

**And
Lead
Us
Not**

Et Ne Inducas Nos

והאללילע

**a novel
by E. Q. Manson**

There was a man whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil.

Job 1: 1

Time is right for a palace revolution!

The Rolling Stones, "Street Fighting Man"

“For English, please enter through door One. Para Español, entrar por la puerta sala de Dos. Dlya Rossii, voyti cherez dver' Tri. Pour Français, entrer par la portepor à Quatre”

A voice like a loudspeaker droned multi-lingually in a room that sprawled like a ballroom aspiring to indoor sporting arena. Walls stood and ceiling floated, distant indistinct, a gauzy white. Objects lacked shadows, becoming formless. All melded to a gleaming blur, not from insufficient light that blends lines into smoke, but from too much light from too many directions. The darkest ebony was indistinguishable from granite.

Sally Jadelaw got her bearings. She was standing. Seeing (to the extent anyone could see) and hearing (quite distinctly).

Her pain had totally vanished.

Memory of the pain, and of her previous surroundings, was sparkling clear. Moments before, she lay on an operating table at Metro Hospital, prepped for a kidney transplant. She came by ambulance, intensely feverish, nauseated, weak and cold. Emergency techs had responded to her husband's frantic phone call. They picked her up off the couch, laid her on a soft foamy stretcher, secured three white straps around her (as though she could have escaped!), and loaded her in. The sky was early evening dark, the air February freezing, but she was only outside for eleven seconds.

She remembered the most insignificant thing, such as the fact that she was out the door and into the ambulance in precisely eleven seconds. She especially recalled exquisite pain, throbbing head, muscle aches everywhere, pinprick tingling on most of her skin, the desire to heave but not the power to make it happen.

Cousins Jimmy and Debra, and her daughter Karen were matches. All three offered to donate a kidney. Karen, only twenty-two, was in the best health of the three. Surgery day was Tuesday. Today was Sunday. Sally remembered hearing, several times during the ambulance ride and in the hospital halls, where Karen was, on which highway, and her distance from the hospital. Not to worry.

Sally felt the IV stab into the bulging vein of her right hand. Saw a white-masked male nurse attaching a tube.

“Mrs. Jadelaw, this is going to put you under.”

“It doesn’t take very long, does it?” was the last thing she said. A page seemed to turn, of a book tall as a telephone pole.

She found herself in this blindingly white cavernous place, packed (but not uncomfortably) with people. All wore something that resembled a hospital gown, but without drawstrings.

These were not patients being released.

This was not a recovery room. This was not a hospital.

This was not even planet Earth.

“Goodness Gracious! I must be dead!”

Sally struggled to subdue and ignore that clear, insistent memory of life just minutes before. The amplified voice bellowed.

“For English, please enter through door One. Para español, entrar por la puerta sala de Dos. Dlya Rossii, voyti cherez. . .”

She milled through the others, not looking at or caring about faces. Each numbered egress was a square arch, ten feet tall and wide. She aimed for the exit marked with a number one.

Sally took stock of her most basic identity. She was forty-eight years old. Not quite a grandmother (middle daughter Michelle was in her fourth month). Catholic. Devout.

No doubt she had reached her intended destination.

“Oh, my. This is it! The hereafter! *The portal to Heaven.*”

Past the archway a whirlpool of dove feathers invited her, misty yet in no way forbidding. Fearlessly, with men on either side identically clad, she walked through the archway into that cloud.

PART I

Then Satan said, Doth Job fear God for nought? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands. But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face. And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power:

Job 1:10-12

Afterlife Day 1, Monday

Sally felt the ether and sounds around her evaporate. New surroundings coalesced. Perceptible light no longer gleamed empyrean, but seemed natural, reflections of daylight.

She was in a warehouse. Long, wide and echoically empty, its raftered ceiling suspended fifteen feet above a smooth concrete floor, dotted with paint splatters and black circles of discarded chewing gum. Multi-paned windows, many of them broken, conveyed the grubby shine of a cloudy day's sun at perhaps four in the afternoon. Car and truck noises meandered through a busted-open garage bay door on the far corner from where she stood.

This looks like Earth. This looks positively ugly. But the pain is gone. I love and miss my family. I want to go back right now, if only for two minutes, to thank Karen for offering her kidney, to thank Frank for everything. I'm filled with love and loneliness.

This is heaven. Some unexpected kind of heaven.

A corner of the warehouse floor was cordoned off by yellow wooden traffic horses, forming a corral. Jutting out from the building's corner were the walls of an inner office. Its single door looked out on the corral floor. Two windows shielded the office within, venetian blinds closed.

Twelve people wandered around the corral, each wearing a copper-brown jumpsuit, full sleeves, full legs. A single piece covered them, ankles to neck to wrists. Mid-calf boots, perfectly fitted, were a clashing shade of brown.

Two additional brownsuited people sat on green-painted park benches, splayed askew around the corral. A very old, short, middle eastern woman; a middle aged Asian man; and standing beside them, a black male teenager. Milling about were several white men and women.

Were these angels? Saved souls? None spoke. They appeared as stunned as she.

Sally inspected her arms and torso. She wore the brown uniform as well. Whatever these people were, she was one too. She wished there were a mirror. She could see and feel her body as the overweight, unshapely thing it had always been. But did her face and hair still look as grim as the last time she saw herself in a bathroom mirror?

From spaces between air molecules, a man entered the warehouse

corral in front of Sally. A large, square-headed Hispanic of about thirty-five who apparently died needing a shave, he looked up, down, across and sideways.

“So this is it?” he said in a booming half Mexican accent, half Texas drawl. He stuck out his hand. “Howdy. Raul Bruguez.”

She shook the firm, quite material, not-at-all ethereal hand. “I’m . . . oh, gracious me! I’m . . . Sally Jadelaw.”

Raul was garrulous, unlike the others. He went about pressing flesh and introducing himself. The others found enough voice to say their names and a pleasantry or two. All spoke some dialect of English.

His forward manner led Sally, and most of the other brownsuited people in the warehouse corral, to assume Raul was in charge. Could he please tell them what was going on, where they were, what was the nature of this odd heaven?

“Me? No sirree. I don’t know nothing more than you. I seem to be wearing the same duds as you all. Anybody else know what’s up with this?”

The old middle eastern woman said “I don’t know!”

The young black man spoke for the rest. “We don’t know either!”

Sally felt in her heart she knew what this was. She felt happy. The presence of God is what brings happiness. It therefore stood to reason: They were on Earth, but on a different plane. They were some creature beyond human, of unknown quantity. Like angels without wings.

“I think I know where we are!” she announced, surprised at her own boldness, for she normally never spoke before being spoken to. “This looks like a dingy broken building in a dingy broken city, but we’re here! This is –.”

Behind her, a soprano voice said. “This is Brooklyn.”

The office door had opened and a short, stately lady emerged. She looked quite fetching in her suit, cut like all the others, but colored fire-engine red.

“I’m afraid that whatever legends you have been fed about this afterlife, they are not what you will find,” she said, in a high-class British accent, as from London far away in space and time. *Whatevah legends. Ahf-terlife.* “Could everyone step inside?”

The sixteen brownsuits, Sally at the end of the line, filed through the door. Straight ahead was another door towards the street. On their left was a counter stacked with wo oden boxes, a wall mostly covered by a

chalkboard emblazoned with a grid chalk-marked with tiny letters and weird symbols, and a door to what looked like a private office. To their right, an empty space with a couple spare benches lined up, facing a blank wall.

“Sit, if you please,” she said with exaggerated politeness. “My name is Clarice Rancourt. I shall endeavor to explain your situation. If you become hopelessly confused by anything I say, please stop me. Fair enough? First: you have made the journey, and you have arrived. You are all formerly living beings. We call ourselves Formers, to distinguish ourselves from Liveones.”

She clapped her hands. “Sounds solid enough, does it? That is because I am, as you are, a semi-corporeal spirit. We move through gas. We fall to the ground. All the solids of Earth, except for special tangible materials such as this. . .” she flicked a piece of paper thumb-tacked to the wall. “. . . will stop you. Now, I want you all to try an experiment. Has anyone in here never cursed? Never spoken a holy name in anger or contempt? Raise your hand.”

The Formers on their seats looked to each other, puzzled. No hands were raised.

“Quite right. Who can tell me how many curses they uttered in their life?”

More puzzlement.

“Actually, you all can. Close your eyes and try.”

Sally thought this was silly, but when she closed her eyes, sakes alive! She could recollect every untoward expression she had ever spoken, instantly! Every Jesus, God, god-damn, and related permutation which a lapse of control let escape her lips, came rushing to focus.

How embarrassing! She had so avoided such exclamations.

Six so far this year (and only January had gone by). Seventy last year. Sixty three the year before. And on back, to her adolescence when she was less reticent: nine hundred and fifteen in high school freshman year.

Clarice said, “Open your eyes. Now does anyone want to try? I have pencils and scratch paper if you need.”

Many Formers, Sally in the lead, took the paper and pencil. She rooted through her mind by the year: all forty-two years since her first “damn” spoken on a dare at age six.

“Anyone have an answer yet?”

Sally normally would have been embarrassed, but she was so proud of finishing first, she piped up. “Eleven thousand, nine hundred twenty.”

The other Formers who took up the challenge came back with *much* higher numbers. Sally had something else to be proud of; having the (relatively) cleanest mouth in the room. Though the number seemed preposterously huge, it came down to only one or two a day on average.

“So you see,” Clarice went on, “the Liveone mind is hampered by cellular limitations. Freed from this, you have these amazing cognitive and processing powers. Now, let us try something else. Did anyone not notice that you can recall, as though it was only minutes ago, everything that ever happened in your conscious life? Quite right. Now, this time, close your eyes and let your mind wander through the paths of memory. If you need a seed to begin, think of a time you looked upon another human being with Lust in your heart.”

Sally closed her eyes and immediately thought of her husband.

Dear Frank. He had done everything for seven months while her constitution declined. Somehow she knew feelings for her husband did not count as Lust. But she had not totally ignored other men and boys.

Shane. In eleventh grade. Tennis team. How his powerful, sinewy legs gleamed in the sunshine around the courts as they played mixed doubles. How those legs rose to small, sexy buttocks. How his hand felt, patting her back after their 6-3 win. How she longed for more. But she had the dubious honor of being the least attractive member of the tennis team. When gymnastics ended and tennis season began, Shane never –

“SEE HOW IT WORKS?” Clarice shouted.

That broke everyone out of their daydreams. “Formers cannot sleep. The closest we can come is to do what you just did. We call it Rev Mode, or Revving. Short for reverie.”

How fascinating! Sally could relive any moment in her life. Which may be a mixed blessing. All the moments that made her cringe could do so again. And again.

Now Clarice told the story of her own death. It was 1922, in Yorkshire England. She had been run through the throat with a kitchen knife, by a young man she had the misfortune and poor judgment to associate with.

“Anyone else die violently?” she put to the group.

Raul Briguez raised his hand.

“Please, before you speak, kindly tell us your name, religion at birth,

religion at death, then how you died.”

“Raul Briguez. Catholic, birth to death. I was shot down by FBI agents in Houston.” He boasted of being the most prestigious drug runner in the city. He then pointed to his right temple, assuming there was a bullet hole.

No one could see any wound.

“There is a reason there is no gaping hole in my neck,” Clarice said, “and none in your head. You have all been returned to the appearance you bore shortly before your body endured whatever ravages ended your life.”

Sally wanted now more than ever to see herself in a mirror. Yet beneath this surface shallowness she felt undercurrents of disquiet at what was being said.

Those who died by the sword . . . must have lived by it? And Raul, a drug kingpin, awarded salvation? He must have repented something stupendous before the bullet struck. It is explainable. But it seems quite so odd.

“Anyone else?” Clarice asked the group. A tall man with a black mustache spoke. “I’m Fred Willamett. Born Methodist, died Pentecostal. I was shot by a jealous husband. And yes, he had a reason.”

The small middle eastern woman raised her hand, and was acknowledged. “I am Rania al Khatib. I was always a Muslim. I killed myself with a rope.”

“Worry no more, Rania,” Clarice said, almost tenderly. “You are among friends.”

Sally was remembering her own death, minutes ago to her perception of time. It was excruciating leading up to it, but could not be categorized as violent if it was acute kidney failure. Or could it have been botched anesthesia? Heart attack during surgery?

Or had her last look at the world been less recent? Could she have died naturally, or even from euthanasia, after an extended coma?

“Excuse me,” Sally said, raising her hand.

“Yes madam?”

“What day is today?”

“Could you tell us your name, religion, and manner of death?”

“That’s the thing,” Sally said, noticing the others were looking at her strangely. “I went in for surgery, and I don’t know if I died right away or . . . or . . .”

Clarice said, "Today is February second. Groundhog day, you Americans call it."

"Oh, okay. I died last night. So it was . . ."

All eyes were on her.

". . . so it wasn't violent. Are you interested . . . in other types . . .?"

Something is definitely amiss. I will grant that the Protestants and Muslims worship the same God I worshipped. But forgiveness must be pursued and achieved. And one story after another from these people is of forgiveness never sought.

Sally spilled it out. "I'm Sally Jadelaw. I'm Catholic. Always was. I died of acute kidney failure. I think. I'm pretty sure."

"That is acceptable, Sally. Not every Former saw the end coming," Clarice stated. "Ladies and Gentlemen, it matters not that your end was grisly, or smooth as fine whiskey. The important thing is you are here. Now then! Physical laws! Pay attention, as not only your own form," she said, patting a black man on the knee, "but the forces you will encounter here," she went on, landing a fist on the door, "are going to be quite counter-intuitive. I invite you all to follow me out the street door here."

The sixteen Formers filed out into a daylight urban landscape. There was a small parking lot, actually just an extra-wide sidewalk upon which visitors to this now-abandoned warehouse could leave their vehicles. On the street itself, cars lined both curbs, all pointed in the same direction, taking up every inch of space. Trees stood bare of leaves.

Sally could not feel the cold or the wind. But frost on the sidewalk weeds, and heavy coats on passersby, told of the February weather Formers could not perceive by touch.

"Avoid the Liveones as they pass! Now, mark my words!" Clarice invited anyone who wished, to try and pick up a fast food wrapper lying on the sidewalk. Several Formers tried, Raul Briguez the most histrionically.

"It seems to be welded to the ground!" he announced as he gave up.

Led back inside and to their seats, the Formers listened as Clarice explained that the office around them, and the bench and counter and traffic horses in the corral, were all "SS material." The matter of the Earth would not yield to a semi-corporeal spirit, no matter how mighty. "That piece of litter you men failed to nudge, could trip you. You must therefore take care with your footing as you perambulate. The wooden objects enclosing our part of the building will fall if a Liveone walks into them.

This is to give warning to us in this office, as a Liveone can cause havoc if not shooed away.”

Sally now was *really* confused.

All this odd terminology. “Formers.” “Liveones.” “SS material.”

Why would these be matters of concern for the saved?

Why has there been no mention of the Lord Almighty?

“Ms. Rancourt?” Sally said, timidly.

“Yes Sally?”

“What does that S S mean, in SS material?”

“Ah. Good question. SS is the initials of Stan's Service.”

Sally dared a follow-on question.

“And whom may this Stan be?”

Clarice looked to the others. With a slight wink, she remarked, “You will see it written that way, and spoken, but it is not a typographical error. Recall the biblical stories of the god of the Israelites who had no name? It is a personality trait of virtually omnipotent beings that they do not want their name spoken. So we abbreviate it.”

A glimmer of recognition went across most of the group's faces.

Sally remained uncomprehending. Stan?

Clarice gave another hint. “It has one letter missing, Sally.”

The remainder of the group now understood. All but Sally.

“One letter missing? Like . . . stain?”

Clarice for the first time showed faint annoyance. “All right. I can say it only once.” Her voice went down to a 10 decibel micro-whisper.

“*Satan.*”

Clarice resumed her lecture. “Let me continue. Now then, when we are actually dealing with a Liveone, we call him a 'subject'.” Then she added, somewhat facetiously, “Him or her. Call '*him or her*' a subject. Pardon my lack of modernity. In my day, 'him' signified indeterminate gender.”

Sally heard, but had stopped listening.

“Sally?” Clarice said, looking at her. “Sally Jadelaw?”

As a semi-corporeal spirit, blood could not rush from Sally's face. But the wide eyes, quivering lips and thoracic tremor told Clarice she had to whisper something to Raul, then move to put her own back against the door to the corral.

Sally's mind raced.

How is this possible? I don't belong here. A mistake must have been

made. Or I've been kidnapped. Or misplaced by the supernatural powers. I don't belong here. I really don't belong here.

I have to get away. Away, and right away! Now!

I can't. The door is barred by this hulk of Mexican American.

The other door!

No. Clarice is in front of it. If the rest of them don't come to her aid, maybe I can push her away. Maybe if I make a rush for the door Raul is in front of, Clarice will leave her post for a second and I can slip out.

Clarice spoke. "Sally, don't go daft on us! No one is going to hurt you."

Sally had not moved from her seat. Yet her eyes bulged, darting from side to side, as if she expected any moment to be sprung upon by marauders.

"Sally, I invite you to rise and step beside me."

Paranoid as a coyote surrounded by hunters, she did as she was told, walking backwards, keeping as many brownsuits as possible in view.

"Thank you, Sally. Ladies and Gentlemen, all rise if you please."

All stood up.

"Sally, mark this demonstration," Clarice said pointedly. To the group she said, "Anyone who has killed a person, other than yourself, sit down."

Raul and one other sat down.

"Any rapists? Child molesters?" Another Former sat down, white, old, male, with head bowed.

"Anyone stolen from the poor?" One more.

"Betrayed a friend?" One more sat down.

"Has anyone still standing spent any time in prison for a crime?" Two more sat down. Clarice whispered something to each of them. One of them stood back up.

Clarice continued to rattle off a list of progressively less severe offenses against man and the Almighty. Only one more Former was seated by the end of the litany.

"May I assume," Clarice said, "that the eight of you still on your feet were apostates or adulterers?" Eight heads nodded. "Do any of you on your feet fear the ones sitting down?" Eight heads shook, no.

Sally watched. The demonstration had indeed put a human face on the bald statistics of damnable sins. That face was not monstrous.

"See, Sally? Half these Formers might live next door to you. This

dread of yours is bloody nonsense! (excuse me) Now may we please continue?”

Sally warily took her seat. But she endeavored to keep a full inch of space between her and any of her neighbors.

Clarice continued the orientation, but most of it did not register with Sally. Clarice spoke of ViPur, the Virtuous Purpose. She spoke of Heaven (“the God Side”) and something called “umbra”, which sounded like what used to be called Limbo, and the billions of souls in each of those sectors. And how it had something to do with the Virtuous Purpose and Stan.

Clarice set up a filmstrip projector, straight out of the audiovisual closet of a 1960’s school. Raul volunteered to run the projector while Clarice turned off the lights.

The first picture was of a faded yellow parchment, adorned with gothic calligraphic letters:

Don’t call it Hell. Call it SS – Stan’s Service.

The soundtrack went “Boop!” A pie graph was displayed, trisected into red, white and gray sections. An announcer’s voice, poorly recorded, recited with forced excitement:

SS (the red) is anyone who is not in Heaven (the white) or Umbra (the gray).

Boop!

Did you think the underworld was passive unending torment?

Think again! You’re going to work.

You ARE back on Earth. You have been selected as an agent in ViPur.

ViPur is the Virtuous Purpose.

As an agent of ViPur, you work with Liveones, those still living.

This is a privilege. Formers outside ViPur rarely encounter Liveones.

If anything seemed monstrous, it was Clarice.

Not that she was large or fearsome. Quite the opposite. She had short pixie-cut red hair, like the flappers of her time. An extremely cute nose and set of cheeks, wispy stature, and disarming demeanor.

That this adorable waif was training a troop of apprentice devils struck Sally as an obscenity. And this trainer expected Sally to roar, sit, and jump through hoops on command.

Clarice watched Sally closely. She was getting agitated again. She

nearly leapt from her seat when Clarice tapped her shoulder.

“Sally, if this is bothering you too much . . .”

Sally said nothing. It was all too incomprehensible.

“Sally, accompany me if you please.”

Clarice escorted her away from the presentation area to the private office behind the counter, a compact room with one window, a desk, file cabinets, and three guest chairs upholstered in cracking leatherette. An old black dial telephone sat on the desk, beside a pre-electric Underwood typewriter.

Clarice shut out the sound of the filmstrip by closing the door, and pointed Sally to one of the chairs. Through hanging blinds, Sally could see past the parking area outside to brick buildings with porches, chestnut trees rising from sidewalks, and a One Way traffic sign.

“I apologize, but I have no assistants here,” Clarice said. “If you find the other Formers creepy, you may have better luck simply reading the orientation material. Have you enough light?”

Sally nodded, and accepted two brochures from Clarice.

“Do I have to lock the door? Or are you right with this?”

Sally nodded. “I’m all right. Tell me, why the old telephone and the old filmstrip projector?”

“That will be covered in a few days. In-processing takes a full week. Now, I really have to get back to my class.” She shut the door behind her, quietly.

Alone in this sanctum within a sanctum, Sally forced herself to read the first brochure.

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History BEFORE CosCon

Humans did not always have souls. Near 25,000 BC, when brains became capable of conceiving personal gods, men were for the first time imbued with souls which outlive the body.

Disembodied souls needed disposition, so God made Umbra - a placeless place of dreamless sleep, no pain, and no pleasure. For 13 millennia, every man who died had his soul transported to Umbra, and has rested, unaware and insensate, ever since.

Survival drove all action. There was no good or bad. Agriculture changed that in 12,000 BC. Men could become thinking, spiritual beings.

For 9 millennia, Stan roamed the Earth, and said to God, “Man credits not thee, but invents nature gods.”

So in 3014 BC God sent prophets to China, India, the Fertile Crescent, and Mesoamerica. Men, individually and collectively, heeded or ignored these true prophets. Heaven was created, to give reward to the righteous. The unrighteous, along with those who lived entire lives not exposed to prophecy, continued to be deposited in Umbra.

Stan objected: “Why is Umbra the fate of both those who fail and those who never knew? Give the failures to me!”

Foreseeing that as knowledge increased, belief and adoration and obedience would decline, Stan proposed –

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Sally lost the will to sully herself with this rubbish, and tossed the brochure aside. This garbage may motivate legitimately damned souls, but she? She did not belong here! And somehow she would get out of here. Her God would not fail her.

Boredom sapped her resolve after ten minutes, though, and curiosity won out. She opened the second brochure.

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The Cosmic Contest (CosCon)

In 2988 BC, barely a generation after true prophets began being sent to Earth, Stan and God agreed to the Cosmic Contest. The winner will decide the fate of souls left in the Umbra. Conditions are immutable until one side wins, or the human race becomes extinct.

*God can imbue **True Prophets**, numbering no more than seven times seven times seven. God may exercise the right to go to earth himself as a Man. After completing either, no more True Prophets could be sent. Man was on his own.*

*Souls of the unrighteous would go into **Stan's Service**, not Umbra.*

*If **half** the souls who ever lived reach Heaven, God wins. If half go to SS, Stan wins.*

*God agrees to **not directly affect human actions**. Within the Prophecy-Based Monotheistic (PBM) religions, human leadership sets criteria for reaching Heaven. God abides by these. This is codified (for Christians) in **Matthew 16:19** “Whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven.”*

Stan believed prophecy-based religions favor the weak over the

strong, thus handing SS the strongest souls. God believed his monotheistic prophecies, delivered directly to Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Amenhotep, Govinda, Gautama, and others, would spread and prosper. His Son would begin a new, invincible religion.

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Oh Balderdash! Granted, Sally admitted, that if true, the Cosmic Contest explained a number of mysteries. Like why all significant miracles happened 2000 years ago or more, and nothing since.

No! A tissue of lies!

The sun went down as a clock on the inner office wall ticked. An hour elapsed before Clarice returned.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she said, taking a seat behind the desk.

Sally looked past the door to an empty presentation area. “Where did everybody go?”

“Your class? They are on the street now. They have buddied up, gone out in groups of two or three, to test their selves against the environment. The orientation section is over and done with, thank you! The next in-processing training section is after midnight tonight. We do the trainings when the streets are empty of Liveones, for reasons you will soon understand. Now, let us look over your information on the roster, shall we?”

Clarice read items one-by-one off a yellow carbon copy, asking Sally to verify the information. Born: Parma Ohio, 1955. Catholic. Father: Randall Finley. Still living, 76. Mother: Rosalind Finley, maiden name O’Flynn. Died 1996, eight years ago.

All correct.

“Well, that answers that. It is in fact *you* on the list. It is you we were expecting.”

It was a mistake, Sally protested. Clarice assured her, “The information was okayed by a liaison office. Not only SS, but the God Side vouches for your placement.”

Sally was firmly unconvinced. This made Clarice weary, but she tried not to show it.

“So, Miss Jadelaw. You still suspect you are in the wrong place. Two questions usually clear it up. You were Catholic until you died?”

Sally groaned. “Of course!”

“Were you born a Catholic?”

“I already told you. Yes!”

Clarice looked back at the yellow paper. “Not apostasy,” she said to herself. Louder, she went on, “This part is critical. You are aware, madam, that as a Catholic, you only need one unabsolved damnable offense, what you call mortal sin, to be barred from Heaven. Correct?”

“Yes,” Sally replied, “but I didn’t commit a mortal sin. Not a one! Nothing to absolve! I remember it all quite well, thank you.” With spreading fingers, Sally likened her memory abilities to a sphere, grown from baseball to beach ball size.

“How sure are you of no damnable offenses?”

“Totally! And even if I *had* committed any, they would have been absolved at confession, which I went to only eleven days ago. I was too sick to do much of anything but lie down ever since.”

Clarice picked up the phone. Sally sat back and tapped her feet, like a customer waiting for their lost package to be located on the loading dock.

Clarice spoke to “District.” She asked if one named Ebbie Gavin could be found, and if so could she make a personal appearance at “Heights precinct.” The tone of her voice in the ensuing “. . . yes . . . yes . . . I understand . . .” and the gingerly way she hung up the phone, did not seem encouraging.

“Step this way, please.”

They walked out, to where Clarice directed Sally’s attention at a map, under clear plastic on the counter that separated the inner office from the presentation area.

“To summarize what you missed,” Clarice said. “What you are going through this week is ViPur agent in-processing. Seven days and six nights of training exercises and classes, after which you will be assigned scout duties in a squad under a Registered Tempter supervisor. Your job will be to use your powers to tempt Liveones to damnable offenses, working alongside lower ranking messengers, and higher ranking agents who possess greater powers. This is where SS has placed you, expecting cooperation and competence. Therefore, I recommend in the strongest possible terms that you not go daft on us! The consequences could be quite unpleasant. Should I call out the dogs (figuratively speaking), or can you handle yourself?”

“Yes, I can,” Sally said, through her gathering trauma.

“Without a buddy, you will be at a disadvantage. Do not be bashful

about introducing yourself to other ViPur agents on the street. You should find them convivial as well as helpful. Now then,” Clarice said, “This map here will give you a frame of reference. This warehouse around us is the outpost of Heights/Prospect Precinct. On the map we are . . . here! All this . . . is Brooklyn New York. Brooklyn is an SS District. The other Precincts in this District are here in Bay Ridge, here in Crown Heights, and here, and here, and here. Here on the smaller map you can see the other districts in this sub-region: Staten Island, Jersey City, Bronx, Queens, etc. Understand?”

Sally nodded in the affirmative.

“Next. Important. As a Former among Liveones, you will be able to read their thoughts. You can’t avoid it; it will be like they are talking to you without moving their lips, and fingers in the ears will not soften it in the least. The only way to adjust to this power is to use it. You cannot get used to cold water without swimming. Now then! Are we ready to dive in?”

Sally nodded. In spite of herself, she was becoming interested.

“Very well. Ebbie Gavin is the District manager. She does the proper, hands-dirty training. A busy woman, but she agreed to talk to you personally at one in the morning, before tonight's training begins. Whatever I have not been able to explain to your satisfaction, she should be able to explain. Training for your class is at 1:42 a.m., in the dead of night. Right here. Understand?”

Sally nodded yes.

“It is now 6:15 p.m. I have many other things to do, so I cannot continue being your wet nurse. You may either lark about the corral feeling sorry for yourself, or go out into Brooklyn. I strongly urge the latter. There are Liveones there. Newly arrived Formers find great solace being in the presence of Liveones. Something about hope for the future continuance of the species. And if anyone needs solace, that would be you, Sally Jadelaw.”

Sally had to agree.

“Can you assure me you will be back at one a.m. to meet Ebbie Gavin?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Very well. Take a good look at this map, and get yourself moving.”
With that, Clarice blew her a kiss.

Night had fallen on Brooklyn rush hour. This neighborhood was set back from the main arteries, and cars which passed on the mostly one-way streets came intermittently, as did pedestrian Liveones returning home from work.

Sally heard words, in distinct voices; snatches of phrase here and there from closed-mouth, solitary Liveone faces. The sounds came and went, only perceptible within ten feet of the thinking Liveone, then fading to silence at greater distances.

Sally wandered through the city. Brick and concrete, street signs and lights, three story buildings with stores on the ground and apartments above, varied only in their window box arrangement and hang of curtains.

One residential block had an alley close to a street corner, almost hidden by hanging tree branches. She walked down the alley and into a courtyard. Rear windows of several dozen houses and apartments looked down on sections of a communal back yard. Snow dusted gardens and a few tall, leafless trees. A barbecue set and beach chairs, set out awaiting better weather, were dimly illuminated by living room and kitchen light glow.

Sally sat on one of the beach chairs. It was not comfortable (to the extent that a semi-corporeal being could feel comfort). It did not “give” under her weight, but felt like pavement.

She heard a thought, in a young girl’s voice.

“– having a night off from work rules–.”

Sally turned her head to see.

Eight feet from Sally’s seat, a back door opened, revealing a teenage girl: full grown in height, tan, a bit dumpy in frame. She had a little-girlish face and pigtails bobby-pinned to the back of her head.

The girl had a pail in her hand. Destination: a green garbage can, its top askew revealing a contents of compost. But before the girl could even walk across the snowy yard to dump it, she heard an old woman’s voice from inside the house.

“Biba!” shouted the old woman, not within Sally’s sight.

The girl’s thoughts came through. *“–muy frio, mi chica–.”* The thoughts echoed the voice of her grandmother; the person who had shouted “Biba.”

Sally rose to her feet to get closer to the girl, hoping to read deeper into her thoughts. Some thoughts were clearly worded, others less so, but

Sally picked up the gist of it. The girl's grandmother, her abuelita, insisted on layered winter wraps, even for a short trip to the compost can. And the girl was an obedient sort.

The girl went back inside and returned in two minutes, having methodically donned a coat and knit gloves of many pastel colors. Sally could tell the gloves were kept in their proper coat pocket, scarf in *its* proper pocket, parka hood scrunched and tied. Everything had its place and everything was in its place. An extremely well organized young lady this was.

As the girl emptied her load of orange rinds, coffee grounds and stale bread into the compost can, Sally probed deeper. She could tell the girl's name, hanging in her consciousness like an easily-plucked apple on a low branch: Dubitha Avila.

Dubitha paused to look at the stars, during which time Sally was able to read more at the forefront of her mind.

Just last Saturday, Dubitha was allowed to go to the movies in the Heights, in the company of either two girls or one (white) boy, those combinations being the safe level of companionship for a teenage girl (with a modicum of sense) in the better parts of Brooklyn. Her two best friends were up for a trip to the movies. Everyone else wanted to see *The Passion of the Christ*. Mama and Abuelita had seen it and loved it. Dubitha, having heard bad things about the movie, decided her progenitors must be sick people to have liked such a gross-sounding flick. She decided instead to stay home.

Sally got all of that from just a few seconds of probing. The depths of understanding that could be gained from reading thoughts! It was utterly extraordinary!

There was more. At home, Dubitha teased Abuelita by coming just short of every expectation concerning grades, savings, modesty of dress, and especially who she should date, when she went out with boys at all, which was almost never.

While the girl surveyed the winter constellations, Sally ate up thoughts like salted peanuts. Dubitha's brain was a puzzle, multiplicitous but solvable. Dubitha enjoyed two of the Bronte sisters, Jane Austen, and the rock group Good Charlotte, which also happened to be one of her son Dennis Jadelaw's favorites.

She worked four nights a week at a Spanish food store, and spoke a fair amount of Spanish. Mama wanted their family to move Long Island

suburbs so they could own a garage. Papa managed a cigarette factory before Dominican revolutionaries chased the two of them to America. Papa's mother, Abuelita (a word Sally knew from high school Spanish) lived with them. Both Dubitha's "rents" and her Abuelita were prejudiced, quick to point out they shared none of the African blood of the great majority of their former countrymen. Abuelita hated Jews – and everybody else not Dominican – and even some Dominicans!

The girl got tired of the cold and the neck-bending necessary to view the heavens, and went back inside. Sally followed a few steps behind, but was unable to get in the door that slammed behind the girl. Try as she would, Sally could not pull the door open.

Of course! She could not move anything but "SS material". Like the immovable fast food wrapper on the sidewalk in front of Precinct, every solid object in the Liveone dimension she could touch, but not move.

What a nice young lady, Sally thought.

This encounter with Dubitha Avila gave Sally an idea. She did not know what her other powers were yet, or how to use them, but ability to read thoughts could be a formidable weapon against evil.

I'll be this girl's guardian angel.

And when I get this mistake fixed and am out of this SS world, perhaps I can continue to be her guardian angel, from above instead of here.

Now I feel much better. No need to "go daft" as Clarice said. Or "freak", as my children would say. Oh, how I wish I could be with them instead of anyone in this, this Brooklyn!

Afterlife Day 2, Tuesday

Back at Precinct, in the presentation area, well before her 1 a.m. appointment time, Sally was in her seat, between a rev and a worry.

"Sally Jadelaw?"

"Umm?. . . Oh! Oh yes! Yes, I'm Sally." Sally rose and shook the outstretched hand.

"Greetings, Dearie. Ebbie Gavin is my name – your in-processing counsellor."

Ebbie was a sturdy woman a little younger looking than Sally, broad and busty yet fragile in the limbs and digits. Her orange hair was pinned back. She wore the same bright red uniform as Clarice, but there was a

difference. Ebbie's suit was topped at the neck by a black band collar. Black on the neck marked her as one with a senior rank.

Ebbie ushered Sally back into the private office. "From what Clarice Rancourt tells me, Dearie," she began, "you art definitely a Good Guy. Good Guy we callest a devout one dropped to Hell on a technicality." Ebbie's diction was British like Clarice's, but considerably more ancient. For one thing, she pronounced dropped as "drop – ped".

Sally repeated to this new redsuit her insistent argument that she had been sent to the wrong place. Ebbie listened with overflowing patience.

"Be that as it may," Ebbie said at length, "when you died, time did stand still for your initial judgment. This was through both SS *and God Side* procedures. Clear enough?"

Sally grunted, "uh huh."

Ebbie went on. "Both sides did observe you as a Liveone. Notes indicate you are sympathetic, gregarious and relatively intelligent. Those qualities did tap you for ViPur, as opposed to administration or the more menial SS occupations."

The character qualities seemed right enough.

Ebbie continued. "As to why you are assigned as a scout rather than a lower ranking messenger: notes hither saith you wert manipulative. 'Twould appear that in promotion of church baked goods fundraisers, you successfully pressured others to contribute."

Sally certainly had not thought herself manipulative. If her pouting, sighing behavior at Saint Leo's bake sale meetings was persuasive, it was unintentional.

"Therefore, Sally, your destination was rightly intended. Many the Good Guy, myself included, had not the foggiest notion that damnation was possible. Living spotless lives we did think. What you need is AdmissionsReport 55-dash-60. 'Twill reveal the reason for damnation. Do you so desire?"

"Yes! May I please see it right away?"

Sally's suit had hip, thigh, calf, ankle, and back pockets, all skillfully seamless to the point of invisibility. The right calf pocket, Ebbie told her, contained an identification card.

Ebbie pulled the appropriate form from an office file drawer, and copied Sally's card information. "Sally Rachel Jadelaw 1146 2564 868RC. 'Tis done! I shall dispatch this request straight away, that you may behold the truth in a few days at most. *In the meantime, I bid you*

heed and abide by my instructions, lest you be sent up the river. Good Guys prosper not well, up the river.”

“Up what river?” Sally asked, increasingly suspicious.

“A figure of speech suggesting the mythical river Styx. Liveones in New York use the phrase to refer to Sing Sing prison, so it is *apropos*. Up the River is Tartarus; what you might call The Real Hell.”

That much Sally could understand.

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