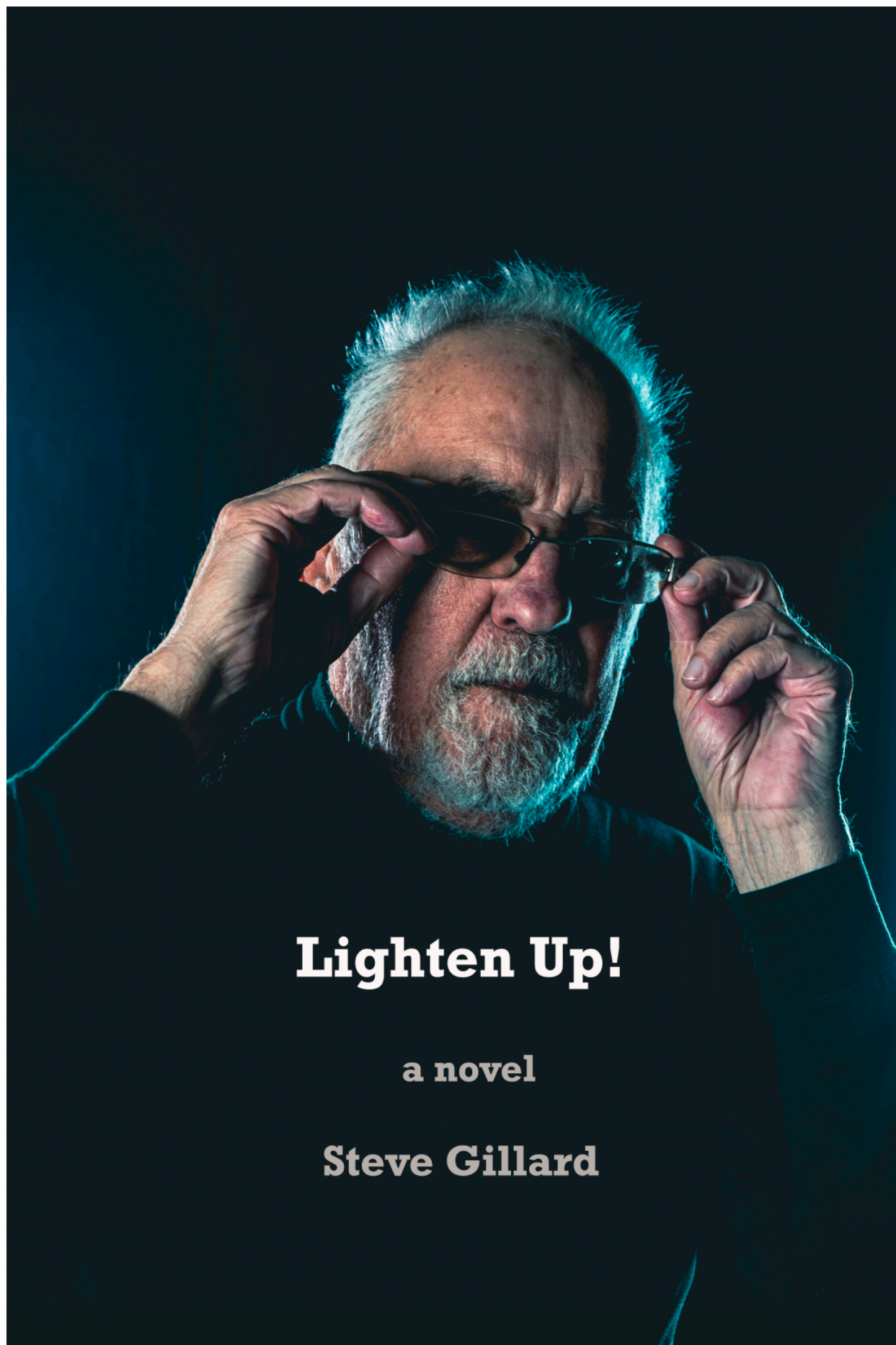




Lighten Up!

a novel

Steve Gillard

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

Erleichda!

When at last he turned his attention to it, his bafflement only increased. The word was a transitive verb, an exclamation, a command, of which an exact English translation is impossible. The closest equivalent probably would be the phrase:

Lighten up!

from *Jitterbug Perfume*, Tom Robbins

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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*)

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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 even my agnostic parents were 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 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.