

Punched By An *Angel*



Ryan Gray

Part Four

"So...when you say 'permanently,' you're not talking about a career change, are you?"

"No, love, I am speaking about a dirt nap, my ultimate demise, giving up the ghost!"

She turned and looked out the window deep in thought, "Oh, I see."

I could tell my wife was not yet willing to believe all I was saying, but she could no longer outright dismiss me either. Not only did I have "random" encounters with folks we just "happened" to have the money to help, but several shocking conversations from Denzin had her thinking deeply. Janine was contemplating the implications in case I wasn't going crazy.

One hour earlier, after our plane took off, I explained how Denzin had so rudely appeared in my office the day before. How he had allowed me to glimpse his true form and power. I also shared everything else I could think of that had been dumped into my brain over the past 36 hours. My wife, the consummate skeptic, had pummeled me with questions. The most popular being why Denzin would not reveal himself to her. Denzin's reply that she was not authorized was a little too convenient for her.

After pestering me three more times, I blurted, "Botulinum toxin."

Janine's face went beet red, "What did you say?" She asked.

A nervous grin grew on my face as Denzin, sitting in the row across from us, shook his head in frustration and closed his eyes for a nap. "Denzin said I should ask you about Botulinum toxin."

"Who told you?" She demanded.

"Who told me what?" I shrugged. "I don't know what Botulinum is!"

"Who told you I've been doing...." She lowered her voice and leaned her blushing face closer to my ear, "That I've been getting botox injections."

"You've been injecting what!?" I snapped.

"Do you think all 45-year-old women stop aging and never wrinkle?" She scoffed, "I need help. Besides, these days it's like brushing your teeth or shaving your legs; all women do it." My wife waved a dismissive hand.

My handler across the aisle butt in. "If that's the case, why did Doctor Patel not give her an injection on her last appointment because she had uncontrollable tearing in her right eye?" Denzin didn't open his eyes as he spoke nonchalantly, "She was so mad, she made an appointment with his competitor across the street, ignoring his advice."

My eyes went wide with the news, "You had uncontrollable tearing in one eye, so instead of listening to your doctor you made an appointment with his competitor, and you say it's no big deal?"

The redness around her gills drained instantly from her face. She went from embarrassed to pale with fear. "Oh, my God!"

Denzin chuckled in the seat across from me, "Yes, literally, your God, lady. He knows."

I shook my head and stared straight ahead, crossing my arms tightly in frustration, "I can't talk to either of you right now. I'm stuck between a Judgy McPerfect Face on one side and some stranger I only find out now I hardly know anymore on the other side."

"Do you think you are any better, *Pastor* John?" Denzin dropped in my title sarcastically.

"I don't think I've had any plastic surgery, nor will I in this lifetime!" I hissed back.

"Wait, is that him, you are speaking to?" My wife butt in, "You ask him what business it is of his, it's my choice...."

Denzin spoke over her, "Yeah, you and your evening beer, locked away in your cave. How is that any different?"

"I hardly think the occasional...."

"Ehhem" Denzin corrected me.

"Fine, daily beer." I half conceded.

He turned his head and looked at me, then raised an eyebrow.

I rolled my eyes, "Or two beers...can be compared with Botox. Makes no sense." I shook my head.

"It does make sense when you understand cause and effect."

I rolled my eyes again. "This should be good."

"Fine, I won't tell you."

"You are such a child." I tisked at him.

"Coming from the adolescent pastor, who just rolled his eyes at me twice, I can't take that insult seriously."

"Fine, then why don't you spell it out for me?"

Janine was still asking questions. "Spell what out? What is he saying now? Is it about me?" My wife only picked up half my conversation, and after the shock of calling out her Botox addiction, she was desperate for answers.

"This has nothing to do with you, sweetie. This is about me and my 'issue' with an occasional beer."

Janine snorted, "Oh, that. It's about time he got to that one."

"You too?" I gasped at her, "I have one or two beers a night. How is that a problem?"

"It's not the beer. So much as...." She let her voice drift away.

"What?" I pushed, "Tell me."

"It's just that you go into your study, have your beer, and neither the kids nor I are welcome, EVER."

I looked over at Denzin, and he was nodding.

"Well, a man has to have time to be alone."

"Five, six nights a week, sometimes all night long. Kids can't tell you about their day, and I can't come sit with you with a glass of wine and just talk anymore. A massive sign is lit up, every night after dinner."

"Oh yeah," I looked away briefly, betraying the guilt crawling up my throat, "What does that sign say?"

My wife leaned towards me and lowered her voice, as she did when saying questionable things, "Piss off!"

"Oh come on, It's not that bad...."

Denzin spoke up again. "Your wife just told you it is. A wise man heeds correction and does not spurn rebuke."

I swallowed hard as Denzin continued, "As a matter of fact, the beer doesn't factor into it, hardly at all. Your attitude of selfishness and hiding away to drink that beer, every night, does."

He twisted in his seat, "Ask your wife when she felt the need to make herself prettier for you, then figure out when you began hiding yourself away every night."

"Five years ago," I answered in a guilty haze, staring back into the past, recalling ignored thoughts and feelings.

"What about five years ago?" Janine asked, her body turned completely towards me, eyes searching my face. I didn't have the courage to face her.

"What happened five years ago, Pastor John?" Denzin was not done using my title as an insult.

My answer wreaked of reluctance, "Five years ago, we finished our brand new church campus."

My wife had heard enough; Janine knew exactly what was being spoken as I repeated Denzin's last words for her benefit. "Five years ago, my priorities shifted, and my family received the message loud and clear."

"Beinvendieodos!" A jolly fat, balding man in a grey suit waved a fedora around. He urged a crowd on as a five-piece brass band bellowed "The Star Spangled Banner."

We eased down a gangway of steps onto the black tarmac of the tiny Mexican airport. The sun was setting, and we were exhausted, yet our work had just begun.

"Pastor John and Mrs. Janine, we are so honored and grateful you are here!" The jolly fat man had an enthusiastic, if not genuine, smile. I tried to shake our host's hand, but the stout man pulled me in tight and squeezed the air from my lungs. He then pushed me away and repeated the same aggressive welcome with my wife. "I am Mayor Ramos, or you can call me Rammy. These are some of our friends from our humble village." He waved behind him and at least a hundred smiling faces and waving hands, and a few mini American and Mexican flags waved back at me. A massive banner read, "God Bless Pastor John!"

"Our 2nd and 3rd-grade class spent all morning making that for you." Several young men fought over carrying our bags, each eager for the 'honor' to load them into the back of the vehicle. The Mayor led us to a waiting vehicle, an old Toyota SUV, with rust spots on the wheel wells. He opened the door for us; the interior looked worse than the wheel wells. The upholstery was torn to shreds, and dust caked everything. "You have to excuse the dirt; you will see our humble village is beautiful but has no fancy tar roads like here at the airport."

"Are we going far?" Janine winced as she sat down as if her Gucci shoes and business skirt were allergic to nature.

"Oh yes, Señora, it is almost three hours to the orphanage," Rammy replied.

I could feel Janine start to moan, so I changed the subject quickly, "You mentioned kids made this sign; I only knew I was traveling here this morning. How did you manage this big welcome so quickly?"

Rammy didn't answer until he ran around the front of the car and hopped into the driver's seat, with a surprising amount of energy. "Oh, we have been praying to the Lord for Sister Helen's orphanage for months now." At the mention of the Lord, Rammy crossed his chest.

Janine leaned in closer and whispered awkwardly, "They're Catholic, dear. Did you know that?"

I lowered my voice, "I can see that, love! Be cool!" I hissed back, then continued on with Rammy, "How will the crowd get back?"

"Oh, don't worry, Pastor John, we have buses to carry them."

"You sure went through a lot of trouble just to welcome us. We are very humbled," I smiled nervously, not really knowing what to say.

The bouncing car jostled Mayor Ramos's voice, "It is us, Señor, that are humbled. You are the answer to our prayers and acting as messengers from God. There's nothing more exciting for the people in our village than to serve Him, no?"

Denzin appeared behind me, riding with the luggage. He leaned forward over the rear seat and whispered in my ear, "The Boss has no brands or labels, only those in the church who obey and those who ignore: Sheep and goats." He squeezed my shoulder for emphasis as he leaned back.

I gulped hard at the thought as I turned my head and whispered over my shoulder, "So you're telling me that those who disobey don't go to heaven?"

He held his hands up defensively, "Hey, that's way above my pay grade and between you and your Maker." He shrugged his shoulders and frowned, then added, "But, why take the chance?"

I opened my mouth to respond and looked behind me, but he was gone - again. I sighed and then winced as our vehicle slammed through a massive pothole. "That figures." I mused aloud.

"What's that, John?" Janine asked.

I lowered my voice so only she could hear. "This road: it sums up the last couple of days, perfectly!"

It was dark, there were no street lights, and more than once we spied raccoons or coyotes crossing the pothole-infested road. Yet, when Rammy's beat-up SUV delivered us to our destination, another greeting party was ready. But this one was different.

We climbed out of the vehicle and approached our welcome with awe.

Lined up in four perfect rows, wearing matching white button-up shirts and pressed dark slacks were 100 of the cutest kids we had ever seen in our lives. A young lady stood atop an old wooden fruit crate, facing the children; she appeared to be only a few years older than them. All the children watched her with incredible intensity as she raised both hands. She thrust her right hand down, and her left hand pushed left, giving rise to the most glorious music I had ever laid ears on.

An excited and glowing plumb middle-aged nun, in a simple grey dress and navy blue head covering waved from behind the children, but kept her distance. She was smart, very smart. Instead of facts and figures, our first impression of her work were beautiful children, singing in perfect harmony to a couple of guilt-laden, rich yuppies.

As the children began the second verse of "Oh come let us adore Him," I wiped a tear from the corner of my right eye. I leaned in and whispered to my wife, "I think we're in trouble."

"I know!" My wife sobbed in agreement, wiping melting mascara from her cheeks. She leaned in and hissed, "And by the way - you tell that nosy handler of yours, I do have a heart, and these tears are not from Botox!"

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