

Punched By An *Angel*



Ryan Gray

"He needs to die!" A massive fist pounded a dark mahogany conference table, "That is the only way they will learn."

A muffled voice spoke through frustrated hands, "No it's not, plus it rarely makes a difference. I just need more time. If I can just..."

The head of the conference table cut the muffled speaker off, "You've had three extensions already. He won't change."

"He can change." The frustrated voice dropped to a low growl. "You have no patience, brother!"

The head of the table leaned forward, "And you don't know when to quit; the mortal dies tonight!"

Aggravated, the advocate stood up and shot back, "You've been over-eager to punch tenant's tickets ever since the crusades."

"And you've wasted our time and resources on a lost cause for years!" The chairman of the table had leaned so far forward that his heels lifted off the shimmering Berber carpet adorning the floor. He stuck his chin out, set his jaw, and gripped the table, glaring lasers at his opponent.

The opposition had a clean-shaven head. He wore a pin-striped navy blue suit and a large golden hooped earring in his left ear. A gleam sparkled from his right eye. He was almost a head shorter than the accuser but thicker throughout the shoulders and chest area. If the head of the table intimidated him, he did not show it.

A mediator arose from a chair between the battling parties and held out massive hands attached to giant arms. He was bigger than the others and shot sharp warning glances between the opposing parties. "Gentleman please, this is meant to be a discussion about a tenant. A tenant the Boss is extremely worried about. The matter has nothing to do with either of you being wrong or right. So, can we please focus back on the mission before either of you does or say something that will require," he paused for dramatic effect, then brought his hands together and cracked his knuckles, "consequences?"

The head of the table, still clenching his jaw, drifted his gaze to the left, "Azriel, what do you think?"

A third party, across from the mediating giant, looked up from behind folded hands. He sighed gently, staring at the ceiling, deep in thought. After shifting uncomfortably in his chair, Azriel looked around the table, then spoke, "I take pride in my work, but no joy. I have never decided a mortal's fate, much less a tenant, and I never will. I only transition those who have been placed on my list. No more - no less."

"Brilliant non-answer." The head of the table quipped as he rolled his eyes and plopped back into a white swivel chair.

"What is your deal, brother?" The bald advocate asked as he too retreated to his seat. "We have dealt with more tenants in breach of contract than we can count. Why is

this one so different?" He paused and looked down for a second before shooting an icy glare at the head of the table, "Is it because you think I haven't done a good job?"

The table looked up at the advocate, then back to the prosecution, ready for the fight to kick off again. But, the tussle fizzled. Instead, the head of the table sighed and shook his head. "Of course not, Dee. You are the best. If anyone could aid this tenant, it was you." He grunted and gritted his teeth for a second while softly pounding the desk, "It's just this one - this guy! He was supposed to be SO much more, to be different. He had such potential, but now...."

"Listen, I know you see him as a hopeless cause, selfish and spoiled considering all he has been given, but I know tenant work better than any other agent. And I know this guy. He can still be brought back into contract compliance, maybe even on a mission."

The accuser chuckled to himself and leaned back with hands behind his head, "This is why I love you, brother; you are the ultimate optimist."

"I have to be." Dee replied with a grin, "It's my purpose, and I only give up on a tenant when I'm ordered to."

"Knock, knock." A new voice joined the room.

"Did you just say, 'knock-knock'?" Azriel chided the newcomer with a wry grin.

The knocker raised an eyebrow and replied with an air of dry refinement. "It's something I have observed young people saying, instead of actually wrapping the wooden door with knuckles. I find it fun and clever."

"Awe, to find joy in the simple things." The giant mediator mused with a chuckle.

The newcomer smiled back curtly, "Yes, to find joy is a gift I value - you gargantuan marble statue."

The giant was slightly hurt by the inference, "What? I find joy in things. Right?" He looked around the table for confirmation.

"Please, Uriel, why are we being visited by the head of administration? It's a long way for you to come just to pick another fight with our large stoic brother."

"Yes, I have an urgent note from the P.A.s office for Azriel and Denzin."

Everyone sat up straight in their chair and swallowed hard.

"From the Boss?" Azriel clarified.

"I assume." Uriel shrugged as he handed over a white, glowing envelope.

Azriel licked his lips and cleared his throat nervously as he peeled back a sealed fold. Inside was an A4 paper in a crisp trifold. He read the note allowed:

"The tenant will receive a stay of execution.

His fate will depend on his response to his agent's assistance and message.

The corresponding agent will make the Boss's desires VERY clear."

"What am I missing with this guy?" The head of the table spat out, "After all he has ignored and the privileged he has taken advantage of - of all people, this guy should know better! So, why does HE get another chance?"

Azriel slid the note across the table to the advocate while he spoke, "I will never fully understand the extent of the Boss's patience, but ultimately," he chuckled, "The Boss is a softy."

"Ironic, coming from the guy most of the known universe has nicked named 'Death.'"

"Get seen in a long dark hood one time, and I'm marked for life." He looked around the table, "you all know I was only picking up that cycle to put it away for the farmer's family, right?"

"Yes, brother, we know!" The entire table moaned in unison.

Azriel blew air out of his cheeks and sagged his shoulders before looking up and returning to the topic at hand, "Anyways, to your point, brother, I believe we all underestimate His patience and need it more than we like to admit." Death turned to the head of the table, "Being a warrior, you should also find that...how did you put it, a few seconds ago, Michael? 'Ironic.'"

Michael held up both hands in surrender, "Don't get me wrong, none of us would be here or exist without the Boss's enormous, sometimes frustrating, capacity for patience. I am only...."

"Being an annoyance and prolonging a settled conversation." The giant cut Michael off, "A conversation divulging into needless speculation and questioning."

"No one is second-guessing their orders, Gabriel." Uriel blurted.

"No, he is right; we have our orders." Michael put the conversation back on the correct track. "Brother Dee, it's up to you now. And everyone here will assist you if, or when you call."

Death placed a gentle hand on the bald agent next to him and winced ever so slightly, "And let us all hope, for the tenant's sake, the assistance you need is not from me."

Part One

Stomping down my oak mahogany floors, I brushed a family photo, almost knocking it from the nail that suspended it against the wall. Bumping the staged image of my wife, son, daughter, and myself with my shoulder also spilled a drop of my AM cappuccino. The studio portrait was my wife's favorite photo of the family. As it should be, "Darn photo sure cost me enough," I moaned inwardly. The pic 'had' to be shot and printed by some *fab* photographer. After steadying the overpriced frame and photo, I once again stomped my polished dress shoes down the hall until I reached my destination; I stuck my head around the corner, "Hun, where are my keys?"

My wife groaned and rolled her eyes at me, "I dunno. Where did you put them last?"

I growled under my breath, "If I knew that, I would not be asking."

"Ugh, fine, I'll find them - again!" My wife, halfway through her morning makeup routine, stood from her dressing table. She tightened the belt, closing her plush purple robe, and shot me a glare before heading back the way I had just come.

I followed her just as a bickering pair of offspring crossed our paths, "Why would I even touch your stupid laptop? I'd rather use my tablet." My 14-year-old daughter, the elder, rolled her eyes with expert precision.

My son, 11 years old, and the temper of the family, growled, "Because you are lazy and always forget to charge your stuff!" He chased her towards her room but was met by a slammed door in his face.

"Mom, please tell her to..."

I cut him off. "Not now, you two; I am late for work and can't find my keys!"

"Ugh, no one ever listens to me!" My son turned and fled to his room, slamming the door behind him.

I turned towards him as he flew by and stepped in his direction. I was ready with a lecture about patience and not slamming doors, but jingling keys in my face stopped me short. Before I could ask where they were, my wife answered with another eye roll. "Under the sweater you wore to the school game last night, and then just dumped onto the sofa."

I smiled sweetly and grinned, "Sorry...thanks." I kissed her cheek, downed the rest of my cappuccino, dropped the cup in the kitchen sink, and escaped into the cool morning air on a bright sunny day.

Sixty seconds later, I was on my way to the other side of town in my new sedan. It was electric, a good excuse for an upgrade. The quietness of the vehicle still unnerved me. However, the amenities and available updates that came with the luxury model were incredible.

I flipped my blinker on to indicate a left turn and passed a mail carrier; he looked up and smiled at me, I waved, but he only continued grinning; something in his eye caught the sun because his right eye gleamed. "Strange fellow," I mused.

A few minutes later, I was cruising down the interstate; I flipped on my favorite conservative talk podcast. I only had to tell the onboard computer to turn it on; it still amazed me every time. I looked up just in time to notice all the other car's brake lights in front of me going red. "Ah, come on!" I braked with plenty of time to spare but knew I would be late getting to the office.

I leaned to the left, against my door, beginning the traffic "dance:" a stop-and-go annoyance with no rhythm but plenty of guaranteed frustration. Several motorcycles drifted past, splitting lanes, "That's not a bad way to travel today." I spoke aloud just as a massive roar behind me drowned out my conservative talk podcast.

A biker in all black, with a shiny little pit helmet strapped to his head, drifted towards me slowly. His massive hog was long and wide, barely narrow enough to slip between the traffic lanes, so he drifted by slowly. As he passed me, he came close to stopping beside me, slowing to a slight crawl. He looked into my window and made eye contact, and grinned.

I smiled back and held a hand up as a small wave; he didn't respond but kept on grinning. I wouldn't have noticed him much. However, just as his face was almost out of sight, a gleam sparkled from his right eye.

I sat up straight, "Huh, that's not possible." It had suddenly occurred to me that the biker looked an awful lot like the mail carrier.

HONK HONK....I had gotten lost in my thoughts, and traffic was moving, I had 'dared' to wait three seconds without moving forward. I complied.

After twenty minutes of stop-and-go dancing on the interstate, I made it to my exit. The exit ramp wound me around 360 degrees before dumping me in front of a stop sign at city street level. As I came to a complete and total stop, I noticed a homeless man holding a cardboard sign to my right. He was standing close enough to the car, so I could only see up to his chin. I remembered I had a couple of dollars in my middle consul, which was a rarity. I dug through the compartment, found the old green papers, and pressed the button to roll down the passenger side window. "Hey, friend, I have a few bucks for you."

The homeless gent turned, stepped up to my car, and bent down. He reached in, took the money from me, and looked up, making eye contact...a gleam sparkled in his right eye.

"AH!!!" I screamed and gassed my car without thinking or looking, but thank heavens, the intersection was clear. I came flying into my office parking lot, gripping my steering wheel with white knuckles. "Maybe I'm coming down with something? Maybe I drank something...no that wouldn't...or maybe, I..." my paranoid contemplation continued as I opened my car door and stood from the vehicle, briefcase in hand.

I continued to mutter under my breath excuses and reasons why my mind was playing tricks on me. I passed a landscapist trimming a strip of grass leading up to my office entrance. He wore gray overalls and a gray hat. Peering up from underneath the hat, he grinned at me; a gleam sparkled from his right eye.

“Holy Moses?” I screamed, gripped my briefcase like a football running back, and sprinted past the impossible gardener and into my office.

“Pastor, pastor...Are you ok?”

“What? Who?” I cleared my throat, breathed, and then turned back to my office manager, “Marge, who is that gentleman trimming the lawn outside?” I pointed in his direction.

She stared at me, puzzled, “There should be no one, Pastor; the landscapers were here yesterday.” She jumped up and walked around her desk until she stood next to me and followed my finger with her eyes. No one was there.

“Huh, I could have sworn.”

“Do you want me to call the landscapers back to fix something, or did they miss a section, pastor?”

“No.” I almost snapped back, “I mean...no, thank you, Marge, that will not be necessary.”

“Ok, can I get you some coffee or water?”

“Ah yeah, sure,” I replied absent-mindedly, wiping a bead of stray sweat from my brow. I turned and headed into my office.

Marcy was on the phone at her receptionist's desk and waved as I approached. She still managed to hand me a stack of memos for me to go through as I passed by. She clicked a button on the phone and pointed her mouth away from the phone in my direction, “Pastor John, don't forget, you have that Korean delegation coming to visit on Sunday.

I smiled weakly and said thank you, only half listening as I took the notes from her out of habit more than desire. Stepping into the office, I loosened my tie and popped open the top button of my collar. I dropped my briefcase onto my desk and then remembered I had my memos in my hand. I looked down at them to check for any urgent matters when a creaking sound behind me caused me to turn.

Sitting in one of my guest chairs against the opposite wall was HIM! A sparkling gleam taunted me from his right eye, and an ominous grin mocked me. Momentary shock held my throat captive. I couldn't speak - couldn't move.

The intruder leaned back and crossed his right leg over his left, “How you doing, John?”

My throat started working again. “Who are you?”

“An old, long lost friend.”

“Ummm.” I stammered at the strange claim. I moved around my desk, clumsily putting obstacles between the stranger and me, “Did we know each other in high school, college, or something?”

The stranger laughed and flicked a hand at me dismissively, “No, no, we’ve known other way longer than that.”

“Kindergarten?” I asked with an uncharacteristically high voice, at which I winced.

“Let’s just say I was with you from the beginning.”

“Beginning of what?” I leaned against the table. I had to take control of this conversation and figure this guy out.

“Just the beginning, John.”

“Ok, well, maybe if we make an appointment or a time for coffee later....”

“Nah, John, you’re thinking is all wrong.” The stranger stood. His head was shaved bald, and he was of average height, with a trimmed brown beard, and dark olive skin. Almost unremarkable until he stepped closer, close enough for me to see his eyes. The iris’s were hazel, yet unsettled, moving, mixed with glittering particles of light, causing a gleam that set off the sparkle in his right eye.

I gulped, “What are you?”

“That’s not the right question, John. The correct question is ‘Why am I here?’”

I gulped again, “And why am I here?” I accidentally parroted him.

He laughed, “That is also a good question, but not the first we should answer.”

I snapped up the phone and dialed 0, “Marcy, come in here, now, please.”

A moment later, the door opened, and she stepped in, “What’s the matter, Pastor? Are

you ok?” Her worried look responded to my terrified face.

“When did this gentleman....” I stopped talking as I looked to where the gleaming stranger stood - he was gone. I turned back to Marcy, “Did anyone pass you in the hall?”

“No, no one did. Are you ok?”

I shook my head and held my breath for a moment, “Nah, I’m good. Thanks, Marcy.

Please leave the door open, though, if you can.”

She paused for a moment, unsure, but eventually smiled and turned around, and went

back to her desk, leaving the door ajar.

I turned, still shaken, sat at my desk in my ergonomic chair, and opened my laptop, ready to work.

“Wow, that was awkward.” The stranger stood next to my large mahogany bookcase. It was my collection of Bibles, dictionaries, commentaries, and a couple of books I had written, books which had given me moderate notoriety in the region.

The intruder spoke while playing with a matte tea cup I had brought back from a trip to Argentina; I kept it displayed next to my selection of thesauruses.

I sat up straight and blinked hard repeatedly, trying to rid my brain of this delusion.

The stranger noticed my blinking and rolled his eyes, “No, John, you’re not hallucinating,” He muttered to himself while putting my decorative cup back onto the shelf, “Why do humans always think blinking would get rid of a hallucination anyways?” He turned back to me and flicked his hand to the left. The door slammed shut. Then he tisked me with a thick index finger, “Now, no more interruptions. Let’s do this!”

I stood and ran around my desk, grabbed the door, and yanked on it. It wouldn’t budge. I pulled harder, but still nothing. I braced my left foot against the wall and pulled with all my might...nothing. “Fine.” I stood, looked at the stranger, and pointed a finger at him, “Whatever little trick you have going on here, stop it right now, Mister, and open this door!”

He stared at me momentarily before finally speaking, “John, we have a situation.”

“Please open the door?” I pleaded.

“A situation that, unfortunately, requires some direct contact.”

I drifted away from him as he slowly stepped forward.

“See, I convinced the higher-ups that you are valuable enough for this opportunity. One last chance for you to get back on track.” He clasped his hands together firmly, selling his point hard.

“Higher ups? What higher-ups? Who...I don’t...” I stammered, my brain not handling the fear and shock.

“Do you still not understand why I am here?” He stopped walking forward and rested on his heels, and sat back, “How about I show you my true form,” As he spoke, his body morphed higher, wider, thicker, and brighter, “Then we can decide if you will listen and where we go from there. Ok?”

Eight Hours later, I pulled into my driveway, still numb and very much terrified.

My wife and kids came pouring out of the house to meet me, something they hadn’t done in years. However, their reason for meeting ‘old dad’ in the driveway was all skepticism and worry, not joy to see their father come home.

“Where have you been? Marcy and Marge called from the office worried about you.” As I approached her, she looked past me to the vehicle I arrived in, “Where’s your new car?”

“OMG, dad, what in gawd’s name is that?” My daughter was aghast.

I looked back at the 15-year-old Ford hatchback I now drove, then stared at my family blankly, “The cheapest vehicle in the lot.” Then I shot a glance at my little girl, “And watch your language.” I pushed past my family, disappointed at how loose my children’s tongues had become.

“I need a drink!” I declared as I stomped up my entry stairs. But the thought of calming my nerves and losing my thoughts into a couple of beers tasted sour in my throat. I looked up and sneered, “Fine, water it is.”

I headed for the kitchen, my wife and kids hot on my heels, “Did your car break down, and that thing is a loaner? If so, we must give that salesman and car lot a piece of our mind.”

I snapped up a bottle of cold water from the fridge and slugged some before cutting my wife off, “No, Janine, the car was fine.”

“Then where is it? And where did you go?”

Exhausted, I slumped against the kitchen counter and sighed, “I took the new electric, luxury car back to the lot and traded it in for the least expensive reliable vehicle they had.”

The kids stared at me and back to my wife, awkward curiosity holding their usually short Tik-tok and Roblox-compromised attention spans. “Kids, go to your rooms while we talk,” Janine ordered.

“No, they need to hear this.” I countermanded the order.

My wife crossed her arms, “Fine, well? I’m listening.”

I took another sip, stared at the floor, sighed, and looked up at my family, “I took the money from the trade-in and gave it to a family on the south side of town.”

“Who? Members of our church?”

I shook my head, “Nope.”

“Friends of members of our church?”

“Nope.”

“Aahh.” She shot her gasp of disapproval at me, a 16-year habit I both hated and dreaded. However, in this instance, Janine’s disapproval was small potatoes.

I shot back my own glare, “I had never met them before, and I did not know how much the trade-in would give me.” I raised my hands in submission and cocked my head back into a small scoff as I reluctantly explained, “But apparently, it was the exact amount, to the dollar, that a family of seven needed to keep their house.” My wife tried to butt in, but I cut her off, “A house they were about to lose because their youngest has Leukemia, and the extra hospital bills were crushing this poor family.”

Janine closed her mouth and thought for a while, “So if you didn’t hear about them from the church, then how did hear about them?”

I sighed even louder, readying myself for the reaction to the crazy bomb I was about to drop on my family, “I was given instructions and an address.” I waved my hands around.

“Instructions, from whom?” My wife was incredulous.

“Who do you think?” I asked with wide eyes and then looked up at the ceiling.

I looked back down, noticing my kids had taken a few steps back, and my wife had again crossed her arms and was rolling her eyes.

“Look, I know it sounds out of character for me, but you know, back in the day, Sweetie,” I stood up and tried to take my wife’s hands into mine, “We did this sort of thing all the time.”

“Ha,” she mused, “Back in the day, we didn’t have a mortgage and two kids in private school.”

I gave up trying to take her hands, and I backed up, “Yeah, about the house and the kid’s private education, we need to talk.”

I slammed the hotel door shut behind me, dropped my bag onto the floor, and flopped down onto the stiff hotel ‘comforter’ face first.

“Well, I think that went very well, didn’t you, John?” The destroyer of my world was back.

“Go away!” I grunted out, “I’m not in the mood.”

“Ah, come on, John, don’t be like that. We are in this together.” He grinned, no doubt with that annoying, cocky grin and that dumb gleam in his eye.

I sat up and located where the voice was coming from. In the corner of the room, a small table and two chairs sat with a hook-shaped lamp peering over the generic furniture. I pointed a forefinger toward his face. “We? We? How are WE in this together? I am the one kicked out of MY house. First time in sixteen years, by the way. I have never even slept on the couch, and now, after talking to YOU, I get kicked out of my own home in one day! We? There is no WE!” I glared at the disrupter of my life, wishing I could make laser beams blast through his skull.

He leaned back and smirked at me, “You know what I am and who I represent, so if you are not onboard, now’s the time to quit.” He clapped and opened his hands two feet apart. Between his palms, a television-like image appeared. It was my family: kids mopping around the house silently - Janine crying, talking to someone on the phone, probably her sister in Chicago.

“Oh great, my wife’s already spreading the word of my insanity through her annoying sister.” I blurted out my first insecure thought.

The odd being sighed, looking down at the image, “You still don’t get it, John. Your family is reacting to the habits you have modeled for them. They are used to you leading in one direction: comfort and safety. Suddenly, anything uncomfortable and scary puts them in a mild shock, especially your wife, who has become every bit as spiritually lazy as you are.” He shrugged his shoulders, “Maybe even worse.”

“Wait, how did you...” I changed my mind and instead asked, “What do you mean?” I began to ask, shaking my confused and tired head, but I was cut off.

“You think humans invented video?” He slammed his hands shut, “Anyways, what will it be? Go back home to the comfortable lazy, vanilla life you know, or see this through to the end?”

I gritted my teeth but shrugged my shoulders in resignation, “Do I have a choice?”

“Yes, you have a choice.” He laughed at me, “You are a church pastor with thousands of attendees. You have an organization with millions in assets and income. Choice is not the issue.”

I shook my head, “No, I mean, where else could I go? I know you, or rather, Who you represent. He has the only truth. There really is no other choice.”

The disrupter smiled, “Hey, living by the Word and not just lecturing on it, look at us - progress already.” He sat forward, “Now, down to business.”

“Wait, what? Can’t I go to sleep now? I’m exhausted.”

“Pish posh, young man,” The stranger was suddenly changed, dressed in an old 19th-century English horse riding suit, buggy whip in hand and top hat under his arm. “Our work has just begun.”

I had too many questions to ask at once, but the most meaningless won out, “I have so many questions, mostly about that outfit; you look ridiculous.”

“Are you serious? I appeared to the Earl of Grey in this suit; you know, the same guy from the tea? Anyways, he needed some extra assurance when ending slavery in the empire, not that you dirty colonists had a notion about ending slavery. It would still be three decades before your country would have to pay its price in blood with that nasty civil war.”

“You advised *the* Charles Grey, the English Prime Minister, 200 years ago?”

“Closer to 180 years, and I would not say, advised as much as...” he waved his buggy whip around, deep in thought, “Revealed is a good word; I revealed to him, just as I am revealing things to you, *Sir* John.”

“If you’re such a big shot, working with prime ministers, foreign dignitaries, and such, why deal with me? What happened, a little demotion? Did you mess up?” I smirked.

This seemed to shut up the cocky intruder for a moment. He swallowed hard and sat back down in his chair, laying his riding crop and hat on the top of the cheap laminated table. He looked down as he spoke. “Yes, John, I did make a mistake.” He looked back up into my eyes and sighed, “I put my faith in you.”

“Excuse me?” I was confused.

He leaned back, “See, I’m assigned to watch over those we deem as disruptors and leaders. Those with the foresight and willpower to effect massive positive change on the world around them.” He brushed something off his top hat, “The engineering department upstairs endows them with special gifts: Charm, people skills, speaking abilities, higher than average IQs, etc.”

He leaned forward and dropped his hands into his lap. "I had a perfect record until you, John. I'm used to working with political influencers, kings, and warlords even. So when I was given the opportunity to assist a pastor: one to influence influencers! I was excited. How hard could it be? I mean, you're not a billionaire playboy or a bloodthirsty warrior."

He stood and began pacing, chuckling to himself, hands behind his back. Saying nothing for a while, he finally shook his head, clenched his teeth, and looked back at me. His eyes were dripping with disappointment. "How hard could it be?" A lone tear streaked his face.

I swallowed hard, my insides sinking down to my ankles. A long-lost feeling in the annex of my mind, barely peeking out, reminded me of who I once was, or could have been, or should have been.

"Never mind," the disruptor of my world interrupted my thoughts, "If at first, we don't succeed...and all that." I looked back up, and the stranger was back in street clothes. "We have work to do."

I cleared my throat, "Um, yeah, right...by the way, what do I call you?"

The stranger smiled, "Denzin, call me Denzin."

"Denzin?" I repeated, "That's a strange name. What does it mean?"

"Truth, John, it means truth."

Part Two

I sat on the edge of the bed, showered, and ready to leave - when allowed to do so by my new handler, Denzin. But, I had to first wait; I didn't know why, just that I had to wait. The night before, I had a massive fight with my wife, culminating in me leaving the house with nothing but an overnight bag. It had begun with me selling the new car, then discussing cheaper alternatives for our children's education, and downgrading our house so we could have more money in the budget for missions and sponsoring orphans. However, all of those sacrifices seemed manageable in my wife's eyes. Manageable, this is until I mentioned the last bit of news. The latest command from my new 'friend' and worst enemy, Denzin: A command that violated all modern reason and good sense.

"Housekeeping." A voice and knock at the door interrupted my thoughts.

I sighed. "Here we go," I thought aloud before speaking up, "Come in."

The door opened, and a plump Latina woman rolled her cleaning cart into the room. "Oh, mister, I am sorry; please excuse. I come back."

"No, it's fine, Ma'am. I was just leaving." I smiled, hoping I had permission to leave the bed.

Awkwardly the cleaner complied and got to work.

"Ask her!"

I rolled my eyes at the voice.

"Ask her!"

"SHH!" I hushed Denzin, "You're so obnoxious sometimes. Just give me a minute."

"Excuse me, sir, did you say something?" The cleaner asked.

"Oh, no, sorry, I was just..." I whined a tiny bit on the inside but complied with the voice whispering in my ear, "Actually, I have a question for you, Ma'am...what's your name?"

"Maria."

"Maria, I am so sorry to be intrusive, but I must ask." I sighed loudly, ending with a moan. I knew how crazy I would sound; finally, I asked, "Is there something wrong?"

"Excuse me?" The lady replied.

"I know it's weird, but..." She cut me off.

"Gloria A Dios!" Maria gripped a small crucifix hanging from her neck and looked up smiling. "I was told He would bring me the answer today." Tears swelled in her eyes.

My jaw dropped. "He did?"

"Se, mister, He said I would meet a man with the answer."

"The answer to what?"

"My sister outside of Teauhana runs an orphanage with two hundred children. But they will lose their building, the owner wants to sell, and they don't have the money to buy it."

"Let me guess. Your sister needs 650,000 dollars, doesn't she?"

"How did you know that? Do you know who I need to speak to?"

A deep frown marred my face, "Yes." I whined out.

"Who, senior?" Maria begged, hope in her eyes.

I winced hard, my lip quivering, then I whined even louder, "Me!"

Denzin plopped down on the bed next to me, "Wow, looks like we are going to Mexico! Amazing!"

"That was everything we had saved for the past 12 years for our retirement! And because of all the fees and taxes, I had to cash out much more than the \$650,000." My eyes bulged from my skull, lecturing the translucent being next to me, "My financial adviser fired me as a client!" I put a hand on my hip, "He's never done that before...and he goes to my church!"

Denzin grinned then shrugged, "So?"

"He'll tell everyone!"

"I know he will." He punched me lightly on the shoulder, "Isn't it awesome?" Denzin was almost bouncing up and down in the security line next to me at the airport. He was far too excited, almost bursting at the seams.

"She's going to kill me." I hissed at the apparition: an apparition determined to plague my nice comfortable life.

"Who's that?" Denzin inquired, a grin still adorning his face.

"My wife, she is going to kill me." I took a step closer to the security check. A young couple was behind me, and a mom with a little girl was in front of me; the little one was intently watching my every move.

"How do you know?" Denzin probed.

"She does not DO change or crazy...and um," I kept trying to describe what I was thinking without revealing too much he could judge Janine and me on.

My new handler was not fooled. "You mean your wife doesn't do....Faith? Trust in God? What you are talking about is being a failure as a spiritual leader, John."

"Yes, ok!" I snapped back, louder than I should have, but I didn't care. I stuffed a finger into Denzin's face and let him have it. "We don't do this crazy 'faith' stuff anymore. We have kids, a mortgage, a life, and friends. Plus, I have friends and members in my congregation that have more than enough money to do this faith stuff! OK?"

The being smirked at me, "First off, it's not *'your'* congregation, and it never was, John. That's one of your biggest mistakes we will deal with later. Second, we didn't ask your members for money. We asked you." He finished by waving his hand, reminding me to take a step forward.

"What about Jim? Jim is worth millions, has several vacation houses, like ten cars, and makes a boatload every year."

"And is ten times the giver and has ten times the faith you have," Denzin cut me off. "Have you ever wondered why Jim has so much?"

"He's in computers."

"No, genius. It's because he is a servant. The guy has helped far more people than he's been paid for. In high school, he got into computers to help his grandma and her friends communicate with their families better, so they wouldn't be so lonely. Then he quit college to develop a new secure tablet specifically for foster kids to stay connected to their families and be monitored by social workers and mentors for safety. The Federal Government purchased that system for a ton, but Jim didn't even keep the money. He reinvested into another system for educating orphans and street children in Asia. Do I need to go on?"

I frowned and let my nose drift up a bit, defensively, "I didn't know all that," I thought for a moment, and took another step in line, thinking up my new excuse, "Well, then riddle me this, smart guy, if Jim is already primed for giving, why not just take it from him, since he has so much more? Why do I have to use all my savings?"

"You still don't get it, do you?" Denzin shook his head, then faced me and leaned in so close to my face that he almost touched my nose. "It's not YOUR savings, and it was never earmarked for you to keep. And also, because: YOU DON'T HAVE ANY MONEY!"

I scoffed back at him, "Of course I do; that's why I'm about to get on a plane...."

"No, you don't." Denzin leaned back on his heels and stared at me for a moment before continuing, "Everything you spend was given to you by faith, for God's work! Do you think that the electronic car you upgraded to came from money you made? Do you think that the 5-star spa vacation your wife went on with the 'rich' ladies from the neighborhood was paid for by you? Do you think you foot the bill for that upscale private school your kids go to - not to mention the house? No, you are using *His* Money, given to you, to spread HIS message to the community around you."

"Oh, come on, my house is not that big."

Denzin shook his head, "Yes, it is; even your sense of proportion is off! Also, it's in the third most expensive neighborhood in the state!"

"Safety is a concern." I shrugged my shoulders.

"You are supposed to be a pastor, a spiritual leader in trusting God. You should never be afraid for your physical safety as much as your spiritual relevance. You didn't ask if you could live in the nicest, safest, cookie-cutter neighborhood around; you just assumed you should! What if God wanted you in the worst area? Or, in the middle somewhere? Which is, BY THE WAY, where "your" congregation actually lives! Maybe, it would have been nice to live near them."

I rolled my eyes, "I'm SOOO sorry; next time, I'll find the nearest crack house and settle my wife and kids right next door. Would that make you happy?"

"That's not the point, and you know it," Denzin snapped back.

"Then what is?"

"*You never asked!*"

I swallowed hard, slapped in the face by this brick of truth. Denzin continued, "Maybe you do live in the right spot, or maybe not. Maybe, you should have been somewhere else, helping a single mom who just so happened to be your neighbor. But now, you'll never know."

I crossed my arms and turned my back slightly, like a child refusing to hear the word 'no.' "So sorry that I'm not perfect."

My handler's voice softened as his hand rested on my shoulder, "We are not asking for perfection." I turned my head and looked at him. He smiled back at me warmly, "Only obedience."

A finger tapped me on the shoulder. I looked back; it was the young couple behind me asking me to move forward, "Oh, sorry, yeah." I replied. I stepped up to a little girl facing me, clutching a stuffed unicorn.

"Are you crazy?" The little one asked.

The girl's mom was busy on the phone and juggling several carry-on cases. The mother was too busy to notice her daughter interrogating the man behind her.

I smiled down at her, "Yeah...you saw me talking to myself, huh?"

She shook her head, "No, silly." She giggled, "Your crazy 'cause you keep arguing with Him." She pointed up at Denzin.

My mouth dropped, "Wait. You can see this guy, too?"

The little one rolled her eyes, "Of course, I can, silly."

Denzin smiled at the girl, "Hi Lucy, how are you doing?"

"I'm ok, but I have not seen Gabe since my daddy went away. Where is he?"

Denzin bent down to one knee, getting down to eye level with the grade-schooler, "Mr. Gabe is very busy helping other strong, amazing girls, just like he helped you. But don't worry; if you need his help again, God will send me or someone else like Gabe to help you and your mommy; just ask, ok?"

Lucy shrugged her shoulders, the unicorn in her hand bouncing as she did, "It's ok, I just miss our tea parties, but I still have my tea parties with his Teacher, just like Mr. Gabe taught me to do, so that's ok."

"Honey, leave the poor man alone." The mom, still on the phone, had noticed her daughter's conversation and put a maternal hand on her back, ushering Lucy back in front of her.

Denzin leaned in and whispered, "Lucy's father was no good; my colleague, Gabe, had to make some moves to keep her and her mom safe."

"And he just showed himself to her?" I asked.

Denzin chuckled, "Oh no, she was born like that; she can see every person and spirit around." He leaned in and whispered, secretively, "Word around the water cooler is that she spoke to Gabriel first, before he knew her gifting. Apparently, he nearly jumped out of his skin!" Denzin slapped his knee and bellowed massive laughter, "Funniest thing we'd heard upstairs this century."

The mom and daughter were about to turn left, ushered that way by a female TSA agent; the agent motioned me to the right. Just as they turned to leave, the little girl spun around and stepped forward, "Hey, Mister."

I smiled down at her warmly, "Yes?"

"Don't fight with God; either He wins or you get real lonely."

She turned and chased after her mother.

Shocked, my mouth opened slightly; I looked over at Denzin. He was grinning from ear to ear as he motioned me down the roped-off security check line towards the x-ray machine. As I moved in that direction he quipped, "So John, are you ready to be scanned?"

Part Three

I peered down at my ticket, rechecking the gate number.

“A16. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“I heard you the last time. I’m just double-checking.”

“No, you are triple checking because you still don’t want to believe I’m real. You keep looking for excuses to ignore me and my message.”

“Wow, quite the sensitive little cupcake, aren’t we?” I chuckled and began the trudge toward Terminal A.

“What is that supposed to mean? Hey, get back here. Don’t you walk away after making that snide remark.”

I located the walkway to Terminal A and began the trudge as I spoke. “I just think it sounds like you have been doing this job too long. Otherwise, how do you explain getting so bent out of shape from me not trusting you to know the gate number? You yourself said you are not God and therefore aren’t perfect. So you could be wrong.”

“But I wasn’t.”

“I think you are overly sensitive to folks ignoring you.”

“No, John, I’m overly sensitive to YOU ignoring me. A sensitivity that has grown for more than a decade. More importantly, ignoring THE Spirit inside of you. A Spirit that took the Bosses thousands of years of implementing an intricate plan so you could be the envy of the entire universe!”

“Oh, come on, ignoring? Are you saying I have completely ignored the Holy Spirit? How about all those hours and hours of prayer meetings and words for my people after Sunday service? Was I ignoring the Spirit then too?”

“Oh, of course not. Mr. Big Shot Pastor got all the accolades he wanted and more. Besides that, it’s convenient and comfortable to minister to those in YOUR building when YOU planned it. But let me ask you this, ‘Pastor,’ when did you last have the notion or faith to pray for someone on the street? Or, do you save your prayers for YOUR people who support YOUR ministry?”

I stepped off one moving walkway and walked to the next one, “Oh, that’s different; I have thousands of congregants. When do I have the time to go find more folks to minister to?” I scoffed at the notion.

We stepped onto the next moving walkway and stopped behind an elderly lady gripping a purple rolling bag. “When did ‘not having time’ permit you to stop sharing the good news?”

I rolled my eyes, “Fine, *Your Worship*. Like every other successful pastor in modern history, let’s suppose I have been neglecting my ministry and only helping myself, as you are SO plainly implying.”

“Which I am.” Denzin agreed and nodded his head.

“Why would God help me with words or give me prophecies that come true? Shoot, we even see folks get healed! Explain that!” That last two words I spat at his face.

The older lady with the purple bag in front turned, responding to my harsh words. Seeing that I was alone and speaking 'to myself,' she smiled at me awkwardly, then shuffled up the moving walkway quickly to escape me.

I opened my mouth to explain myself but instead waved my hand at the air, defeated. "Whatever. Who cares?" I looked up to see Denzin with a massive grin on his face. "What?" I snarled, "Do you like me looking insane?"

"No, but we do like to hear that you don't care what others think: again, progress!" I rolled my eyes.

"And to answer your question, you forget your duty. When praying with your congregation, you are ministering to them. It's their faith and their prayers that are being answered. It has NOTHING to do with you other than standing with them. If anything, their prayers were answered despite you being there, not because of your presence."

My jaw dropped, "Well, that's a sucker punch to the man parts."

Denzin shrugged his shoulder and turned to face the end of the moving walkway, "It was meant to be."

We both hopped off the moving walkway. I took about ten steps towards my gate but froze, "Out of the frying pan...How did she even know to be here?"

"I can manage a text without you knowing, son! Besides, now you both can reignite and catch the fire together!" Denzin finished my euphemism for me.

I released a massive sigh, then forced a charming grin onto my face and stepped forward, my heart around my ankles, tail between my legs, "Hi, sweetie, so happy you met me here."

Janine turned to face me and raised an eyebrow, "Husband." She returned my kiss on the cheek with an obligatory peck, then asked, "Why am I here?"

"We are doing a last-minute overnight to Mexico," I furrowed my brow, "But what about the kids?"

"My sister is staying with them." Her stare dared me to respond.

I accepted the challenge - and failed miserably. "I thought we had agreed, no cloven hooves in the house?" My wife's gaze narrowed. But I was still too immature not to continue, "No bother, as long as she keeps from shedding all over the furniture, I'll be happy." I hefted Janine's bag, carrying both mine and hers together as we strolled towards the gate.

"That was not very nice," Denzin hissed at me as he walked between us, about one and a half paces back.

My wife took a deep breath, "She was nice enough to come over last minute to indulge my husband as he loses the last of his marbles."

I frowned, "Touche, my love."

"Better," Denzin quipped.

We walked in silence to a row of fake leather cushion seats suspended by a chrome frame. After we sat down and my wife checked herself in a compact mirror, she asked, "So, why are we going to Mexico?"

"There are 200 orphans who are about to find themselves homeless in the next few days unless we do something about it." I summed up, hoping that would pull hard enough on her heartstrings to keep any probing questions far from me.

My summation did not shield me from Janine's interrogation.

“How did you discover the needs of these orphans?”

“I had a very nice cleaning lady tell me. She told me when I was at the hotel that I had,” I hesitated, looking for the right words, “Been told to take a break at.”

“Hmmpf,” she jumped ahead, “So, what you are saying is that God had me kick you out of the house, so you ‘just’ happened to be at the right hotel room at the right time?”

I shrugged my shoulders, “Um, yeah. And met a lady whose sister needs \$650,000 for 200 orphans to have a home.”

My wife sneered and began digging through her handbag, “So what, we don’t have that kind of money. Well, unless we...” Realization stopped her from digging and made her jaw drop. She turned to me, her face turning a shade of red I had not seen since she gave birth to our son, “If you cashed out our entire retirement, I swear...”

I winced at the comment, “Yeah, I would not say that...and besides, I did warn you.” I blurted this out much louder than I meant to, garnering unwanted attention from other passengers. I leaned in and lowered my voice and pasted on a fake smile, “That’s why you kicked me out of the house, remember?”

“No.” Janine shook her head, “I kicked you out of the house because I thought you were losing your mind. Then, after this craziness passed, you would come to your senses and...”

I shook my head, “No, this will not pass. We have been tasked with keeping 200 orphans off the street.”

“Tasked by who? Did God Almighty come down and tell you? If so, why won’t He tell me? After all, it’s my money too!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Denzin’s expression. First, his jaw dropped, then he stood, and his jaw clenched, and his fists tightened. I held up a finger, hoping that he would not do anything rash. I then took my wife’s hands and placed them on my lap. “Love, when I have ever done something I felt God wanted us to do, and I was wrong?”

Janine frowned, “I don’t know.”

“And I know you care about orphans.”

She rolled her eyes, “Yeah. But why can’t Jim help pay for it, and the church?” She smiled slightly, “Maybe we all go thirds, that way, we are still helping but we can still save...”

“You don’t get it, love. I have been arguing every point you can imagine, but the answer I get is...” I hesitated, not having any clue how the following statement would be received.

“What...what else are you not telling me, John?” Janine demanded an answer. Her voice was wary of how I might reply.

“It’s not ours.”

“Huh?” She sat back, “What’s not ours?”

“Any of it.” I replied with big shocked eyes. “Cars, clothes, house, money, it’s not ours.”

“Well, yes, technically, everything we have belongs to God,” She rolled her eyes again.

“No, I mean, basically we take way too much from the church budget. Our salary, house, lifestyle, all too much!”

“Wait a minute.” Janine gasped, “Are we supposed to just live like 18th century nuns, nothing but an extra habit and a bucket?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I looked over at Denzin, still pacing back and forth, listening in on our conversation. He shook his head, NO, and laughed out loud. I continued, “I think we are just meant to live like the folks we minister to and use the rest for the gospel.”

"The gospel?" She sat back in her chair and picked up her designer handbag, then dropped it in her lap out of habit, "That's a word I haven't heard in a long time."

I swallowed hard and sat back in my chair. We both stared across the airport terminal and out of the window. After several moments of silence, I spoke, "I know it's been a long time since you've heard that word. That's my fault. I've ..." I drifted off thinking, then suddenly turned to my wife, "I don't know where this will go or how crazy it will get, but you have to believe me when I say I'm not going nuts. This stuff is real, and if I don't comply with "

"What, John? What else are you not telling me?"

Usually, my first name on my wife's lips meant she was mad at me. This time her tone wasn't only furious; it was confused, angry, and concerned. I was her husband and the leader of my family, but Denzin was correct. The direction I had been leading our family was similar to the rest of our friends and neighbors. I was leading us alright, but I failed to recognize the signs of slipping off that sometimes rocky, narrow path that was blessed with simplicity but often confused with boredom. That simple narrow path often led over mountains and through dark, perilous woods but allowed for the warmth of the sun on one's soul.

Since our kids had been born, and the church had exploded in growth, our path had become too easy, too comfortable, and less and less warmth to be shared within our souls. The fact was, our family had to do some massive backtracking if we were to link back up with that difficult yet satisfying narrow path.

I turned to my wife, "If I don't make these serious changes now, I will be forced into retirement, permanently!"

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!"

Part Five

A handsome Asian woman with porcelain skin and long, thick highlighted hair stood in front of a massive cross surrounded by manicured, lush foliage. She smiled warmly and held out her arms in a warm measured greeting, "Welcome to the Sound of Salvation! The fastest growing church in the Midwest, and home to your favorite brother and founder, Pastor John, and his beautiful wife, Janine."

The camera angle switched as the announcer continued her introduction; she strolled deeper into the garden as she spoke, "I'm Sarah, and on behalf of the Sound of Salvation, we wish to welcome any new guests and returning members for an incredible time of worship, Bible teaching and family fellowship."

"Don't forget," she smiled warmly, "At the bottom of this screen and in the envelopes in front of you is all the information you will need to donate to this amazing ministry." The camera angle widened, revealing that Sarah had approached the giant cross centered in the garden. She laid a graceful hand upon it and peered up, as though 'pondering,' "Because, you never know, who else still needs to hear the truth."

I stood behind my podium, Bible open, hands spread wide. A position I had been in nearly 1,000 times before.

Yet, this was the most nervous I had felt since I first opened my Bible in front of a crowd. My first audience was fifteen years earlier in our small single-family garage with two other families and a 70-year-old widower. Janine had still been pregnant with our daughter, I had finished my Bible degree only six months prior, and I was still selling cars part-time at a used car lot, two towns over. To make ends meet, Janine taught preschool, down the street. Hence our general countenance was that of the walking dead. But, man...were we happy! After three blissful years of marriage, and a healthy pregnancy, I was now pursuing my passion. Preaching on Sundays, a work I KNEW God was calling me to.

"BUT, what if I say the wrong thing? What if I am boring, how will I know if the neighbors will even like me or care about God?" As if it were yesterday, I could still feel those thoughts rummaging through my skull as I kept Janine awake the night before, tossing and turning. "OR worse yet, what if no one shows up and I was wrong? What if God did not call me here? What then?" But as I felt the wave of nausea in my stomach turn to knots with only fifteen minutes before the moment of truth, that calming, perfect feeling of sunshine washed peace into my soul. "We'll be fine," was all the inner voice said, and that was all I needed.

Six months later, my garage was too small for the growing crowd. In a year, the YMCA gymnasium we rented was overflowing, and in five years our first church building was inadequate. In evangelical church circles, I had become a rock star! Even today, I usually have three or four pastoral teams from around the country, sometimes from around the world, come to shadow me, and learn "my secrets." 'Secrets' I was all too eager to share.

These thoughts flashed through my mind like never before. Many of these memories were a result of our whirlwind trip to Mexico resulting in us purchasing the land and orphanage with our retirement funds. But it hadn't stopped there, on the way home Janine made a list of

furniture, handbags, and jewelry she was going to sell. Then on a layover in Phoenix, she got on the phone with her rich friends back home and demanded they donate to an annual trust solely for our new orphan ministry. After we arrived home, Janine, within seconds of getting my permission, had found a real estate agent, put the house up for sale, then sat the kids down. We explained our change in schools, so we could afford to help more orphans and the poor.

My daughter was the first to react. "Duh Dad, of course, we can do that to help out. Besides, you and Mom liked our school way more than we did."

Then my son pipped in, "Can I go with you to the orphanage next time? Maybe I can bring my comic books and video games to share?"

As my wife and I glanced at one another with shock, Denzin chimed in, suddenly appearing next to me, munching a green apple. "Out of the mouths of babes..."

I came back to the moment, remembering where I was, I played with my notes then reached under my lectern for a bottle of water and took a sip. My "prep" gave the audience time to settle down, and it allowed me time to procrastinate.

I chuckled to myself thinking of how cocky and arrogant I had become. Back in our old house's garage, I was terrified and could do nothing but claw my way up that straight and narrow path, desperate for just one or two folks to show up and hear about Jesus. However, after our incredible "success" the scariest part of my 'journey' became who I would have to offend this week because I didn't have time to sit and meet with everyone. Or, who should I hire, for yet another new position, because we were growing, again! "Life was rough" we arrogantly chuckled to each other around the office, as I'd 'humbly' accept yet another pay raise from my financial committee.

The thoughts, embarrassment, and conviction swirling through my head finally emptied themselves out of my mouth. "I am such an ass!" I blurted out, forgetting that almost 3,000 church people were staring at me, waiting for the weekly message.

At the semi-swear word, half the audience held its breath, the other half leaned forward and smiled. Bob, who always arrived 45 minutes early so he could sit in the front row, left of center, grinned and commented loudly to his neighbor, "Buckle up, this is gonna be a good one!"

"Excuse me, friends, I mean..." I shook my head attempting to gain my composure. I looked up, spying Denzin leaning against the back wall. He grinned and winked at me while munching on a massive bucket of cinema popcorn. 'That little punk,' I gnashed my teeth as I thought to myself, 'Is he just here to watch me fall flat on my face as I get run out of my own church on a rail?' His right eye sparkled at me like a warning beacon on a lighthouse in treacherous waters. Treacherous waters I felt from all sides. But which waters do I choose? The waters in the here and now, that could only kill my earthly body, or the waters in the beyond, lasting for eternity?

That long-lost desperate feeling, clawing its way through my guts, intensified. Sweat dripped down the side of my head as I swallowed hard. 'I can't do this,' I thought to myself just as something inside of me quit. I could feel myself shrink inside.

At that, a long-lost feeling of cleansing sunshine washed over my soul. "Just be honest," was all the inner voice of peace said; it was all I needed.

"No, I am not sorry. Because I have been an ass!" I reaffirmed, "And that's Biblical!" And I was off - or rather, should I say, we were off: "Like Balaam in Numbers, the Lord has been

saying something to me, something I was too arrogant to hear or stubborn to consider. Like Balaam in the book of Numbers, I have been greedy and would rather have a little bit of fame than be humble before God! God, the Creator of the Universe, the only reason we have any of this, this..." I waved my hands and peered around the massive auditorium, "This monstrosity. A gargantuan building constructed for you," I pointed at the crowd, "and for me," I pushed a thumb into my chest, "but not constructed for Him!" I finished my thought with a finger thrust at the ceiling.

"Anyone remember our first building?" I grinned. "We had two services, about 150 folks at each service and we all knew one another, right?" I saw several familiar faces nodding. "When we kept growing, I can't say what the solution was." I threw my hands up in surrender, "Cause we," I paused and shook my head, "No, it was I! I never took the time to ask. I just assumed it was my place to have a bigger and bigger Sunday service!"

I stepped to the right side of the stage, "Maybe, I was supposed to raise up another pastor, recruit 30 or 40 of you all and send you to the other side of the city or another state, maybe even another country!" I stepped to the other side of the stage, "Or maybe, I was to let one of our amazing associate pastors step up and give them a chance to take over as senior pastor, so I could go and start another church somewhere else. Maybe I could have even gone to another country, like the Apostle Paul!" I drifted back towards center stage, "But we will never know, because I was too insecure and too egotistical, eager to soak up all the glory. I should have rather stepped out of the way and let that glory drift to the heavens where it belongs!"

"Besides! If this massive building was for God, do you really think it would be empty six days out of the week? Do you think God would have a huge building used only for a massive crowd to hear mostly feel-good lectures and thinly veiled music concerts?" I shook my head and scoffed, "But that is what I wanted, that is what I chose!" I beat my chest with an emphatic fist.

I calmed down and shook my head, "I chose to pour 10 million dollars of God's money into this land and building. Why? For His glory? So God would rejoice in what we...or should I say, I built? Like Nebuchadnezzar, overlooking the hanging gardens of Babylon, so I can thump my chest and say," I pounded my ribs firmly again, then bellowed, "Look what I have made: 'Look at my kingdom!'" My mouth rattled off words faster than my brain could connect, "Not, His kingdom come, HIS WILL be done!"

I stared into the crowd, blankly. "Let's be clear, this place is about John's Kingdom and John's will!"

I snapped out of it and began making intense eye contact with the audience. "No! No more, I stand before you to repent...Like the Pharisees in the Gospels, I have become nothing but a white-washed tomb. Good only to store a corpse and dry bones." I shook my head, "And that's all I've had to offer you over the past ten years. Empty words, empty leadership, empty songs of worship." I spoke as I drifted across the stage.

I suddenly spun on the crowd and lifted my head, "Keep in mind, this is all on me, not the worship leaders, the elders or deacons, my staff, or even my family. I'm the head, I reaped the glory, I am to blame!" I stepped up to the edge of the stage, "I thought I was your pastor." I looked over the crowd, trying to connect with every face, "And I am sorry because I am not and was never meant to be."

I continued to look the crowd over. As I did, I noticed a row of middle-aged Asian men in navy blue suits, avoiding eye contact. 'The Korean delegation. Holy Moses! How could this get

any more awkward?' My brain began to whirl as it tried to stem the tide of words flowing from my guts through my mouth.

"Don't stop!" The warmth I'd already allowed back onto my soul demanded I complete my task.

I winced, forcing the awkward feelings out of my brain, stood, and got back to work.

"I never was your 'Pastor.' At least, not in the way I advertised it." I shouted out before strolling back to the pulpit, and placed my hands on my Bible, "In this book, it clearly states, 'He is the Good Shepherd.' And that we," I circled my hands widely, "All of us, are His sheep. Me too! I am also a sheep, just like you. Somewhere along the line, I forgot that. I forgot that I am not any more or less special than you. As the great Apostle Paul said, 'Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in Paul's name?' No! Of course not."

I plopped down on the stage in my navy blue suit and pulled on my red power tie until it came off. I popped open my top button and sat back on my hands, releasing a massive sigh to the ceiling. Tears welled in my eyes as I chewed on my lip thinking for a moment. "You know we have some of the most famous pastors and biggest churches on earth ending their careers in disgrace. Affairs, scandals...stealing from their own churches." I sat forward, hands dropped in my lap, "I just knew, I was better than all of them. I would never cheat on my wife, and I haven't stolen a cent in my life."

Shameful tears dripped from my face, "But I have stolen, and I haven't been a good husband or father." Glancing right, I noticed the Korean delegation was cut in half, but those who remained were sitting forward, the desperate need to know where I was going with this madness was written all over their faces. "I have taken the money you gave me, for the work of the gospel and used it on selfish things!" I stood and walked over to my lecture, "Do you see this!" I pointed at the oversized stand, "It's only meant to hold a bible and notes, maybe a bottle of water or two. However, we had this custom built for \$2,500," I rolled my eyes to the heavens and threw my hands in the air, "The old wooden one was donated by a church family for free, and still worked fine!" I pointed up at the camera following me around, "And even if we should be televising every stupid little thing we do, why did we need to purchase brand new cameras, again?"

I ran upstage right, "These drums, replaced our old ones, which still worked fine and were handed down to the youth." I scoffed at that comment, "UGH, handed down to the youth, doesn't that just sum up how we see ourselves? We spend all this money on ourselves, for a once-a-week church service, with all the best leaders and all the best equipment. But for our kids, our children! Our most valuable assets, our future, they get the lower budget, the hand-me-down equipment, and the youngest and least experienced pastors!

Why?" I looked around the crowd, locating and making eye contact with all the elders and deacons I could, "What are we thinking? What is wrong with us?" I screamed. My voice dropped as I rocked back onto my heels, "I know what we are thinking - I know what's wrong with us! As I said before, I am the reason this church isn't what it should be. The reason we don't take our youth seriously is the same reason I have been a bad husband and a worse father." I recentered myself on the stage and loomed over the crowd, "I know the truth, and I 'supposedly' have dedicated my life to teaching it. However," I stuck my finger in the air, "I neglected one tiny little detail." I took a breath and tried to continue, but a sudden lump in my throat gobbled up my words. I swallowed hard and tried to speak again, with mixed results, "I

didn't..." I spoke slowly, deliberately, and as clearly as possible, tears freely flowing from my eyes, "...I didn't take the time to teach my own kids the Bible. I haven't prayed or done a Bible study with my own wife for who knows how long," I looked left and down at my wife, making eye contact, "I haven't led my family towards Jesus ever since I became a 'successful' pastor. I never taught my family how to pray or why to read the Bible. Just, 'Show up on Sunday and you'll learn with the rest of the crowd.'" I paused, still staring at my wife, her eyes swollen and red as she wiped at them.

"Janine," I choked a bit, "I'm sorry I haven't been who you married, for a long time. I've led us in the wrong direction, the easy way, away from the straight and narrow. Forgive me, please, let me try to make up for it?" My wife clasped her hand onto her mouth, to stifle the sounds of sobbing. I took a step forward to go to her, to hold her, but that same inner voice, washing warmth into my soul, warned me to wait. She had her own baggage to handle.

I cleared my throat and wiped my eyes. I turned and faced the crowd, "I don't know where I go from here." I paused and waited, hoping that voice would continue to speak through me, and not leave me short, "I don't know how next Sunday will be different. I don't even know if we will meet. However, if we do begin a fresh journey together, it will be the right journey, it will be for the gospel. It will no longer be for John."

I don't know why I did, but I took off my coat and dropped it on the stage. I snapped up my Bible and walked out the auditorium, through the double doors. Hannah, one of our deaconesses opened the sanctuary door for me. Sam, my head of security opened the front door to the parking lot and began to follow. I shook my head 'No' at him, and continued to walk - alone. I drifted through the parking, down the sidewalk, and deeper into the city.

It could have been thirty minutes or three hours, I really can't say how long I walked for, nor did I care. But I eventually got thirsty.

Still clutching my large print, NIV leather bound 'preaching' Bible, I walked towards a gas station and into a mini-mart. As I approached the front door a voice stopped me short, "Excuse me, please?"

I turned to see a later-aged man with white hair and a desert camo army jacket standing with his hands behind his back. His bulbous nose betrayed his vice, but his steady and clear eyes gave me a reason to believe that alcohol was his only vice.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm sorry to ask, but I just need some help."

I shrugged, "What do you want?"

He was about to ask for something but then looked down, saw my bible, and shook his head, "Never mind."

"No, sir, please tell me. After the day I've had, you could ask me to buy you drugs and I wouldn't judge." I chuckled.

He laughed with me, "Ok, well." He looked away, "I was hoping for some cigarette money."

I started to say I was sorry and to give him the usual line about buying him some food or a drink, when that same warmth in my belly stopped me, "Just buy him a pack."

I smiled warmly, "Give me a minute." Two minutes later I emerged from the mini-mart with two bottles of water and the only pack of cigarettes I had ever bought in my life. I motioned him over to a picnic table and sat down. He sat across from me.

"I'm John, by the way."

"Bill. Thanks for the smokes, man. I know I should quit, but I'm trying to quit drinking right now, so I'm focused on one addiction at a time." He giggled nervously.

"Well, my pleasure to help, but," I shook the pack of cancer sticks at him, "I'll give you this pack on one condition."

He turned his face away slightly and eyed me with suspicion, "Yeah, what's that?"

I smiled at him, "Just tell me your story."

A grin grew on Bill's face as he leaned forward, nodding his head eagerly, a lone tear streaked his weather-worn skin, "Ya got yourself a deal!"

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?*

Punched By An Angel
By Ryan Gray
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