly died, I have to go back and finish what I showed up on Planet Earth to do in the first place."

"Did you know what that was or did they have to tell you?" I say. I'm enjoying his yarn, though I'm sure the helium inspired it.

All I recall from my own helium experiment in high school was making silly comments in a Donald Duck voice.

"We are instantly transported from the theater to a table at the Café Terrace in Arles, France," Wiley says. "The one in Van Gogh's *Café Terrace at Night* painting. Don't ask me why, because I have no clue.

"I recognize it because the owner of the Mickey D's here in town put a print of that painting in the men's john for some bizarre reason.

"I'm drinking *espresso* and eating *croissants* with my two Light Being buddies, like I said before, and talking about the movie.

"You don't know this, but I also had plans to enter the ministry while I was at Seattle Pacific College.

"My reasons for going to law school are every bit as bizarre as yours.

"I took the GRE, just like you, but my score, also in the ninety-

ninth percentile, I'll have you know, stayed attached where it belonged.

"I was accepted into the Pastoral Studies program, but when I showed up for an appointment with the professor who would be my advisor, to talk about classes, he had abandoned me for lunch with another student who was a former beauty queen.

"I was pissed and bailed on everything.

"I blamed God for leading me down down a dead-end path and decided he must want me to go back to an old high school daydream about being a lawyer.

"Sound familiar? I was on a debate team, just like you, in a high school in Eastern Washington. I was pretty damn good, too.

"MVP at the State Debate Tournament my senior year."

"Anyway, I won't belabor that history, just to say that my Light Being friends insist that it's all part of my *Soul Plan* for this Earth go-round, that I am right on course and right on schedule.

"Then they drop the bombshell."

"Let me guess," I say. "After five decades of tending the deep fryer at McDonalds, you get to be a minister after all.

"You just needed to try to kill yourself in order to figure it out."

"That's almost exactly what I said to my Light Being buddies," Wiley says, "only I was being even *more* sarcastic than you're probably being right now.

"Which I totally understand. And that's not even the best part."

"Let me guess again," I say. "You get to use a movie theater for your church, while Reverend Brent and I have to settle for an abandoned laundromat that used to be a rundown tavern on a back street."

"Sorry about that," he says, laughing. "But that's still not the best part.

"The best part is I was specifically told that I had planned, before I even showed up in my mama's tummy, to help create a church that turns out to be based on a character dreamed up by the creator of *The Simpsons*."

"Okay," I say. "You're saying you were told this by what you're calling your *Light Being buddies*. Do these characters have names?"

"They do, actually," he says. "They both had lives as humans before they chose to serve as Spirit Guides for a group of us presently living in these skin suits.

"My Guides are Jeebus and Blue, and they were actually alive as human adults about the same time I was in grade school, back in the '60s.

"I won't burden you with their stories right now, but you might

find it interesting sometime.”

“No offense,” I say, sighing, “but I’ll have to confess I’m having trouble understanding how a guy as smart as I know you are, Wiley - given your LSAT scores, and all - how you can believe you’re having conversations with Light Beings from some dimension we all fly to when we die.

“Just sayin’.”

“No offense taken,” he says, laughing again. “I know how absurd it all sounds. But I also know what happened to me.

“And there have been lots of confirmations and verifications.

“But, again, I won’t burden you with all that unless you specifically ask me to.”

“I’ll take a pass, for now,” I say, “but I’ll admit it’s an entertaining story. Worthy of its own *Simpsons* episode.”

“You know,” he says, “I never thought of that. I’ll have to see if the other Jeebus Freaks are interested in having me contact Matt Groening.

“I actually met him once, after all this happened.

“He heard about our church on some newscast and wanted to know more.

“To his credit he gave us the green light to keep on going. He could have made life difficult for us, but he liked what we were doing.

“Back to my story:

“I didn’t want any part of this crazy scheme Jeebus and Blue were describing. I wanted my body to be buried and my soul to hang out with whoever else I might be able to hang out with in the Afterlife.

“They told me they could introduce me to Robin Williams and Gilda Radner, two of my favorite humans who have crossed over.”

“But they kept insisting it was part of my *Soul Plan* to start a Church, based on a joke, and had been since before I was born.

“They kept talking about how much the Big Kahuna enjoys a good joke, wants us to be lighthearted.

“Especially since a big part of the idea was that we could do a lot of *good* with the First Church of Jeebus, and I believe we have.

“I knew they were telling the truth, especially when I found out that Mike Ballman had been waiting for me to show up in his life because he had the same idea.”

“Okay,” I say, “I’ve got to meet up with Reverend Brent at the Church in a few minutes, but I’ll be back to hear more, especially this thing about Mike Ballman already having the same idea.”

I leave the Half Moon Diner grinning and shaking my head. I can’t wait to hear Jim Brent’s take on all this.