

Punched By An *Angel*



Ryan Gray

Part Six

I thanked my Uber driver and hurried back inside the massive church complex, excited by my conversation with Bill. I left not only illuminated but also inspired. We had spoken for hours, which eventually led to getting lunch and then taking him back to his homeless shelter.

Bill had finished a five-year prison sentence almost a decade earlier; for breaking and entering. A compulsion his previous drug addiction had spurned on. While in the state penitentiary, he had kicked the drug habit, but in his own words, "Only to turn pro as a drinker."

His drinking cost him any hope of a stable relationship, job after job, his driver's license, and then, almost his life. Someone found him passed out in his own vomit, barely breathing six weeks prior. He spent three days in the hospital for alcohol poisoning, dehydration, and malnutrition. The doctors told him, one more episode like that and there would be nothing they could do.

Bill joined the 12-step program the next day, but it had been a struggle so far. Smoking was the only thing he looked forward to, as he had been on unemployment for years and had just lost his housing, again. So, he was homeless.

"What would it take to get you on your feet?" I finally got around to asking, expecting something about needing a job or money, Bill's answer could only be described as divine. An answer to the question I owed the church elders and our supporters. The question of: "So, what now?"

After I burst through the gaudy swinging glass door, I paused for a moment, "Why are these still open?" I asked aloud as I stepped back outside, and swiveled my head around surveying behind me. In my enthusiasm, I missed the fact that the massive church parking lot was almost half full. "There are no evening services tonight or functions, are there?" I said to no one in particular, furrowing my brow. I turned back towards the building and took several steps through the foyer toward the auditorium. A light was on! "What's going on here?" I stepped up to the big double doors, gripped a brass handle, opened it nervously, and stepped inside slowly, and then I froze.

Bodies littered the ground, most of the chairs had been pushed aside, or piled up awkwardly into small chair mounds. Samantha, one of our youth worship leaders, played a lone guitar singing old hymns from the bottom step of the stage. Above her were three individuals on their faces, weeping. The sounds of sobbing and wailing intermittently echoed throughout the massive hall.

"John, John! Over here!" Across the giant room, Jim, my most active and the wealthiest of the elders waved at me as he picked his way through the bodies of weeping, praying parishioners.

I waved back as I stepped over people and around others meeting him halfway, "What the heck happened, Jim?"

"You mean, what the Heaven happened - Isn't it amazing?" He chuckled aloud at the tired church joke, "After you left, nobody knew what to do, Jorge over there went over to close the service for you, but as soon as he approached the pulpit, he fell on his face and began sobbing."

I looked up at Jorge, one of our associate pastors, and sighed. Sure enough, Denzin stood behind him. When he noticed that I saw him, he grinned and flashed two thumbs up. The gleam from his right eye sparkled. "Let me guess the rest," I asked as I took Jim by the arm and led him towards the pulpit, "No one can get close to the lectern without doing the same?"

"Yeah." Jim nodded excitedly, "We stopped trying after the third one. How'd you know?"

I exhaled deeply and glared at Denzin, "Let's just say I have some special insight."

"Well, after those three started weeping, Mrs. Johnson over there fell on her face, begging God for forgiveness; Bill went down hard, hands in the air, someone started singing "Redeeming Love," a few others joined in, and the rest has just been what you see here, going on for five hours now!

I opened my mouth to say something but then shut it after I glanced over at Denzin and raised an eyebrow. He shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

Jim asked, "Now what? What do we do, John?"

I set my big preaching bible on the nearest chair and began rolling up my sleeves. "Come with me, Jim, I need your help with something." I carefully stepped around three congregants who looked to be melting into the stage carpet, weeping uncontrollably. I made my way behind the see-through lectern. "Don't be afraid, Jim," I glanced at Denzin, "You'll be ok, right?"

Denzin motioned at the lectern with an open hand, palm facing up, with a coy smirk on his face. Jim and I both closed in on the lectern, slowly, and cautiously. I didn't even realize that I was holding my breath until I gripped the fiberglass and nothing happened. Jim and I both exhaled in unison. I glared across at Denzin who was holding his belly while laughing uproariously at us both.

"Oh," Denzin rubbed his eyes, "It's so good to laugh!"

"I know what you are thinking, John, and it's a good first start to our new journey," Jim grunted out as we hefted the pretentious note holder, "Let's toss this thing in the dumpster."

I replied with a grunt of my own, "Good thought, but I have a better idea."

Six months later I dropped my large Bible onto a solid yet disheveled wooden pulpit. It had paint stains and WWJD bumper stickers slapped onto it at odd angles. When you included the pink and purple hearts painted all over the old lectern, it wasn't much to look at, but neither was I.

It had been months since I had seen Denzin and I doubted I'd ever see the gleam in his eye this side of Heaven again. Since the last time I had seen the meddlesome angel, I had traded in my suit and tie for a pair of Wrangler jeans, sneakers, and a maroon polo shirt. A shirt, I probably should have ironed. I looked out over my congregation and smiled. All the fancy clothes and suits had left the building. No one showed up on Sunday without being dressed for hard, joyful work.

Mixed in with our 'usual' crowd was the real ministry. Unruly children being chased by our volunteer 'big brothers and sisters.' Most of the kids were from the foster system. Then we had our former security guys, now nicknamed the 'passion police' convincing the homeless folks we had bussed in from downtown to either sit down or take their turn next door at the showers. Finally, there was our group of Spanish speakers from Central America. They were seating themselves around one of our two translators, who turned to me and gave me a big thumbs up,

indicating they were good to go. We had grown this group to fifty folk, mostly Guatemalans. We would have had more, but our evangelistic team was having trouble convincing the rest of the Central American community that we weren't immigration officers. I had faith that eventually we would get them all!

I looked out over the hustle and bustle of our new congregation. The TV cameras were sold and gone, we had kept two projectors, one that was portable. We used only half the worship band on stage, and sometimes only a single guitar and singer. I shared the Bible from behind an old pulpit, donated by one of the original families that had believed from the beginning in what God was doing in our church. The see-through, fancy lectern was now a part of the children's church. The pompous stand had now been brought to earth by a rainbow of colors and stickers. The symbol of my former arrogance, probably wouldn't last the year, which made my heart beam.

Although less than half the original window dressing of the service remained, we surely had been left with "Gideons 300." You see, our service was only the beginning of our Sunday church time. After this, a hot meal was served for anyone that was needing it, as well as hot showers available next door. We even had donations of unused toiletries from local hotels we gathered from around town every week. Across the street, we had volunteers waiting in the church offices we had made available. These amazing brothers and sisters were ready to help with filing paperwork, job searching, and adult classes. They also printed anything needed from DMV and immigration forms to class schedules, etc. After worship, our church kids, including the foster kids and their big brothers and sisters went off to the children's church. After that, they broke into small groups, which led to mentoring time with their big bros and sisters. The afternoon was set aside for looking over homework and tutoring.

You see, we had all ditched our suits and ties, not because we wanted to, but because there was no longer room to play a part or dress to impress. Now, we are all dressed to serve! My wife, in the front row, still the classy lady, showed us all how to be stylish yet sensible. She mostly came to support me, as her ministry with the Mexican orphanage took up most of her spare time. On a side note, she's fallen in love with life, all over again...and me for that matter. But I won't kiss and tell, I'm too smart for that - LOL.

Sitting next to the love of my life, are my beautiful children. They have also become different people in a much more humble and joy-filled lifestyle. They love their new school. Surprisingly, they both said there may be less drugs and alcohol and more focus on education in the public school they both decided on attending. My shift in ministry focus has also afforded me more time to be with my wife and kids, both as a family as well as on one-on-one time. This one-on-one time still leaves me with a lump in my throat after every daddy-daughter date or time hanging out with my son.

Now, don't think for a moment, we still don't do the necessary church stuff. On Wednesday nights we have a Bible study-style family church service, especially for our Sunday volunteers. But no matter what our new and improved ministry looks like, we've all rediscovered that our focus is no longer on the Sunday service, but rather on being real Jesus people. To love the least of these, to be kids in our Father's kingdom.

I took a breath and was about to begin my opening prayer, but something made me stop short. A homeless man, sitting halfway to the back of the auditorium, wearing a black baseball cap, an old greasy Carhart jacket, and torn pants grinned incessantly at me. Something about

his expression gave me pause. As our eyes connected he nodded his approval at me and stood up to leave just as a sparkle twinkled from his right eye. I almost leaped off the stage towards him, but he shook his head, held up his hand to bid me farewell, and turned to leave.

“Thank you.” I blurted aloud, a tear jerked its way free and rolled down my right cheek. The noisy audience didn’t seem to notice my words, but he did.

Denzin turned back to me, faced the stage, and shook his head. He placed both hands on his chest and then pointed them up toward the heavens. Then, for what I can only imagine was for kicks, he gave me one last shock.

With a wry smile of mischievousness, he knelt on one knee and scrunched his body into the ground. His clothes melted away, giving way to a fountain of golden light almost too brilliant to look upon. Just as he looked like he was about to burn a massive hole through the carpet, the heavenly being sprung from the floor and exploded through the ceiling towards the sky.

For a moment I was dazed and confused, but I shook it off, remembering where I was, and moved back towards my pulpit.

Suddenly, my teenage daughter was next to me, “Dad, was that an angel?”

I grinned, “Sure was.”

Her jaw dropped, “That’s so cool! He looked like he knew you. Are you friends?” She asked while hanging on my arm.

I was surprised that my daughter could see Denzin, but not shocked. A part of me knew she could. I put an arm around my baby girl and smiled down at her. The events of the past six months flashed through my mind. “Six months ago, he was the last being on earth I wanted to see, but now...Yeah, I guess I am friends with an angel.”

She hugged me tight, “My life is nuts! It’s so cool!” Then she let go and bounded down the steps in search of her “little sister” to take to the children’s church.

As I watched her leave, I got my Bible opened to the Gospel of Luke, then surveyed our church, His church - honestly, I can say that I don’t know how my story will end, but I know where my renewed journey began - and this time, I won’t waste it...*Will You?*

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