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Introduction

“I contend we are both atheists; I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours.”
– Stephen F. Roberts

What is mythology? If you’re a member of the target audience of this anthology, you might agree, at least in part, with this general sort of answer: “Mythology is the collection of stories of various cultures that are fantastically fun, wildly entertaining, impressively imaginative, and vital as representations of the cultural progression of human civilization over thousands of years.”

If you’re not one of the target audience of this anthology – that is, you believe in a Higher Power or Supreme Being or God or Devil or whatever – then you probably also agree, at least in part, with that statement as it applies to every single religion in the world... except for yours.

That’s one of the many fun things disbelievers get to enjoy about religion. It doesn’t matter how outlandish the stories from the mythology of a believer’s religion are, because he knows for certain that it’s the true word of his followed deity of choice. In the same breath where he laughs at the stories of Zeus throwing thunderbolts down from Olympus, he’ll believe Jesus walked on water. While shaking his head in holier-than-

thou fashion at the tales of Sigyn catching the snake's venom as it drips onto Loki's face, he'll believe he'll have seventy-two virgins waiting for him in paradise. Although scoffing at the idea that Ganesha had four arms, an elephant head, and rode around on a rat, he'll believe that Joseph Smith used seer stones to translate golden plates provided to him by Moroni. As he slaps his knee over the absurdity of the Aztec mother goddess Coatlicue, the serpent-skirted deity who gave birth to the moon, the stars, and the god of the sun and war, he'll not give a thought about Yahweh creating the heavens and the Earth in six days, just a mere six thousand years ago.

It would all be amusing if it weren't for the power these ardent believers have over global society and all our lives. Overzealous religious types seem to have two basic tenets: They don't want anything they've always known to change, and they want everyone to believe everything they do. And when things change, or when people tell them they don't want to believe, they don't seem to take it very well. Despite so easily identifying the silliness of other religions and being astounded that anyone could believe such silliness, they don't see such silliness in their own beliefs.

Those of us who embrace common sense, intellect, and reason are able to identify the silliness in all belief systems, and it's only logical that we don't have atheist mythology of our own. But there's no reason we can't have fiction! And fiction, after all, is what all that religious mythology is about. The difference is that we understand that stories are just stories; even if they have themes or morals or points to be made, the characters aren't real, the situations aren't real, and the events aren't real. We understand that.

That doesn't change the enjoyment of good stories, and this anthology offers several of them. Moreover, this anthology is about giving a forum to talented, imaginative writers who have something to say about the perils of religion, and within the framework of speculative fiction. Having been blacklisted

by more than one offended editor for submitting irreligious tales, it was clear we needed a place to show off *our* mythology – clearly labeled as the fiction that it is.

I've worked to find a balance to the types of stories contained herein so that there's something to appeal to everyone. The only main requirement was that there was some sort of speculative element to the story that sets it apart from mainstream fiction. That means a story could be a near-future dystopia where religion has overrun society (even more than it actually has), or one set in a fantasy world with theocracy is the norm, or a tale simply imagining what might have happened – or what could happen.

We have a great mix here, and I think that there really is something for everyone. I hope there are a few somethings for everyone.

*David M. Fitzpatrick
Brewer, Maine
January 2011*

Dedication

Bill R. Moore and Jade Woods Moore

*“They locked up a man
Who wanted to rule the world
The fools
They locked up the wrong man.”*

That bit appeared on the back cover of Leonard Cohen’s 1971 album *Songs of Love and Hate*. By all reports, Cohen, who spouted this and other thoughts during a live performance in 1970 at the Isle of Wight, was just messing with his audience by trying to sound deep and insightful. Whatever it meant to Cohen, and whatever it means to other people, it meant something to Bill Moore, a contributor to this anthology.

It never occurred to me to ask Bill just *what* it meant to him, which is odd since it was the tagline at the end of every email he sent me for nearly a year. I have no doubt it meant something deep indeed, because being deep was the essence of Bill Moore.

“I love the idea of your anthology,” he told me. “It is indeed about time atheists got one. It is one of my main personal goals to spread atheism and agnosticism through literature, and I am glad to see a kindred spirit. There are far too few of

us, as you are, of course, painfully aware.”

Like me, Bill had had what he called “startlingly little success” getting his atheist-centric fiction and poetry published. His revelation was old hat to me; being sixteen years older than Bill, I’d had ample time to alienate myself from many religious editors who were offended that I had dared to send stories featuring themes about the drawbacks of religion.

Bill and I talked at length about the lack of markets for such fiction—and, especially, for such poetry. Poetry was a love of Bill’s, and he submitted many poems to me for potential inclusion here. I’m not a poet, so I’m a hard sell there, and rejected them all. Now I wish I hadn’t.

But Bill took it all in stride, and we discussed at length the lack of good markets for atheist-centric poetry and for speculative poetry in general. Before I knew it, we’d decided to co-edit a book of atheist poetry. We had found a great thread together; he was eager to work on any projects, and he appreciated an editor who truly cared and actually edited. He was never one to let his ego stand in the way, and approached constructive feedback in the spirit it was intended.

“I truly appreciate your comments and commend your efforts,” he once said. “I hope we can find some common ground, publication-wise, because it certainly isn’t every day that one comes across a kindred spirit in this arena ... Thanks again for all you do—for me and the noble cause of atheism.”

A lot was happening in Bill’s life through 2010. Most notably, he was relocating from Oklahoma to New York state, as his wife, Jade, had received a scholarship to attend Cornell University for her graduate studies. Jade Woods Moore, named Susan at birth and changing her name at age 19, was from Colorado. Born premature and with a heart problem, she dropped out of high school in the ninth grade and schooled herself. She and Bill met online and visited back and forth for a while before she moved to Oklahoma, earned her GED, and started college with Bill. Both of them graduated summa cum

laude from Southeastern Oklahoma State University, Jade with a degree in political science, and Bill with a degree in English.

Jade's dream was to go to law school, and eventually to be a lobbyist for the March of Dimes in Washington. Her goal was to help disadvantaged people, and going to Cornell had been her dream. The scholarship was for the Cornell Institute of Public Affairs, a two-year program through which Jade would earn a Master of Public Affairs.

"At CIPA, Jade was concentrating her studies in public and nonprofit management," said a write-up on the CIPA site. "She felt that her experiences in life had allowed her to see firsthand the importance of equality in education, housing, and health care, and her goal was to pursue a career in public policy that would engender social change."

Jade was excited about Bill's writing. She was interested in whether I had landed any female contributors to the anthology; she was concerned about the apparent dearth of non-religious women in any arena, but particularly as writers. I referred her to a few titles, such as *Women Without Superstition*, a collection of women's writings edited by Anne Nicol Gaylor.

Having run into many brick walls trying to publish his atheist-centric work, Bill was extremely avid about *Atheist Tales*. "We are such a minority, after all, though the speculative genre is certainly less religious than most," he once said. "I've often suspected that I've been rejected out of hand for being anti-religious. That's why I was so excited when I saw *Atheist Tales*; it seemed a gold mine!"

When I ran into trouble getting enough quality submissions, he eagerly offered to write another story. "I wish I could send you something else for it," he said. "I've been trying to think of something but haven't done so yet. Hopefully I still will, at least in time for the second installment, which I hope comes out."

He enjoyed the amusing antics religious people often displayed, like when he'd get immediately booted out of Christian

chat rooms because of his nickname, VoodooLord7, which he'd used since the eighth grade. He prided himself on being more knowledgeable about the Bible than most of the Christians who opposed him—like one time in high school, when he was reading *And the Ass Saw the Angel* by Nick Cave. A Christian student began lambasting him for reading something with such a vulgar, immoral title, only to be become utterly perplexed when Bill pointed out that it was a verbatim Bible quote (Numbers 22:23, for those of you keeping score).

In a college creative-writing class, students were to rewrite an original English poem, and a classmate chose the Song of Solomon (despite the fact that that wasn't originally in English, which Bill pointed out to no avail). During discussion, Bill noted that his favorite part was when the narrator talks about bowels moving. This led to a frantic debate about what that actually meant, and Bill just sat back and enjoyed everyone panicking over whether Biblical characters ever defecated.

The last time I traded emails with Bill was in June 2010, when he and Jade were preparing for the big move to New York. "It'll be nice to leave the Bible Belt!" he said—exclamation point included, for he was very excited.

We didn't talk for the next three months. On October 16, I finally finished editing all the *Atheist Tales* manuscripts that I had accepted and sent them out to their respective authors for approval. I didn't hear from Bill right away, which should have seemed odd, because he was usually very quick to respond. I didn't think much of it, but I had no way of knowing what had happened just eleven days before.

On Tuesday, October 5, 2010, at about 3:15 p.m., Bill and Jade were traveling along Mineah Road, Route 13, in Dryden, New York. Jade was driving their 2005 Honda, and there was a terrible accident at an intersection. A tractor trailer smashed into the driver's side of the car. Both vehicles ended up in the ditch. Jade was pronounced dead at Cayuga Medical Center a short time later. Bill suffered massive head trauma; he was

transported to Robert Packer Medical Center in Sayre, Pennsylvania, where he died the next day. She was 24; he was 25.

I only knew because Bill's mother had gotten his computer and was going through the difficult task of cleaning up all the loose ends of her son's life. His contribution to *Atheist Tales* was one of those loose ends, and she really wanted to make sure his story could still get published.

Bill said he grew up in "the buckle of the Bible Belt." The irony of him leaving that buckle and quickly losing his life is not lost on me. I can already hear the cries of some heartless and insensitive types as they claim it was God's retribution for Bill's atheism. But of course it wasn't anything related to mythology; it was just something that happened, one of those terrible things that is, unfortunately, the stuff of life. No gods. No meaning to their deaths. No reason for it all. Just an absolutely horrible thing that happened, out of anyone's control.

I'm honoring the memory of Bill R. Moore and Jade Woods Moore by dedicating this anthology *to* them, but it isn't *for* them, because they're gone forever. This dedication is for you. It won't bring either of them back, and I know Bill won't be smiling at us from some far-beyond afterlife. But he would be if it were possible. Even for atheists, it can feel better if we imagine, for a moment, that there is something after, and that our lives aren't just blinks of eternity's eye.

But that's what they are. Bill Moore made the most of his life, however brief it was. He knew what mattered to him. He wrote about those things. He spoke of atheism as a noble cause, and he was right. He knew that life was fleeting, and that only what we do with our time here matters. It's the worst tragedy that he didn't live a lot longer than he did. If there were any better example of making the most of the time we have, I can't imagine it.

A New Beginning

Bill R. Moore

They had traveled throughout many universes and seen many suns on Their search to find the race that met Their singular needs. They had seen many possible subjects and passed on them as if they were nothing. Occasionally, They even tried them but always without success.

And then They found Earth.

The moment They saw the planet, They knew it was perfect, for it was a planet with the ideal atmosphere, climate, and water content to supply Them with the very thing They needed: intelligent life. And on it were any number of species on which They could experiment. But not just any race would do. No, He was very selective in choosing a species He and His kind were to overtake.

After endless tests, speculation, and arguing amongst themselves, They found a sufficient life form to meet their needs. After exhausting the land, They settled, inevitably, on the creatures of the sea. Then, slowly at first, but at increasingly faster intervals, They began to overtake these creatures.

It's All About Soul

Jane Gallagher

The fact that the United Earth Convention of 2244 had declared human cloning illegal didn't sway John Benning's decision in the least. He wasn't even concerned about the scores of undercover Acolytic Police he knew were out there, dispatched by the Church and constantly hunting for those breaking the morals. Anyone off the street stopping by Benning's genetics shop in search of something as mundane as a new pair of eyes, even though appearing as an average Congregationalist, could easily be an officer of the Church. Breaking any number of morals could cause a business to be shut down, or worse.

For genetic alterations outside moral allowance—a very rigid set of rules outlined by the Church—the punishment depended on which moral was broken. Extreme tithing, public ridicule in the stocks, or Net-broadcast whippings were not uncommon for small violations. Deviances of greater extreme commanded more serious judgments, and cloning a human was, by far, the worst. Certainly, only violations of the Ten Commandments and a few other select Words of God were

grounds for death by crucifixion, but cloning could command amputation and organ removal.

In all other respects, Benning was a completely moral Congregationalist in society. At his genetics shop, he sold completely moral things such as age-reduction procedures, genetic repairs, stimulated regrowth of limbs and organs removed by the Church as punishment (provided the ordered suffering period was over), and certain vanity replacements approved by the Church. But Benning knew he could do it and could hardly resist himself.

He had several factors in his favor. First, he was a geneticist by vocation and an extremely good one, and had a lot of morally allowed equipment used in animal cloning. Second, he was respected by local Church authorities and was friends with several street-police Acolytes who trusted him. Third, he had a sub-basement hidden beneath his shop in which to perform the lengthy cloning process, a suitable hideaway that was impervious even to the periodic full-premises search-and-seizures that the Acolytic Police routinely conducted.

But the most important factor of all was that John Benning had once had a twin brother. Jacob had died three days after birth and John's mother hadn't reported it to the Holy Authority. His birth, however, had been reported, so as far as the Church was concerned, there were two humans with the same DNA walking around on the Earth. A clone could easily be explained as a long-lost brother come back to his sibling.

So, in the secrecy of his shielded sub-basement, John Benning used his years of experience and chemical concoctions not legally available since before the Great Crusade a hundred years before to clone himself. Intensive, controlled accelerants and constant nutrient baths brought quickly to life a full-size genetic duplicate of him in under a month's time. There were a few things to take care of; even identical twins had different fingerprints and retinal patterns, for example, but it was a mere hour's work in his upstairs lab to work up a new set of

All Hail Splork

John Lance

“So, this is awkward,” said the President of the United States as he adjusted his red-and-blue striped tie.

“What do you mean, mortal?” asked the giant Viking sitting astride an eight-legged horse on the White House lawn. The Viking wore an eye patch over his left eye and glowered at the President with his right. Several ravens were perched on the Viking’s shoulders and helmet, and they watched the President with the same unblinking stare as their master. The President decided not to mention the bird poop.

“Well, you see, no one really believes...” the President’s voice cracked. Taking a moment to compose himself, he tried a second explanation, using his best ‘I-need-to-raise-taxes-please-don’t-vote-me-out-of-office’ voice. “You see, times have been hard. Very hard, since last you were, ummm, here. And I’m afraid that the situation is not what it once was.”

The Viking’s eye narrowed. The President tried not to notice. He hated giving speeches in person. It was so much easier to lie directly to a camera. The President also had the nagging

suspicion that he had met the Viking previously, but couldn't remember where or when, which always annoyed him since he was usually excellent with names and faces.

The President continued. "In the last couple thousand years, humanity has grown fond of a few other folks. Personally, I'm a fan of Jesus, but plenty of other people follow Mohammad or Yahweh or Buddha, or—" Suddenly the President knew why the Viking looked so familiar. "I just need to pause here and ask: By any chance are you aware of how closely you resemble the mascot for the Minnesota Vikings? It's really remarkable."

The one-eyed giant adjusted his horned helmet but did not reply.

"No, you're probably not. I shouldn't have even mentioned it. Anyway, what I'm trying to get at here, Odie..."

"Odin," said the giant.

"Right, Odin, sorry, Odie is the dog from the comic strip. What I'm trying to say is that, well, we were expecting someone different for the whole 'end of the world' thing. What did you call it again?"

"Ragnarok, the twilight of the gods," replied the giant.

"Right, that. Anyway, we all thought there'd be four horsemen who ride on horses that have, you know, four legs, and an angel that was going to blow a trumpet and, well, the truth is, and I'm being honest with you here, Odie, this is going to be a very hard sell to the American people."

"Speak clearly, knave."

The President sighed. He hated speaking clearly. Unfortunately, there were times when it had to be done. "The truth is we just don't believe in you anymore."

"You don't believe in the gods? You are atheists?"

"No, no, we believe in *a* god—just not you."

"You are pagans?"

The President hesitated. "Are you sure there isn't someone else I could speak to, Hera or Hercules perhaps?"

Resuscitation

James Hickey

ANNUNCIATION

These days, half the headlines make me feel like what's his name, in the Bhagavad-Gita. Watching, over the shoulder, as I write this, her laugh tickles my ear as she whispers, "Arjuna!" I look up from the Jimbo Resuscitation Blog that she created for me. "His name..." She gestures as I smile.

"Right. I always forget that." Acknowledgement, nodding: "You are the best, baby."

"Beautiful friends," she says, smiling now, "you know, like you said."

Ah, yes. So I did. Anyhow, like Arjuna, getting ready to raise his arm and drop his sword to commence the slaughter for that greedy bastard Krishna. On any given day, all the cousins are ready to lock and load and rock and roll. The Gulf Wars, 9/11, and the systemic economic meltdown a generation past—everybody feels it. Every city crowd, every gathering of people who are the least bit strange to each other, even if the

Dalai Lama himself has keynote responsibilities. Feels like the end of a cattle drive, when the steers smell the finish and fear is a fist around the heart.

No wonder, as it stands, that everyone also seems obsessed with “the afterlife.” This is where my story comes in. I have personal, first-hand, I’m-betting-my-resuscitated-life definitive data about all of those currently irresistible issues of Heaven and Hell. I could offer all kinds of ‘po-mo’ details about setting and psyche here, but what are they compared to this magnificent material, the very stuffing of nirvana versus nothingness? No matter how the shit hits the fan, I have to honor this.

I’ve died, I’ve come back to life, I’ve written a book—moderate-to-nothing sales, until that idiot Robertson, “Pat Jr.,” bless his heart, declared jihad against me—and lately I’ve been doing the book-tour deal. The media hipsters have been filing their nails before their stories, and now here I am back in Atlanta. I’ll just say up front that hometown turf has never felt so foreign.

Anyhow, that’s the setup. Ms. Free Speech Radio News, my marvelous *compañera*, is still here, taking advantage of her exclusive access, assured of the continuation of our wonderful “friendship,” and keeping watch over me, another miracle in the chain of serendipitous circumstances that this whole scene suggests. The lucky accident of life beckons us to accept it all, whether we have the stomach for it or not. Part of acceptance is memory, which is what I’m doing right now.

I knew that the midweek-afternoon crowd—over a hundred and fifty at the Peachtree Road Borders Cafe, not including security, media, various gawkers more or less clueless—represented success, at least from the business perspective of booksellers. Still, given the extremely sharp stick in fundamentalists’ eyes that my story represented, I knew that the hazards of success were significant. More than this, I knew that Borders,

of awareness, barely audible to my observant self, the words tripped off my tongue, from page 169 and the final few paragraphs of the fifth-printing's afterword.

Just hours before, my wife and I had been laughing at the passing icebergs, swilling Scotch, and slurring Robert Frost:

Some say the world will in end in fire,

Some say in ice.

From what I've tasted of desire,

I hold with those who favor fire.

But if I had to perish twice, well

Ice is nice,

And would suffice.

And then we drowned, in cold, dark water. Yet here I am, a writer with a book, pleading for attention, for just a modicum of thoughtful consideration. If ever a tale of love and redemption pointed out a future for our kind, this one does. Not because I've written this guide do I beg my readers' indulgence, but because, by the terrible grace of whatever guides the cosmos, I was the first to experience such an awakening from the long cold sleep of dreamless night that is death.

As always the applause was modest, albeit I sensed a deep psychic hush in a few listeners, which I found so gratifying. More often each time I read a growing gallery of folks attended who obviously were about to succumb to the reaper: There the palsied old fellow with the respirator, there the young woman with the chemo-glow, maybe eight or so others here in Atlanta, all of them with brimming eyes and a paradoxical patina of hope. It looked like hope in any case, as I paused prior to speaking again. To me, just the notion that people might choose something other than religious pap represented a powerfully positive sign for our kind.

"Hey all! I hope that some of you will stay for my broad-

Rise Up, Rise Up!

Sarah Trachtenberg

I know it sounds too coincidental to be true, but I really was on an airplane when it happened, flying home from Stockholm.

Let me explain. It's hard to sound humble when I say this, but I was collecting the Nobel Prize in Medicine. My wife took the time from her research to join me and we received as many congratulations as we had at our wedding twenty-seven years ago. I was on top of the world, but my wife later told me that I hadn't smiled much during the award ceremony.

"It was just such a serious moment," Sally said afterwards over one last glass of champagne in our honeymoon suite. Maybe she was right. Olympic athletes didn't smile when they received their medals, even if they said they were the happiest moments of their lives. On the other hand, hadn't Sally and I both smiled ear-to-ear when our two children were born?

Part of me felt silly about the whole Nobel thing. Sure, I was proud of my achievements. I was proud of what I had done to deserve such recognition. Why not? I had worked hard

and I earned it. Still... well, my finding wasn't exactly what I had been looking for. Earth-shattering though it may have been, it was, like Fleming's penicillin, something into which I had fallen ass-backwards.

I'm a neuroscientist. Not a brain surgeon, mind you, at least not exactly, and I do joke, "It's not brain surgery." When I share the nature of my research at cocktail parties, people make a lot of mad-scientist jokes as if my work were implanting ideas into people's brains. Really, it's not. When examining the physiology of depression, in the interest of drug development, my data revealed the exact area of the brain, which the press quickly dubbed "god-shaped hole," that enabled religion. The geography of the brain contained the exact spot—so amazing, the brain! It never fails to fascinate—that was the cause of so much pain and guilt. And now, it would be possible to shut it off like a light switch.

It was a perfect time for that perfect windfall. New Atheism was in full swing: advocates, mostly biologists and physicists, organized and came forward to speak out against the existence of god and for the idea that religion was doing more harm than good. More and more atheists stood up to be heard, either having come out of the closet or recently "converted." For the first time, mainstream movies and TV shows had atheist themes and characters. Books about religion, and specifically whether religion was extremely good or extremely bad, sold almost as well as Harry Potter books. The news media, with an almost bloodthirsty delight, were reporting what I was tempted to describe as catfights between the pro- and anti-religion camps. As for myself, I paid little attention to such matters and hadn't even read all the popular books until my discovery thrust me onto the stage. I didn't expect to be in the limelight and didn't know quite what to do with it at first.

When the pharmaceutical team was about to release Nogerinoil, the gravity of the matter hit me. This may sound childish, but unlike the way the researchers on the Manhattan

Project couldn't seem to surmise, despite all their brains, that their creation was going to be used to kill people, my realization wasn't one of dread; really morbid curiosity. I had encouraged Nogerinoil. I knew, of course, what it would do: cure depression. Many people were depressed due to religion. Patients knew this, or at least their psychiatrists knew, and wanted to get rid of the factor of religion. Simply inhibit the god-shaped hole and patients would be spared the misery that plagued them.

Nogerinoil could save lives, since many depressed people killed themselves, to say nothing of the rest of the damage: depression caused car accidents, industrial accidents, child abuse, and so forth. Economically, the media pointed out that Nogerinoil would alleviate the problem of depression-related absence and lack of productivity at work, which cost corporations tens of billions a year. What a boon!

I hadn't given serious thought to what Nogerinoil would do for religion itself. For the religious. For those who weren't depressed and wouldn't "need" the psychopharm. Would the non-depressed world even notice yet another prescription drug on the market?

Finally, when TIME magazine interviewed Ronald Barlofski, the top pharm guy, and me, and buzz had it that TIME was thinking "men of the year," what I hath wrought hit me. The journalist was one of those aging hippie types who had a Pulitzer under his belt. When things got more comfortable and chatty between him, Ron and me, the journalist asked me point blank:

"Dr. Ray, do you think that the world would be better without religion?"

So simple, and yet... I knew from previous interviews about my god-shaped-hole discovery that journalists rarely asked yes/no questions, but at times, nothing else would do.

Ever since the media reported my findings and especially after Ron spearheaded Nogerinoil, I had fielded much more

Fried Eggs

Gary J. Beharry

"I'm trying to meditate here!" God yelled over untempoed bongo-drum beats from the other bedroom. When the pounding didn't stop, he poked his head out of his bedroom to see Satan in the room across the hall, naked, flouncing around two huge human-skinned bongo drums—somehow managing to stand out amidst crumpled candy wrappers, Popeyes Chicken boxes, empty ketchup packets, *Playboys*, *Swanks*, and ashes strewn about the floor.

"Satan!" God boomed at his first-time roommate.

Immediately, Satan stilled and smirked at his landlord. "What's up, doc?" he asked coquettishly.

God sighed, counting to ten while stroking his beard. "It's my meditation time. Can you keep it down for another half an hour?"

Satan spread his hands out in a placating gesture and said, "I don't get a chance to express myself down there. This is the only vacation I get. Remember, this was your idea."

God sighed again and grimaced. "All right. All right." He

looked away suddenly and, before retreating, said, "At least put some clothes on. I should have never exaggerated you."

He heard one drum beat, followed by two more. "I take after my father," Satan said, followed by more drumbeats.

God gritted his teeth. Why did he agree to this stupid arrangement? Of course, he knew why: It was part of his self-therapy. After all, how could he be an omniscient power who said that man should forgive, yet at the same time have his most beloved angel damned to Hell? So he recently decided that, for two weeks out of every year from now on, he would give his most disappointing one-time servant a supervised vacation.

"How ya feelin'? Hot! Hot! Hot!" Satan sang from his bedroom, banging on the drums with each word.

Freedom. It was such a taken-for-granted thing. God retreated to his room and continued his meditation, scowling when Guns N' Roses' *Appetite for Destruction* started blasting from Satan's room. Rhythmic bangs in tune with the guitar strums of "Sweet Child of Mine" brought to God's mind Satan jumping up and down, strumming on his air guitar.

After Axl Rose sang his entire album for two encores, God finally thought that Satan had tired himself out, but his face quickly reddened when he realized what Satan was actually doing: squishy rubbing and moaning sounds oozing through the bottom of the door and finding their way to God's ear, ending minutes later in a drawn-out moan.

God slammed his pillow over his head. Eventually, the great wail of ecstasy died away but was quickly replaced by heavy footsteps plodding down the hall. Water splashed in the bathroom, then the heavy footsteps returned, this time combined with a long, wailing yawn. Minutes later, God began to count the heavy snores, and gradually felt himself drifting to sleep.

God scratched his crotch through his striped boxer shorts, stretched his arms, and yawned.

Dear Theologian

Dan Barker

Dear Theologian,

I have a few questions, and I thought you would be the right person to ask. It gets tough sometimes, sitting up here in heaven with no one to talk to. I mean really talk to. I can always converse with the angels, of course, but since they don't have free will, and since I created every thought in their submissive minds, they are not very stimulating conversationalists.

Of course, I can talk with my son Jesus and with the "third person" of our holy trinity, the Holy Spirit, but since we are all the same, there is nothing we can learn from each other. There are no well-placed repartees in the Godhead. We all know what the others know. We can't exactly play chess. Jesus sometimes calls me "Father," and that feels good, but since he and I are the same age and have the same powers, it doesn't mean much.

You are educated. You have examined philosophy and world religions, and you have a degree which makes you

qualified to carry on a discussion with someone at my level—not that I can't talk with anyone, even with the uneducated believers who fill the churches and flatter me with endless petitions, but you know how it is. Sometimes we all crave interaction with a respected colleague. You have read the scholars. You have written papers and published books about me, and you know me better than anyone else.

It might surprise you to think that I have some questions. No, not rhetorical questions aimed at teaching spiritual lessons, but some real, honest-to-God inquiries. This should not shock you because, after all, I created you in my image. Your inquisitiveness is an inheritance from me. You would say that love, for example, is a reflection of my nature within yourself, wouldn't you? Since questioning is healthy, it also comes from me.

Somebody once said that we should prove all things, and hold fast that which is good. My first question is this:

Where did I come from?

I find myself sitting up here in heaven, and I look around and notice that there is nothing else besides myself and the objects that I have created. I don't see any other creatures competing with me, nor do I notice anything above myself that might have created me, unless it is playing hide-and-seek. In any event, as far as I know (and I supposedly know everything), there is nothing else but me in-three-persons and my creations. I have always existed, you say. I did not create myself, because if I did, then I would be greater than myself.

So where did I come from?

I know how you approach that question regarding your own existence. You notice that nature, especially the human mind, displays evidence of intricate design. You have never observed such design apart from a designer. You argue that human beings must have had a creator, and you will find no disagreement from me.

A New Broom

Dan Thompson

Severed human heads stared sightlessly at the shuttered windows of the buildings surrounding Tarragona's plaza, each decaying remain spiked on one of hundreds of tall poles planted in the paving. Some of the men in Sam Thorne's landing party swore godless curses at the gruesome display but most were struck speechless.

"The Brotherhood," their guide, Franco Ortiz, whispered. "Since they conquered Catalonia, the Brotherhood has been busy converting the heathen." He pointed to the rows of heads. "They are the ones who were too devout in their beliefs to accept God's Hand as the True Faith; Christians, mostly, and a few Jews and Muslims."

He led them to a corner of the plaza, where a large pile of broken machinery glinted in the moonlight. Suspended above the shattered brass, steel, and cast-iron apparatus, a wooden cage hung from a timber frame, holding the rotting remains of a man. Above his empty eye sockets, wisps of gray hair waved in the gentle breeze. White bones poked through tattered strips

of cloth and flesh.

“Professor Morgan,” Ortiz said. “When the Brotherhood discovered the Difference Engine in his workshop, it outraged them. Technology is the Great Evil. Science caused the Cataclysm. That’s what they preach. When they found a working computer! Well, you can see for yourself.”

The eruption of the super-volcano at Yellowstone had buried North America in ash and quickly killed millions. The dense clouds of ash that were blown into the atmosphere circled the world and brought a volcanic winter that lasted for years. The darkness, the cold, and the acid rain that fell from the black skies caused mass extinctions of plant and animal life. Ninety-five of every hundred humans on Earth died of starvation, disease, or at the hands of other humans in those terrible years. The survivors might have kept the machinery of civilization running, but rumors that the Cataclysm was a man-made creation, triggered by scientists’ meddling with nature, spread nearly as fast as the ash clouds. The terrified and angry survivors smashed machines, burned books, and lynched anyone associated with science. A two-hundred-year Dark Age settled over the world. Now, a few isolated nations like Hypatia struggled back to civilization.

Anger froze Thorne. His people had stories that said computers had once changed the world. It would be generations, at least, before they could build one. They’d only recently rediscovered electricity. But then they got word about the Babbage Machine, a computer that they could build. Hypatia’s leaders believed gaining it worth the risk of sending a ship, even though they had so few. They had placed their hopes and trust in him. They desperately needed an advantage in a world full of enemies that hated them because they refused to bow down to superstition. Now that hoped-for edge was nothing but a broken promise.

“Damn them to their own hell!” Thorne swore. He was too late. They’d made the long voyage through packs of icebergs

drifting down almost to the Equator and a fierce storm off the coast of Africa that nearly sank them. Now he risked himself and his men in an enemy-occupied city – all for nothing. With Morgan dead and the Difference Engine destroyed, he'd failed his mission.

"It was horrible." Ortiz was still talking, quietly, staring at the cage. He hadn't heard Thorne at all. "They let him die of thirst. I came every day but I couldn't help him. I wouldn't let the *señorita* come here at all."

"You did well, friend." Thorne placed a comforting hand on the slight man's shoulder. He felt Ortiz trembling; whether from rage or sorrow, he didn't know. "Now, let's get away from this stinking place."

Ortiz led them to a large house just off the plaza. Inside, he lit an oil lamp, illuminating a large room furnished with comfortable-looking chairs and a table. Large, dark oak shelves lined one wall, filled with books in leather bindings and even a few with the colorful paper covers common before the Cataclysm. Thorne heard a soft scuffing sound and turned to see a young woman coming down a curved staircase of the same polished dark oak as the furniture and bookshelves.

She had raven-black hair woven in a heavy braid, and her face held an olive complexion. Dark eyes, a patrician nose, and a full mouth graced an oval face. A tight Catalonian dress showed to advantage her voluptuous figure. She was beautiful. And she held a small flintlock pistol in her right hand, pointed unwaveringly at Thorne's chest.

Carmen Morgan aimed the pistol at the big man standing next to Franco. Tall, nearly two meters, and broad-shouldered, he had long, dark-brown hair tied in a sailor's queue and a full but neatly trimmed beard. A wide-brimmed hat shaded cool, gray eyes. His deeply tanned, weathered face gave a false impression of age. She decided he wasn't more than five or six years older than she. She didn't doubt for a second that he was

The Word Is 'Freedom'

Corwin Merrill

They pursued him through the deluge, mindless crusaders with a purpose. He'd been able to see lights behind him across the fields for the last hour, but in the past five minutes he'd been able to hear them. The mad, howling storm was so intense that to hear them at all meant they were dangerously close.

Horizontal rain stung his face like a plague of locusts. He leaned into the screaming wind, squinting, hand out to break the rain from his eyes, and pushed onward. He couldn't be captured. If they acquired what he carried, so many would suffer.

He stole a look over his shoulder. Beyond the rise were the faint glows of many lights. He stumbled on the muddy gravel but kept moving. They were damn close, and he was so tired. He'd barely slept at all in the past five days. His body ached and cried out in its exhaustion for him to stop, to just collapse and let sleep overtake him. He couldn't let that happen.

* * *

"How do we know he has it, Captain Gramwell?" the nervous young man hollered over the storm.

"Another of his kind told us all about it," Gramwell hollered back in the dimness of their lights. "It's amazing what those barbarians will say when you drive a few steel spikes through their bodies."

"I wonder what's taking the skimmer so long," the kid said.

Gramwell smiled. "You tired of this, kid?"

"No, sir," the kid said, but his face said otherwise.

"Not discouraged from the rain and the wind?" Gramwell asked with a sardonic grin. Rain smacked his wrinkled face; wind whipped his soaked hair around. He was the only one in the group not wearing any headgear. The rest of them were bundled up as if ready for an Arctic trip. "Not tired and hungry and wishing you were dry?"

"I suppose I am, sir," the kid yelled. "But I want to see him caught."

"As well you should," Gramwell said with a chuckle. "And we'll get him, son. We have to. He carries something we need. So all of you remember," he said, raising his voice, "as tempting as it is, keep this one alive—and don't damage him. We don't know where it's hidden."

"Sir, the skimmer is on its way," came a voice from the liquid darkness, and Gramwell smiled with satisfaction.

He broke the rise and saw it. Straight ahead, nearly invisible in the black torrent, he saw the dark outline: the forest, several hundred feet away. A surge of hope exploded in his heart like a firecracker and he staggered drunkenly forward. If he could break the treeline before they topped the ridge behind him, he'd be safe. Without dogs or air support, they'd never track him in there. His heart was like a woodpecker trapped inside a tree. His lungs felt like swelling balloons, full of chilly air and cold water. If all he got out of this

were pneumonia, he knew he'd be lucky.

His foot suddenly hit an unseen rock and he went over the way they'd toppled what was left of the Washington Monument when he was eight. He hit the ground sprawling, cursing the precious lost seconds.

He clambered to his feet and snapped a look back as he staggered into a clumsy sprint. He couldn't see their lights behind him. The trees loomed close before him. He was going to make it. He ran again, fast and awkward, feeling like the scarecrow in a movie he'd seen as a child. It was banned now, like most movies—especially a fantasy like that, full of magic and all. The censorship was such a tragedy—

The sky lit suddenly up above and before him. He yelled in anguish, skidding to a stop as the massive hovercraft roared into view over the treetops and dropped sharply between him and the woods. Blinding spotlights targeted him as if he were some overrated stage performer. The thirty-foot, silver-domed skimmer's sensors were locked on and he knew it wouldn't lose him. He watched helplessly as it lowered to the ground, blue-glowing pulse guns emerging from their compartments with hydraulic whirs.

He stood in the driving rain, pelted as if by countless nails, hands up and fingers at his temples, waiting for the end. That was standard procedure. He only hoped they opened up good, and aimed above his shoulders. That ought to destroy his cargo.

Behind him, the voices were getting louder. He looked over his shoulder to see the searchers herding toward him like excited cattle. He spun back to the hovercraft, eyes wide.

"Do it!" he yelled above the roar of the storm, keeping his hands at his temples. "DO IT!"

They did it.

He was on cold concrete, still wet. Every joint was stiff. Every muscle ached. He had a pounding migraine. He tried to

The Screwletter Tapes:

Messages from Heaven... to a 21st-Century Christian

Earl Lee

PROLOGUE

These phone messages are from the private voicemails of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, known affectionately to his closest childhood friends as "Wurmig." These voicemails were transcribed in 2005 and inadvertently preserved in the Vatican Archives for the benefit of future generations of Christian scholars. And now that Cardinal Ratzinger has become the Pontiff, these messages take on a whole new importance.

Who is the person who speaks on the voicemails? In the context of his messages the author claims to be "Archy" who is an "Angel of The Lord" or alternatively a "Holy Inquisitor." His identity is uncertain, and some skeptics have claimed that he could be just a lowly priest or even a lay person who is mentally ill – although that cannot

be determined from the context. In any case, his phone messages to "Wurmig" provide a new theological insight into the "The Heavenly and Angelic Hosts" who watch over us.

Several Christian theologians are already describing these messages as the most significant event in the history of the Christian church since Pope John XXIII opened the secret letter from Our Lady of Fatima, on 17 August 1959, and then discovered that the envelope contained the lost laundry list of Pope Pius XII, from Easter 1944.

– The Editor

THE VOICEMAIL MESSAGES

Message #1: Television and Popular Culture

"You have reached The House of Ratz. Sorry I can't answer the phone right now, and my assistant is always under a Bishop these days. But your call is very important to me, so please leave your message after you hear the beep...."

[BEEP!]

"Hello.... Wurmig, is that you? Pick up, please. Come on, pick up.... Oh, Damnation, I hate these things. But... oh well... here goes."

[Noise in background as a wooden chair is adjusted on Linoleum.]

"My Dear Wurmig,

"After the visit of Our Beloved Pope, George 'n Ringo... Ha! Ha! That joke always gets me. Here, let me start again..."

"After Our Beloved Pope John Paul visited the United States last winter, I decided that it was My duty as an Angel of the Lord... and as an officially lay'd leader of the Holy Office of the Inquisition... to visit a group of churches in the St. Louis area to see how Our Master's message was received.

"I was led to believe that the United States was a very liberal country. I was expecting the city of St. Louis on the Missis-

issippi River to be very much like Paris on the Left Bank of the river Seine. But much to My surprise and delight, the people I met were all staunch conservatives in their religion. I am told that this is a fairly new development, and it is one that is very much to Our liking.

“The growing social conservatism in the U.S. is a hopeful trend, especially as conservatism lends itself to an unflinching belief in religious rites and traditions – that is, to traditionalism in general and *in situ*. And this trend helps Our Holy Cause.

“I know you are very concerned about the fact that many millions of Americans watch television and get all their news and opinions from that source. But not to worry. Years ago there was a leftward bias in the news, especially during the Vietnam War era, but that old liberalism has dissolved into a stew of bad memories. For example, Dan Rather is no longer an anchor on network TV news. Instead, people listen to Bill O’Reilly and Ann Coulter and Rush Limbaugh, *bless their souls*, not to mention the consistently Rightward message of all Our good friends at the Fox News Channel – *May the Saints Preserve Them in Their Sanctity and Holiness*.

“Almost all of the major talking heads are on Our side now, like Pat Buchanan and Mike Huckabee. Pat has always been a strong Defender of the Catholic Faith, and Mike is a Holy-owned subsidiary of the Southern Baptist Convention. None of the more left-leaning news commentators is willing to challenge Us! – at least not directly. They know that Our Defenders stand ready to inundate their bosses with angry letters and threats to boycott their sponsors. We are masters of the poisoned pen and the rumor mill. We don’t have to worry about mere facts because We can bombard Our enemies with iron-balled opinions. The Church Canon stands always forever ready, and The Holy Church will always be triumphant! Their mere scientific facts and secular truths fall before Our lightest shadow, and the power of Our True Truth – meaning the Only Begotten Truth of the Saints and the Scriptures – it overawes

From Above

Marianna Manns

The unrelenting sun scalded the crowd of worshipers that had gathered to listen to the Messengers. It was only once a week that anyone faced the intensity of midday; except for days of temple, citizens rested while the sun was highest in the sky. They would not complain of their personal ordeal—the poor with their bare feet blistering on the baked ground and the rich with sweat soaking their silk garments—for the wealthy and the poor served alike. On one day of every week they knelt outside the temple like equals.

It had been the Messengers who decided that fortune had no place in the sacraments. “The Gods reward those who follow their laws,” they said, “regardless of standing.” Those who were privileged enough to indulge in luxuries on any other day found no favour at the temple. They knelt outside on the ground next to the poor, albeit with palm-fiber sandals to protect their feet and heavy veils covering porcelain skin.

Everyone knelt in silence, stone-like and still, their heads bowed. Enduring the steaming temperature, the stifling air, the

blinding sun, and the stinging sand, not one person so much as whimpered in discomfort. All wore faces of stone as they awaited the ceremony.

A boy called Sajha knelt in the front row, staring down at his sun-stained toes. Like those around him, his face did not display the pain of sitting stiffly in an awkward position while the skin on the bottoms of his feet baked beneath him. He tried not to think about his flesh cooking as if on a charred iron grill, but images of thick, blackened slabs of meat kept squirming into his head.

Instead of supporting him in his crouched position, his calloused hands were crossed over his chest. It was a struggle of will to keep them there as his calves began to cramp. He had lived for sixteen years under the reign of the Messengers. If the Gods willed him to kneel in wait for an indeterminate amount of time without moving a muscle before each ceremony, then he would. But even the Gods and their Messengers could not prevent his bitterness. He was still human.

Sajha hoped that his thoughts were not reflected on his face. He had never been given any indication that the Gods could access his mind, but if the Messengers saw his displeasure his family could lose its favour.

His family flanked him on both sides, a devout group of workers strong of body and of faith. They served the Gods and were rewarded for it. Sajha's sister, Aalya, had recently been granted permission to study at the temple of the Messengers. It was an honour for their family, bringing them a scholarly status. Sajha had also benefited personally from her elevation.

It was unheard of for a well-off young lady like Jade to speak with him, but Sajha had mustered up the courage to at Aalya's acceptance ceremony. Jade was a daughter of one of the Messengers, and looking across the crowd at her now, Sajha felt that she was wrapped in mystery. Her hair had a red sheen to it, and her skin was a light cream, hardly touched by the sun. Her eyes did not wander the crowd as his did. She

stared straight ahead to the dais at the foot of the temple, where the Messengers would stand, with a knowing look in her almond-shaped eyes. Jade was not mystified by the Messengers, which made sense, being that she was the daughter of one. Her pride and confidence left him bewildered that she would converse with him.

Yet at Aalya's acceptance ceremony, while the early guests waited in a shadowy alcove on the side of the courtyard, Sajha had made an effort to work his way toward her. Jade had looked regal and omniscient that day as well. He had searched his brain for something to say to her, but was speechless until she spoke.

"That is your sister. Your family must be proud."

Sajha was surprised at her confidence and way of speaking. There was no questioning inflection in her voice, and he was put off guard, but eventually replied, "Yes, they are."

"They have good reason. The Messengers choose few disciples." Jade glanced into the bright courtyard to where Aalya was preparing for her initiation, a look of genuine concern in her eyes. "You will help her with her studies, I am sure? Some are unable to take the strain of being chosen by the Messengers."

"I will."

"She will do well, then," Jade replied. Then, as suddenly as the conversation had begun, she had picked up her skirts of undyed cotton and whisked herself away.

Remembering the conversation set Sajha's heart pumping. He wished he had said something more intelligent or interesting, and he replayed the situation over again in his mind, imagining all the things he could have said to impress her. More than once he thought of what it would be like if he had been chosen to study with the Messengers.

The memory faded from his mind as the Messengers approached. The soft swish of robes and the plodding of leather-shod feet penetrated the silence. Seven figures, clothed in simple

white, took lengthy, measured strides towards the centre of the crowd. Men and women alike wore their hair long and looked majestic despite modest garbs. They took in the crowd with steady gazes, their faces impossible to read.

The Messengers spoke as one, their words unified eerily in a single voice made up of a variation in timbres and pitches, yet clear and distinctive. "Today the worshipping of the Gods must be delayed to contend with an issue that has come to their attention." The voices were expressionless, revealing nothing, but Sajha's breath caught in his chest at their words.

"There has been a violation of the will of the Gods that must be dealt with swiftly and effectively. A third child has been born to a family, in direct disobedience to the Gods' will. This growth in population is unacceptable, but the children will be raised by the Messengers of the Gods, cared for by the generosity of the State. This is a place of honour for them, but penitence must be paid by their antecedents."

They turned as one towards the temple and motioned for the crowd to look upon the lawbreakers, a pair of married merchants, who were escorted by one unarmed guard. Fear was evident in their faces but they did not try to escape. They walked bravely to the dais and knelt before the Messengers.

Their obedience was surprising to Sajha, who felt that he would fight defiantly even if he had broken the rules. He understood that the Gods' laws were for the benefit of their society, but as he imagined himself before that dais all he could envision was a struggle, to put all of his physical strength to hindering his assailants. He would scream and beg for mercy, for the crowd around him to rise against this brutal authority.

Yet in all the oppression he had seen in his life, never had a victim pleaded. They always accepted their fate peacefully. Most said it was the will of the Gods, or the power of the Messengers, that strengthened people as they faced their punishment. The couple knelt with careworn faces raised, dignified, toward the sky.

Unlikely Messengers

David M. Fitzpatrick

The bitter January cold stabbed like frozen needles into Mitch Jensen's face as he hurried through the night. A wind whipped down the street, as invisible and unrelenting as an angry poltergeist. He wasn't dressed for this kind of weather, and he could already feel his aching lungs constricting, but then the city manager had made it sound like nothing short of an emergency. He'd even left his Bible on the front seat of his car, just so it was easy to keep his hands pulled inside his coat sleeves. He brrr-ed aloud against the cold and mounted the steps to Bangor's City Hall. He'd never been there at two in the morning.

The lights were on and a waiting city cop opened the door for him. Jensen felt the welcome blast of heat in his face.

"Morning, Pastor," said the cop, whose name tag said he was Officer Guilford. "Cold night for this."

Jensen shivered, pausing to haul his inhaler out of his jacket pocket and take a puff. "That it is. So what's this about?"

"I'm just supposed to let you folks in," the cop said. He

motioned for Jensen to follow.

“What other folks?” Jensen asked as they headed up the stairs. He puffed again on the inhaler, and felt his lungs relaxing. Oxygen was good.

“Lots of your religious colleagues,” he replied amidst the hollow echoes of his boots thudding in the stairwell. “I guess this one needs a bunch of different faiths.”

“What happened?” Jensen pressed as they stopped at the top of the third-floor stairs.

Guilford’s brow furrowed on his solemn face. “I was told not to talk about it, but... one of my officers found him in Bass Park, near the Paul Bunyan statue. He was dazed and not dressed for this weather. And when Officer Dickerson saw... the *thing*... well, he called Chief Cullen, who called the city manager, and here we are. You’ll see soon enough.”

They entered the third-floor hallway and there was Officer Dickerson, a grizzled, heavysset city patrolman. Like Guilford, he looked distracted.

“The last one,” Guilford said to Dickerson.

Dickerson looked Jensen up and down. “Kinda young for a priest, aren’t you?”

“Actually, I’m a Methodist minister.”

“Oh, sorry—I don’t go to church much.” A weak laugh stumbled out. “Although I guess I’d better start. Anyway, they’re down the hall—city manager’s office.”

Jensen could feel the cops’ eyes on him as he headed for the open door. This was easily the strangest trip he’d ever taken to City Hall—not like council meetings or registering his car. Suddenly, he thought about that Bible he’d left in the car, and he was gripped by the idea of running back for it. Then he fought the urge; it was really cold out there.

He found the city manager at the receptionist’s desk, slumped back, looking dazed. There was a flat-panel television on the wall, where a CNN anchor was delivering the latest headlines at low volume. The city manager regarded Jensen

and said, “They’re in there.” He motioned to his own office. CITY MANAGER WILLIAM STINSON, said the nameplate.

“Bill, what’s this all about?” Jensen asked, leaning over the desk.

Stinson smiled. “It’s a miracle, Mitch.”

Jensen sighed and straightened up. “I hope so. I’m very tired and I have to deliver a sermon in a few hours.”

“Skip church,” Stinson said. “You’ll soon be delivering a sermon to the whole world.”

The time for mystery was over. Jensen spun about, headed for the office door next to the wall television, and threw it open. And he froze in his tracks.

The other clergy looked up at him with deadpan stares. Father Murphy from St. Andrew’s, not wearing a crucifix or carrying a rosary, was there. Rabbi Sidney Levy from Temple Beth Yushurun, with his braided beard, stood next to him. There was Reverend John Clark from Sunbury Baptist in a jogging outfit instead of his usual polyester three-piece. Finally, there was the normally elegant Amelia Largay, minister of the Brewer Unitarian Universalist Church, who wore jeans and a T-shirt and had a mass of disheveled blond hair haphazardly tied back in a scrunchie.

But they were all an afterthought compared to the man seated in front of the city manager’s desk, whose attire was completely inappropriate for a subzero January night. He wore loose-fitting gray shorts with the blue University of Maine “M” on them, a Red Sox 2004 “World Series Champions” T-shirt, and green L.L. Bean slippers. He wasn’t even wearing a hat—but he did indeed have something on his head, so to speak.

He looked up with dazed, mournful eyes, regarding Jensen’s bulging eyes and sagging jaw. The guy was thirty-ish, and could have been a banker or a millworker, a lawyer or a convenience-store clerk. He was an everyman—except for the ghostly apparition hovering above his head.

“My God,” Jensen breathed aloud.

“That was our consensus,” Amelia said.

It was a giant ring, a foot in diameter, hovering magically a few inches above the man’s head. It glowed with a soft light, and Jensen could almost see glimmering rays emanating from it. It seemed to be spinning ever so slightly, shimmering like polished gold. Without a doubt, it was a halo.

In a weak voice, the man said, “I just don’t understand.”

Jensen’s legs felt like immovable pillars of salt, but he struggled forward, breathless. The closer he got, the more the halo seemed to shimmer and rotate. The man angled his head to keep his pleading eyes on Jensen, and the halo angled with him. Jensen reached out, and his hand felt warm and tingly as it passed through the halo. He pulled his hand back and said, “What’s your name?”

“Mike,” he said, and his voice was tired and slightly hoarse. “Michael Barry.”

“When did this appear?”

“I don’t know. I was home watching TV, and the next thing I knew, the police were talking to me and I was in the park, freezing, with this thing over my head.” He looked at Jensen, with a helpless expression. “What the hell is it?”

“It’s a halo, my son,” Father Murphy proclaimed. “A symbol of sainthood.”

“I’m no saint,” Michael said. “I’m anything but.”

“No—halos are just artistic representations; they aren’t supposed to actually be visible,” Jensen said. “Triangular halos are used in representations of the Trinity. A circle with a cross represents Jesus. Rings like yours are for saints—who must be dead and later canonized in your faith, Father.”

“While square halos are often depicted on unusually saintly people who are still alive,” Murphy said, “you’re right that they’re not supposed to be visible in life.”

“Not so fast,” Rabbi Levy said. “In Exodus, it was said that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai he had a glowing or radiant face. Jerome mistranslated this as ‘his

Calling God's Bluff

Vincent L. Scarsella

*"For all life longs for the Last Day
And there's no man but cocks his ear
To know when Michael's trumpet cries
That flesh and bone may disappear,
And there be nothing but God left."*

– William Butler Yeats, *The Hour Before Dawn*

*"The central observation of those who study suicide
is that, in some places and under some circumstances,
the act of one person taking his or her life can be contagious."*

– Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*

At two a.m. on the morning we left for the Calling God's Bluff Festival, Mike Hansen, my law partner and best friend in all the world, uncorked our last bottle of Dom Perignon.

"A toast!" he said, swaying a little. "To death!"

Two hookers we had picked up to take along for the ride were sleeping in front of the fireplace of Mike's lakeside bungalow under afghans Mike had retrieved from the back bedroom and tossed over their naked bodies. A dying flame cast long, malevolent shadows across the floor to the wall behind us. Every now and then a cinder popped off the charred hunks of smoldering logs onto the polished oak floor. One of the whores, Kayla—Mike's date, the one with the husky voice and short, ash-blond hair—cracked out a snore every now and then.

I was sprawled out on the floor, and after Mike took a swig of the champagne he offered me the bottle. I declined. Enough was enough. We had been partying all night, smoking joint after joint of expensive pot and snorting too many lines of the purest coke. In the middle of all that, Mike had popped open our last three bottles of the Dom Perignon left over from celebrating the \$14.5 million Gleason verdict last year.

Last year... had it only been a year?

Around midnight, we had started kissing each other's whores, stripped off our clothes and found ourselves engaged in a wild, orgasmic free-for-all. Somehow, after all that, after all the booze and coke and pot and sex, I was completely sober. And my declination of another swig of champagne seemed to have sobered up Mike as well.

"Are we really going through with this?" Mike sighed and fell backwards onto the sofa.

Mike and I had been friends twenty years but we had never been closer than that night. We had made love to each other's whores. And, two days from now, we were going to face the end of our lives together.

"Yeah," I said. "We're really going through with it. By this time Sunday, we'll be dead."

He stared into the glow of dying embers in the fireplace.

"No, not dead," he corrected, with a slight burp. "Calling God's bluff."

Incredibly, right then, the prospect of that—of death—didn’t frighten me. I was a true believer at that moment, certain that death for us and for all mankind was the right and proper thing to do. Dying would finally and forever deliver us from the folly and evil of life. Amen.

“Yeah,” I said and smiled. “Calling God’s bluff.”

Calling God’s bluff.

That had become our mantra, our battle cry.

It had started out as a whisper in some long-forgotten place. A letter to the editor, a comment in some chat room perhaps. A call to a radio talk show host. We presumed that the Teacher, or whatever he was being called back then, had started it all in a moment of epiphany, after the idea had incubated and evolved in his mind all his life. Someone reported he had practiced his routine years ago on some street corner. Or maybe he had just heard someone mention it off the cuff one day and had adopted it as a mission all his own.

Nobody was sure. And nobody cared anymore how the whole thing had started. All we knew was what the Teacher was saying made perfect, logical sense.

“What we’ll be doing, my friends, is simply this: calling God’s bluff!” he had proclaimed in his best wide-armed, white-robed, long-haired Jesus-Christ-Superstar style, exuding that supreme confidence and determination that we had come to know and love. He had first used that phrase, *calling God’s bluff*, during one of his prime-time sermons, his grand infomercials that had become the highest-rated shows of all time, with more viewers worldwide than the original runs, reruns, and syndications of *I Love Lucy*, *Gilligan’s Island*, and *Seinfeld* combined.

Calling God’s bluff.

Day after day and night after night, on his radio talk shows, Internet sites, and television infomercials, and in his bestselling

book—entitled, of course, *Calling God's Bluff*—and on Oprah, the Preacher reminded us that our lives were absolutely and positively meaningless.

And that there was one, and only one, infallible Truth: No matter what we did, death came. And then, in an impassioned sermon just a few minutes past midnight this past New Year's Day, the Teacher gave us his stark solution, finally revealing what he had been irrevocably leading up to all that time:

We must kill ourselves.

All of us. The whole human race in one act of bravado and scorn, the ultimate act of calling God's bluff.

He even gave us the exact date and time when we must do it. When, at the Holy One's command, all of humanity over the entire planet—from Ho Chi Min City to Tehran to The Big Apple to the jungles of the Congo to Hollywood, Vegas, and Chicago—in one mass act of release, would snuff itself out in a universal act of self-extinction, coinciding (so it was later claimed by certain of his disciples) with some astral, cosmological alignment of the heavens.

He would lead the event in front of a live audience, at least a million strong, at something called The Calling God's Bluff Festival, on some wide-open farmland on the plains near Buffalo, Wyoming, USA.

Crazy, right? No way to sell that.

So how did he do it? How did the Preacher convince type-A guys like Mike and me that the lives we led were not worth keeping? That we should give up our law firms, our dental practices, our vice presidencies, mutual funds, 401(k) plans and stock options, IRAs, country-club memberships; our SUVs and Hummers and BMWs and Jaguars; and, most of all, our expensive, overpriced, overtaxed homes in safe, slumbering, sterile subdivisions? How was he able to convince us that, because of death, our lives literally meant nothing, and that, therefore, the only thing that mattered was calling God's bluff

Cone Zero, Sphere Zero

David M. Fitzpatrick

The sinister Enforcers, bedecked in the bright-red body-suits and head cones all citizens feared, came to Jellin's living cone shortly after the Light once again illuminated the World. An Avatar came with them, hovering nearby, observing everything as one of the eyes of the Immortals. Jellin hated those soft-looking balls of pink-orange flesh as much as he hated the Enforcers. It was because of what had happened with an Avatar near the end of the last Light that the Enforcers had come, Jellin knew.

"You are Jellin, son of Lumbis, son of Riksen?" the lead Enforcer said, more an imperative than a question. They knew who he was.

"I am," Jellin said, feeling his mouth parch. Agonizing memories of the pain cages he'd endured in his youth flooded through his mind, and he tried not to tremble.

"You are to appear before the Oligarchy."

It sounded like a statement, but Jellin knew it was a command of absolute authority. He knew he was in serious

trouble; there would be no warning for what he'd done to that Avatar. In fact, Jellin couldn't recall anyone ever having the courage—or stupidity—to kill one of them before.

"May I get my coat and my head cone?" he asked. He knew they couldn't refuse him, since being in public without one's head cone was a serious violation—for him, and for the Enforcers who denied him getting it.

"Quickly."

He retreated into his living cone. The Light streamed through the triangular windows as he went to his dressing room and pulled his white coat on over his white bodysuit and found his matching white head cone. He fitted it into place over his bare head, and he realized he was trembling.

He turned to head back to the door and gave a start, stifling a yelp of surprise. The Avatar that had come with the Enforcers was there, hovering half a man's height away, studying him. They were always unsettling to behold: slightly squished ovoids with textured surfaces, barely glowing a light pink-orange hue, as if illuminated from within. Each had a subtle indentation that was slightly darker in color, more a light red shade, which was what people called the eye. An Avatar's eye always faced whatever it studied.

He regarded it in silence, and his thoughts went astray as usual: How did the Avatars fly as they did? Was there intelligence inside their roundish forms? Or were the supposed Immortals watching through them, as everyone was foolishly told to believe?

He banished the thoughts. He had to keep his mind clear. He didn't believe the supposed Immortals or their Avatars could read his thoughts, but it was best not to take chances. He stalked past the intrusive Avatar and felt it move in behind him as he left his living cone. Outside, he followed the lead Enforcer down his walkway, and heard the other two marching in step behind him. He was suddenly very scared.

They walked the trodden dirt paths that weaved in graceful

curves in and about the living cones of the community. Nearly naked children playing in their white loincloths stopped to stare from beneath their white head cones in gape-mouthed awe as they passed, and soon adults were peering out doorways at the spectacle. Avatars dotted the air here and there, some intently watching the children’s games, others following adults around. They did that often, randomly appearing to study citizens for as little as ten breaths to as long as several complete Lights.

As they marched, Jellin could see the Light in the middle of the World, mounted atop the massive metal pole that shot skyward from the Master Cone towards which they headed. He couldn’t see the Master Cone yet, as it was only about thirty men high; but the pole that spiked skyward from its peak was easily a thousand men tall. The Light, burning fiercely atop the pole, was a massive orb that illuminated the World.

Jellin glanced up as he marched stolidly behind the Enforcer, and beheld the ceiling of the World. The Cone they lived inside was massive, its apex so high above that it could not be seen. He knew from the scholars that it was as high as the World was wide—about ten thousand men high. In every direction, Jellin could see the smooth wall of the Cone, angling down from the zenith far above.

He lived a thousand men away from the center of the World, so it wasn’t too long before the living cones became crowded together in the high-population area. Soon, he could see the Master Cone towering above the smaller living cones. The living cones grew larger and grander the closer one got to the center of the World, housing citizens of higher social levels. Eventually, the largest of them housed the Oligarchs themselves.

Eventually, they made it to the Master Cone in the center of the World. The massive metal pole shot out of the top of Master Cone, but Jellin couldn’t look up at it without being

blinded by the burning Light high above. They led him up the hundred-step stairway and through the towering, triangular door, then through the gargantuan cone and into its expansive central hall. He'd only been in once, as a child, when a Scholar had taken Jellin's class there, and it was as cold and empty as he remembered. It was ten men across; on the very far side of the hall was the protruding curve of the thick metal pole that ultimately held up the Light. In leveled rows of seats before the pole, he realized the Oligarchy was gathered.

They were all seated, wearing flowing blue robes and blue head cones. Twenty-two Oligarchs were on the lowest level, then eleven, five, and three; above them sat the Oligarch of the Fifth Level, the Master Oligarch, presiding over them all. It was a hierarchy of power, but even those on the lowest level were as far above Jellin socially as the Light was above the World. He went very suddenly from scared to terrified.

"Jellin, son of Lumbis, son of Riksen," the amplified voice of the Master Oligarch boomed. Jellin could see him speaking into a tube, which was linked to many cone-shaped outlet horns which somehow made it all louder.

Jellin felt his heart pounding madly in his chest as he dropped to one knee and bowed his head. "Yes, Master," he called out as strongly as he could manage.

"Do you know why you're here?" the Master bellowed.

"Yes, Master," Jellin said to the floor.

"Indeed," the Master said. "Look at us, and tell us why."

Jellin raised his head, beholding the forty-two grim faces that regarded him as the criminal they believed him to be. "It was an accident, Master. The Avatar was behind me, and I didn't know. I spun about so quickly —"

"Silence!" the Master roared. "We're not interested in your tales of fright regarding an Avatar. We've all been startled by the eyes of the Immortals before. Enough of your whinings, and tell us if you know why you're *really* here."

Jellin was stunned. He was certain the Enforcers had come

for him because of what he'd done to the Avatar, but apparently that wasn't the case. Destroying an Avatar was certainly punishable with a pain cage until death, but...

"I am commanding you to tell us why you're here, citizen," the Master said, his dark voice cleaving through Jellin's muddled brain.

"I'm... sorry, Master," Jellin managed. "I do not know."

"I see," said the Master. "Oligarch, read the charge."

An Oligarch of the First Level stood and unraveled a scroll, leaning in to speak into his own tube. "The citizen is charged with violating the Code of Life in questioning the nature of the World."

Jellin's mind tumbled. What was this all about? He knew better than to talk about his secret beliefs to anyone. He hadn't said a word to a single soul.

"During last Light, did you not tell one Bendik of your belief that there is a larger World outside the Cone?" the Oligarch on the First Level asked.

Jellin blinked in surprise. Was that what this was about? Did Bendik run his mouth again, as he had when they'd been children, and tell someone something he shouldn't? But Jellin had been careful for thousands of Lights to not say anything in Bendik's presence that could remotely be construed as—

"Answer the question!" the Oligarch of the First Level hollered, and Jellin shook himself out of his reverie. "Did you tell Bendik there is a larger World outside the Cone?"

"I did not, sir," Jellin said, choosing his words carefully. "I merely was considering the Cone's zenith, far above us. I wondered aloud if it is constructed like the Cone's wall, down at the base."

"But there is nothing to consider about the zenith," the Master boomed from above. "The zenith is like the wall—like the entire Cone. There is nothing but the Cone. This is the World."

Why?! Jellin screamed inside. Why do you think that? Why